

## **HOMESCHOOLING: HEEDING THE VOICES OF LEARNERS**

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### **Abstract**

To date, homeschooling research has focused mainly on homeschool educators' perspectives. Heeding homeschool learners' voices is essential for trustworthy understanding of the homeschool context. This article reports findings regarding one homeschool learner-participant's views and experiences from a qualitative, multiple case-study of four homeschools. Findings concerning the mother are presented as context for the learner's meaning-making. Homeschool educators and learners were interviewed concerning their discourses and perspectives regarding their respective homeschools. Projections were used, exploring participants' meanings at a deeper level, and three sessions of non-participating observation in each homeschool. The views of the homeschool learners and their homeschool educators corresponded somewhat, but also indicated important differences. The homeschool educators in the study appeared convinced of acting in their children's best interests, yet often without accommodation or awareness of their particular needs. On a conscious level, the homeschool learners bowed to the educators' wishes and did not communicate their needs or feelings. On a deeper level, lack of congruence occurred between homeschool educators' and learners' views. This is discussed from a bio-ecological perspective, thus with due regard both for developmental factors and the entire context of each homeschool. We consider implications of the findings for homeschool practice, further research and policy.

Key words: homeschool, homeschool learner, learner perspective, bio-ecological

## INTRODUCTION

Among the many changes wrought in the new, democratic South Africa, those concerning the educational curriculum are particularly challenging and still subject to constant revision. The outcomes-based curriculum implemented since 1998 can be viewed as an outcome of change occurring internationally through centuries, in an inexorable movement away from individual values to classroom-based, mass education. The perception that educational goals and standards are thus deteriorating has contributed since the late 1970s to an increasing tendency by parents world-wide to homeschool their children (Brynard, 2007), a system also legalised in South Africa in 1997 (Bester, 2002).

Homeschooling differs essentially from that which is conventionally found in institutional schools. The strong, discursive base for practice amounts *per se* to a testament of individual differences and change, which have fundamental implications for the understanding and evaluation of homeschooling in general and any homeschooling practices in particular. Research in respect of homeschooling appears limited and/or biased, and has hitherto focused predominantly on the homeschool educators' perspective, for example their reasons for homeschooling (Botha, 2005; Van Galen, 1991); their own perception of their role (Oosthuizen & Bouwer, 2007); their choice of curriculum distributors, methods and approaches to be used in their homeschools (Botha, 2005; Lowe & Thomas, 2002); and the advantages and disadvantages of homeschooling (De Waal, 2000; Ray, 2002; Romanowski, 2001).

The homeschool educator is obviously not the only participant in the homeschool situation. If a trustworthy understanding of the homeschool context is to be gained, it is essential to also heed the voices of homeschool learners. Each homeschool educator and learner enters the homeschool situation with certain values, perceptions and experiences, and is subjectively involved in all homeschool events (Van Schalkwyk, 2010) – which inevitably has an impact on the teaching and learning that take place there (Mullins, 1992).

The views and perspectives of homeschool learners seem to be sharply underrepresented in the available research literature. Only two relevant studies could be found. Bester (2002) refers in her study to parents' views of their children's experiences, but the learners themselves were

never directly consulted in her research. Mullins (1992) found that the attitudes of homeschool learners towards the homeschool were largely affected by their perception of the extent to which they had originally been involved in the decision-making process pertaining to their homeschooling. Our research did not, however, confirm this finding. Also, the studies of Bester (2002) and Mullins (1992) merely used interview data without examining the learners' personal meanings or behaviour at a deeper level. From a research methodology perspective, and in view of the participants' stage of development, we doubt whether information from interviews as the only data-gathering technique can be considered sufficient if the voices of homeschool learners are to be heard accurately.

Moreover, behaviour, feelings and experiences should not be interpreted in isolation from the context in which they occur, since a specific meaning is attributed in specific circumstances (Henning, 2004; McMillan & Wergin, 2010) based on the values, perceptions and past experiences of the individual. The context of each homeschool is unique (Oosthuizen, 2005), *inter alia* because formal education is transferred to the family system. A systemic approach is therefore necessary to investigate the homeschool context in depth, taking into account the underlying values, perceptions and outcomes of each participant. One such model was developed by Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

In terms of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model, the relationship between the two *microsystems* of family and homeschool can be described on a continuum ranging from virtually fully detached to strongly overlapping and even assimilating. Various role players play a part in both microsystems, for example the homeschool educator (generally the mother), the learner(s), the father and siblings. Microsystems do not function in isolation, but are continuously interacting with one another and with other microsystems on a *mesosystemic* level. 'Between' family and homeschool, the mesosystem may quite possibly become virtually indiscernible depending on the degree to which the one accommodates the other. The extent and nature of the homeschool family's interaction with other microsystems, such as befriended families and the learners' peer groups, obviously contribute to the extent and nature of isolation/involvement that may be experienced by participants of the family microsystem. Microsystems are also affected

by the *exosystem* (systems in which the learners are not directly involved but that exert an influence on other participants in the microsystem, for instance a parent's work environment), the *macrosystem* (attitudes, convictions and values inherent to a specific community or culture) and the *chronosystem* (timeframes pertaining to the interactions within the systems and the stages of development of the participants). Research into homeschool learners' perspectives should necessarily involve all of the above systemic levels for any truth or relevance to be claimed.

Many homeschool educators do not consider the results of academic testing as the sole criterion for success, since their mission does not involve only mastering knowledge and skills, but also, for example, acquiring a particular value system (Lines, 2000). To ascertain the quality of tuition in a homeschool, it is essential to take into account the values, perceptions, experiences and objectives with regard to tuition, learning and outcome of both the homeschool educator and the learner. Quantitative research clearly cannot examine these fundamental aspects of homeschooling, because of its focus on measurable facts, events and statistics, rather than contextually on the participants' perspectives, interpretations and/or ways of giving meaning (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002). Research into homeschooling should be undertaken by using qualitative methodology and focusing on the participants' perspective-in-context.

In this article, we report on a single facet of a broader study pertaining to the effect of discourses on homeschooling (Van Schalkwyk, 2010), namely *learners' participation and perceptions within their homeschools*. Painter and Theron (2001) take discourse to mean "frameworks of meaning that are realized in language but are produced by institutional and ideological structures and relations", and we premised that each homeschool practice is unique and articulates with those discourses that the family members subscribe to. Recognising and acknowledging the homeschool learners as active agents who each gives a personal meaning to their lives within and through their social context (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2010), we entered their subjective world so as to explore *their own interpretation and experience of their life world* (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000), *which included the homeschool*. We studied the perceptions of both parents and learners from a discursive and systemic

angle, examining the occurrence and implications of similarities and discrepancies among their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

After explaining our method of investigation in the next section, we present an overview of the general findings. Due to limited space we then offer, as a detailed example, the results and findings pertaining to the homeschool educator (the mother) and learner in only one of the four case studies of the investigation. We will, however, frequently refer to the full study to substantiate our findings. Viewing the findings concerning the mother as a context for the learner's meaning-making enables us then to consider the significance and implications of similarities and discrepancies between the meanings ascribed by this mother and learner and, ultimately, the implications of our findings for homeschooling, research and policy.

## METHOD

Our research design entailed a multiple case study of four homeschools so as to provide a thorough analysis and description of a single phenomenon, in this case homeschooling, within the natural context (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). We pursued maximum variation in our sampling, applying the following selection criteria: 1) two years' experience of homeschooling in the intermediate phase; 2) representation of different curricula or homeschooling organisations; and 3) being situated in the local environment. We approached curriculum distributors as well as homeschoolers to obtain the contact details of other homeschool families. The first four homeschools that complied with the selection criteria and agreed to participate in the research were involved in the study. Two Afrikaans-speaking families, one English-speaking family and one Asian family participated in the research. The ethical measures were meticulously adhered to in respect of protection of identity, informed consent obtained in advance, freedom from obligation, no misinformation and no exposure to risk. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

Data gathering was a lengthy and extensive process, stretching over a period of approximately one year for each homeschool. Various data-gathering techniques were used, namely

unstructured interviews based on an interview schedule with the mother, father and participating learner; a reflective interview with the mother; projections by the three participants; three unstructured non-participative observation sessions; fieldnotes and, as a control measure, reflective journaling. *Projection* refers to “the process of ascribing unwittingly one’s beliefs, values or other subjective processes to others” (Reber, Allen & Reber, 2009). A projection plate from the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), a projection test frequently used in clinical practice, was administered.

The verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were carefully studied to identify the discourses that emerged from each. The statements containing potential discursive content were selected, retaining the context. Following a discourse analysis, these were arranged in terms of primary and secondary discourses. The transcriptions of the projections were analysed and interpreted. The observation data were analysed with regard to the learners’ perspectives, attitudes, behaviour and values within the homeschooling events. Per homeschool, the similarities and discrepancies found among data sets, as well as between the versions of the homeschool educator and learner, were investigated. Similarities and discrepancies that occurred among the four homeschools were also studied.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### **General overview of the four homeschools**

The first family was English-speaking and consisted of four family members. The family had homeschooled for the past seven years and neither of the two girls had ever been in an institutional primary school. The mother used material that was readily available, and followed no specific curriculum or programme. The second family was Afrikaans-speaking and consisted of the parents, their son and a grandmother. The boy had attended an institutional school up to the end of Grade 4, but at his own request his mother had homeschooled him over the past three years, using the *ACE curriculum*. The third family was an English-speaking Asian family consisting of four members. The boys had been in an institutional school up to Grades 6 and 3 respectively, after which they had been homeschooled for the past two and a half years using the *ACE curriculum*. The fourth family was Afrikaans-speaking and consisted of the parents, two girls and a grandmother. The family had been homeschooling for six years and neither of the two

girls had ever attended an institutional school. They used two programmes, namely *KONOS* and *Love2Learn*.

The results of the investigation confirmed the uniqueness of every homeschool. The parents subscribed to various discourses, all of which found expression in different ways in the homeschool practices of the educators (in all four participating homeschools the mothers fulfilled this role) as well as the learners. It emerged that each homeschool practice and many of the perceptions encountered there could only be understood and explained from the discourses in force in the family concerned. We recognised discourse as the macrosystemic context of the homeschool, since the reasons for the existence of these homeschools, as well as the day-to-day functioning and experience of each particular homeschool practice, were driven by discourse(s). For instance, in homeschools endorsing a patriarchal discourse, the father played a dominant role in all decisions regarding curriculum and practice.

All the case studies showed that the parents were trying to act in the best interests of their children. The outcomes that the parents had set as goals on their children's behalf differed from one another, but everybody was convinced that homeschooling was the only way in which these outcomes could be achieved. This belief drove the parents to provide homeschooling for their children, despite their own inadequate knowledge and skills (not one of the mothers was a trained teacher). It furthermore became clear that the parents had to make numerous sacrifices (for example on a personal and financial level), but nevertheless remained committed to provide the best for their children.

From the research it also emerged that the parents' discourses determined what was regarded as the best interest of their children (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). We found, however, that despite the parents' intentions and efforts, and also despite their perceptions that their children were happy and had fully bought into the idea of homeschooling, the child-participants in three of the four case studies were experiencing a degree of discomfort and even unhappiness in their homeschool. This discrepancy is discussed next, by looking at the results and findings with regard to Sally, a learner in the first homeschool.

### **The discursive context of Sally's family and homeschool**

The family members welcomed the researcher warmly from the very first contact visit. Sally's mother was a homemaker; she was sweet-tempered, caring and loving. She started training as a nurse, but called it off when she got married. Sally's father worked in Information Technology and he was gentle, quiet and reserved. Their two daughters, Sally and Shirley, were aged 11 (Grade 5/6) and 8 (Grade 2/3) at the time of the investigation. Sally related to the researcher spontaneously, was chatty and appeared comfortable, whereas Shirley was somewhat quieter, still very childlike and more in the background.

Sally's mother put forward Christian convictions, medical considerations and the best interest of her daughters as the reasons for her decision to homeschool the girls. For her, it was crucially important for the family to abide by the Biblical prescriptions as endorsed by the church to which they belonged, even concerning dress code, hairstyle and makeup. Homeschooling enabled her to raise her daughters according to these guidelines and teach them in such a way that they would be 'good' Christians and "good" wives and mothers. Sally was asthmatic and allergic, and the homeschool setup enabled her mother to keep her away from allergenics. The mother also believed that the homeschool enabled her to protect the girls from the unsafe world and negative influences, and was convinced that this isolation was in the best interest of her daughters. The family seldom socialised and when they did, only within the church community to which they belonged. Hence, the mother endorsed two discourses in particular: a *Christian prescriptive discourse* and an *isolationist discourse*. The father concurred with these discourses, but, considering the children's development as of paramount importance, he primarily endorsed a *human development discourse*. Due to space constraints we will focus on Sally's mother in discussing this case study since, as the homeschool educator, she played the more dominant role in the homeschool context.

### **The context of Sally's homeschool**

A separate room was set aside for the homeschool. The working environment was organised, with a desk and computer for the mother and each of the girls. The mother was calm and serene throughout. They were never rushed, the school did not start at a fixed time and each girl worked at her own pace. When the researcher arrived for the third observation session, the children were



busy in the study, presumably with schoolwork, while the mother was hanging out the washing. This confirmed that tuition time was sometimes taken up by household chores. This day was not as organised as those observed earlier; both girls were more demanding and frequently required the mother's attention and help. The mother's attention was divided and at times she found it difficult to give the necessary assistance. However, she remained unruffled, patient and supportive throughout.

Moments demonstrating the positive relationship between the mother and daughters were frequently observed, yet she made markedly fewer caressing gestures towards Sally than Shirley. The mother's involvement with her family and her supportive attitude towards the girls were obvious throughout, and they readily carried out her instructions and wishes. It was clear that they were close and really cared for one another. The way in which they acted towards one another as well as towards the researcher was congruent with the values to which they had subscribed in the interviews.

However, contrary to the mother's contention during the interviews, the girls did not work independently, but waited for her assistance and/or confirmation. She helped them with items, showing great patience and support, and putting no pressure on them to perform. At times Sally interrupted her mother while she was helping Shirley. We never observed the direct enforcement of discipline, so Sally was not reprimanded about this. Also contrary to what she claimed in the interviews, the mother's actions were not based on educational principles. Her preparation of a daily programme mainly involved the selection of work and only in exceptional cases the presentation and/or contents of the learning material. She consistently read out Sally's assignments for her and explained them; she did the girls' corrections for them and gave them the answers without encouraging or supporting them to try on their own. In most cases she did not provide an explanation in answer to a question, and merely told them to do it "like this", because "this is the way the book does it".

When they did a test on multiplication tables, both had to answer the same questions, with no distinction being made between their grade levels. The girls performed well in the test, but both chose easy tables that were below their expected grade level. In some other subjects, the girls

were also not on the age-appropriate grade level. For example, Sally's reading ability was noticeably poor and her mother had to stop her frequently to repeat words that she read or pronounced incorrectly.

### **Sally's voice, based on her interview**

For the sake of truth value, ie to rule out influencing, Sally's interview and projections took place before those with her parents and also before the observation sessions in the homeschool. From the outset, Sally presented herself as someone who liked to draw and would one day like to become a fashion designer, "*because I love drawing clothes*" (in all cases, underlining originates from the discourse analysis and indicates formulations with possible discursive and/or emotional overtones).

Sally almost immediately, and repeatedly, revealed a strongly developed sense of duty. She was thoroughly aware of the rules she had to abide by, yet she often found this hard and even against her will: "*...it's hard to help my mom to, like, hang up washing and wash the dishes. But sometimes she does so many things for you, you sort of have to do things for her to help her ... you have to help her. So I don't like doing things, but I know it's the right thing to do, so I'll do it.*" She described her reluctance to help as plain naughtiness (in her own eyes and those of her parents) – yet she had ambivalent feelings about this: "*I fight with my mom, I mean, but it's not like a real fight, like 'I hate you' and things like that. It's just like a fight, 'I don't want to do this, I don't want to do that' ... And sometimes I'm quite naughty and misbehave... Well, me and my father sometimes don't get along because, I mean, I'm naughty and he gets angry with me". It seemed as if Sally did not subscribe to her parents' prescriptive Christian discourse of her own free will, but yet she tried her utmost to keep them happy. She considered herself to be someone with "*problems*". She made numerous efforts to "*become better*", but did not succeed, which contributed to her apparent feelings of helplessness, self-accusation and failure. "*Well, I have problems...I back-chat. ...So I'm struggling with my problems and I just don't know how to fix them. And so I do get hidings 'cause, I mean, it's the right thing to do, to make me good. And, I mean, I still don't learn and I always try everything, but I don't know what to do anymore.*" (looking and sounding despondent) "*It's hard for me... I've tried to stop it, but I'm much better... I'm trying to get better.*"*

Her parents' view of the world as an unsafe place apparently contributed to Sally believing the same and this manifested in an exceptional degree of dependence on her mother. "...*I've been very stuck to my mother and I didn't want to, like, leave her and I love her and I'm scared I'm going to lose her... Well, I mean, in real schools, ...when you run, you get hurt and what if your mom is not there? No-one is there. ...I'm with my mother, and I'm in the house.*" However, she was in two minds and demonstrated a need to break away to greater independence and freedom, albeit with shaky and unsteady steps: "*So, I'm letting go one bit at a time. ... So now, I'm starting to get the hang of it and I'm starting to let go, go free.*"

According to Sally, there were two reasons for their homeschool: "*Well, my parents ... to keep us safe. And so that they know that I am not doing bad things ... to see what we're doing and stuff ...*". She mentioned being teased while at nursery school. It seems that the homeschool not only protected her against physical dangers, but also on a social and emotional level – though a degree of ambivalence could be noticed once again: "*So everybody teased me... So it wasn't nice, but everybody gets teased.*"

Sally thought their family time was insufficient, and blamed this partially on her father's work commitments and the amount of work that he brought home. She admitted to sometimes feeling lonely in the homeschool, but nevertheless preferred it because it was safer. "*I do get lonely and I got no friends, but I still think it's much better than school... I mean, have you heard all the tragic news in the schools? Killing, people missing, and I like home schooling...*" At this point in the interview, Sally took on a rather defensive attitude, though without supporting arguments (which probably indicates that she was finding herself on sensitive terrain): "*Well, in my opinion people don't like home school at all, but I do. I don't know why, it's just a feeling in me that says home schooling is better and I agree with whatever it's telling me inside.*"

### **Sally's meanings ascribed to her homeschool at a deeper level**

The tone of Sally's interview was reasoned and self-correcting, with explicit acknowledgement of what was 'right'. However, when her attempts to express a deeper meaning of her situation were scrutinised more closely, a completely different picture emerged. Two projection methods were used, namely holding a conversation about Sally's drawing of a human figure, and

administering one plate of the TAT. Due to space constraints we quote only excerpts from the transcriptions.

### Human figure drawing

The Draw-a-Person method was not administered in the conventional manner. When the drawing was completed, the researcher used it as a point of reference to conduct, as far as possible, a projective conversation with Sally. Asked to suggest a name for the figure, Sally came up with *Tulip*, and spontaneously and elaboratively responded to questions such as the following: *“First I would just like you to start off and tell me a little bit about Tulip. ... What is she really good at? ... Tell me a bit more about her interests. ... Tell me a bit more about her experiences, receiving education at home.* (This remark, when Sally had of her own accord referred to Tulip’s homeschooling.)

### Excerpts from Sally’s narrative

*“She loves exploring and everything, and then one day she was found somewhere, because she was a little orphan girl. She didn’t really have a home... someone found her and they adopted her. But this was a rich person. So she was like, now, a princess... So then she lived in a palace and everything, and she had a wonderful life. Then, one day, she had to get married because she had to take the throne. So now she had to choose, she didn’t even want to get married, she just wanted to, like, explore, she loved exploring and doing her own thing. ... but nobody would listen to her and nobody wanted to do what she wanted to do, just what they wanted to do. And she started to get very sad and unhappy. So she ran away to a place back to where she was and she loved it there and she wanted to stay there forever and ever. But she knew she couldn’t, ’cause she had no money and no food. So she couldn’t do anything, so she had to go back. So she just thought about it for a tiny bit and so she said she will get married, ’cause that’s the only thing she could’ve done. So she did and they lived happily ever after... When she struggles and she gets angry, she just, like, goes out, goes outside and just goes somewhere far away and just sits there and thinks about everything what happened. And then she thinks it over and over and over and then she finally comes back in a good mood and they say sorry... The most important things to her is probably her animals, because her family, her parents died. So she’s got really nobody. Only her sister, but she hardly gets to see her. So her animals are sort of her closest things... There was only one person that really cared for her and that she liked, like her closest friend was one of the maids that worked there. Her name was Rosie. And they talked to each other and they had fun together. So she made only one friend... Her mother taught her at home, because the school*

*was too expensive, because they were poor, so they didn't have money to go to school... It was fun for her to experience at home and things. So she enjoyed it a lot. But she didn't get enough because her parents were quite elderly so they weren't that young... She didn't know what to do, because she had no family there next to her and with her. So it was hard for her, but she got through it in tough times... She went to school for, like, Grade 1 or 2, but everybody teased her... She didn't like that... At homeschool it was just, like, her mother and her sister, they wouldn't say anything bad to her. So she felt welcome and comfortable, where in school she felt terrible... When she was in the orphanage and the palace she liked the orphanage better than the palace because at the orphanage she knew she had to work, but nobody bossed her around like the palace people did. But she loved being homeschooled, it was her favourite thing to do."*

### Interpretation

It appeared that Sally experienced her current situation as restricting, demanding and duty-driven and longed for a radically different lifestyle of adventurous exploration and the freedom to make her own wishes come true. She thought no-one was aware of her needs, since they neither listened to her nor understood her. She demonstrated a strong desire to escape from her current situation, but at the same time also experienced a depressing awareness of being caught up in circumstances where she was not able to exercise a choice regarding her own future. She did, however, seem to expect that the future would eventually be positive. She carefully worked through and solved problems, conflict and rage on her own, while at home she pretended that everything was fine. She projected an intense feeling of loneliness for which neither the homeschool nor her relationship with her parents could compensate, although the homeschool protected her from being teased and offered her a sense of comfort. She was strongly critical of an excessive expression of power. In conclusion, she explicitly emphasised the fact that homeschooling was her preferred setting.

### TAT

TAT Plate 1 was administered, using the standard instructions.

### Excerpts from Sally's projection

*"So now this boy has to do violin lessons, but he doesn't like it and he's sick and tired of doing violin lessons. But his parents say, 'No, go on, it's such a beautiful instrument, you must keep*

*doing it.’ But he doesn’t like it and he’s just, like, sighing and he doesn’t like it. And everybody teased him before because everybody else had, like, guitars and pianos and a lot more fancier stuff than a violin... So now his parents, there’s a concert coming up, and his parents just wanted him to do violin. But he wasn’t even an instrument person. He liked to, well, he liked doing other things, like building and exploring and being adventurous. And he hated violin, so he did it to make his parents happy. But he didn’t like it and so he was always so sad, because he didn’t make himself happy. So he didn’t like it, so later on he did the concert that was coming up and then he told his parents in their faces, ‘I hate the violin and I’m, I don’t wanna do it. I’m not even an instrument person. I just did it to make you guys happy. I never did it to make me happy.’ And so, ja, he stopped violin and his parents was upset, but they were okay with it. ... Cause, probably it’s been in their family for centuries, also a violin. The men were playing a violin, so they wanted him to play violin too. So it can still carry on for centuries. ... Well, they probably got angry with him and they wanted to hit him and smack him, but you must calm down your temper, you mustn’t get ‘Awww’ (pulls a face, bares her teeth) like that, you must calm down your temper and just let it flow, go easy on it.*

### Interpretation

The child in the projection was intensely resentful about his situation since he was expected to carry out his parents’ wishes at the expense of his own. Even so, he obeyed so as to make them happy – but this did not mean that it brought him any joy. It isolated him from his peer group and made him the target of their mockery. He eventually stood up to his parents, stated his true feelings and abandoned the prescribed activity. Sally expected that the parents would at first be upset and even angry about such a step (a step that she considered very brave), but she suggested that they would eventually accept it – in line with the accepted code of behaviour, where one had to curb one’s temper. She viewed the demands and expectations set by the parents as a feature of the different generations over the ages, and thought this situation might well continue unchanged for ages and ages to come.

## DISCUSSION

### **Sally’s thoughts and feelings about her homeschool**

The implications of Sally’s thoughts and feelings about her homeschool can be meaningfully reflected upon by balancing them with those of her mother and interpreting them through the bio-ecological lens. Even though they were not the primary focus of the research, the marked differences between mother and daughter merit further contemplation.

There was a high degree of congruence among the mother's interviews, projection and behaviour, which pointed to strong, internalised values and which consistently and clearly reflected her goals concerning her family and homeschooling. She never said that she was striving to accommodate any specific needs that her children may have. Yet, her loving, obliging manner showed no signs of forced behaviour and her belief that she was acting in the best interest of her children repeatedly surfaced. She considered the mastering of knowledge and skills as less important than adherence to the hidden curriculum of Biblical prescriptions, and stated that her goal was to shape her daughters' characters for them to become 'good' wives and mothers. From an educational perspective, this was observed to have a clearly restricting effect on the teaching and learning situation.

By contrast, Sally's interview data, projections and observed behaviour differed not only from those of her mother, but also from one another. Her behaviour (at the observable level) was mainly accommodating, though occasionally rather demanding and excessively dependent, and sometimes even slightly unrestrained. There was, however, no sign of the rebellious behaviour that she had described as quite a serious problem in her interview. While we obviously have to consider the artificiality of the observation situation and its potential effect on the participants' behaviour, there is also the possibility that Sally normally managed to display adequate impulse control on a behavioural level – especially in the homeschool – to (as she put it) 'make her parents happy'.

Sally's interview contained various indications of a unique, distinct temperament that probably articulated with her budding adolescence. She, however, described it as a conflict (a 'problem') and showed numerous signs of ambivalence between a conscious acknowledgement of what was expected and her own inclination. Already from the outset, Sally's mention of her love for drawing and her wish to become a fashion designer implied a strong rejection of the conservative values which she was expected to endorse and pointed to her fascination with the world outside the narrow circle of her existence. A developmentally understandable reluctance to carry out all the duties and orders imposed by the family system caused her to describe herself as naughty, and contributed to feelings of guilt and a sense of despondency and helplessness. According to her own perception, the world out there was extremely hazardous and hostile, and she was

grateful for the security and indulgence that she experienced at home. At the same time she admitted that she was too close to her mother, recounted her efforts to gain some distance and tried to place the teasing into a more realistic perspective. Following the grim confession of her loneliness, she immediately tried to overturn this with a feeble effort at defending homeschooling. In summary, it seems as if Sally tried very hard in her interview to identify with the principles set by her parents, but did not fully succeed in doing so.

In her projections, Sally's pent-up feelings emerged even more plainly. In both cases, she projected the child's discontent with the current situation. She displayed feelings of rebelliousness about parents' expectations and demands of their children, and showed a strong desire to articulate her own needs and realise her own interests. Her feelings of restriction and isolation were intense. Her projections indicated a turning point in her experience and handling of problems. Her projection in respect of the drawing told of a child unhappy and caught up in her situation, but who – after attempting to escape – every time came to her senses and did the 'right' thing, with positive consequences within her existing system. Her TAT projection, on the other hand, reflected intense discontent and resistance that eventually culminated in an explicit expression of rebelliousness and a refusal to obey the parents' wishes any further – after which the child's parents were compelled to listen and become reconciled with what he wanted.

How important is it, then, to heed the voice of this girl and other homeschool learners? Or should one argue that, within the perspective of the discourses endorsed by her mother, Sally's restiveness and pent-up rebelliousness actually confirm the wisdom of her parents' resolve to choose homeschooling? Don't parents know better, after all, what is in the best interest of their children?

But no matter the discourse, it should be fundamentally questioned whether the developmental needs (including learning needs) of any child may be disregarded when considering any form of education or curriculum whatsoever. From a bio-ecological perspective, the microsystem of Sally's homeschool seems to be driven by her mother's discourses and goals (a strong macrosystemic influence), rather than by well-founded educational principles and a readiness to accommodate her daughters' developmental needs, for instance, in reading. Her careless



handling of the learning content inevitably impeded their scholastic progress and, in her projection on her drawing, Sally in fact displayed a desire for better quality tuition. The huge overlap between the microsystems of family and school constituted a basis for isolation because it restricted the family's exposure to outside influences on a mesosystemic level. Other microsystems (for example a peer group) hardly featured at all. Interaction with the microsystems of relatives and a few families within their church circle were selective and strictly controlled. Mesosystemic influences were drastically restricted in this way and Sally's isolation was reinforced accordingly – despite her mother's belief that she had ample socialising opportunities. Sally's parents were less isolated owing to their active involvement in church activities and her father's work outside the home. Sally, however, experienced this exosystem to restrict their family life, in claiming excessive amounts of her father's time. Furthermore, her projections revealed that, for a girl of her age, it was not a simple matter to control the lure of the world and a hankering after daily contact with the peer group. On the chronosystemic level, therefore, there seemed to be signs of radical disharmony in both dimensions – neither the truth of a diverse, rapidly changing and demanding reality, nor the authenticity of the needs of an early adolescent was being accommodated.

### **Broader implications with regard to research, policy and the practice of homeschooling**

Due to the limited scope of this study, generalisation of conclusions is evidently not possible. A few pointers however deserve to be considered. The results of the four case studies differed from one another in various respects, which confirmed the unique nature of each context and also warned strongly against a superficial or biased approach in the investigation of homeschooling. The value of a qualitative research approach and the triangulation of a variety of data forms – rather than interviews only – can hardly be overestimated.

At only one homeschool did the research reveal congruence between the data of the mother and the learner. This learner felt that his parents actually took his views and inputs into account, and this probably contributed to a homeschool situation in which he seemed to flourish. The extent of the differences between the voices of the other mothers and learners emphasises the imperative to purposely heed the voice of the learner. It might well be so that many learners suffer in their homeschools and that their happiness as well as development is being compromised in various

fields, for the sake of their parents' discourses and goals – this despite the fact that the latter are indeed deserving of respect for their sacrifices and the results achieved in homeschools. It was found that the guidance offered by homeschool organisations with regard to the social and emotional needs of learners, as well as the programmes used by the parents in this study, were inadequate and not grounded in reliable research. The possibility that this fact contributed to the learners' unfulfilled needs must certainly be considered.

A well-founded education policy that allows parents the freedom to take on their children's education themselves will not amount to an abdication of responsibility, but should continue to focus explicitly on the learner's developmental needs. Considering the lack of educational training of the majority of homeschool educators, this implies a policy that is strong and comprehensive enough to at least monitor the scholastic progress of the learner consistently, and to promote the emotional and social well-being of the learner through the evaluation and accreditation of homeschool institutions and programmes.

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