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A Critical View of Home Education

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The remarkable spread of home education needs to be considered in light of the arguments driving its growth. While acknowledging that there are many good reasons for individuals to choose home education, this analysis examines some of the most prominent assumptions and claims that advance the practice as a mass movement. Specifically, arguments regarding the rights and responsibilities of parents, and the impact of home education on students and schools are considered with regards to organisational theory, democratic governance and social science standards. These arguments promoting home education highlight the individualised or privatised focus of the phenomenon. The paper contends that home education amplifies the advantages and disadvantages of students' background characteristics, yet such serious equity issues are too often disregarded in an emerging paradigm based on the pursuit of individual advantage.

Keywords: home education, peer effects, achievement, common good, privatisation, organisational theory

Recently in the USA, the Southern Baptist Convention considered asking all of its member families to withdraw their children from public schools. The largest Protestant denomination in North America was weighing a resolution to condemn public, or 'government', schools as 'anti-Christian' institutions that promote homosexuality. The resolution suggested homeschooling as the first alternative for the denomination (Pinckney & Shortt, 2004). While the resolution did not pass, the conservative Southern Baptists did vote to secede from the Baptist World Alliance, as many felt that the two organisations were now too far apart on many theological and social issues. These two motions exemplify a broader phenomenon evident in many areas of social life in countries across the globe. Increasingly, people are withdrawing from many of the common institutions that have defined social life in market democracies over the last century (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Reich, 1995). Instead, they seek individualised – or privatised – control and enjoyment of these decisions, opting to leave institutions rather than participate and deliberate with fellow members, citizens or congregants.

Although homeschooling is just one instance of this wider trend, it is also perhaps the most prescient example in one of the areas most critical to social life in a pluralistic world. While there are often many good reasons for parents to educate their own children rather than send them to a local school, the decision to do so essentially represents the privatisation of educational decision-making. Homeschooling families are – often consciously – rejecting interference from, and accountability to, any external authority; as Reich (2002: 58) notes, home educators see the direction of their children's schooling 'as a matter properly under their control and no one else's... with no intermediary between them and their child'. And this move to wrest educational control

from the public square is happening on a mass scale, not confined only to religious fundamentalists. Although middle-class professionals may choose home education for different reasons than religious conservatives, all enjoy space created from the rollback of the public's responsibilities in education. Yet while many people can certainly articulate strong justifications for why home education makes sense in their particular circumstances, the widespread popularity of a movement based on the pursuit of individual advantage can have detrimental consequences for institutions premised on collective participation (Lubienski, 2000). In that sense, although there are obvious benefits for individuals, the larger move toward home education is part of a broader, global phenomenon of withdrawing from common enterprises, commodifying public goods and consumer-ising citizens.

This analysis examines the main arguments for the large-scale movement towards homeschooling, and considers the implications of such movements for the institution of public education in market-oriented democracies. In doing this, the essay makes no claims of any inherent superiority of public schooling. (Indeed, I am largely in agreement with many of the serious critiques of the institutions of mass schooling in pluralistic, democratic societies.) However, writing from a North American perspective, this paper presumes that homeschooling parents in more developed nations *choose* to educate their children at home, and that, without deciding to make such a choice, most parents send their children to local schools. Hence, school-based education (typically state-sponsored) serves as the default option for most families, and is therefore the natural point of reference in weighing arguments for homeschooling.¹

While largely theoretical, this paper draws on a range of perspectives in considering some of the arguments that advance the broader move toward homeschooling. After discussing the *right* to educate one's own child at home, the analysis considers claims of the effectiveness of homeschooling through a social science lens, finding that many of the claims are unsupported by empirical evidence and analysis. Then, I discuss the logical implications of homeschooling for the viability of democratic institutions by drawing on organisational theory to evaluate some of the claims for home-based education regarding institutional effects – implications that are often misrepresented or simply ignored by advocates of homeschooling. This is followed by a discussion of the receding role of broader public interests in the development of children. The concluding discussion sets home education within the wider neoliberal thinking on the role of individuals in market societies, where homeschooling represents a serious but hardly unique trend of withdrawing from collective efforts and privatising control in pursuit of individual advantage.

Advancing Home Education

In order to understand the notable rise of the home-education movement in many market democracies (Meighan, 1995; Ray, 2004), it is useful to consider some of the leading arguments that promote its growth. While families have always been educating their children in the home, the emergence of this

phenomenon in recent decades as an alternative to more common forms of schooling is not simply due to the removal of legal prohibitions against homeschooling. Instead, social movements such as this are nurtured through social networks, and championed in the public arena. As such, they are advanced largely by the power and appeal of the ideas undergirding the movement.

In fact, there are some excellent reasons for many families to educate their children at home. For some, of course, this is not a choice, but a necessity, when threats of violence, economic conditions or accidents of geography deprive children of their right to a state-funded education. However, in present-day market-oriented democracies, most families engaged in home education have *chosen* this alternative, believing that the reasons articulated in favour of homeschooling make it a superior approach – relative to the other available options – for their children. Yet, while this may make sense for some individual families, a larger-scale movement calling for a mass migration into home education is not based simply on the individual circumstances of its adherents, but on arguments which are thought to demonstrate that homeschooling is a generally superior option to other types of schooling for vast segments of the population. In the following sections, I outline four of the most prominent arguments for a mass movement into home education: parental rights, academic achievement, improvement of schools, and parental duties. Following each, I discuss the substance and implications of these claims.

Home education as a parental right

The argument: as outlined in landmark documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, parents have a ‘prior’ right to decide on the type of education to be provided for their children – a right that supersedes the rights of other external agents (see Monk, 2004). Deriving from the tenets of classic Western liberalism, this contention affirms the nuclear family as the primary social unit, with parents acting on behalf of, and in, the best interest of the child (see, e.g. Brighouse, 2000).

This is probably the best argument for allowing parents to educate their own children. Few would dispute a parent’s right to exercise authority over a child’s education. Parental control over many aspects of a child’s upbringing is a central part of the Western tradition, and rightly extends to educational decisions as well. And this would seem to include not only the right to choose between different educational institutions, but to choose to provide the education.

However, two things need to be noted with respect to this claim. First, while this right is valid, it is not absolute. Children are not simply the property of their parents, and parents are not the sole authority with respect to a child. Families are subject to externally imposed constraints and checks in a number of areas of child-rearing – commonly accepted limits on the free exercise of a parent’s will over a child. For instance, parents are not free to make decisions that needlessly put a child’s life or limb in jeopardy. Other forms of neglect or abuse would also provoke intervention from authorities external to the parent–child relationship. In the liberal tradition, individuals are ideally free to make their own decisions, and to enjoy or suffer the consequences of their

decisions. Thus, liberalism tends to advocate for as few formalised constraints on individuals as possible. However, children are a special case, generally recognised as not yet having the knowledge or autonomy to make their own decisions, or to enjoy or suffer the consequences of those decisions. Consequently, parents are typically seen as serving on behalf of the child, both making decisions for the child, and offering special protections for the child. Yet this proxy model pre-empts the liberal assumptions in some areas, since individuals (children) must bear the consequences of others' (parents) decisions, both good and bad. This is evident in, for instance, dietary choices, hygiene and religion. When a child must shoulder the consequences of another individual's (the parent's) repeated poor choices, then it is generally recognised that some form of external intervention is warranted. So although parents are usually the primary agent in this role, they are not the sole agent. The public holds an over-riding responsibility in the wellbeing of the child. This interest can supersede the parent's in certain circumstances, most notably when there is some sort of negligence or abuse occurring that is detrimental to the child's wellbeing or future. While this is most evident in instances of physical or sexual abuse, the public also has an interest in the child's educational wellbeing.

Secondly, the existence of a right does not necessarily dictate the manner in which it must be exercised, nor does it imply that it must be exercised at all. A right is not an imperative. For instance, although parents have the right to criticise their children, it does not follow that they should then constantly do so. All rights are set in the context of responsibility, and so the exercise of any right needs to be considered in terms of its consequences for others. This is particularly true in the case of home education, where the choice to exercise the right to homeschool has implications both for the child and (as is shown below) for others as well.

The relative effectiveness of home education

The argument: children educated at home have greater levels of educational attainment, on average, than children educated in public schools, often distinguishing themselves in academic competitions. This general record of performance relative to other options indicates that homeschooling is an effective approach to education (e.g. National Home Education Research Institute, 2003; Wall Street Journal Editorial Board, 2002).

While this is one of the most appealing arguments for home education, it is also probably the weakest. In making claims for the effectiveness of a practice, one needs to specify what the practice is intended to achieve. Just as there are myriad tasks assigned to more common forms of educational provision (Labaree, 1997), as an alternative to those forms of schooling, we could consider how well any number of generally recognised educational goals are met by homeschooling: fostering creativity, imparting skills, teaching tolerance and so forth.² Two of the primary goals most often discussed in relation to homeschooling are socialisation and academic achievement. The former involves a charge often levelled against homeschooling: that it inhibits the proper socialisation of children. In the narrower sense, this claim is overblown. There is little reason to think that homeschooling – if done correctly – cannot

introduce a child to basic social norms, at least as transmitted through a given family. (On the other hand, there is reason to think that this situation may deprive children of exposure to more diverse socialising experiences, as is described below.)

The latter goal of academic achievement is, however, much more problematic – but nonetheless prominent – as an argument for home education. As a case in point, homeschooling proponents in North America often cite two studies that show home-educated students scoring better than public school students on standardised tests (Ray, 1997; Rudner, 1999). Based on these findings, advocates explicitly and implicitly assert that home education ‘works’ (see, e.g. National Home Education Research Institute, 2003).³ Students educated at home certainly learn (if that is what we mean by ‘works’), but there is no basis for the claim that home education is a more effective form of education than other means of provision. A central tenet of empirical analysis holds that the mere presence of correlation does not imply cause. In that respect, evidence that some (or even all) students schooled at home outperform school-educated students in no way indicates that the practice of homeschooling *caused* improvements in academic achievement.

In fact, based on the data in these very studies, one might note that these same home-educated students also have background characteristics that differ, on average, from those of the typical public schooled student – characteristics associated with academic success, such as higher family income levels, higher levels of parental educational attainment, more stable families with higher rates of employment (for fathers), and higher rates of a parent (typically a mother) at home (Rudner, 1999; see also Belfield, 2004). With family attributes such as these, it is likely that these children would perform quite nicely in school settings as well.⁴

Indeed, a number of critical methodological obstacles stand in the way of attempts to demonstrate an overall superiority of homeschooling over other forms of educational provision. Perhaps the most daunting issue is that we simply do not have a good idea of how many children are educated at home. As we know that many families refuse or neglect to report their activities, from a social science standpoint it is virtually impossible to know if any claims regarding homeschooling activities or outcomes (or motivations) are representative of all home educators. Similarly, most research on home education measures students who are being educated at home at a given time. Families who have tried homeschooling and then returned to schools for various reasons are underrepresented in such surveys, meaning samples are more likely to reflect those who have felt successful with the approach. Moreover, there is the over-riding concern that studies of homeschooled students and families are studies of a self-selected population. Even if the social and demographic characteristics of representative samples of home-educated students matched those of representative samples of school-educated students – which is itself doubtful – the fact remains that the homeschooled families *chose* to pursue this option. This indicates two important things: (1) by definition, the families made a choice that reflects a serious interest in the education of their children; and (2) these families have the resources not only of time and means, but also the initiative, to make that choice. These factors

will generally influence a student's academic success, although they cannot necessarily be captured by typical sampling techniques.

Without knowing how many people are home educating, for what reasons, in what ways and to what effect, we cannot draw compelling conclusions about the degree to which the act of homeschooling boosts academic performance, especially relative to other forms of education – the 'value-added' question. The phenomenon inherently defies the experimental design model useful in assessing the value-adding effectiveness of a practice, as the choice that defines the act of home education pre-empts any use of random assignment. So, in view of the relatively positive educational trajectory we can infer with most homeschoolers – having the family attributes, including a deep commitment to a child's education, that would predict success in school settings anyway – we really cannot say much, if anything, about how much value home education adds to a child's learning relative to other forms of education. In light of advantageous student-to-teacher ratios, individually customised curricula, and family-background characteristics, it could be that, on average, homeschooled students should be doing even better than they are. Perhaps they would have even greater academic gains if they were in schools, since all these factors that define homeschooling are also associated with success in school. We do not know, and claims about the relative merits of home education are unsupportable.

Increased options and the impact on institutions

The argument: although sometimes cast as anti-democratic, the home-education movement can in fact help public institutions. Home education offers parents another option in a growing marketplace of educational choices (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Welner, 1999), and as such can contribute to the development of alternative instructional strategies that can be used in schools. This option also provides public schools with some much-needed competition.

Increasingly billed – at least in wealthier nations – as one of many lifestyle choices available to consumers, homeschooling is part of an expanding range of educational options that goes far beyond the old set of choices consisting of state-run or independent schools. In many settings, reforms and technological advances have introduced autonomous state-sponsored schools, proprietary schools, virtual schools and other forms (e.g. Espínola, 1993; Srivastava, 2004; Tooley, 1999). In this respect, education is beginning to resemble other aspects of consumer society in market-oriented countries.

Yet while we assume that choice is a good thing when consumers are selecting clothes or entertainment, for instance, there is reason to question whether this consumer model is appropriate for public goods such as education (Lubienski, 2003b). While the aggregate of individual choices can lead to general benefits in many cases, peculiarities of certain collective goods lead to market failures – the need for a good, or the need for a good to be evenly distributed, may be undermined through market models (e.g. public health or safety). Although this in itself does not preclude an element of choice in the production and distribution of a public good such as education, the homeschooling movement epitomises the broader moves toward unrestricted pursuit of individual preferences. As a lifestyle decision, home education

largely shuns collective goals in favour one's own (Ray, 1997). Furthermore, this is a lifestyle decision available only to those who can forego earnings and resources for their children's education – a sacrifice, but, by definition, an affordable one for those who make it. This is likely to have a detrimental impact on institutions designed to produce and distribute a good in an equitable manner.

Still, it is possible that external effects of this pursuit of one's own advantage can positively impact public education systems. As a relatively unregulated and by all accounts diverse enterprise, home education can serve as a source of innovation in the development of alternative curricula and pedagogies. While this can be beneficial to other forms of education, two caveats have to be noted. First, as homeschooling is focused on individual students or small groups, many potential instructional innovations may not necessarily replicate in school settings. Secondly, even when innovations can be used by other schools, almost no channels exist for the transmission of ideas out of homeschools and into public or other schools. Moreover, it is worth noting that many families appear to have rejected schools not for a lack of innovation, but because there is often seen to be too much innovation in many schools (Lubienski, 2003a).

Another area where home education can have a beneficial impact on public schools is through competition. While neither system is designed on a competitive model, homeschooling offers a viable alternative for families dissatisfied with a school's performance, thus providing a form of sanction in cases where a school's budget is tied to enrolment. In that sense, failing schools can essentially be forced to pay a price for their ineffectiveness by losing students to other options. While neat in theory, this claim depends on a number of assumptions. Students would have to leave failing schools for better options. However, the institutional effectiveness of schools is only slightly less opaque than the effectiveness of home education. Failing schools are often protected by a more passive clientele, while more consumer-minded families may leave high performing schools for a number of reasons (Benveniste *et al.*, 2003; Willms & Echols, 1992). (In fact, in my research on local education markets in North America, it is often not low-performing public schools, but higher-performing religious schools that have been most threatened by the growth of home education; see Lubienski, 2004.) Moreover, a critical number of students would have to leave a school for their loss to have a real impact. In fact, the loss of a few disgruntled families might be welcomed by some administrators who are tired of contending with vocal dissenters (Hirschman, 1970). Furthermore, organisations would have to sense the loss of students to respond – homeschooling families that have never attended schools are less likely to be noticed by an organisation than are families that have left. On the other hand, the loss of homeschool students can be challenging to local schools, but not necessarily in ways that they can address. Simple budgetary sanctions aside, a school's effectiveness derives from several sources, including the peer effect of students – that is, the background characteristics that students bring with them to the classroom, and the impact it can have on the learning and aspirations of other students (Bell, 2003; Hutchison, 2003; Rothstein, 2004; Thrupp, 1999). The loss of families with high

expectations for their children, and the initiative and means to act on them, are likely to have repercussions for schools more serious than the loss of operating revenue, and may easily outweigh any beneficial aspects of competition.

Families shaping educational experiences

The argument: parents are best situated to know the needs and interests of a child, and to shape the curriculum accordingly. By elevating family control, home education shields students from destructive influences, positioning parents to impart more appropriate values and experiences to their children.

Frustrated with the ability of schools to deal with the individual aspects of each child, or concerned about their cultural influence, many families turn to home education as a means of maximising the 'prior interest' they have in their children's education. As noted earlier, one of the primary functions ascribed to education is the idea of socialisation. While this goal can be addressed to some degree within the confines of the immediate family, in a pluralistic democracy, this goal for education takes on the added imperative of exposing children to more diverse experiences and people than they would be likely to encounter within their own family. Legitimate parental concerns about academics and other influences need to be weighed against the public's responsibility to make sure that children have the skills and confidence to choose (if they wish) to live and work with different people and cultures.

In fact, anecdotal evidence abounds of families and other groups using homeschooling to *limit* the exposure that children have to other ways of life – an effort to reproduce the worldviews and lifestyles of the parents onto the next generation. As but one extreme example, polygamist communities in British Columbia and the Western USA use homeschooling as part of an explicit strategy to limit their children's experience with (and comfort in) the outside society. This is done so that the children will then stay in the community and accept 'the Principle' that women and girls are to be treated as property (Krakauer, 2003). While obviously a fringe practice, and certainly not reflective of homeschoolers in general,⁵ this example points to an important issue. Although radical elements might be the more obvious cases of this, in fact, homeschooling itself is inherently structured to reproduce the family in terms of ideologies, class positions, worldviews and so forth. While to many this may sound like a good idea, it also has some serious repercussions for societies that celebrate individual choice.

Ironically, although homeschooling epitomises the elevation of individual choice, it can also inhibit the exercise of choice. True choice is based on autonomy, where individuals are empowered to select from a range of alternatives. Pre-empting the opportunity for individuals to investigate and experience different alternatives undercuts their autonomy by effectively constraining the range of choices available. Yet the autonomy of a child, as a preautonomous person, is entrusted to the parents – a set of people whose characteristics are homogenous to the child. The family, as the basic social unit, is properly structured and situated to limit the range of influences children experience. So while families appropriately serve as a shield, in liberal democracies that celebrate the rights of individuals, the public has an inherent interest in assuring that future citizens are exposed to different worldviews,

life options and so on. This goal is most often assigned to schools, which (despite their failings) are more heterogeneous than the nuclear family. Both sets of interests – the family and the public – have been institutionalised in the lives of children as part of a creative tension that seeks to guarantee the child is both protected and exposed, that the child has access to both the comfort of sameness and the stimulation of diversity. Just as it would be a mistake to recognise only the public's interest in heterogeneity, the wide-scale elimination of this institution in favour of a narrower focus on the family's homogeneity would also be mistaken.

Conclusion: Unaddressed Problems and the Future of Home Education

The growing movement toward home education is fuelled by claims about schools and homeschooling that often reveal unexamined assumptions undergirding the movement, but which also suggest that it is part of the wider trend across many countries toward privatising parts of social life that previously were thought to cross into the public sphere. Claims about parental rights and duties to shape a child's educational experiences, while valid, neglect the public's legitimate interest in that process. Assumptions about the performance of homeschooling relative to public schools, and its impact on public education, indicate an often unwarranted disdain for the public sphere. Indeed, the ascendant neoliberal paradigm promotes the privatisation of public concerns, commodifying the benefits of common undertakings.

Of course, the public's interest in the education of children has been institutionalised largely in the form of state-run school systems. For many homeschoolers, this form of governance is the essence of the incapacity of state-funded education systems to educate their children. The mass production model, applied to children through the apparatus of government, serves as the crux of constant conflict between various interest groups and ideologies, leading to faddish, impersonal and ineffective schools. Furthermore, the institutions of the state can function as a means of social control, and can limit opportunities for some groups. While there is certainly some truth to these views, on the other hand, education in the public sphere also serves as a source of liberation for some groups, expanding opportunity for many who would not otherwise have advantages from their home lives, and providing and creating a sanctuary for those in more oppressive home environments. Indeed, compared with the institution of the family, the institutions of state-supported education are better suited to promote equity – a central concern of a democratic and meritocratic society.

The equal opportunity to advance socially and assume responsibilities based on one's ability and effort, rather than one's inherited advantage, is an implicit foundation of democratic life, and an even more important consideration in diverse and pluralistic societies where group advantage is a constant concern. Ideally, education should make the advantages or disadvantages of family background irrelevant to one's future prospects – a goal the schools often fail at, yet one that homeschooling is not only incapable of addressing, but is intended to frustrate. While schools too often exacerbate the social and

economic differences between students, the public nature of these institutions affords the opportunity to illuminate those problems, and the public structures undergirding schools often position schools as the best way to address inequities. Home education, on the other hand, not only takes those issues out of the public arena, but also solidifies an individual's family background as the primary determinant of future success.

This ascendancy of individual advantage over common concerns is not the exclusive purview of the homeschooling movement, but reflects the neoliberal paradigm increasingly evident across the globe for the production and distribution of many public goods and services. There is an anti-institutional element to the home-education movement, where parents believe that institutions can be destructive, or think that they can do a better job than an impersonal bureaucracy. However, as the homeschooling movement grows and matures, it is quite possible that much of it will become reinstitutionalised in structures that parallel public organisations (but are beyond the control of the public), as families discover the problems, specialisations and economies of scale that shaped other educational institutions. Thus, in addition to anti-institutionalism, the broader theme of home education centres on the notion of taking control of an issue that previously had a distinct public aspect as well. Debates over curricula and pedagogy highlight the messy and contested nature of schooling in the public realm, but the simple and efficient solution of homeschooling only withdraws from such public discussions, privatising and enclosing the common benefits of educational endeavours.

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Notes

1. Therefore, this analysis does not examine homeschooling efforts that are done out of political, cultural or physical necessity: for instance, the education of oppressed groups whose rights to an education are denied by authorities. Nor does it consider other educative activities (e.g. learning motor skills) that virtually all children experience in the home.
2. However, as a largely individualised enterprise, it would be unfair to consider how well home education succeeds in fulfilling certain societal goals placed on institutional schools; for instance, we really cannot say that home education promotes segregation or leads to de-tracking – and it would be unrealistic to expect homeschooling to contribute to those types of societal goals.
3. 'Home Schooling Works!' is the claim made by the (US) Home School Legal Defense Association in describing this study that it funded (<http://www.hslda.org/docs/study/rudner1999/default.asp>). This is despite the fact that authors are careful to warn that methodological issues prevented generalising to larger populations or making claims about treatment effects.
4. Of course, as noted, it is inappropriate to generalise to the general population, as the research did not draw a representative sample of homeschoolers – a caveat that would apply to claims regarding both academic achievement and family background characteristics. In making the point about family background characteristics, I am not claiming that this research shows that homeschooling families have 'better' attributes for education; without a represen-

tative sample, such claims cannot be sustained. The point is that advocates who 'prove' the superior academic performance of homeschoolers with non-representative data could have applied the same (erroneous) logic to demographic data in showing that home-educated students have other advantages (which would, of course, have undercut their assertions regarding academic performance).

5. Different forms of education can be and have been used by different groups in similar strategies to limit students' future prospects in the 'outside' world. The elevated role of the family in homeschooling, however, makes it easier to abuse the practice for such ends.

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