

HESITATION TO RESOLUTION: OUR HOMESCHOOLING NARRATIVE

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Abstract

Our decision to homeschool began with hesitation and uncertainty. Our initial concerns included the socialization of our children, the delivery of curriculum, as well as the contemplation of our aspirations for our children. Through research, and the observation of our children, it has become clear that allowing our children to follow a willed curriculum is the chosen path for our family. This narrative explores the issues that were initially concerns and how they have become our motivation for homeschooling.

As a family, we have recently come to the decision not to enrol our children in school. Our oldest son is turning 4 soon, and would be of age to attend kindergarten next fall, our youngest son is two. From the time our children were born, homeschooling has been something we have been considering. In the last few months, with kindergarten registration approaching, we have taken some time to research and reflect. My husband and I have decided it is our preference that our children do not participate in the public school system. We have consulted with our son and he is happy with the decision and would prefer to stay home.

The decision to keep our children out of the school system has not come without angst. Both my husband and I have spent a considerable amount of time reading, researching,

Hesitation To Resolution: Our Homeschooling Narrative

discussing and debating. There were a few key issues that initially came up as concerns: socialization, curriculum, and our desires for our children. These issues were holding us back from homeschooling, however, as we went through the process of researching and reflecting, the key issues that initially made us reluctant to homeschool our children, have now become the defining reasons for our choice.

Although my husband and I have come to this decision together, as I proceed with the paper I will be using the term ‘I’, as opposed to ‘we’. Throughout the process of coming to our decision, we have lived different life experiences and consulted different sources of research. Our separate paths have led us to the same decision; however, the story presented in this paper will be mine. For background information, I feel I should disclose that I am a teacher. I have taught in the public school system various grades and subjects from Kindergarten to grade 10. I have also recently completed my Master of Education degree. It was during my time as a Master of Education student that Dr. Carlo Ricci shared an alternative path with me, one of a homeschooled, unschooled child. At the time I had not yet had children, and the theories were only interesting possibilities. When my children were born, and I began to see the world through the lens of a parent, my personal values changed. My husband and I made changes to our situation to allow me to stay home with them. I feel very fortunate that homeschooling is a possibility for our children as I do not have to return to work.

Socialization

“What about socialization?” is the first question everyone asks when I tell them we are not enrolling our children in school. I too was concerned about this when I first began exploring homeschooling. However, through research and the observation of my own children, I am

confident that the opportunities for socialization for my children will contribute to healthy social development.

I was not as much concerned about how people would perceive our children and our families choice, but the opportunities I could provide for interaction. As Hauseman (2011) notes, homeschooled students are often portrayed in the media as “nerdy-know-it-all” with a “serious lack of social skills” (p. 6). As well, I have had friends comment on the general public’s perception of homeschooled children as being abnormal. Although these perceptions made me take pause, it was only momentarily and they in no way affect our decision. The judgments of others are not something I spend time worrying about. I acknowledge that these perceptions may exist for some people, but it is not a factor in my decision in any way.

What was a concern for me, were the peer interactions that my children would be exposed to. My sons’ friends are beginning Kindergarten already and our days have changed as our usual play companions are no longer available. My first task has been to reach out to homeschoolers in our community. We live in a small rural Ontario community where most families chose to homeschool for faith based reasons. As atheists, we would prefer to socialize with families that are homeschooling for philosophical reasons; primarily because I do not want our meetings to have a devotional focus. I have been lucky to find a network of families’ homeschooling for similar reasons. We are able to meet a couple of times a month, depending on the weather as we are all within an hour’s drive of each other.

My concern initially was would these bimonthly meeting and our local play dates be enough for my children? Children enrolled in school are surrounded by children all day every day. Were the interactions with peers that my children were experiencing enough for healthy

Hesitation To Resolution: Our Homeschooling Narrative

social development? After consulting various authors and resources and observing my own children, I have decided that the peer interactions that are available to my children are appropriate for healthy social development. According to Neufeld and Maté (2005) “The belief is that socializing- children spending time with one another- begets socialization: the capacity for skillful and mature relating to other human beings. There is no evidence to support such an assumption” (Neufeld & Maté, 2005, p. 241). Since becoming a parent, so many other parents have casually discussed with me the importance of social time for children and use it as rationale for enrolling them in daycare and preschools. However, I feel this is an assumption that is tossed around and many parents are not putting much thought into supporting these assumptions. On the contrary, there is support for the benefits of homeschooling in providing healthy socialization. In a small study conducted by Koehler, Langness, Pietig, Stoffel, & Wyttenbach (2002), the authors found “the home schooled children demonstrated above average social skills, while publicly schooled children demonstrated average social skills as reported by parents” (p. 473). In addition, a study conducted by Ray (2003), following up with homeschoolers in adulthood, points out that “homeschooling produces successful adults who are actively involved in their communities and who continue to value education for themselves and their children” (p. 6). Moreover, Barone (2012) notes that “Research, direct observations, and anecdotal reports clearly show that homeschool children are well on their way to strong social competence, good self esteem and the ability to become active and involved members of their communities” (p. 4). In addition, I did a search for research demonstrating negative impacts of homeschooling on socialization. The general results showed that there were none, or only those whose parents were choosing to homeschool purely for the reason of passing on their ideologies and sheltering their children from other interactions. Neither of which is our intention.

The research that has been conducted, that supports our decision, is comforting; however it is the observation of my own children that fills me with certainty about our decision. Our boys are young and still beginning to navigate the world of social play. However, as I observe them I see play that is imaginative, spontaneous and creative. When they interact with peers, children that are older, and adults, they are confident, respectful and polite. Of course there are times when they are tired, hungry or unwell when they are not themselves. But, for the most part I see no need to change our situation or provide alternative outlets for them, when I feel assured that our current situation is working well. As parents, by instinct, we have adopted an attachment parenting approach to our interaction with our children. I feel that by enrolling our children in school, and forcing independence and peer attachments before they are ready, could have a detrimental effect. As Neufeld and Maté (2005) note, “Subjecting children to experiences that make a child dependent on peers does not work. We need to ground children’s experience of schooling in adult attachments” (p. 238). Our decision to homeschool allows us to maintain the attachment relationship that we have established with our children, while providing them with social outlets through homeschool groups, play dates and extra-curricular activities. Through research and reflection, my initial hesitations about the socialization of homeschoolers have been alleviated.

Curriculum

Curriculum was another area of concern, initially. I was worried that my children would not have the exposure to all the subjects and topics that a schooled child would. As a teacher, I have read the lengthy curriculum documents for the Ontario public school system. There is an enormous amount of material to be covered throughout a school year. The Ministry of Education describes the curriculum as:

Hesitation To Resolution: Our Homeschooling Narrative

What children are taught in Ontario public schools. [The curriculum documents] detail the knowledge and skills that students are expected to develop in each subject at each grade level. By developing and publishing curriculum documents for use by all Ontario teachers, the Ministry of Education sets standards for the entire province (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012).

As a teacher, abiding by the curriculum documents was a requirement of my daily work. However, as I now view the world through the lens of a parent, I question, is that what I want my children's education to consist of?

My first issue with the curriculum, as a parent, is the content. To have a governing body decide what, and when my child is taught, or permitted to learn, under their guidance, is bothersome. For example, the Social Studies and History curriculum for elementary school system is designed to be delivered consecutively. Yes, that is a logical approach in theory, but what if my child wants to learn about the First Nations people while they are in grade 5 studying early civilizations? Through homeschooling, I will be able to explore various topics as my children become interested, not as the curriculum dictates.

As well, Balmer (2007) argues that "the Ontario primary junior curriculum is exclusive and preserves dominant perspectives" (p. 17). In her paper, Balmer (2007), presents three arguments: "first argument that histories within the curriculum are defined and taught from a Eurocentric perspective, the second argument that the curriculum excludes gay and lesbian issues entirely, and the third argument that the curriculum does not address multicultural education" (p. 3). Balmer's arguments motivate me to homeschool my children to allow for a diverse and varied education. As Ricci (2012) eloquently states, "Our goal should not be to standardize

things, to try to make everyone the same, but to support and understand the value in diversity” (p. 81).

In addition to content, the curriculum dictates the developmental level my children are learning at. By homeschooling, we will be able to respect our children’s pace as they learn, whether they are behind or ahead of the public school expectations. Learning to read is something that is on my mind at the moment, as my oldest son is talking about reading and his peers in school are beginning to read. My concern is that children in the public school system are being forced to read, through various programs, before they are developmentally ready. Wolf (2008) shares the same worry, “I’m concerned that many of our children will be forced into doing things that are really pedagogically and physiologically premature and unnecessary”. The expectations of the school system to have students reading at standard levels does not allow for the natural development of reading based on the readiness of their brains. As a mother of two boys, this is a concern for me. Wolf (2007) notes that boys are generally later at developing reading readiness:

But there is a reason why children don’t actually learn how to read usually before the age of four or five. For one thing, learning how to read requires that the brain integrate various sources of information—auditory, visual, linguistic, and conceptual. That means a lot of connections between different brain parts, and these areas aren’t fully myelinated until age five, or even later in most people. And they tend to myelinate later in boys.

My hope is that by homeschooling, our children will learn to read naturally, without the pressures of living up to the expectations of others. The expectations of schools are to produce students who achieve high scores on reading achievement tests. However, as Wheatley (2013)

Hesitation To Resolution: Our Homeschooling Narrative

points out reading achievement tests largely point out low-level reading sub-skills, as opposed to reading comprehension and a love of reading (p. 19). My preference for my children is to develop a life-long love of reading, and as well as a life-long love of learning. By allowing them to learn independently, I hope to be able to preserve that gift for them. As Holt (1983) observes, “The spirit of independence in learning is one of the most valuable assets a learner can have, and we who want to help children’s learning, at home or in school, must learn to respect and encourage it” (p. 132).

Aspirations

Finally, it is my desires for my children, and their future that has turned my homeschooling hesitation to resolution. As a parent, I have been reflecting on what it is that I want for my children. Aside from good health and happiness, what are my wishes for them? What characteristics or experiences do I feel are of value for them as they progress through life? I know I do not value high grades, standardized test scores, reaching predetermined benchmarks, attending the most prestigious schools, or a prestigious career. These are not my wishes for my children. If it is possible to narrow down, what I do wish is that they will be confident, to love learning, to be fulfilled, informed, critical, compassionate, and have a strong sense of self. I do not want their self-worth to be determined by a grade that someone else assigns them. These are my wishes for them, but as they grow they will have their own aspirations. As Gray (2012) expresses, “Ultimately, the purpose of education is that of finding meaning in life, and each person has to do that for himself or herself” (p. 2). It is their journey for them to take. As Holt (1983) points out, “adults tend more and more to see school as a place where children start a race that will go on all the rest of their lives” (p. 167). My wish for my children is that they do not

participate in the race and they find their own path. With this in mind, our approach to homeschooling will be to follow a willed curriculum.

As Ricci (2012) describes, “A child, like an adult, learns most and learns best when he or she learns according to his or her will. Following her own will leads to the development of her “willed curriculum”, her entirely personal, customized education experience” (p. 1). Once we had made the decision to homeschool, I was not sure yet what approach we would take. In one moment with my son, it became clear to me. He had decided to work on printing and we purchased some books at the store for him to work in. I had been letting him work freely when, and how he wanted to in them, without any interference. However, once we decided to homeschool, I decided to intervene to get a sense of our home learning experience. I had been sitting at the table with him reading, while he was happily working. As Ricci (2012) experienced, the “damn devil teacher” in me interrupted him (p. 65). I put my book down and began discussing upper and lower case letters. I asked him to print certain letters for me. I could immediately see the joy in his work dissolve. He became irritated and no longer wanted to work in his books. In a matter of minutes, the decision to follow a willed curriculum became clear to me.

Conclusion

We are at the beginning stages of this journey as a family. As of now, we have decided to homeschool and follow a willed curriculum. However, our journey is emergent and it is our children’s path that is still to be developed as they grow, and learn. Socialization, curriculum and our desires for our children’s futures have been the focus of our rationale for homeschooling

Hesitation To Resolution: Our Homeschooling Narrative

thus far. Initially points of hesitation, through research and through the observation of our children, they are now the motivation for our decision.

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Hesitation To Resolution: Our Homeschooling Narrative

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