Showing Examples of a Child's Work

Providing examples of work may not be effective in producing generalisations about the education provided and may damage the child's natural learning process:

- Provision not performance: As we understand it, an LEA's duty is to enquire whether a parent's provision is suitable, rather than to focus on a child's actual standards of learning. While there is probably a grey area between the two points, there is also a significant difference. With the first, all the responsibility is with the parents. With the second, the child's performance is being used as part of the judgement process. This may lead to undue pressure on the child to perform, especially if s/he begins to feel that they are 'not up to standard' and might be 'letting their parents down'. A sense of being tested and a risk of failure is one of the easiest ways to block a child's natural learning process. (This is not the same as a child choosing to rise to a challenge.)

- Different criteria: In selecting work, a parent would naturally find themselves selecting a piece on the basis of whether they think it would impress or not. The assumption being that good pieces will show what a high standard a child has reached, and therefore what a great education is being provided. However, by what criteria should 'good' be defined? A piece which to one person may show a good standard, may not be perceived in the same way by someone else they could easily have different criteria by which to judge 'good'. The problem may be more acute when LEA Advisors, familiar with school inspections and methods, are faced with autonomous home-educators. Autonomous education is a comparatively radical approach that may challenge long held beliefs about what 'good' learning looks like. Potential for confusion over the criteria abound.

- No universal standards: If the variations in criteria used by an individual can cause problems, there is also difficulty in defining universal standards that can be applied generally. Children are all different and while, say, average reading ages may be suggestive, there is huge natural variation in when and how individual children come to reading. The same is true for other areas. An individual piece of work, taken alone, will be judged using generalised criteria that may bare little relation to, or understanding of, the individual child's progression and development.

- Bad pieces? In terms of learning, maybe 'bad' pieces of work are more valuable. The 'journey' to produce something is far more important than the end result, especially when starting out. A very 'poor' piece may represent a triumph for the learner because, finally, they have succeeded. Some children may be producing 'good' work that has taken them very little effort or trouble perhaps they are not being 'stretched' by their provision; others may have to slave away for days to produce 'poor' work but they are developing their skills and abilities much more.

- Good enough: A focus on producing 'good' work may ignore the huge potential learning from the thinking, problem solving and creativity when any

leaner decides to take on a new challenge. Good education is surely about cultivating a habit and desire in individuals to challenge and stretch themselves because this is how we develop our abilities. Settling for 'good enough', not taking the risk of 'failure', denies us this stretch.

- Extrapolating to the whole: It is rather ambitious to expect one or two pieces of work to be a reliable guide to the education provision a parent is making. Pieces of work represent the end of a process and it would be difficult to intuit what that process is from simply seeing them. The question of 'a suitable education' is about judging a wide and diverse provision of learning opportunities. It is not obvious how examining one small example, out of context, allows a judgement to be made about the whole. It's similar to looking at just one tyre before deciding on the mechanical state of a whole car.

- Learners' rights: In respecting the rights of learners generally and children in particular, a sound principal would be to seek permission to use pieces of work in this way. Knowing that you have to show your work to someone unknown can be very off-putting to the natural creative process by creating undue and corrosive tensions.

- What does it look like? Perhaps some people expect home-education to look like school with the child sitting at a desk with workbooks open. However, unless you shut a child in a cupboard, it is impossible to stop them learning! They take in information all around them, from the TV, radio, computer, shop, park, everywhere. 'Autonomous' learning can look like anything and isn't limited to the school model with life divided into neat subjects. If we need to alter our view of what learning should look like this will imply an altered set of criteria for judging both the provision of 'suitable and effective education' and what a good example of work might look like, or indeed whether 'work' is produced at all.

- A situation where examples may be useful is when all parties are likely to use the same sets of criteria. This may occur when parents are using a fairly formal and 'traditional' approach, or 'school-at-home'. In this case there are many well known and traditional 'standards' in common use by schools, the LEA and parents. If the parents see examples as a useful method then this is likely to be the best scenario for their use. However, there is still the danger that pressure will be exerted on the child to produce results which reflect well on the parents and which satisfy the LEA.

- A final situation could be considered - using examples during a visit. If parents elect to accept a visit, then using a piece of work to illustrate the way their provision happens can be very illuminating. The tale of how a particular piece came about can be very illustrative of the process which was used. In this case the emphasis is on the process of learning rather than having to worry about criteria for judging the final result.