

A PERSONAL JOURNEY INTO HOME LEARNING

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Abstract

In this narrative the author, Colleen Raja, shares her personal experience and reflections on the decision she made to homeschool. Through reflection and story she shares her own struggles and triumphs in learning about herself, her surroundings and the true desires and needs of her children. She also addresses and debunks some of the typical stereotypes and objections to home learning. In the end she sees that what had taken her several years to discover about and desire from the lifestyle of home learning took her children mere moments to embrace.

Rationale

The Beginning

Choosing to homeschool wasn't a natural decision. For my part it was very much about care, love, and concern, I will refrain from speaking about my husband other than to say how very supportive he always is of my 'strange' or unconventional ideas. When I was a young single-mom, of 19, I didn't believe in homeschooling as something that was good for children. I imagined sickly looking pale children who had no friends

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and didn't go outside. I laugh now, thinking about how absurd and naive my own impressions were, nonetheless I came by them honestly, as I suspect many others do. It was through a series of coincidental conversations with people who were clearly more open than I was, that I began to realize that my misunderstandings on homeschooling were more stereotypes than truth and far more prejudicial than reasonably commonsensical. So over several years, though I wasn't always serious about it, the thought grew in my mind and I wondered about homeschooling. It wasn't until my oldest son left daycare and started school that I began to seriously question things. I was concerned with the big and small things alike. I began to wonder why my child didn't have enough time to complete his lunch and why every small infraction (like horsing around with other boys) on the playground seemed to land him in the principal's office. More than that, I began to question the seemingly political curriculum that had my child openly wondering if it was at all a 'good thing' to be a boy. I often kept silent on these things, advocating where I felt I could, but quickly learned that I was not the 'professional' in the situation and that my parental opinions could be taken or left at any time within the context of professional discernment. As time went on and I became more confident in my concerns I began to initiate frank and open conversations with my husband about my concerns about school and, of course, the idea of homeschooling. It wasn't until five years later that we would begin to teach our own.

My Story

I suppose that my care and concern about schooling came from a normal tendency I have to think critically and more-so from my desire to see my children become 'their own persons', not persons shaped by an institution. I grew to believe that

as long as my boys were subject to what can be arguably called school “conventions” – a worldview imposed on them by mandated government ideologies; visited upon them through social pressure and curriculum - that they would never be truly free to grow to be their own persons. That being said, it is important to point out that I am not antigovernment, nor do I consider myself right or left wing. I am, however, strongly in favour of the kind of freedom that simply doesn’t exist in schools today. This is a freedom that I believe that schools, by their very nature, cannot let exist. I am reminded of John Taylor Gatto’s description of the “seven-lesson school teacher”. Lesson five is Intellectual Dependency.

The expert makes all the important choices; only I, the teacher, can determine what my kids must study, or rather, only the people who pay me can make those decisions, which I then enforce. If I’m told that evolution is a fact instead of a theory, I transmit that as ordered, punishing deviants who resist what I have been told to tell them to think. This power to control what children will think lets me separate successful students from failures very easily. (Gatto, 2005, p. 7)

Let me explain where I was coming from. I remember all too well sitting in my own university classes, guided by veteran professionals, and amongst soon to be professional teachers and ECE’s trying to find my niche. I knew I was capable in my fields, and I enjoyed academic success, but in my heart there was a constant and ever-growing opposition to what I was being taught. There were many courses, conversations, discussions and debates about curriculum, behaviour, ‘the role of parents’ and morality (whether we called it that or not). In being involved in these discussions wholeheartedly I found myself constantly advocating for, what I believed

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was, a better way for children. I wanted people to see the value in things like parental inclusion, avoiding “assessment”, listening and caring as a first response, better choices and aiming for personal standards that would, whenever possible, let children ‘be’, and be loved. Though I supported “school”, I didn’t support an uncompromising system that seemed to only work in one way. Children, in my view, were too important for that. As Wendy Priesnitz (1995) wrote:

...when we speak of children’s rights, we usually refer to protections rather than true rights. In this mode the person to be protected has no choice but to receive the protection according to society’s rules. So it is with Education. We acknowledge the right of the child to an education, then make the delivery compulsory. (p. 128)

To further my position I do think that knowledge is, in many cases, as they say, power. However, if a good amount of schooling doesn’t incite one to act on what he or she knows then what is the meaning of it all? I knew that as an ‘academic’ I might be able to sit around ‘discussing’ these issues all day long or write a few papers, but where would that lead? So this became my plight. There I was with degrees focused in media, propaganda, social control and the power of words (AKA Journalism and Communications); coupled with a modest training in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Education, not to mention my own experiences. While at the same time I was putting my oldest son through a system that I constantly questioned; advocating when appropriate, but never certain that I was doing the right thing by leaving him there. I truly wanted him to be free. I didn’t dislike his teachers; I knew them on a surface level and thought they were ideal for the most part. Yet I saw so many conflicts within the

bureaucratic confines of the system, the overwhelmed schools and the governments of the day who seemed to regulate “curriculum” based on their target electoral audience. Further, I struggled with seeing colleagues, peers and mentors, teachers and ECE’s alike, say terrible things and act in inappropriate ways toward the very parents and children they were meant to support. So, it was that the more I learned and experienced, the more I realized that things didn’t seem right; the more strongly I believed that I had to put my faith in the professionals around me, the more I had to wonder ‘why not me?’ If my high expectations were for those who taught and cared for my children, and for myself who had and would teach and care for others, why wouldn’t I teach my own?

To complicate things further I must admit that I dreaded being looked down on because of social stereotypes that clearly existed in my family, in society and amongst my peers regarding homeschooling, not to mention the inevitable choice I would have to make to give up my prospective career and what would most certainly be a high paying teacher’s salary. At the end of the day, that certainly wasn’t a good enough reason for me, nonetheless it was a consideration. The positive research and personal evidence I found on home learning was far too overwhelming to ignore, some of which will be noted within the literature review. Below is a summation of concerns and responses that I, as a pre-homeschooler was, and am now still somewhat cognizant of.

Some of the concerns most commonly voiced by friends, relatives or neighbours involve a lack of socialization opportunities; lack of educational tools and resources in the home, especially for advanced academic subjects; doubts about parental ability and qualifications to teach; lack of high school diplomas or other

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credits which might limit career or further educational possibilities; and the danger of brainwashing or overprotection by narrow-minded parents who could severely limit their children's view of the world.

Although these are the things that should legitimately be of concern when considering home-based education, parents, perhaps to their credit, tend to worry about them more than necessary. The experience of other families eliminates them as real problems. (Priesnitz, 1995, p. 87)

My final conflicts were with myself and the path of life I had been seriously questioning. That is the path of being a teacher. Did I really want to spend the next thirty years of my life teaching a very confined curriculum alongside what I felt was dangerously close to 'government issued morality' (as I saw it)? Did I really want to risk losing my perspective on loving children, or risk struggling with becoming a teacher caught between government expectations and children desperate for simple and well deserved acceptance, and relationships based on a genuineness of heart – not "professional" guidelines?

Human relationships become "abstract" when they are conditioned by distant impersonal forces, such as the so-called free market or the mass media, or by huge institutions like powerful governments or corporations. We can see the history of schooling in the West over the past two centuries as the triumph of abstraction and bureaucratic management over local, communal, and organic ways of living and learning. Public schooling was conceived as a form of social discipline that would enable the industrial state to harness the energies of the

young generation to the demands of a competitive system of production serving the interests of a national state. (Miller, 2005)

I knew the more difficult road would be to give up the path of professionalism in order to turn to a life I had never experienced before. The idea of life as an at home parent, personal caregiver and ‘facilitator of learning’ for my children was – to be brutally honest – not one that I had ever thought to be of the slightest interest to me. Whatever my reasoning was, I remain sure that I was a most unlikely candidate for the job. I am embarrassed to say that I think, in part, I feared being undervalued as an at home caregiver instead of a trained professional. I knew many in Canadian society stereotypically devalued the idea of the ‘Domestic Engineer’, choosing instead to pay homage to the ‘working woman’ as the greater woman. In discussing the dominant models by which we live, Riane Eisler in her keynote speech to the Homeschool Association of California conveyed “Caregiving, that most essential human activity, in the dominations system is relegated to a secondary place to women, as in ‘that’s women’s work’” (2004). I am happy to say that in my ignorance I was very wrong on all counts.

Purpose

One of the most under-researched topics in all of education is homeschooling. Upon reflection I have to wonder if it is good or bad to encourage the dissection of something so personal. I find it oddly comforting knowing that it would be incredibly difficult to gain an accurate assessment of all forms of homeschooling since it, like other lifestyles, does not follow a regimented path.

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My intention is to reveal the lack of research supporting the homeschooling initiative. I hope to expose some of the myths and stereotypes that are present in this modern culture that have influenced, not only myself but those around me at the time of my decision to begin homeschooling. Further, I will expose some of the general differences between homeschooling and public schooling. This will be done through a general review of the literature on homeschooling.

Through this short study I also hope to reflect on, and continue to be motivated to gain a better understanding of the life path that I, along with the my husband and children have chosen to undertake. It is important to note here that although I will be writing largely about my own experiences, the decision to homeschool was not made exclusively by adults. In fact it was the willingness and excitement of our two children that gave my husband and I the courage we needed to take on the challenge of homeschooling. It was the fearless attitude of our children that gave us the confirmation we needed to know that home learning was the right choice for our family. With these things in mind I am challenged to reflect on my philosophical growth in order to gain a better understanding of the changes that have occurred in my heart and life over the last several years due to what I see as my own deschooling. Finally, I hope to gain a better personal understanding of the importance and value of first person reflection as a research methodology.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the general literature that exists today on homeschooling. In 2003, the number of homeschooled children in the USA was an estimated 2.2 million (Bielek & Princiotta, 2006). Yet still, little conclusive

information has been written on the practice of homeschooling, and the people who are involved in it (Collom, 2005). It is intended that in this literature review several aspects of homeschooling will be explored in order to grasp the general approach to this specific topic and how it is understood today.

It is important to note that much of the data mentioned here has been carefully extracted from articles pertaining to homeschooling. Some of the aforementioned articles hold a valuable information pertaining to the practice of homeschooling, however in some articles, the practical side of homeschooling did not necessarily make up the dominate purpose of the literature itself. Homeschooling has grown in popularity, yet there is very little research dedicated specifically to sharing primary information about homeschooling families; their causes, struggles, strategies and lifestyles (Green, 2007).

One reason for this may be because of the “underground” homeschooling movement wherein parents avoid sharing personal information because of their belief in privacy (Grubb, 1998). This is in some part due to the fact that many homeschoolers do not hold a status quo world view and thus are not willing to give up personal information to researchers who are unknown to them (Collom, 2005). It also may be because homeschooling is a relatively under-researched topic. Whatever the reasoning, it is my intent to extract as much basic, yet practical information as possible from the literature I have collected. I hope to use this data to prove that there is much more relevant research needed in order to better understand homeschooling as more than just an educational choice, but an intimate culture.

What is homeschool?

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Just as the act of homeschooling cannot be understood in a simplistic way, the definition of homeschooling itself demands a broader definition than one might assume. For example, simply defining homeschool as teaching “school subjects to one’s children at home” does not do this pedagogy justice (“Homeschool”, 2011). In fact, many progressive researchers are now rightly viewing homeschooling as more than just an educational choice, but a life choice. This is because the personal nature of homeschooling and the diversity of homeschooling philosophies have made it difficult for educational researchers to see it as an easily definable ideology or pedagogue (Collom, 2005). Although the research on this topic is limited one thing is clear, homeschooling is a very personal decision. The parents who choose to homeschool see it as the right alternative to a public school system that does not meet the needs of their children in some way.

Studies on homeschooling suggest that it encompasses a much larger framework than once thought. Within any family, homeschooling can take place using one specific teaching strategy or avenue; or it can take place in multiple ways wherein parents make use of various available methodologies. Whatever they choose one thing is certain, parents are not bound by the same approved curriculum strategies and methodologies set out by government agencies (Grubb, 1998). Furthermore they are not as constricted by bureaucratic influences that all too often play heavily into the making of the “system”. Arguably, public opinion, teachers unions, lobby groups and funding applications are examples of things that, at times, are considered before the needs of students. This is not to say that homeschoolers do not have to be accountable, but rather that they themselves become solely responsible for the social

and educational well-being of their own children and so have little interaction with government agencies etc (Ray, 2004).

Most homeschooled children are taught in the home by one or two parents. Parents however, often find creative and viable methods of ensuring that homeschooling is not exclusive to the home. Common ways of doing this is by working in mission fields, volunteer work, national competitions and participation in special studies and events (Ray, 2004).

Who is homeschooled and why?

The short answer to this question seems to be “anyone” and “why not?” Nonetheless I will begin with the ‘who’s’. Besides the growing number of students throughout Canada and the U.S. who are homeschooled, some of the most remarkable and memorable people in the world did the bulk of their learning in the home milieu. From Hollywood celebrities like Dakota Fanning and Whoopi Goldberg to incredible artists such as Claude Monet and Leonardo De Vinci, homeschooling it seems is as old as education itself. Great names in literature like C.S. Lewis and Robert Frost along with famous inventors Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison lived as they learned and learned as they lived. There is no doubt that their learning environment played a key role in shaping their success. (“Successful and Famous People That Were Homeschooled”, 2011)

The truth is that there are really no specific criteria that children must meet in order to be homeschooled. Homeschooled children have parents who, for whatever personal reason, have decided that their child or children are better off being taught at home. For instance, parents may choose to homeschool their child for spiritual

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reasons. In the United States there are a large number of Christian homeschooling families. These families believe that the public education has gone too far to secularize learning and therefore no longer coincides with their own values and belief systems (Bielick, Chapman, & Princiotta, 2004).

However, it is important to point out that homeschooling is not exclusive to Christian families, nor do Christian families only homeschool for religious reasons. The “whys” of homeschooling are as diverse as the families who choose it. Many parents feel that their children should be taught by people who genuinely care for their children. Consider that children in public school spend more than six hours each school day with adults who are not family members. In an age where teachers are often expected not to touch pupils and not to be a disciplinarian, children are regularly left without knowing their own boundaries.

Parents often feel that for whatever reason, their children are not receiving the education that they need (Collom, 2005).

Many parents feel that difficult social situations in schools are getting out of hand. They want their children to participate in a positive social environment which benefits and highlights their education. These parents feel that many government policies or inaction in behavioural situations have hindered or will potentially hinder their children in areas of personal growth and emotional security within the school system (Bielick, Chapman, & Princiotta, 2004).

Furthermore, some parents choose homeschooling simply because they want to give their children the choice (Green, 2007). These parents in particular recognize the benefit and value of homeschool that has already been established and thus allow their

children the right to take part in their own decision making about schooling and learning. Children are given a voice, and take part in choosing their own educational path from public school all the way to university level studies. That being said, the research confirms that there is such a broad range of reasoning for homeschooling that social issues such as race, gender, class, education, marital status and family income do not play a significant role in parents' reasons for homeschooling and the achievement of their children (Collom, 2005).

What are the stigmas or stereotypes attached to homeschooling and responses to these?

There seems to be great offence taken by some in government, school boards and higher education pertaining to the homeschooling lifestyle choice. Many of society's educational leaders have come out against homeschooling citing concerns over everything from unnecessary social retardation to conspiracy theories about elitist and religious parental dictatorships.

Dave Arnold of the Illinois Education Association said of homeschooling that, "Parents would be wise to help their children and themselves by leaving the responsibility of teaching math, science, art, writing, history, geography and other subjects to those who are knowledgeable, trained and motivated to do the best job possible" (Neal, 2006, p. 103-104).

In response, research has shown that in comparison to their public school counterparts, homeschooled children almost always excel in academic skills as well as in the hotly contested area of socialization (Neal, 2006). Moreover, homeschooled children have proven to emerge from their studies as more confident about politics and

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government, likely to engage in dissent and vote independently, act respectfully as well as go to college or university (Ray, 2004).

Critics charge that often homeschooled children are in danger of being streamlined academically. Furthermore they are concerned that homeschooled children will be “weird” and unable to function in the real world (Aria, 1999). Opponents of homeschooling say that there is no telling how a public education might have benefited homeschooled children, because these people believe that public education gives a broad range of options for children to explore (Aria, 1999). Furthermore, they believe that homeschooled children lack the social experiences and understandings to become leaders. However, in a broad study, a Private School Principal named Linda Montgomery found that homeschooling “nurtured leadership at least as well as it does in the conventional system” (Ray, 2004, p. 7).

Some criticize Christian homeschoolers in particular, citing the closed nature of a Christian only curricular program. However, homeschooling parents rightly point out that no education is free of values. For these parents it is a common belief that the values of the public system do not always coincide with their family values. In that right, Christian homeschoolers respond to critics by exercising their right to choose the value system under which their children will receive their education (Neal, 2006). Parents of homeschoolers are also accused of elitism. Critics charge that parental elitism and monetary fortune has led some parents to school their children at home; as if their children were too good for the regular school system (Aria, 1999). Critics charge that these types of children are at risk of perpetuating the social gap that is so prominent in society. Along with this, critics fear that homeschooled children miss out

on the opportunity to be multiculturalized. This in itself is an opinion that is contested by homeschooling families. In fact, some homeschoolers charge that it is the public systems that hinder growth and development of children for a variety of reasons. Furthermore a recent study conducted by Bielek and Princiotta (2006), shows that in the United States, 50% of homeschooled children lived in families where the family income was \$25,000 or less, and only 26% lived in families where the income was above \$75,000, thus demonstrating that homeschooling transcends socioeconomic boundaries.

How does homeschool learning differ from mainstream teaching?

It seems that if there were a nemesis to mainstream teaching, homeschooling would be it. Homeschooling offers so many things that a public school education cannot. To begin, traditional homeschooling offers a lower student to teacher ratio than even the best private schools (Neal, 2006). Curriculum expectations and teaching methodologies are geared specifically to the children in the home and adapted to meet each child's individual abilities. Parents in this atmosphere feel free to integrate core curriculum with family values and traditions in order to give their children a more holistic education (Slattery, 2005).

Furthermore, teaching strategies within homeschooling can vary in order to balance between teacher and student abilities (Slattery, 2005). In other words, families can easily work together to find out what methodologies and strategies work best for the entire family. Further, many homeschooling families do not "school" their children at all. Although there is an expectation that learning will take place, many families leave the topic, methodology and planning to the learners. Parents learn alongside, or help their

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children find the resources that will enable them to learn from their own points of interest. From this it can be argued that homeschooling offers a strong alternative to congested classrooms, and regimented curriculums that keep teachers somewhat confined in terms of meeting the needs of all of the students.

Yet another component exists and plays a large role in the difference between homeschooling and public schooling. That is, in a word, freedom. Families who homeschool enjoy the rare freedom of being allowed to go to and fro without worry of school attendance schedule. This means that families can feel free to plan weekday adventures, teach on vacation, and expose their children to relevant hands on education during school days and in school hours (Neal, 2006).

Many homeschooling families enjoy the freedom to do extras. For example, if a homeschooled child is accelerating in the area of music, parents have the option of taking them to a weekday matinee at a symphony (Slattery, 2005). Also, if a child is greatly interested in exploring nature, parents have the freedom to teach their children in an outdoor environment or integrate hiking into their child's curriculum. If a family wants to make faith a large part of the curriculum, they can freely talk about God and make community service a large part of their lifestyle. Whatever choices homeschooling parents make, the most positive thing is simply that they have the freedom to make that choice. They are not at the mercy of school bureaucracy, or strained teachers; homeschoolers have effectively taken the power and responsibility of teaching their children away from the government and put it into their own hands.

Furthermore, in a home learning environment, one might rightly argue that the family dynamic is better equipped to put the learning back in the hands of the learner

than the traditional school setting. That is to, whenever possible; leave the choice of what and how to learn to the learner who is, in most cases, learning within the authentic atmosphere of a community, not the constructs of a bureaucratic network. Thus home learners are free to share control in the learning and home environments, not perpetuate the 'school' mandate within the home. John Taylor Gatto (2005) wrote this of communities;

One thing I do know, though: most of us who've had a taste of loving families, even a little taste, want our kids to be a part of one. One other thing I know is that eventually you have to come to be a part of a place – part of its hills and streets and waters and people – or you will live a very, very sorry life as an exile forever. Discovering meaning for yourself as well as discovering satisfying purpose for yourself, is a big part of what education is. How can this be done by locking children away from the world is beyond me. (p. 61-62)

Lastly, it is possible that the greatest difference between homeschool and public school are the well rounded achievements of the children and young adults involved. For example, one significant study found that 25% of homeschooled children were at least a grade or two above their peers. Moreover, homeschooled students score very high on achievement tests and commonly reach the 70th to the 80th percentiles. The parents, however, say that the real proof that homeschooling works is in their "well-adjusted and well-rounded children" (Bielek & Princiotta, 2006).

What's missing?

Though it was possible to find information about homeschooling, there is a serious gap in the research. That being, the understanding of how homeschooling

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really works for everyone involved. Though many may criticize and fear homeschooling, the evidence strongly suggests that it is growing faster than ever and becoming more and more normal. When looking into such an issue, there is critical information that needs to be added to the discussion being done by researchers (Green, 2007). Some of this is the following: How do the children feel? How do the parent's feel? Is this a life opener or an irresponsible stifling practice? What really happens during homeschool? Even if every family is different, isn't there some commonality that can be researched? Why has so little been done on the actuality and reality of the practice of homeschooling; especially when an express purpose of homeschooling is to be outside of the typical system (why are we doing typical research on a non-typical phenomenon)?

Defining my Methodologies

For the purpose of this research paper I am using a qualitative approach comprising both Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry and Autoethnography. The former is demonstrated in that my research relies heavily on storytelling and the intertwining of story with outside resources. The later, Autoethnography, is clearly demonstrated within this research because the story under examination is exclusively my own. That being said, I feel it appropriate to make note of both methodologies as they are best suited to describe my intended approach.

Qualitative research encompasses a broad scope of exploration for the investigator. To give it a simplistic definition I might assert that it offers those things which quantitative research does not. That is, a look into the human side of research

wherein the people are the primary focus and subjectivity is assumed. As one source put it:

It is therefore difficult to define qualitative research since it doesn't involve the same terminology as ordinary science. The simplest definition is to say it involves methods of data collection and analysis that are nonquantitative (Lofland & Lofland 1984). Another way of defining it is to say it focuses on "quality", a term referring to the essence or ambience of something (Berg 1989). Others would say it involves a subjective methodology and yourself as the research instrument (Adler & Adler 1987). Everyone has their favorite or "pet" definition. Historical-comparative researchers would say it always involves the historical context, and sometimes a critique of the "front" being put on to get at the "deep structure" of social relations. Qualitative research most often is *grounded theory*, built from the ground up. (O'Connor, 2011)

“Narrative Inquiry characteristically begins with the researcher’s autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the research puzzle (called by some the research problem or research question...)” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 41), it is experience as expressed in lived and told stories. Nel Noddings (2007) points out that for example, “much of today’s research is focused on what works, in, teaching everyone algebra” (p. 81). Contrarily, an autobiographical narrative inquirer would likely begin with his/her personal experience in algebra and then look into the stories of others who have a story to share along the same subject lines. Thus the narrative inquirer is not hoping to find merely “what works”, but rather “what is happening to people” in the realm of algebra and to make a contribution regarding human experience of such.

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Fernanda Duarte (2007) explains Autoethnography as research wherein “a writing genre in which the researcher ‘becomes’ the very phenomenon under investigation (Mehan & Wood 1975 cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741)” (p. 1). In other words it is the personal experience of the researcher that becomes the main focal point of the research itself.

It is therefore a rather personal style of research characterized by ‘confessional tales’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740) that do not figure in more conventional styles of academic writing. Autoethnography has no pretense of objectivity. The researcher’s own experience becomes the object of investigation, as she is ‘fully committed to and immersed’ in the groups she studies’. (Duarte, 2007, p.2)

My Approach

My intention is to as frankly and as vulnerably as needed, use my own story, to bring to light and in turn reflect on my journey into the lifestyle of home learning. I have chosen this process of reflection and storytelling because of the authenticity it brings to something as personal as a lifestyle choice. Since I am clearly immersed in the lifestyle of home learning (I have chosen, that is, to keep my children out of the public school system so that they can be free to learn in a variety of different environments and in many different contexts) I will attempt to unpack and express my thought process through this personal inquiry.

On “story”, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) had this to say:

As researchers we come to each new inquiry field living our stories. Our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories. Their

lives do not begin the day we arrive nor do they end as we leave. Their lives continue. (p. 64)

It is with this in mind that I cut into my own story, part-way and reflect. My story neither begins here nor ends with the completion of this short work. It is instead an opportunity to look back, to look ahead, to learn and to share.

Why use these methods

Though much more research is needed in the area of alternative learning, I have no intention or hope of grandeur in adding my thoughts and experiences to the conversation. I would, however, consider it meaningful if, even for a moment, someone who had brushed aside, or dismissed alternative education was intrigued enough to take a second look. It's as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) say:

The contribution of narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field. Furthermore, many narrative studies are judged to be important when they become literary texts to be read by others not so much for the knowledge they contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research that they permit. This use of narrative inquiry extends the educative linking of life, literature, and teaching... (p. 42)

Limitations and Strengths

This research is limited by two main factors. The first is that it is a research paper of limited capacity because of its length. As it is not my intention to examine my research in the context of a full thesis I am naturally limiting my self-reflection, and risk

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leaving out data that may otherwise be valuable. The second limitation is the context of the research itself. In comparing this study to formal research it quickly becomes clear that my exploration limited by its own subjectivity.

On the contrary, this research is undoubtedly strengthened by its seeming limitations, meaning, because the research is not formal in nature it presents no misrepresentation of objectivity. It is unabashedly informal and subjective so as to offer a glimpse of life without the presupposition of solving a research problem. It is a thoughtful contribution, nothing more and nothing less.

Importance of the Study

As expressed earlier, there is a lack of information in the subject area of homeschooling. Further there is, in my experience, a notable amount stereotypical mainstream misinformation that perpetuates inaccurate and sometimes negative attitudes about alternative learning styles. That being said, it is necessary that any positive contribution be seen as important.

Discussion

I can remember thinking often about the stereotypes of homeschooling and of schooling alike. Wondering if the censorship that I was seeing in schools really matched the talking points on politically correct behaviour that seemed to be constantly coming from teacher's, professors and peers. I had always had a policy of open communication with my boys where no subject was 'off the table', but I couldn't help but wonder what I would do as a homeschooler if their personal opinions became a source of concern...politically speaking.

Of course it would be the height of hypocrisy to pretend that I don't have my own ideologies and that I wouldn't train my own children through that lens. I do.

Nonetheless after four years of teaching my own I can say that I make certain to listen to and encourage all questioning and discussion topics (both politically correct and potentially offensive, alike) with the hope that my children will grow to always question, and always think with their own mind.

As highlighted in the literature review, many people believe that homeschooling parents give their children narrow ideologies instead of broad opportunities. This is a comment/concern I have heard, primarily from educators, more than once. In reflecting on this concern I have realized that I do not believe the public education system and its teachers shy away from teaching ideology. On the contrary I am certain that the public system is instead one of the greatest perpetuators of it. One example of this is government and school board sanctioned 'appropriate' forms of speech in the name of political correctness that shut down questioning and important communication skills that are so very essential in the formative years. Under fear of 'getting in trouble', adults and children alike spend a great deal of time monitoring their words and avoiding conversations that could otherwise lead down untrodden paths.

In her book *When School Reform Goes Wrong*, Nel Nodding (2007) said the following of political correctness:

To ask "What do you mean by that?" is a sign of respect. To suggest that an offensive statement might still contain a nucleus of truth is a mark of scholarly wisdom. Then the question becomes one of showing how the issue under contention can be pursued without offence. One of the greatest defects in the

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system guided by NCLB is the erosion of intellectual habits of mind. We are living in a new age of self-righteous anti-intellectualism. (p. 25)

Finally, as I reflect on using the narrative inquiry methodology, I have found narrative inquiry difficult. Unfortunately I have spent far too much time trying to find the right “box” to put narrative inquiry into instead of enjoying the freedom that comes through exploration. This journey has not taken a straight path as I had hoped it would and I have truly been stumped from day one. I knew almost nothing about first-person research methodologies before I began, and I am thankful for this as it has served as a wonderful reminder of the power of words. I relate to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) experience:

As we began, we were vaguely aware of doing something different, but it was not until we were fairly far into the task that we began to see ourselves at the centre of a storm – a place where the grand narrative of inquiry in one of its most successful educational expressions – that is, in the construction of a universal educational objectives – met an alternative way of inquiry thinking. It was a place where the grand narrative confronted narrative thinking. (p. 24)

Conclusion

Looking back, I believe I chose the more difficult, albeit the more noble task. In the undertaking of “teaching my own”, I have learned that home education is simply not really about “education” at all, it is a lifestyle and a constant giving of oneself. I realize that throughout this journey into home learning the most deficient learner has been, is and probably always will be me. This is not because I am not “smart” or well-schooled; I

am all of those things, and more. It is because I am on a journey that I never expected to be on, a journey where I have had to unschool myself in order to find success. It may be the same with all who assume to be educators. After all, it only took a mere suggestion to convince my kids that learning at home might be a good idea. In passing I recall asking my oldest son, who was preparing for grade five, and my youngest, who was turning four and in daycare, what they would think of learning at home and not going back to school and daycare. They looked shocked that what we were saying was even humanly possible and asked curiously and quietly “can we do that”? “Yes! PLEASE!” It literally took me years of thoughtful wonderings to come to the conclusion that my sons came to in a few short seconds. As time has gone on they have grown to take a proactive approach to not only the style of learning they do, but also what it is that they want to learn.

It has occurred to me previously and again throughout this journey that perhaps I am not suited to teach in a classroom as much as I once thought. My thoughts and heart have, over the last several years shifted to admit that I do not want to help children follow to a government mandated philosophy or stern and overly complex curriculum. However, it is still harder than it sounds. In admitting this I am challenged to meet my own standards as I attempt to influence the lives of others. The types of “education” I don’t want imparted on my own children by others, I must be careful not to impart myself, nor should I impart them to other children.

As I reflect on my previous determination to be a homeschooler it becomes apparent that my beliefs on school have changed a great deal in the last four years. I no longer feel the strict need to “teach” everything to my children. I make an honest

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effort to trust them to their own judgments and learn, for the most part, what they want and in the manner they choose. Though I do still hold the expectation that they will demonstrate daily that they have a focus for their learning. It's difficult to let go and have less and less control over their learning; nonetheless they never cease to amaze me with their interests and ability to learn so many things on their own and without my help. For example, in second grade my youngest son was up in his room working through some math. He, recalling a conversation he had had with his older brother about how multiplication works, took it upon himself to move onto that subject and correctly complete the work that he had assigned to himself. Not interested in praise, he didn't mention it to anyone until I discovered it. Likewise, in grade 8 my oldest decided he wanted to learn about anatomy. After finding some inexpensive but rich resources his interest progressed to the bones thinking that it would be fun if he challenged himself to memorize the bones of the body. Of course not every day is full of remarkable learning moments, but with the right support and freedom, I believe there is no limit to the success they can have.

I know now that I will not be spending my life pushing the children that I love so much to just "learn" math and science, but instead, I am committed helping them learn as they live.

Before I close I feel it is important to note that, after reflecting on the "homeschooling" I have done, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with that term. I have reluctantly used it throughout this paper to define my experience with my children learning in the home, but I really feel that it does not do justice to our family lifestyle nor does it express or convey the importance and/or diversity of home learning in general.

Though I have not found any other terminology that I prefer, I think Wendy Priesnitz appropriately expressed the inaccuracy with the title when she wrote of her detachment to the term “homeschooling”, a term that she helped normalize. She said: “It totally misrepresents my feelings about childhood and education...for me homeschooling conjures up images of school-at-home – a regular school experience transplanted into the home. This is a vision that ignores totally most of the philosophic reasoning behind deschooling” (1995, p. 128).

As a final note: This journey and reflection raises my respect level for school teachers. I imagine that the most wonderful teachers in the world aren’t the ones who get the best evaluations or the ‘best’ class test scores but rather they are the ones who help make a long school day into a good day for so many children who sit in class wishing they were somewhere else.

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