

Homeschooling Is Not Just About Education: Focuses of Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the meanings parents attribute to homeschooling. The literature reveals two main approaches to this subject: a view of homeschooling as a pedagogical practice and a holistic perspective. Employing qualitative methodologies, we administered in-depth interviews to 30 mothers who engaged in homeschooling in Israel, in order to gain a better understanding of what homeschooling meant to them. Analysis of the interviews indicated that the participants attributed diverse meanings to homeschooling. These represented many themes, which were gathered into four super-themes: control, lifestyle, family, and child. The first two themes were emphasized more often than the latter two.

KEYWORDS

education and life; holistic perspective; homeschooling; postmodern; premodern

Introduction

This article explores the meaning that parents attribute to homeschooling (also known as elective home education). The literature reveals two main approaches to research on this subject: that of homeschooling as a pedagogical practice and a holistic view of the practice. We begin with a brief description of homeschooling, followed by a review of research on what homeschooling means for parents who choose this form of education for their children. We conclude that in order to fully understand the spirit of homeschooling, it is necessary to consider not only the pedagogical characteristics but additional aspects as well.

Homeschooling is a practice in which parents do not send their children (of any age) to school but educate them at home instead. This is not a new practice; in fact, throughout most of human history, parents bore the responsibility for their children's education. Most children were taught in their parents' homes or, alternatively, learned a trade as apprentices. The few schools that existed served a very small percentage of the population of children, usually those expected to fulfill religious positions or children of the well-to-do. In most cases, these schools focused on

teaching different aspects of religion and not general studies (Avner, 1989; Cai, Reeve, & Robinson, 2002; Hiatt, 1994; Tyack, 1980).

In response to the Industrial Revolution, governments established public schools, enacted mandatory education laws, and over time assumed the responsibility for the education of children (Evangelisti, 2013; Gaither, 2009; Hiatt, 1994; Wilhelm & Firmin, 2009).

Over the past few decades, parents have begun to share the responsibility for their children's education, and some have even chosen to refrain from giving an external organization charge, instead assuming full responsibility for the educational process by means of homeschooling.

The beginnings of this trend in the United States appeared in the 1970s; at that time reports indicated that about 13,000 children were being home-schooled. Nowadays, 40 years later, the estimated figure is 2 million, and in Britain the estimate is about 80,000 (Blok & Karsten, 2011; Davis, 2006; Ray, 2011). In Canada it is about 50,000, in Australia about 30,000, and in France about 2,800 (Authors, 2013).

This rise in the number of children being homeschooled may stem from increasing dissatisfaction among parents with the conventional school system, coupled with growing public legitimation of this practice. In many places in the world, and particularly in the United States and England, parents who educate their children at home and meet certain criteria are deemed to be fulfilling the mandatory education laws.

In Israel, homeschooling is a relatively recent development; it began only two decades ago. However, it is a growing practice. The number of homeschooling families in Israel is estimated to be about 400, whereas two decades ago it was only about 60 (Authors, 2013).

The state of Israel, which was established about 70 years ago, did not undergo a process of transferring the responsibility for education from parents to the state. From the time it was established, the state was responsible for the education of children. However, parents in Israel today are allowed to homeschool their children, provided they obtain permission and meet certain criteria. Thus, the processes currently under way in many Western countries have affected Israel as well.

In light of the recent development of homeschooling in Israel, the legal aspects of the practice were established over the past decade, most notably in a 2006 and later a 2009 directive from the Ministry of education's director general, which stated, among other things, that

homeschooling applications will be approved in cases where the parents present a very well-established worldview which rejects education in a school, or cases in which there are exceptional, special and extreme circumstances for which the Ministry of education allows an exemption from the Mandatory Education Law for parents who request that their child not study in a recognized educational institution, on

the condition that the child is found to be receiving a systematic, satisfactory education in his home. (Ministry of Education, 2009, our translation and emphasis)

The Ministry of education also established a unit to supervise and assist parents who homeschool their children. These legal arrangements paved the way for families who wish to homeschool to do so legally, but because they were instituted only a few years ago, the number and percentage of homeschooled children are relatively small compared with other Western countries. However, as noted, the practice is growing rapidly. To date, there is no organized, updated database on the characteristics of families that homeschool in Israel.

These developments represent a universal trend that is not specific to any one country: Parents are once again assuming more responsibility for their children's education. In particular, they are becoming more involved in the public school system, sending their children to special or private schools, or taking them out of the school system and educating them at home.

Parallel to the increase in the number of families that educate their children at home, many studies have been conducted to examine this practice. Some have compared the scholastic achievements of children of the same age who attend schools and those who are educated at home. Others have examined the reasons why parents choose homeschooling (Bates, 1991; Marchant & MacDonald, 1994; Neuman & Aviram, 2003; Ray & Ware, 1991; Rothermel, 2005; Snyder, 2013) and the processes that occur within the homeschooling context (see Kunzman & Gaither 2013, for a recent review of the literature on this subject).

Researchers have attempted to distinguish between different homeschooling groups, such as structured and unstructured homeschooling (the latter is also referred to as unschooling; Authors, 2016; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Ray, 2011; Rothermel, 2011). Homeschoolers who advocate structured schooling follow a defined curriculum, usually of their own design; proponents of unstructured homeschooling teach varying subjects, based on the wishes of the children, without any external dictates. These parents provide a supportive environment for learning and enable the children to choose the materials, methods of learning, and times for study (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Bertozzi, 2006; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Ray, 2011; Rothermel, 2005).

However, many researchers of homeschooling treat this practice as an educational and pedagogical option, a means by which parents can be involved in the schooling as well as the education of their children. It is one of several possible alternatives to the conventional education system, which also includes public and private schools. Studies based on such a pedagogical perspective examine the curriculum, the role of the child in the learning process, scholastic achievements, teaching methods, teaching

materials, and other educational aspects of homeschooling (Bagwell, 2010; Coleman, 2010; Gaither, 2008, 2009; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Meighan, 1997; Ray & Ware, 1991; Rothermel, 2002, 2004).

Although this is the most popular approach today, it is also possible to extend the study of homeschooling beyond the purely pedagogical aspects. Neuman & Aviram (2003) described two approaches to the study of homeschooling, one purely pedagogical and the other holistic. The pedagogical study of homeschooling considers the educational aspects of this practice; in comparison, the holistic approach examines the ways in which homeschooling affects the lifestyle of those who choose this practice. Literature based on this approach has viewed homeschooling as life changing; accordingly, it has examined factors such as the influence of homeschooling on parents and children, family structure, marriage, career and employment, income and standard of living, attitudes and perceptions regarding life, the daily life routine, as well as other life-changing factors (on this, see also Ray, 2013).

The pedagogical and the holistic approaches to homeschooling examine different questions. In this article we further broaden the holistic approach by examining what homeschooling means, beyond a pedagogical option, to parents who practice it.

In the majority of cases, homeschooling is a choice that parents make for their children; therefore, it is important to understand the focuses of the meaning that parents attribute to this choice, or in other words what it is that they choose.

The pedagogical choice of homeschooling is well documented in the literature. However, it is also important to understand the other components involved in the decision to homeschool. Accordingly, the present research sought to answer the following question: “When you say *homeschooling*, what do you mean?”

Method

In this study, we used a qualitative participant-centered research methodology based on the hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Glense & Peshkin, 1992; Maykut & Morehouse, 1997; Shkedi, 2011).

Hermeneutics takes its name from the Greek god Hermes, who interpreted the messages of the gods for humans. Accordingly, this type of research involves giving meaning to texts, language, and behavior by means of interpretation; it is one of the most common qualitative approaches used in the social sciences (Bleicher & Bleicher 1980). This approach enables us to examine a phenomenon as it is experienced and perceived by the subject participating in it (the phenomenon). In order to understand the phenomenon, the researcher must first understand the significance that the subject ascribes to the phenomenon (Jorgensen, 1989; Willis, 1991). Consequently, a

study such as this must collect descriptions of experiences and their significance.

In-depth interviews with the participants is one of the central tools in such a study (Creswell, 1995). The aim of the present research was to gain a better understanding of the meaning of the practice of homeschooling to parents who engage in it; therefore, the hermeneutic approach, which focuses on interpretations of reality, was appropriate.

Participants

The research population comprised 30 mothers who engaged in homeschooling in Israel. The research participants volunteered to participate in response to a notice distributed among homeschoolers by various means. Only two families refused to participate in the research; thus, it can be assumed that refusal to participate did not affect the research results.

The families that were interviewed lived in urban and rural communities in northern and central Israel. All of the participants were from the Jewish sector and led a nonreligious or traditional (not Orthodox) Jewish lifestyle. In all of the families, the fathers were the main breadwinners and the mothers spent most of their time at home with the children.

The number of children in each of the participating families ranged from one to five, with an average of 2.13 children ($SD = 1.03$). In each of the families there was at least one child who was between 6 and 12 years old. The average education of the mothers was 15.94 years ($SD = 2.80$). For the sake of comparison, in Jewish families in Israel, the average number of children is 2.3 and the average education of mothers is 14.6 years (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016a, 2016b).

The choice to interview the mothers was based on the fact that usually the mother is the family member responsible for homeschooling. In addition, in our study, the mothers were the family members who spent the most hours every day with the children and were involved in the teaching and learning processes.

As noted in the Introduction, there is a lack of data on the people who homeschool in Israel. Therefore, it was not possible to establish the extent to which the interviewees were representative of all homeschoolers in the country. It is hoped that the development of research in this field will result in the creation of a larger base of reliable data about the characteristics of this group.

Procedure

In accordance with the gender of the interviewees, all of the interviewers in this research were also women. Some were students and others were not. The interviewers participated in a 1-day training seminar in which they learned

how to carry out the interview. The training included general knowledge about homeschooling and knowledge about qualitative research methods in general. In addition, each of the interviewers practiced administering the specific interview chosen for this study, followed by reflection.

The interviewers arranged a convenient time for the mothers and went to their homes. The interviewees received an explanation about the study and signed an informed consent form required for their participation in the study. They were then interviewed for 60–75 min. The interviews were semistructured: The mothers were asked a series of structured questions, the purpose of which was to understand the significance of homeschooling for the interviewees (“Tell me about your family,” “What is homeschooling for you, for your family, and for your children?” “Tell me about the way you conduct your homeschooling”). In addition, the interviewers conducted an open conversation on the subject of homeschooling in order to elicit indirect comments by the interviewees regarding the meaning of homeschooling for them. All of the participants responded to all of the questions asked during the interview. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Analysis

We used ATLAS.ti software to analyze the transcripts. One researcher carried out the analysis. The results of this analysis were then reexamined critically by a second researcher, according to Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) peer debriefing. Disagreements between the two researchers were resolved through discussion.

The first stage of analysis involved analysis of the relevant texts and their division into themes. Each segment of the text was linked to a theme whose name reflected the written content. Sometimes a number of segments of text were linked to the same theme. At the end of this stage, every relevant segment of text had been linked to a theme, which in effect generated a list of themes.

In the next stage, a mapping analysis was carried out that examined whether there were links between various themes and identified common denominators. During this stage of the analysis, some of the themes were divided into groups of super-themes with a common denominator.

We did not include the themes related to homeschooling as a pedagogical choice in the analysis, and they are not described in this article, as these were beyond the defined focus of the research question.

Results

In this section, we present our analysis of the interviews with the parents regarding the question of what homeschooling meant to them. The results are presented according to the super-themes that arose from the analysis.

Sense of family

Some of the respondents noted that the family setting was right for their children and homeschooling was natural for them and the rest of the family in terms of both the children's lifestyle and their style of learning. They referred to homeschooling, or to the child who stayed with the family and did not go to school, as a natural "default":

Children should live in the community within their own family. Ideally, it's really a tribe, but that doesn't happen in our world. We live far from our family, but the default is that children live within the family, the family lives within the tribe or community, [so there] has to be a really good reason to [go to] school. (Participant 9)

Moreover, Participant 8 said, "In our family at any rate, the home is the center; the siblings are the center and the parents are in the center—not society."

These comments suggest that sending children to school is not the right thing to do; it contradicts the desired lifestyle within the family and the desirable learning style, which is also within the family.

I try to recall how I used to feel about school. Now it's a lot about this being our family, how we live; we can't do it any other way. The thought that [name withheld] would go to school and we would start the day—every day—without him, that my daughters would be away from him all day and he would have all sorts of personal and social experiences without most of his time being at home seems very unusual to me and it doesn't fit at all with our life. (Participant 8)

The child in the center

For some of the research participants, homeschooling was a means of placing the child at the center of their activity. In order to enable children to express their full potential and grant them rights regarding decisions that affected their own lives, the parents chose to educate them at home and not send them to school. This enabled each child to discover and explore his or her interests at the pace and in the manner suited to the individual.

This theme of the child in the center might be considered a pedagogical characteristic of homeschooling (in this respect, see Dewey, 1986, 1997, who emphasized the importance of teaching according to the child in the center). However, in the present research, it emerged as part of the holistic aspect of homeschooling.

From this perspective, the theme of the child in the center referred to the parents' perceptions of the process that their children underwent within the family, that is, the experience of reconciling family-related collectivist values with individualist values that focus more on personal desires. Who knows better what is right for the children—the collective (in this case, represented

by the parents as the family leaders) or the individuals themselves? For example, “Homeschooling is enabling and opens things up compared with conventional education, which closes things ... because homeschooling puts the child in the center” (Participant 7) and “These are not my goals; how can I decide? These are their goals, their life ... I can’t decide that this is the right way for them just because it’s good” (Participant 12).

Responsibility, choice, and control

The analysis of the interviews indicated that homeschooling enabled parents to take responsibility for their lives and those of their children. Furthermore, the choice of homeschooling gave the parents a great deal of responsibility—which parents who sent their children to school transferred to the education system. For example, “He is my child and I am responsible for him. I am with him and I take responsibility for everything good or bad that happens to him. I think this happens less among conventional parents” (*Participant 14*) and “The whole idea of giving someone else the responsibility for education is difficult for me” (Participant 21).

Some of the parents referred to this responsibility as a hardship, especially with respect to the responsibility to provide the child’s learning needs.

If something doesn’t go right you have to figure out what the difficulty is yourself ... I think the parents of children who attend school also have responsibility, but here it is very great and sometimes it is heavy and stressful ... there’s the calm, but on the other hand there are the questions when you don’t go with the mainstream: What am I doing to my child and is it right and do I really understand him? (Participant 4)

It’s not freedom and ... I always said that it means taking responsibility ... There is no freedom here. I constantly have to be responsible for this and for that, for the transportation of that one, and for the studies of the other one, so there’s no freedom here. (Participant 24)

Moreover, Participant 22 said, “I have a lot of responsibility. There’s nobody else to blame. For better or for worse.”

The findings also revealed that parents felt that homeschooling enabled them to exercise their right of choice regarding their and their children’s lives.

I don’t want to just let life pass by, especially not as a person who chose this [i.e., homeschooling]. It’s not something that someone dictated; I chose it. It gives me a great deal of strength when I talk with you; it reinforces what I wanted to say. I chose it every time. Even when it was very difficult, I said, “This is our choice.” (Participant 2)

It is interesting that the parents also referred to the subject of choice and responsibility when they spoke about their children’s education. They tried to

give their children the same sense of responsibility for their actions and for exercising their right to choose. Participant 5 said, “It is also a responsibility to come to the pool with all your swimming gear. There’s no way around it—this is your responsibility, not mine. I always say that.”

Furthermore, some of the interviewees referred to homeschooling as a way for them to control different aspects of their and their children’s lives, for example, by reducing the volume of stimuli the children and adults were exposed to in the contemporary world:

I’m talking about this class of 40 children in a room. It’s much more. I think that our world today is full of much more stimulation than we were meant to tolerate, and we succeed a bit in distancing ourselves from this and surviving with a slightly lower level of stimuli ... and this [overstimulation] attacks us every time from every direction. I can take only as much of this as I want and am capable of, and the children can, too. (Participant 9)

I am really very happy not to be part of that consumer culture. I’m not interested in stores. I go to the mall once in a while and I don’t find anything. It doesn’t interest me and really isn’t part of my world. (Participant 17)

The parents reported on their control over the study materials the children were exposed to:

I control the study material. For instance, sometimes [name withheld] comes home with stories, first-grade reading material that shocks me. For instance, there was a story ... a boy whose hair was very long and everyone laughed at him and said he had girl’s hair and he should get a haircut. So in the end he got a haircut. The moral of the story was that he should cut his hair, understand? (Participant 6)

It’s the films we choose with messages that we definitely accept even though every movie with acceptable messages always has small things. We are ultimately the main figures that they look up to, if you can say that. We have the right to express an opinion and it is our opinion, and not the film itself that determines things in the end. (Participant 7)

They also spoke about their control over the children’s actions and their social encounters.

There’s more parental supervision over what the children do. We are around all the time so they have much less opportunity to behave inappropriately, you could say, without us or someone else knowing about it and dealing with it. (Participant 15)

The kids at school, especially the older ones really frighten me. I also see some cases with children and I know what it leads to; they influence each other. I know I have a child who is very sociable and cares a lot about his peer group, so he wouldn’t be one of those who’d sit on the sidelines. (Participant 7)

Development of self-awareness

The respondents noted that in addition to the process of choice they experienced and the effort to control different aspects of their lives, their deviation from conventional conduct in terms of education and in other ways and the need to examine each decision and question the choices customarily accepted by the majority of the population promoted their development of self-awareness and awareness in general.

You are in a constant process. If you do something everyone else does, you don't stop and think whether it is right for you. You are already into something, part of a herd that walks forward in a given direction. But when you choose your own way, you have to constantly think about whether it's the right path. You constantly check whether it's right for you. Whatever happens to the children, you suddenly think perhaps that's not right. I think this is very good, because it develops awareness and self-awareness about things in general. (Participant 1)

Moreover, Participant 3 said, "It's infinite learning; I really love it, it appeals to me and I discover a lot about myself through it. There were times when I really felt stuck."

In this respect it is also interesting that the parents referred to the principle of developing self-awareness and self-knowing when they spoke about their children's education: "We enable them and encourage them to ask themselves such questions and to connect to themselves" (Participant 15).

Change in lifestyle

Some of the respondents noted that the choice of homeschooling had paved their way to other choices, which changed their lifestyle. For them, the step of leaving the education system was significant and subsequently led them to other changes in other realms of their lives.

For the parents, the act of questioning a practice that is so widely accepted in society—sending one's children to school—and their success in developing an alternative led to the questioning of other practices that they had previously taken for granted. Thus, for example, they reexamined the issue of nutrition and began eating healthier food than they had in the past, reconsidered the subject of feeding infants and chose to breastfeed rather than use formula, and also redefined the meaning of career for themselves in ways that were not necessarily consistent with the accepted perception of the concept but were suitable for them personally.

Since then our world has been completely different. There's no comparison. It's a completely different world. It's as though we said we'd start with one change and now it is never ending. Things change all the time. It's really like that, as though the moment we thought about something so significant as the education of our children, the mandatory education law, what most people do and so forth ... from

the moment we questioned this and survived it, everything became open for questioning. (Participant 28)

It was the sort of thing that we then also began to eat healthier food and become aware of the whole issue of nutrition in quite an extreme way—what we wouldn't eat at all and what we would—things we hadn't thought about much. It came together, our entire life changed radically. (Participant 8)

Slowing down the pace of life

For some of the respondents, homeschooling was a way to slow down the pace of life for them and the other members of the family. These parents described their lifestyle before they began homeschooling as stressful and fast moving and spoke positively about the slower pace of life and reduction of stress that accompanied their choice to educate the children at home.

They noted that unlike in the past, the morning hours had become calm hours when there was no obligation to get up at a set time and hurry to get the children to school. The slower pace was also notable at other times of the day, when it was now unnecessary, for instance, to rush to get home from work before the children and prepare their lunch or tidy the house in the evening and go to bed on time in order to get up early the next morning, and so forth and so on. For example, "Life is much more relaxed than having to get up in the morning, get the kids organized ..." (Participant 13) and "So my life was much more intensive before. What happened to me was that suddenly I had the opportunity to slow down the pace" (Participant 1).

Stopping the race of getting the kids to school at seven, the earliest possible for the preschool, rushing to work in order to get back 1 minute before having to pick them up, coming home and managing to get everything necessary done with the children and tidy the house—and all that in the little time that remained—and then going to bed thinking about what you had to do tomorrow, stopping that crazy pace. (Participant 11)

Finally, Participant 4 said, "In most cases, you don't have to set out at eight in order to get to an activity. The earliest is nine, and we try to make it later. So our entire life is much more relaxed."

Slowing down the pace enabled the parents to be more relaxed and calm and to devote more and higher quality time to the children. It also enabled the children to learn at their own pace, not the one dictated by others; the respondents considered this a more correct way of learning. The underlying assumption of this view is that learning occurs when the learner is "available"; thus, learning at the student's pace is effective because it takes place when he or she is receptive—at the right time, place, and manner for the individual. Participant 9 said, "First of all, I am much more thoughtful and calm and take things much easier. Sometimes I just watch the children

discover, find, and learn to understand all sorts of things by themselves.” Another participant said,

There’s learning that is incidental. In other words, in school it is very selective. I think that when children are available to absorb what they are taught, they learn, and when they aren’t, they don’t. At home things are more open, more open to the children’s pace. (Participant 24)

Living in the present

Some of the respondents said that for them, the transition to homeschooling was actually a shift to living in the present rather than the future, that is, dealing with things occurring now and not just planning ahead.

At this point in time I’m not constantly thinking about the future. On the one hand, I am looking ahead; but on the other hand, I’m living my life in the present, and I tell the children it’s great to live in the present with the difficulties, because that’s our situation right now. (Participant 2)

Moreover, Participant 23 said, “The thing is that we live as though it’s mainly about what’s happening here.”

Rectifying past experiences of school

For some of the respondents, homeschooling represented an effort to rectify their own past experiences with school. These experiences included, among others, being forced to study material that they were not ready for, a daily schedule dictated by the school that was not suitable for them, and a sense that the school “looked right through them.”

As a result of these negative experiences, which one of the respondents even defined as a “trauma,” the parents took action to protect their children from such experiences by educating them at home.

I know that the age of readiness for reading and writing is up to age 9. That means it ranges from age 5 to age 9, and there are some children, like [name withheld], who are interested and some like [name withheld], who knows all the letters and can read but even now doesn’t enjoy it. It doesn’t interest her enough for her to sit down and learn, so I don’t push her. I know it will come one day when she’s ready. The day will come. As a child I suffered terribly from this and I said I would never force my children. I sort of knew there wasn’t any alternative, but then I discovered there was one. (Participant 1)

It bothered me terribly that I had to study for a test and I had to hand in papers and I had to get up in the morning—all that obligation. I didn’t live near the school; every day I had to get on a bus terribly early, and the whole thing was so difficult for me . . . so actually we began the homeschooling as a result of our pain and our past. (Participant 8)

Table 1. Focuses of meanings.

Super-Theme	Themes
Control (14)	Responsibility (9), choice (3), and control (5)
Family (5)	Sense of family (5)
Child (6)	The child in the center (6)
Lifestyle (15)	Development of self-awareness (4), general change in lifestyle (3), slowing down the pace (10), living in the present (3), and rectifying past experiences of school (3)

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent the number of interviewees who mentioned each theme or super-theme.

Table 1 presents the themes that arose from the interviews divided into four super-themes. The numbers in parentheses represent the number of interviewees who mentioned each theme or super-theme. As can be seen, more parents referred to the super-themes of control and lifestyle than to those of family and child. All of the themes and super-themes describe holistic aspects of homeschooling, that is what homeschooling meant to the parents in terms of control, family, children, and lifestyle.

Conclusions and discussion

As noted in the introduction to this article, much research has examined homeschooling as a pedagogical practice intended to replace the conventional school system. Accordingly, it has focused on different pedagogical aspects of homeschooling, such as the curriculum, the learning process, scholastic achievements, teaching methods, teaching materials, and others.

However, the findings of the present research indicate that for the interviewees, homeschooling was much more than a pedagogical choice and was associated with diverse aspects of their daily lives.

It is therefore important to understand the significance of the parents' choice of homeschooling beyond the pedagogical aspect. For some homeschoolers, the choice of schooling at home is a life-changing decision (on this, see also Lees, 2014). Therefore, it is important to understand the significance of homeschooling for families not only from an educational and pedagogical perspective but from a holistic one as well.

Focuses of meaning

Homeschooling can be considered through the focuses of meaning attributed to this practice. The most common focus—that of pedagogy—involves various aspects of the educational process. From this point of view, one might consider homeschooling as the ultimate form of parents' involvement in the education of their children (Authors, 2013).

However, an investigation of the meaning of homeschooling practice from a holistic perspective, as presented in this article, reveals additional focuses of meaning that may deepen our understanding of our question in the present research: “When you say *homeschooling*, what do you mean?” According to our research findings, the main focuses of meaning attributed to homeschooling are control (responsibility, choice, and control), lifestyle (development of self-awareness, change in lifestyle, slowing down the pace, living in the present, and rectifying past experiences of school), family (sense of family), and child (the child in the center).

Control and lifestyle seem to be more important to the interviewees than family or child, as more parents mentioned them (see [Table 1](#)). This may indicate that the aspects associated with lifestyle and parents’ need for control are central in their choice of homeschooling and in many cases even more important than family and other aspects. It might suggest that homeschooling can be seen as part of broader social changes currently under way that also serve as the foundation for other changes in the field of education in general. In other words, the changes in lifestyle in the postmodern era and the greater control of individuals over their lives constitute the core of a change being expressed in numerous social and educational processes, of which homeschooling is only one.

The finding that home education is largely about lifestyle and control is consistent with the conclusions of earlier research in an American context (Stevens, 2001). In the following, we discuss the findings in order of their importance, beginning with control and lifestyle, followed by family and child.

Examination of homeschooling in terms of control and choice highlights these aspects of the lives of homeschoolers. It draws our attention to questions involving the relevance of the issue of control to other aspects of the lives of homeschoolers, the extent to which homeschoolers implement the principle of choice in other realms, the degree of conflict between the two principles—control and choice (e.g., giving a child choice means diminishing some of the parent’s control)—and so forth. It would be interesting to use psychological questionnaires to examine the behavioral aspects of the ability of self-direction and compare parents who homeschool with parents who send their children to school.

Examination of homeschooling in terms of the lifestyle focus of meaning also highlights family life; it involves questions regarding the impact of choosing homeschooling on lifestyle, the pace of life, the relative speed and significance of the impact on different aspects of life, realms that are not affected by the choice of homeschooling, the cultural impact of homeschooling on lifestyle, and more.

The focuses on family and the role of the child are interrelated. Examination of the practice of homeschooling in terms of these focuses of

meaning highlights the family life of the participants and gives rise to questions concerning the importance of family values in the lives of home-schoolers, the extent to which these values contradict those of socialization and culture, the role of the child in the family constellation, the resolution of contradictions between the values of family and of individuation that underlie the child-centered approach, and more. It would be interesting to conduct research on parents' views regarding the potential conflict between values of family and of individuation as well as how they try to resolve this contradiction in practice.

Mapping out homeschooling in terms of the focuses of meaning attributed to it (those presented here and others) could serve as a reflective tool for parents who educate their children at home. As such they could use it to examine the character of the homeschooling they practice in terms of the importance they ascribe to each of these focuses of meaning. They could also use this as a basis to trace their emphases on the different focuses of meaning from a historic perspective, from the period before they engaged in homeschooling (because they had no children or their children attended school) and other significant points in their family history to the present.

Such mapping might also serve as a planning tool: It could be used to determine goals for the future by examining the desired situation in terms of the relative importance of the different focuses of meaning.

Correspondingly, people outside of the family or group of home-schoolers, such as researchers and policymakers, might use such mapping to better understand the different families that engage in homeschooling based on the focuses of meaning they ascribe to the practice.

Historical development

As mentioned briefly earlier, education took place at home and was one of the aspects of daily life (education is life) throughout most of human history (Brubacher, 1947; Romi & Shmida, 2009). The Industrial Revolution created the necessity to separate education; it was organized to take place at set times in set places and was not connected to daily life.

Examination of the current trend of homeschooling as a pedagogical choice alone perpetuates this separation between life and education. From this point of view, the most significant difference between schooling and homeschooling is that in the latter, education takes place at home instead of school.

Examination of homeschooling from a holistic perspective reveals that it embodies a trend of returning to a practice of education as one of the aspects of daily life that accordingly takes place at home. The study of homeschooling as a pedagogical choice alone is liable to blur this important trend.

In comparison, research on homeschooling as a holistic practice may reveal the close relationship that has been reestablished between education and life. Even though the choice of the parents in the present research to educate their children at home might be considered a pedagogical one, for them homeschooling was more than that. It actually constituted a choice to restore the connection of aspects of learning and education with other aspects of life, such as issues of control, family, child, and lifestyle.

The separation of life from education was a characteristic of the modern period. However, the reconnection between life and education in present times represents a universal development occurring in many places in the Western world, including Israel. It is particularly important to consider this, as it reflects a dramatic change in the way children are being raised and educated. One sign of this is the steady increase over the past decades in the number of children being homeschooled in different countries throughout the Western world.

Figure 1 is a schematic description of our view of the development of the relationship between education and the home. Point A represents the period in which life and education were connected (most of history). Point B signifies the time of the Industrial Revolution, when education and instruction were separated from daily life and became the realm of the school. Point C represents a view of contemporary homeschooling as a purely pedagogical practice, an alternative to education at school. Point D illustrates the result of a holistic view of homeschooling, which reveals it as an attempt to return to the premodern period and reconnect home and education.

Naturally, in modern times (represented in the figure by Point B), there were situations when life and education were connected (as reflected in Dewey's theory of life and education). However, the prevailing trend was one in which education took place detached from life, both physically (in a different place, namely, the school) and in terms of content.

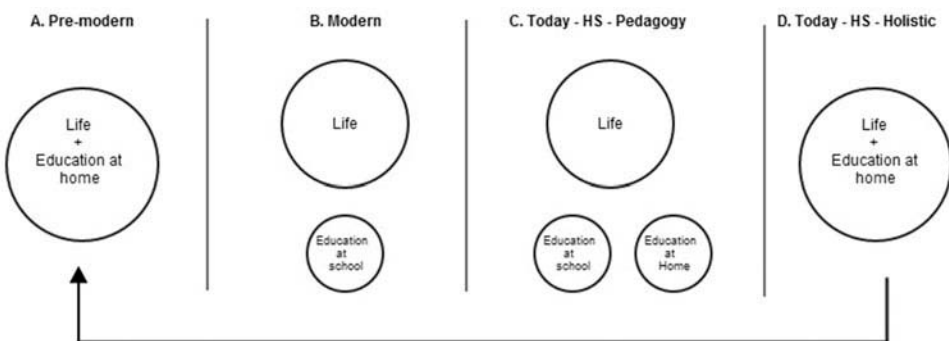


Figure 1. Schematic description of our view of the development of the relationship between education and the home. HS = homeschooling.

Limitations

In considering the conclusions of the present research, some limitations should be taken into account. Some researchers divide homeschooling into two streams: structured and unstructured homeschooling, also referred to as homeschooling and unschooling, respectively. This division is grounded in different pedagogical approaches, and the research described here did not examine the difference between parents who hold different pedagogical approaches. It would be interesting to conduct research from a holistic perspective that examines the differences between these two perspectives and the relevant focuses of meaning that each group respectively attributes to homeschooling.

It is reasonable to assume that the focuses of meaning identified among homeschoolers are associated with the length of time the families have engaged in this practice. For example, we would expect families that have educated their children at home for a long time to mention more aspects of lifestyle compared with newer homeschoolers. It might be interesting to design a follow-up study regarding the correspondence of the focuses of meaning attributed to homeschooling and the length of the participants' experience with homeschooling.

Home education is primarily a decision made by parents regarding their children, and therefore the current research explored the way in which parents perceive home education. It would be very interesting in future research to examine the same research question among homeschooled children.

The present research was based on the declarative level of information; the parents presented their attitudes and perceptions in response to questions about what homeschooling meant to them. The results of such research contribute interesting insights into the worldview of parents as expressed on the declarative level; however, they are still limited to the realm of perceptions and attitudes.

Further research should examine how this declarative level is expressed in practice, particularly with regard to the focuses of meaning that arose here. For example, it would be interesting to investigate the extent to which the principle of choice or the principle of child-centeredness is expressed in homeschoolers' lives.

In addition, the findings of the present research indicate that parents perceive homeschooling not only as a pedagogical act but as a holistic practice that affects many different aspects of their lives. This study was conducted using a qualitative methodology. It would be interesting to try to validate these findings using quantitative research methods by means of questionnaires. Our search did not reveal any questionnaires of this type; therefore, it would be interesting in further research to create such

instruments. An investigation of that type would enable examination of the correlations between different items as well as their relative weights and perhaps help to construct a psychometric scale for interviews related to homeschooling.

It is important to consider the effect of mothers' characteristics on their views. Variables such as level of education, number of children, and degree of religiosity could have an impact on perceptions. In the present research, the sample size precluded examination of these aspects. It would be interesting in further research to study the way in which they affect the attitudes examined here.

Summary

The present research was intended to expand the set of concepts used in reference to homeschooling (also known as elective home education) and to support the argument that a holistic approach would reveal additional focuses of meaning to that of pedagogy. The study of homeschooling from a broader conceptual perspective may further the understanding of this practice, serve as a reflective tool, provide a planning instrument for homeschoolers, and reveal contemporary homeschooling as a return to earlier times when education and life were interwoven and took place primarily at home.

The present article is another step toward a growing understanding of the factors that underlie the rapidly increasing practice of homeschooling. This research may contribute to a broader perspective on homeschooling.

Exploring homeschooling beyond its pedagogical aspect enables us to look at it as part of much broader social trends and in the overall context of human existence in terms of life and education—its connection to our past, what it means in the present, and perhaps also how it might help shape our future.

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