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Scott Davies & Janice Aurini

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# Homeschooling and Canadian Educational Politics: Rights, Pluralism and Pedagogical Individualism

**Scott Davies and Janice Aurini**

*Department of Sociology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario  
Canada*

Homeschooling is becoming increasingly popular in Canada. Drawing on a variety of secondary sources and our own data from the province of Ontario, we advance three arguments. First, homeschooling is gaining legitimacy from the increasingly pluralistic nature of educational politics. Second, the lobbying tactics of homeschool advocates increasingly resemble other choice-seeking actors in education. Rather than expressing alienation from dominant political and cultural streams, most homeschool advocates frame their claims using the language of individual and parent rights. Third, as homeschooling enters the mainstream, more of its recruits are sharing in a burgeoning culture of 'pedagogical individualism' that prizes educational alternatives tailored to the needs of each unique child.

**Keywords:** homeschooling, school choice, individualism, education politics, education policy

## Introduction

Homeschooling is enjoying newfound legitimacy in Canada. Independent estimates suggest that homeschooled children represent nearly 1% of the student population (Bauman, 2002; Hepburn, 2001; Sokoloff, 2002), while homeschooling associations provide much more generous figures (e.g. <http://www.life.ca/hs/>). This growth has sparked media and policy controversy, with supporters hailing homeschooling as a bold alternative to prevailing forms of education (e.g. Bauman, 2002; Hill, 2000; Lines, 2000; Trotter, 2001), and detractors warning of its threat to public schooling (e.g. Apple, 2000). Yet despite mounting interest in homeschooling, the amount of scholarly research on the topic is surprisingly small.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the existing literature by linking the rise of homeschooling to broader changes in educational politics. We draw on secondary sources and our own data from Ontario, Canada, where we have examined various forms of private education, documenting their growth as well as interviewing key actors, conducting site visits and attending events. Along with Linda Quirke, we have conducted 75 interviews with parents, principals, tutors, business people, preschool educators, homeschoolers, and representatives from regulatory agencies, franchise associations and instructor training programmes.

After offering some background on homeschooling, we advance three main arguments. First, more actors are demanding alternate forms of schooling that depart from mass 'one best systems'. This growing pluralism is imbuing

homeschooling with greater legitimacy. Second, homeschool advocates are now framing their demands in ways that reflect this trend. Whereas these groups originally voiced their alienation from 'technocracy' or 'secular humanism', they now use a more mainstream language of rights. Third, the cultural motivation for new recruits to home schooling lies increasingly in highly individualistic conceptions of learning.

## **Background**

Modern homeschooling in North America is rooted in cultural values that are distinct from, and sometimes in opposition to, the mainstream. Homeschooling is generally seen to have been pioneered by two vastly dissimilar groups: Protestant fundamentalists and John Holt-inspired 'unschoolers' (Stevens, 2001). The fundamentalists, disenchanted with the increasingly secular nature of public schooling, turned to homeschooling to ensure that their children were exposed to religious teachings, and to shield them from societal excesses that they deemed to be anti-Christian. They opted for a structured method of homeschooling that taught the basics and promoted the authority of the family. Using the base of church-rooted organisations, Christian homeschooling now consists of a highly organised network of families, support groups and suppliers of educational materials. They appear to be the dominant force in US homeschooling (Stevens, 2001), where it is now estimated that 2.2% of all students are homeschooled (NCES, 2004). However, fundamentalists are less numerous in Canada, and as a result, they are less dominant in Canadian homeschooling (Arai, 1999).

The unschoolers emerged after the demise of the Free School movement, when author and educator John Holt encouraged his followers to try their own hand at teaching their children. Convinced that large bureaucratic schools only harm children by subjecting them to the inhumane routines of 'technocracy', unschoolers developed a radically unstructured alternative that aimed to stimulate learning by cultivating children's natural curiosity in enjoyable settings. These parents often led 'alternative' lifestyles, rejected the structured, materialistic and career orientations of the mainstream, and saw in educational alternatives the opportunity to mould their children by different values (Miller, 2002). Some unschoolers disavowed the term 'school' altogether, and sought a home-based alternative to school, opposing the tendency of fundamentalists to simply replicate formal schooling in the home. Unschoolers instead rely on children's curiosity to guide activities, using the home to 'lead out' (ex ducere) a child's potential (Coalition of Independent Homeschoolers, 2004b).

## **The New Educational Polity**

The recent growth of homeschooling should be viewed in context of changing educational politics. Throughout North America, those politics are becoming increasingly pluralistic, with a wider variety of lobby groups, headed by both experts and parents, voicing their demands (Boyd & Meyer, 2001; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Fuller, 2000; Reich, 2002). This pluralism has promoted calls for greater choice in education. More actors are openly critical of the mass

'one best system' approach to public education, and seek a greater variety of offerings. Their efforts have spawned a variety of legal and policy victories, evidenced in the rise of charter schools, voucher experiments, new private schools and homeschooling (Davies *et al.*, 2002). This changing polity has had two impacts on homeschooling. First, it lends homeschooling more legitimacy, constructing it as one among many viable choices for parents, rather than as an aberrant act of deviance. Second, by attracting new recruits, the culture of choice is making homeschooling itself more diverse.

Today, fewer Canadians associate homeschooling with a negative 'anti-public' sentiment (see Arai, 2004). All of our interviewees commented on the new social acceptability that homeschooling has achieved in the past decade. Media coverage of homeschooling is generally favourable in Canada, and dozens of books are being stocked by mainstream bookstores that offer tips and guides to homeschooling. This normalcy has been aided by the association of homeschooling with the broader school choice movement. Homeschooling is increasingly seen as a viable alternative to public schooling, alongside other choices such as private, magnet or charter schools.

'Choice' has become the common denominator for an increasingly varied homeschool movement. Pointing to a lack of societal consensus over what constitutes 'good education', the choice movement argues that only parents truly know the best interests of their children. One interviewee put the issue thus:

The solution is to simply have choice. Not every parent can homeschool, obviously. But if you have the framework to have full homeschooling, partial homeschooling, whatever, there should be a whole variety of solutions offered by the school system . . . More freedom. A combination of home schooling, private schooling, should be available.

Another says:

We almost need to go back to the idea of when schools were first introduced, when a community got together and decided to make a school. I would like to see schools given back to the community. I don't like seeing the government involved at all. I don't think they necessarily make the best decisions for the population, and I don't think they make the best decisions for my children.

Similarly, a well known homeschool advocate claims: 'People have to have the ability to choose the sort of education at any time they want. And that's what publicly funded education should be, rather than a monolith that you're supposed to agree with.' Rather than framing homeschooling as a radical departure, new advocates conceive homeschooling as simply another alternative to public schooling. As such, it is viewed as an option among many, rather than as a wholesale rejection of public education.

This shift in public attitude has been buoyed by recent legislative changes. Whereas many provinces previously regulated homeschooling via inspections or curricular requirements, there is now more freedom for families. For instance, the Ontario government now recognises homeschooling as a 'viable alternative to public education' and permits educational experiences that are

'unique to each family'. Boards of education can now deem homeschooled children to be receiving satisfactory instruction by simply accepting notification from parents, rather than needing approval from provincial inspectors, or requiring that parents follow traditional schooling methods (Government of Ontario, 2004).

Another sign of legitimization has been the increased willingness of public universities to accommodate homeschooling families through the development of alternative admission policies that utilise entrance tests, portfolios and interviews. Well organised and politically savvy homeschooling parents have demanded access to higher education, and 24 universities have answered this call to date, including the University of Toronto, McMaster University and McGill University (HSLDA, 2002). These policy changes have been touted as a 'major victory' by homeschool associations.

As it becomes more legitimate, home schooling is also diversifying. With many legal battles resolved, it is easier for families to engage in homeschooling. With greater ease of entry, homeschooling is attracting a wider range of participants. In addition to the original Protestant and unschooling groups, one can find homeschooling support groups for Montessori, Waldorf, Roman Catholic, Afrocentric and special education approaches.

Moreover, the types of pedagogies associated with homeschooling are becoming broader. The greater range of homeschooling organisations is bringing the support and information networks that can facilitate a wider variety of pedagogies. As a result, more homeschoolers are interested in sampling from a menu of pedagogies than in following the dictates of a single approach. For instance, the Homeschool Legal Defense Association likens the homeschooling parent to an 'artist', who has at his/her disposal an 'entire palette of colours to mix and use', and a 'vast army of effective methods from which to choose' (HSLDA, 2004b). New books increasingly offer 'how to' messages that discuss a variety of approaches, such as 'Unschooling', or 'School at Home,' rather than advocate any particular orientation. Common titles include *Homeschooling Handbook*, *Homeschooling for Dummies*, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Homeschooling*, *A Parents Guide to Teaching Children*, *The First Year of Homeschooling Your Child: Your Complete Guide to Getting Off to the Right Start*, *Homeschooling for Success*, *Easy Homeschooling Techniques: Your Complete Guide to Low Cost, Time Saving, High Quality Method* and *Basic Skills for Homeschooling*. Thus, in an increasingly pluralist educational arena, new and more mainstream recruits can now tap into a variety of homeschooling philosophies, associations, support groups and materials that suit their preferences. Rather than using homeschooling as a political statement, more parents see it as a mere option for their children's education (see Arai, 2004).

## **Framing Homeschooling: The Right to Choose**

As they gain legitimacy, score legal victories, diversify and attract more mainstream parents, homeschool lobbyists are deploying new tactics. With a more disparate membership, homeschoolers have needed a new language around which to unite and voice their public claims. When lobbying government, homeschoolers are dropping the particularistic vocabularies of

their religious and Holtian founders, and are turning to a more universal language of rights. These themes are being harnessed to unite homeschoolers and emphasise their 'shared history', despite the fact that many practice dissimilar pedagogies and lead vastly different lifestyles (Coalition of Independent Homeschoolers, 2004b). In particular, they are marshalling three broad themes: choice, parental freedom and individual rights.

As discussed in the previous section, 'choice' has become a dominant theme among homeschoolers, who support (for others) the creation of educational alternatives such as voucher or charter school experiments. But what tends to set homeschoolers apart from other choice-seeking parents is their insistence on the centrality of parental authority. For instance, the Ontario Federation of Teaching Parents places a premium on 'the rights of parents to choose the educational method that is in alignment with their beliefs and the learning styles of their child' (OFTP, 2004). We found that homeschoolers, more than parents and teachers involved in private education, were more likely to assert their knowledge and rights over those of officials. Parental rights, they argue, are more important than the assessments of 'experts'. For instance, one group claims to have chosen homeschooling as 'the best way for us and our children to learn, grow and thrive. . . (we are) dedicated to reclaiming homeschooling as the unique province of children and parents, unshackled by the Divine Right of Experts . . .' (Coalition of Independent Homeschoolers, 2004b). Another group urges that

... parents should make important decisions affecting their children both because parents are most likely to appreciate the best interests of their children and because the state is ill equipped to make such decisions itself. Moreover, individuals have a deep personal interest as parents in fostering the growth of their children. (HSLDA, 2004b)

Homeschoolers, more than other parents, are likely to 'defend and advocate the fundamental rights of parents to direct the education of their children and to protect family freedoms' (HSLDA, 2004a).

A third organising theme centres on legal rights. In a far cry from the 'granola cruncher' image of the unschoolers, today's homeschoolers have become extremely adept at using existing laws to advance their agenda. For instance, HSLDA has successfully used clauses in Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and recent Supreme Court rulings to frame homeschooling as part of an individual's freedom of conscience, and right to life, liberty and basic safety. Other advocacy groups link homeschooling to United Nations Declarations of Human Rights that support parental choice in education (OFTP, 2004). For some homeschoolers, this leads to a more inclusive direction:

Homeschoolers support the rights of all people to equal protection under the law. We believe we ALL have the fundamental right to direct our own lives in our own ways. Home educators are a diverse and exciting blend of families. . . (Coalition of Independent Homeschoolers, 2004a)

What is interesting, however, is that the use of universal languages of rights can lead to a growing split between homeschoolers' public expressions and

their private opinions. For instance, while homeschoolers now mostly avoid criticising public schools, and instead insist on their rights to choose, many hold the public system in contempt. As one former homeschool lobbyist acknowledged in a private interview:

For me, it's so clear that schools don't work. I feel that the older I get, the more blunt I become. That is because I don't have a vested interest anymore that I'm worried somebody is going to pick up and put [my words] where I don't want them to be. I think the home schooling community as a whole has become less afraid. Certainly they're articulate in a way that they never were. And if it's necessary to couch it in certain terms, there's enough people with political smarts to do that.

These 'smarts' also allow them to avoid internal disputes that could harm their coalitions. 'Choice' as a social cause avoids the imposition of ideals on others, and stresses commonalities rather than differences. As a left-wing unschooler and supporter of progressive social policies like gay marriage told us:

For many years I struggled with the fact that I support, for instance, a fundamentalist Christian person who is spanking their kids, who feels that the child is evil when it comes out of the womb and has to be fixed by the parents, I'm supporting their right to home school. And I struggled with not wanting to do that for many years. More and more we're seeing the Christian and secular home schooling groups get together because they realize that [choice is] what it's all about.

How can we understand this gap between private opinions and public ideals? One route is through the notions of 'framing' and 'resonance' developed in social movement research (for examples in education, see Binder, 2002; Davies, 1999, 2002). The key premise is that lobby groups will change how they 'frame' or express their claims to resonate in a changed political environment, or to build coalitions by stressing shared interests rather than emphasising differences. For instance, Davies (1999) examined changes in the lobby tactics of non-Catholic religious groups over several decades. While in private their rationales were strongly couched in religious terms, and while many had misgivings over the state policy of multiculturalism, in public they gravitated towards idioms of multiculturalism and parent choice. They did so because the political culture of Canadian education had changed, having made older religion-based notions of 'moral duty' out of step with the times, and because multiculturalism provided a good frame upon which to build a multifaith coalition. Likewise, Canadian homeschool organisations, when lobbying for funds, tax breaks or curbs on home inspections, focus almost entirely on notions of choice and rights, as those themes, rather than those of religion or anti-technocracy, resonate in today's educational polity.

### **The Underlying Culture: Pedagogical Individualism**

As they gather new recruits in a more pluralist polity, and claim their rights in public, what are the pedagogical preferences of today's homeschoolers? And as homeschoolers grow closer to the mainstream, what educational



values do they share with other choice-seeking parents? In this section we argue that many protagonists across the current choice movement are embracing a highly individualised conception of learning, one that prizes a customised experience to enhance a child's personality, idiosyncratic talents, cognitive style and sense of self.

It is now common for theories of learning to be premised on the notion of individualised learning styles. The current popularity of 'multiple intelligences' and the idea that each person learns in a unique manner signals a profound cultural shift. Educational textbooks and magazines regularly discuss the need to recognise and accommodate different types of learners. While most educators share this sentiment, large public schools are bound to less individualised methods simply by virtue of their large size. Ontario's class size average of approximately 25 students necessitates that 'individualised learning' remains more of a sentiment and expressed goal than something that is readily achievable. But spurred in part by the new culture of learning, Ontario has recently seen a sharp growth in the number of private schools, in particular new small schools (Davies & Quirke, 2005). These schools boast much smaller class sizes than the public norm, claim to give to each student personal attention and are premised on the ethos that schools should be matched to the cognitive needs and lifestyle of their students.

This culture is also affecting homeschooling. Whereas some homeschooling pioneers, particularly the Fundamentalists, sought a more structured mode of pedagogy, this appears to be less the case today. As a homeschool advocate claims, '[R]eal learning is personalized, individualized and self paced... we can abolish a one-size-fits-all curriculum that is not created by the learner' (Priesnitz, 2000: 54). One interviewee describes:

There are different learning styles, and [standard school teaching methods] fit those people who are readers and oral. But the kinetic, or people who have to touch things, it doesn't fit them. So, a lot of children whose learning style is different, obviously struggle [in public schools]. Now that the material on these learning styles is available, parents are aware of it.

Another homeschool mother discussed her educational options: 'It's not just teacher and blackboard, because not everybody learns that way. There's a lot of different learning styles.' One homeschooler and part-time tutor emphasises: 'I really, really haven't seen much success in any kind of mass system. I really do believe in individually tailored education programmes. I don't think kids learn at the mass level, I don't think you can dictate the pace at which kids learn.' Another homeschooling mother offers: 'Rather than waste their time on subjects that they don't have an interest in, wouldn't it be better for them to excel in the things that they're interested in? Wouldn't we be better off as a society if we allowed that to happen?' One interviewee offered a bold claim: 'A lot of kids who have problems in school, those symptoms, quote-unquote, disappear when they're at home, because they can learn at their own speed, in their own way, jumping around the room, if that's what they need, or talking aloud, or whatever is more difficult to do in a school situation. It's about individual learners.'



Homeschool associations are also calling for individualised instruction that meets each child's unique needs, and recommend the creation of specialised educational experiences through accessing available parks, museums or art galleries. They fault the anonymity that is promoted by mass public schooling. For instance, an advocate for one group states:

The management of large classrooms requires certain mechanics not unlike assembly lines in factories – none of which are conducive to creativity and individuality... In home education, one-to-one learning is the rule. Even when there are several children, the parents can make time to spend with each child. While curriculum guides for public schools stress the values of one-to-one learning, in the majority of classrooms this is difficult to achieve. There are simply too many students. (Lindquist, 2003)

This same advocate stresses the individual freedom associated with home education:

[Homeschooled] children can learn about things they are interested in and at a time in their lives when they are ready to learn. No preconceived schedule forces them ahead or holds them back .... Children can receive a superior education attuned specifically to their own needs, learning styles, personalities, and interests. (Lindquist, 2003)

Importantly, most of our interviewees took a very pragmatic approach to homeschooling, aiming to solve particular educational problems for their children rather than espousing a specific doctrine, whether religious or Holtian. One mother described her decision to try homeschooling: 'I had nothing against the public school. Both movements [public schooling and homeschooling] have their strong and weak sides. When my younger son started to have problems, personal problems, we said let's give it a try. You can stay out for a few years, see what happens...'. The parent described further how, in contrast to a Christian emphasis on structuring home education, many new recruits are taking an eclectic approach: '[P]arents start adapting, and seeing what could work for them. Because the books are available, because the support is available, parents feel free to adjust their teaching style to the kid's learning style.'

Our interviewees discussed how homeschooling conventions now alert parents to the array of available learning methods, rather than imposing either an unschooling or fundamentalist orthodoxy. New recruits are less interested in expressing their alienation from society's secular or technocratic excesses. They see themselves as choosers among a variety of methods, rather than as espousers of a single pedagogy. For instance, examining new books on homeschooling, a now-common theme is that parents should try a mixture of several methods until they find one that best suits their child. The vast majority eschew ideological themes in favour of practical advice, whether for homeschooling for success, teaching basic skills, adopting proven techniques or finding teaching resources on a tight budget. This emphasis on accommodating children's uniqueness is emerging as the common

denominator for the choice movement, and is uniting homeschoolers, who were historically split between Protestant fundamentalists and Holt-inspired rebels.

## Conclusion: The Future of Canadian Homeschooling?

In an educational polity that is increasingly pluralistic, and in which learning is conceived in individualistic fashions, homeschooling is enjoying a newfound legitimacy. Fairly or not, mass public education is increasingly faulted for being insensitive and unresponsive to this imagined range of learning styles. As a result, private alternatives, particularly homeschooling, are being promoted through a language of rights, with homeschooling sometimes touted as the best choice to meet a child's unique cognitive style. But even with the encouragement of a pluralistic polity and popular individualised pedagogies, there is a natural 'cap' on the homeschooling population, as it is limited to those families who can afford the time and foregone income of at least one parent (Arai, 2004). One possibility for further growth is that homeschooling become more 'high tech', using on-line courses and e-learning tools, but such a change can take homeschooling from its hallmark of individualised, one-on-one attention to a more impersonal, standardised model. It appears, therefore, that further growth will depend on the polity: are governments willing to not only permit homeschooling, but to also subsidise it via tax breaks and subsidies? Canadian policy-makers are currently unwilling to do so, and a recent survey suggests that neither does the public support such measures (Livingstone *et al.*, 2003). Many existing homeschoolers, able to afford its time and expense, are willing to forfeit any financial support that would entail greater controls. As one homeschooling group stated, 'We aren't so interested in the approval or endorsement of government agencies or educational organizations, and we tend to be skeptical about accepting funds or aid from these sources and even about making use of the services they may be interested in offering to us' (Coalition of Independent Homeschoolers, 2004b). To grow further, then, homeschoolers will need to further elaborate their 'rights talk' to convince governments and the public that they are entitled to greater support, while attracting new members who will tolerate more regulation of their practice.

## Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Dr Scott Davies, Department of Sociology, McMaster University, Kenneth Taylor Hall, 1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4M4, Canada (daviesrs@mcmaster.ca).

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