

## What a 200-year-old experiment teaches parents about home schooling

### Level 3 • Advanced

#### 1 Warmer

Discuss your answers to these questions.

- What is your mother tongue? How did you learn to speak it? How did you learn any foreign languages you speak?
- When and how did you learn to ride a bike?
- Approximately how old were you when you first used a computer? Who taught you how to use it?

#### 2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

undeterred  
grapple with

capacity  
latter

verifying  
radical

containing  
anxious

privileged  
illiterate

retaining  
soothe

1. preventing something harmful from spreading to other people or places \_\_\_\_\_
2. worried because you think something bad might happen \_\_\_\_\_
3. used for referring to the second of two things that have just been mentioned \_\_\_\_\_
4. make someone calmer and more relaxed when they are feeling nervous, worried or upset  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. continuing to do something even though the task before you is very difficult \_\_\_\_\_
6. remembering ideas or information \_\_\_\_\_
7. checking or proving that something is true or correct \_\_\_\_\_
8. try hard to understand a difficult idea or solve a difficult problem \_\_\_\_\_
9. a way of doing something that is very new or unusual \_\_\_\_\_
10. having advantages and opportunities that other people do not have because you have a lot of money or high social status \_\_\_\_\_
11. unable to read or write \_\_\_\_\_
12. the ability to do something \_\_\_\_\_

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#### What a 200-year-old experiment can teach anxious parents about home schooling

*Learning isn't only about textbooks; it's about awakening in the pupil the desire to grapple with interesting challenges*

Sarah Stein Lubrano

4 August, 2020

- 1 For perhaps the first time in the history of modern education, millions of primary and secondary students may begin the school year from home. While pupils in England are due to return to in-person learning in September, uncertainty remains as Covid-19 cases rise, local lockdowns are implemented and the scientific community warns that the government's test and trace system is not up to the job of containing potential spikes caused by the return of schools. Some parents may choose not to send their children back for their family's safety.
- 2 School leaders and teachers will be rightly concerned about kids who have fallen behind. Parents and carers will be feeling anxious about the need, once again, to juggle work and home schooling.
- 3 The latter may also worry they are poorly equipped to support their children because they cannot remember topics such as long division. While there is little they can do as they wait for news of the months ahead, an experiment carried out by an 18th-century French schoolmaster, Jean-Joseph Jacotot, may soothe some of their anxieties about home schooling and their lack of knowledge of the school curriculum.
- 4 Jacotot found himself assigned to teach in Belgium. The children in his charge spoke only Flemish and he only French. Undeterred, he gave his students a novel written in his mother tongue, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, and a French dictionary, and encouraged them to take on the task of teaching themselves.
- 5 Remarkably, it worked. The students enjoyed solving the "puzzle" for themselves: "The intelligence that had allowed them to learn the French in *Télémaque* was the same they had used to learn their mother tongue: by observing and retaining, repeating and verifying, by relating what they were trying to know to what they already knew, by doing and reflecting about what they had done."
- 6 Learning often has nothing to do with someone older or better read pouring the right information into the learner's mind. (Consider how often children and even adults learn from trial and error, from learning to ride a bike to using a new technology.) Instead, learning has to do with awakening in the student the desire to grapple with interesting challenges. It has more to do with asking a child difficult questions at the dinner table, with encouraging one's children to construct treehouses or fall down Wikipedia rabbit holes, and less to do with filling in the blanks of workbooks.
- 7 Jacotot went on to teach other topics he knew nothing about, like painting and the piano, using his new style of teaching called "universal education". It was founded on the idea that "all men have equal intelligence" and that "all human beings are equally capable of learning". It was radical in its time, when only the sons of relatively privileged men received a formal education, and it is still radical now.
- 8 The challenges facing Jacotot were similar to those facing our education system today: unequal access to education and parents who know little about the topics their children are supposed to be learning. Jacotot's work was in part meant to demonstrate that the latter problem was also an opportunity to rethink how underprivileged children might learn. Parents (who in Jacotot's time were often illiterate) could teach not by knowing but by encouraging and asking questions. If education is reimagined as students combining freedom and the right resources to explore ideas for themselves, then a surprisingly wide array of people can "teach" – including carers during a pandemic.
- 9 We should worry less about the number of hours that children spend on Zoom and more about their access to resources, from books to technology, that they can use to explore the world around them from the safety of their own homes. At present, poorer students appear to be falling behind during virtual learning, in large part because of a lack of access to the right devices and the internet.
- 10 This does not, of course, mean that there is nothing to worry about when it comes to virtual learning. Studying from home still means missing out on a great deal of emotional and social learning that is crucial during childhood. Some students with special needs also do worse. A turn

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to home learning should not mean that teaching is simply left to carers altogether; teachers' knowledge of the curriculum and expertise in the classroom is invaluable, and students need a greater variety of experiences, structure and resources than parents alone can provide.

- 11 But as history and philosophy can demonstrate, learning does not only happen in a classroom and it does not always require an expert to

supervise it. Jacotot's discovery is that human beings are learning beings: they know hardly anything at birth but seek out and develop incredible capacities. It should make us less worried about children during this difficult time and even more hopeful about ourselves.

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### 3 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer to each question according to the information in the article.

- The article casts doubts on ...
  - parents' ability to teach their children at home.
  - the effectiveness of the British educational system.
  - the government's coronavirus test and trace system.
- An 18th-century experiment showed that ...
  - children are able to teach themselves many things with the right encouragement.
  - Belgian pupils were quicker at learning than French pupils of the same age.
  - children need someone older and better read to teach them.
- Through his experience as a teacher, Jacotot developed a radical new style of teaching that claimed ...
  - boys are more intelligent than girls.
  - only sons of wealthy families should receive a formal education.
  - everyone is able to learn if they are given time and opportunity.
- During the current pandemic, the outcome of this 18th-century experiment should make us worry ...
  - more about the time children spend on the internet.
  - only if children do not have books and computers available at home.
  - that children are being taught by parents and carers.
- One problem with children not being able to attend school during the pandemic is ...
  - that carers have to teach mathematics.
  - a lack of interaction and contact with other pupils.
  - teachers losing their jobs to parents.

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#### 4 Expressions

a. Find the following expressions in the article.

1. not good enough (five words, para 1)
2. If someone is \_\_\_\_\_, you are responsible for taking care of them. (three words, para 4)
3. trying several possibilities and learning from your mistakes (three words, para 6)
4. a large number of different people or things (two words, para 8)
5. the particular requirements of people who have physical or mental disabilities (two words, para 10).

b. Now use the expressions in sentences of your own.

#### 5 Discussion

- **Talk about a time you learnt something by trial and error or simply through a desire to grapple with the challenge.**
  - o How did you feel during the process?
  - o How did you feel afterwards?
  - o Are you still be able to do the thing that you learnt?
- **Have you ever been taught something by someone who you thought was not up to the job? Talk about your experience.**
- **Talk about someone you know who has special needs. Do they use any special equipment or do they need any special assistance at work or at school to help them learn or perform certain tasks?**

#### 6 Small-group task

You have been asked to look after two children for two weeks. If possible, this should be children you know – for example, relatives of yours, or your neighbours' or friends' children. Roughly plan what you might do with them to make the time interesting, challenging and educational.

Share your plans with other groups.