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What Britain could learn from New Zealand about home-schooling

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If ever there was a moment to address the issue of home-schooling, it is now. The pandemic has disrupted teaching, school life and examinations in catastrophic ways. Many children will now never get the education they would have had. But every crisis is an opportunity — and this crisis offers the chance to reform education in radical ways for the better.

Britain could learn a lot from New Zealand. Since 1922, the Kiwis have run a state-funded national correspondence school, known now in Maori as *Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu* (Te Kura for short). In Western Australia, a similar school has existed since 1918 and is known as the School of Isolated and Distance Education.

The Correspondence School/Te Kura approach is not a revolutionary concept. It is similar in many ways to the Open University. In New Zealand, Te Kura has delivered distance or home learning to children at all school levels over many generations. Te Kura educates around 23,000 pupils each year (in a population of around five million), making it the country's largest state school. It covers all curriculum years at primary and secondary level, as well as helping mature pupils study for exams they previously missed. During New Zealand's lockdowns, day school pupils have been able to enrol in Te Kura to help supplement their education, and Kiwi pupils who are overseas are also able to enrol at the school.



'Do we have to compete on a global level?'

My mother worked as a primary school teacher for the NZ Correspondence School for many years. In those days teachers marked 'sets' sent in by pupils, based on written learning materials supplied in large canvas envelopes sent out regularly to families. Teachers established strong bonds with their pupils, and would help advise parents on their children's education. This communication was supplemented by radio programmes and an annual end-of-year ceremony broadcast on national radio, which was attended by the Prime Minister.

The NZ Correspondence School was originally set up to support families living on isolated farms, other rural areas and in lighthouses, as well as for Kiwis working overseas (in the Pacific Islands, for example). My late mother-in-law Anne Douglas was one such pupil. She lived on a remote farm in Canterbury and would collect her homework from the letterbox each week on her pony.

As society changed, the NZ Correspondence School evolved to look after kids on hippie communes or in itinerant families, for example, as well as children who were disabled or had special educational needs. In Australia, given the colossal distances between towns and farms, the need for a correspondence school was even more pronounced.

Nowadays the interaction between pupils and teachers is much easier, thanks to the internet and video calls. The means of communication may have changed, but the principles haven't. Te Kura has been a great success story in New Zealand. Exam results are generally good, although they do vary across ethnicities. Children who have had disrupted educational histories are provided with remedial support to help them catch up. There is also a strong emphasis on vocational education, with summer schools on offer for pupils wanting to increase their credits for university entrance.

Unfortunately for British parents, there's no centralised distance learning model like this in the UK. Anyone who has tried to educate their children at home — either before or during the pandemic — won't need me to tell them this. Over the past year, home education has in large part been provided remotely via individual schools, with mixed results. Exams have been cancelled, and many pupils' academic progress will have been hindered.

In addition to the children who are currently trying to learn at home while their schools are closed, a correspondence school would also help children who were already being educated at home before the pandemic began, for a multitude of reasons. Estimates for the number of children outside the normal day school education system range from around 50,000 to a quarter of a million, and the number will almost certainly have risen during the pandemic. For children like this whose education isn't organised via an individual school, their parents need to understand the curriculum and then overcome the difficulties of trying to arrange individual exams with different exam boards and at different locations.

Right now, there are only a few options for anyone outside of the school system who chooses to educate their children at home and cannot afford to rely on private tutors. There is the Oak Academy which, with government support, is beginning the process of delivering distance learning. It is a positive development, but it does not have the scale to support the huge number of children in need. There are private companies offering GCSE and A-level correspondence courses, but these charge fees and many do not allow under-16s to enrol. The best other options are the government's website and the BBC. But there is no reason why home education couldn't be provided more effectively (for those who want it) via a national correspondence school. It could bring together teachers and students from around the country.

The pandemic has exposed the need for a larger, more comprehensive organisation staffed by fully qualified teachers which can supplement the main school system. I am sure Te Kura would be delighted to offer advice should there be interest here in a similar correspondence school. Former All Black (and to be fair, Australian) rugby coaches have helped British teams to raise their game; perhaps some Kiwi support in the field of distance learning might now come in handy too.

WRITTEN BY
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