Homeschooling as a Fundamental Change in Lifestyle

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This paper discusses home education (homeschooling) in Israel. The first section reviews the legal situation, the scope and the current status of homeschooling in Israel. The second section presents data from qualitative research conducted in Israel, which shows, among other things, that homeschooling is perceived by those who practice it as a solution to several problems in different areas of life. This solution generates a total change in lifestyle, i.e. a paradigmatic change. This change is described primarily at two levels – on the one hand it is a process of heightened awareness and a willingness to take responsibility for different areas of life such as children's education, health, employment and self-fulfilment; and on the other hand it is also a trigger for taking a more flexible and easy-going approach to life. The third section discusses two attitudes towards homeschooling: (a) as a pedagogical move which emphasises parental involvement in their children's education (a common approach to homeschooling); and (b) as a holistic phenomenon that relates to changes in lifestyle of those who homeschool (as seen in the study presented here). The paper suggests that while these two attitudes can be researched separately, they are both important in order to gain a meaningful understanding of homeschooling.

Keywords: homeschooling, holistic, qualitative research, lifestyle, postmodern

Introduction: Homeschooling in Israel

Throughout history, children's education has always been the responsibility of their parents. In late 19th century Europe, and later in the USA, the need for a factory-oriented socialisation process arose in response to changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. The school filled this role for society, and thus the state took responsibility for the children's education.

Towards the middle of the 20th century, the trend in both the USA and in Europe shifted back to the parents. There was a noticeable trend calling for renewed parental involvement in their children's education (Avner, 1989; Cai *et al.*, 2002; Hiatt, 1994; Tyack, 1980). This trend took hold in Israel as in many other parts of the Western world and as a result parental involvement in their children's education has undergone something of a revival. Homeschooling is definitely part of this trend, although this phenomenon of parental involvement is visible in other ways as well.

Early media exposure of homeschooling in Israel occurred during the mid-1980s. It is reasonable to assume that even before this time, there were families that had already embarked on this route although to the best of our knowledge there is no documentation of such. Until the last decade, homeschooling in Israel was considered very unusual and on the whole, did not receive any

formal recognition from the establishment. Although it was possible for families that opted for homeschooling to receive official permission, the mechanism for doing so was not always clear. In Israel, the Compulsory Education Law obliges parents to send their children to school. However, the Minister of Education does have the authority to give exemptions when it is deemed to be justified. From the legal point of view the process to acquire such an exemption is quite complicated, and it needs to be renewed every year (although this is not always the case – see Dgani, 2003). In recent years, more families have submitted requests to homeschool and last year the Ministry of Education published regulations on the matter in an official Ministry of Education Bulletin.

According to official Ministry of Education data, currently 60 families in Israel have embarked on homeschooling (Ben-Artzi, 2003; Shabbat, 2003). However, the actual number is apparently somewhat greater, and it appears that some families are reluctant to disclose the fact that they are home-schooling to the authorities. (On this matter see Avner, 1989; Lines, 1987, 1996; Natale, 1992)

In their study, Knowels *et al.* (1992) describe five stages in the development of the homeschooling movement in the USA. I will use these stages to help describe the situation in Israel, and to characterise Israel's current stage. However, it is important that the reservations cited at the end of this description are taken into account. The stages are as follows.

(1) Dissatisfaction with the existing public education system for political, economic and ideological reasons, which has resulted in an increased number of homeschool families.
(2) Confrontation between the homeschool families on the one hand, and the establishment, the schools and the authorities on the other.
(3) Cooperation between the school and the homeschool family, frequently following a court ruling in favour of homeschooling.
(4) Networking (or forming an association) among the homeschool families based on shared interests (ideological, financial and social) usually after they have been the 'banished' minority kept separate from the rest of the social environment.
(5) Compartmentalisation, which occurs when the number of homeschool families increases, thereby also increasing their opportunity for contact with each other. As a result of the above, they can, together with the other homeschool families, now explore the differences in educational philosophy, which then leads to the formation of different approaches or schools of thought. (According to Knowels *et al.* (1992), at least two different schools of thought evolved in the USA. One school of thought is liberal, nonreligious, humanistic and pedagogical while the other adheres strongly to a religious/Christian ideology.)

The description of the five stages in the process is unique to the USA and reflects political and social processes that occurred there. However, the fact that it is possible to identify some of these stages here in Israel (mainly

'Dissatisfaction' and 'Networking', but also 'Cooperation' in at least one case and 'Compartmentalisation'), as well as the fact that the social environment today provides certain conditions that are a part of these stages (see below for details), indicate that a similar developmental process is taking place in the Israel's homeschool movement.

The conditions mentioned above refer to

- *Increased media coverage of homeschooling*. The homeschool movement has gone from almost total public disregard to increased media coverage (television and newspapers) of the whole subject. Whereas in earlier years homeschooling was never even discussed in the media, these days dozens of articles on homeschooling have already appeared in the newspapers and on television.
- *General public dissatisfaction with the education system and a search for alternatives*. Dissatisfaction with the education system and the search for alternative education have both been around for years. The real proof of this lies in the endless attempts to change the education system that have taken place in the past and which are continuing to occur even today.
- *Forming a national level association of homeschool families (networking)*. A magazine, 'The Natural Way ('Beoffen Tivee') is published every month in Israel. This booklet, an environmentally friendly 'greenie' by nature, covers areas such as life in the natural environment in general and homeschooling in particular. Homeschooling is viewed as an extension of the 'close to nature' concept and also reinforces family values (see Lines, 1987 on this subject). This magazine also offers a contact list of people who, as they put it, 'have chosen to be part of the idea' and provide a communication network of sorts for homeschool families. There are also a number of websites available that serve a similar purpose (e.g. http://www.homeschool.org.il), and in different places throughout Israel homeschool families meet together on a daily or weekly basis; a national meeting of homeschoolers takes place once or twice a year. In my opinion, the magazine, the websites and the local and national meetings are precursors of the homeschoolers in Israel becoming more formally organised.
- *Favourable academic and public outlook that emphasises the advantages and minimises the disadvantages of homeschooling.* It can be assumed that the many favourable and supportive articles that have been written through-out the world (e.g. Knowels, 1988; Lines, 1996; Meighan, 1989, 1995, 1997; Nicholls, 1997; Petrie, 2001; Simmons, 1994) have strongly influenced the current public and academic climate in Israel and their approach to homeschooling.

However, despite the above, homeschooling in Israel has been reviewed very sparingly by our academics. To date, only three books on homeschooling have been published in Hebrew (Dagani, 2003; Kasher *et al*., 2002; Meighan, 1997) and to the best of our knowledge, only two comprehensive academic studies have been carried out in Israel.

Homeschooling as a Fundamental Change in Lifestyle

This section of the paper will present research findings that show that homeschoolers regard the shift to homeschooling as a deep and fundamental change to their lifestyle. This change affects, at different levels, various aspects of their day-to-day life including career/employment, structure of the family unit and health.

About the research

The research findings presented in this paper come from a qualitative study that was carried out in Israel between the years 1999 and 2003. The study is based primarily on postmodernist constructivist hypotheses and not on positivist hypotheses (on this matter, also see Glense & Peshkin, 1992; Maykut & Morehouse, 1997; Moss, 1996; Shkedi, 2003) and tries to examine, among other aspects, the ramifications of the choice to homeschool, and also how the homeschoolers evaluate the homeschooling process.

The study included an extended period for general data gathering about homeschooling in Israel, and a period for the in-depth gathering of data from eight homeschool families.

The study was based on a phenomenological hermeneutics approach (Levy, 1986; Tsabar-Ben Yehoshua, 2001; Valdez, 1987) and used the interview as its main tool (on this matter see Glense & Peshkin, 1992; Rosenthal, 1990, 1993; Shkedi, 2003; Tsabar-Ben Yehoshua, 2001). Eight homeschool families under-went in-depth interviews, which were then analysed structurally and thematically. Each interview was individually analysed in order to identify the significant themes. The thematic analysis of each interview was done according to a process described by Giorgi (1975) (also see Shekadi, 2003; Tsabar-Ben Yehoshua, 2001). The process is listed below.

Steps 1–4 apply to each individual interview.

(1) Read the text as one unit to identify central topics.
(2) Divide the text into units of significance or 'meaning units'.
(3) Identify the significant theme in each unit.
(4) Arrange the information into groups according to similar themes (topics) and give each group a core theme.
    Steps 5 and 6 apply to information retrieved from all the interviews.
(5) Rearrange the information across the central themes of all the interviews together, to provide a cross-section of the themes.
(6) Review the central themes and produce a theoretical statement.

In addition to the above, the study utilised the following methods: text analysis, observation of the participating families, and observation of the local and national meetings. Some of the findings of this study are presented in the next section.

Fundamental change in lifestyle

A theme that comes through clearly in this study is that homeschooling represents a solution to a basic, deep-rooted problem. This solution generates a fundamental change in lifestyle. In this section, I will describe the problem-

solving theme as well as the significance of the fundamental change in lifestyle.

Homeschooling as a solution for a fundamental problem

The motif of homeschooling as a solution to a problem was presented by most of the families. Homeschooling is perceived as a solution to difficulties of three types – the parents' negative experiences as children (both in school and in the family framework), negative family and marital experiences, and the children's negative experiences in school.

Parents' experiences during childhood. Homeschooling allows parents to undergo a corrective experience, which can compensate for negative experiences from their childhood whether in the family or school/educational context. For some of the parents, homeschooling actually addresses two problems. It allows them to re-experience and better cope with their own difficult experiences, as well as allowing the parents to invest in their children at a level that they themselves would have liked to receive but did not.

Negative family and marital experience. Homeschooling is perceived as a solution to negative family and marital experiences. The ability to remain within the bosom of the family and to foster greater interaction within the family is perceived as a corrective experience for those who have gone through unhappy family and marital experiences.

Negative experiences of the child in school. In this case, homeschooling is perceived as rescuing the child from regressing emotionally and ethically or morally, which is what occurs when he or she encounters the conventional school system. In some cases, the child's entry into the education system triggers a process of regression, which neither the system nor the parents manage to halt. The process of re-claiming responsibility for the child's education is perceived as a solution to this problem.

Homeschooling as a fundamental lifestyle change: A paradigmatic change

The interviews showed that the choice to homeschool brought with it other significant changes that affected many areas of life. Borrowing a phrase coined by Kuhn (1996) we can refer to homeschooling as a paradigmatic change. The choice of homeschooling affects areas of family life beyond education (e.g. medicine/health, family relationships, work, self-fulfilment), and re-quires different practical and ideological preparations than those needed for conventional school education.

The fundamental lifestyle change is expressed in two central concepts that stood out when analysing the interviews: (a) awakening and taking respon-sibility; (b) flexibility and an easy-going approach.

(a) Homeschooling as a process of awakening and taking responsibility. Most of the interviewed families perceive homeschooling as a process of awakening, i.e. a transition from simply accepting many life-affecting aspects, which were basically thrust upon them by the social environment, to a situation where they check the issues before making decisions that are often contrary to what they would have 'automatically' decided in the past. The interviewees perceive this as a positive process, which gives them back some control over

their lives. This awakening process also means that the interviewees must take responsibility for other areas of their life where they did not realise they could actually make choices. For the interviewees, the awakening process is the transition from 'autopilot' to a situation of heightened awareness where they must make intelligent, considered decisions.

They perceive the awakening process as requiring them to step outside the mould of their pre-homeschooling life. This 'stepping outside the mould' is expressed in external changes that they make in areas such as work/career, allocation of time, use of medical resources, etc. and also in changes of perception about what they really want in their lives and how they are going to achieve it.

Learning and education. The most obvious example is the process of taking responsibility for their children's education and learning processes, which is the cornerstone of homeschooling. With homeschooling, the parents are busy examining their attitudes and establishing their educational outlook, i.e. what is good education, what is desirable, what do they want to give their children and how will they do it? This line of thinking tends to lead to a change of perception about life in general, and specifically to educational concepts.

However, this example is only one of many which, when they occur together, amount to a fundamental change in lifestyle. Other areas in which the families are trying to reclaim responsibility include health care, work/career and self-fulfilment.

Healthcare. These families tend to look beyond conventional medicine and also try to use a self-help approach by finding their own inner strengths for healing and strengthening themselves. They will often choose complementary medicine, home birth as opposed to hospital birth, and a self-healing approach. Instead of 'handing over your body' to conventional medicine in the expectation that they will treat the body and 'give it back to you' at the end of the process, these families try to take care of themselves using different methods. However, they maintain an open mind on the matter of conventional medicine and are willing to use it when necessary. The difference is that they take responsibility for deciding the 'when, what and how' of any treatment that will be required.

Work/career. These families are trying to extract themselves from structured work environments where their time is planned for them by someone else, e.g. the work manager, and to shift to more independent work arrangements where they will have control over the type of work they choose to do, their scheduling, etc. At the same time the place of work also changes, and more work is actually done at home.

Self-fulfilment. The definition of self-fulfilment changes and now instead of the person maximising their potential through their career or studies, they will be focusing on maximising their potential within the personal and family arena. Prior to the awakening process, relinquishing the opportunity for an academic career or for serious career advancement would have been equated with relinquishing an opportunity for self-fulfilment. However, after the awakening process, this is perceived instead as a release from a situation that actually hampers the ability to identify the appropriate channels for self-

fulfilment. Continuing to advance on the career path would prevent the person from identifying in which area they want to realise themselves. They would be caught up on a path that promotes automatic decision making, in an environment that would reinforce the success of their march along the career advancement route, and this would mask the person's true feelings.

Some of the interviewees related to the difficulties involved in taking responsibility for areas in which people are not usually responsible. Keeping to the well trodden path that everyone follows and making decisions automatically helps shield the person from taking responsibility, thereby making life easier. However, the awakening process and the taking on of responsibility obliges the person to examine everything they do, not to take anything for granted, to acquire extensive knowledge in a wide range of areas, and more than anything, to take risks. In choosing to take responsibility for areas such as education, health, etc. the person making that choice can no longer point an accusatory finger at an external body or system and blame them. They must now take full responsibility for their successes and failures.

The awakening process is viewed as a positive process, which leads to taking maximum responsibility in different areas of life. In taking responsi-bility the person is required to acquire knowledge and make intelligent, considered decisions. The interviewees consider that taking responsibility and making intelligent, considered decisions are values well worth promoting.

(b) Homeschooling as a process of flexibility and an easy-going approach. The theme of a more easy-going approach to life was very prevalent in the interviews. The concept of an easy-going approach refers to making unplanned moves, participating in the natural progression of matters without trying to alter their course. The easy-going approach appears as:

(1) Ideology. The optimal situation to be aimed for both in the education process and in life in general. It is important to note that in some of the interviews, there is no distinction between the education process and life in general, because there are those who believe that education is part of life and therefore there is no need to separate them.
(2) Practical move. The axiom about the easy-going approach, which was raised in the interviews, is that life is full of unexpected surprises, i.e. life is fairly temporary and definitely arbitrary. In life, matters progress at their own pace and according to a plan which no one has any control over.

Consequently, the following came up at the interviews:

• There is no point planning for the long term because you can never tell what will happen in the future; there is no doubt that events over which a person has no control will affect the planning and generate changes. The same applies to educational procedures, i.e. there is no point in developing a long-term study programme because it is impossible to know which skills will be required in the future. It is therefore only necessary to learn those skills that are required in the short term.
• If plans have been made, it is important to remain open-minded about change, i.e. flexibility is essential in order to succeed in a temporary world full of unexpected surprises.

The easy-going approach translates into actions in the educational procedure as not planning any 'lessons'. Instead you live and the natural course of events presents you opportunities to learn. An example given in one of the interviews cites a child who, during a trip to somewhere, is curious about directions of travel and distances. The parent utilises this opportunity to teach the child the basics of map reading. This example is presented to show the contrast with the situation where a parent and child sit down at a given time in order to try and learn previously set material. Learning with the easy-going approach is the opposite of planned and structured study.

According to the worldview of the interviewed families, life is a process in which unexpected events occur. This process cannot be directed and attempts to force plan reality leads to unnecessary difficulties and failure. Consequently it is necessary to 'go with the flow' of the easy-going approach. Furthermore, the interviewees expressed a belief that going along with the natural course of events, and accepting them, is likely to bring a successful and desirable outcome to the easy-going person.

Conclusion: Two Approaches to Homeschooling

Homeschooling as a pedagogical alternative: Parental involvement in their own children's education

The research described in the previous section presented an approach that regards homeschooling as a fundamental lifestyle change. This change can be seen in many important areas of day-to-day life such as employment/income, self-fulfilment, healthcare and education, and finds expression in the taking of responsibility and in the easy-going approach and flexibility.

Another way to view homeschooling is to see it as part of a phenomena of an increasing level of parental involvement in their children's education (see Lines, 1987; Mayberry, 1988 for information about parental involvement in their children's education). I wish to expand this approach further, and then to review the research potential to be found in observing homeschooling via these two approaches.

Parental involvement is a well developed area in Israel. It is important to note that it can occur in many different ways. We can draw a scale representing the level of parental involvement in their children's education (or in other words the degree of responsibility that a parent takes for their child's education). At one end we will find the parent who hands over the task of their children's education altogether to the school – they bring the children to school in the morning and take them home again at the end of the day, and this is the total of their involvement. At the other end of the scale, we will find the homeschoolers who have made an absolute choice, to take upon themselves full responsibility for their children's education and not to hand the responsibility over to other parties.

In between the two ends of the scale there are other means for parental involvement such as:

- Parental involvement in the school. This involvement occurs at different levels, beginning with the passive parent whose sole involvement with the school is at a transfer-of-information level (they receive school notices, etc.); then there are those parents who provide the school with resources (e.g. snacks for class parties, volunteer supervisor parent accompanying school trips); parents who participate in services offered by the school (e.g. lectures on education and psychology, etc.); parents involved in educational processes in the school (e.g. parents who teach a specific lesson, after-school activity, etc.) and including parents who are involved in setting school policy and determining the educational nature of the school (Friedman, 1989; Noi, 1990).
- Setting up and participating in unique educational frameworks. This is a more far-reaching solution than the parents who are involved in an existing school, because it is based on the hypothesis that it is preferable to build a new framework rather than try and change the existing one. Establishments of this type may either exist under the auspices of the Ministry of Education or exist privately.
  In Israel, there are a number of unique schools that come under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. These schools provide a partial solution for parents who want to remain within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education but who are searching for ways to bridge the gap between the existing situation and the desirable one concerning their children's education.
  Private solutions are usually initiatives taken by a group of parents who are trying to build different educational frameworks. This type of solution is quite common for the preschool age group (e.g. parent cooperative kindergartens) though not just for them. There are also groups that try to offer alternative solutions for school-age children.

As mentioned, homeschooling can be regarded as one of the ways that parents choose to be involved in their children's education. With homeschooling, parental involvement is total and all-encompassing, placing it at one end of the parental involvement scale. However, there is a broad range of other options available to parents who *want* to increase their involvement in their children's education and homeschooling is just one of them.

There are many reasons for the desire to increase involvement. According to Aviram (1999) and Meighan (1997), the reasons lie in the postmodernist revolution (which parallels the term 'postindustrial', although the term postmodernism also has a social–cultural emphasis), which has changed the face of Western culture in recent decades. According to this explanation, current school education was shaped in the modern period, and the shift to a postmodernist society requires changes in education and the creation of alternatives, one of which is homeschooling. The new characteristics of the postmodernist reality encourage homeschooling. Although this is not the place to explore these characteristics and their influence on our lives in general, and specifically on our educational choices, I would like to briefly mention a number of conditions (for further information see Aviram, 1999; Meighan, 1997; Perelman, 1992; Toffler, 1980).

- The telecommunications revolution has made study material and information far more accessible than in the past; the opportunity for individual involvement in knowledge creation is also great (Bane & Milheim, 1995; Enisberg, 1994). Consequently, people have become accustomed to the fact that they can acquire meaningful knowledge and even be a partner in its creation. They then feel they are more capable of the task of educating their children because they have acquired both knowledge and the tools to know how to utilise it.
- The social consensus about truths and ideologies is waning, and so too the mandate given to schools to educate according to the 'right' vision (Aviram, 1999; Meighan, 1997).
- The school is becoming less relevant for those who study there because it less and less reflects the postmodernist reality and is therefore unable to prepare its graduates for life in this new era.
- The country's ability to force its will on its citizens (in every area, but particularly regarding education) is decreasing.
- The employment revolution – in terms of the organisation, is characterised by a trend towards decentralisation and chaos; in terms of the employees, it allows distance working or working from home with flexitime (Drucker, 1994; Rifkin, 1995; Sanjee, 1994). Working from home on flexi-time frees up more time for people to devote to their children's education.

As Israel becomes more influenced by the postmodernist revolution, it can be assumed that parents' desire to be involved in different ways in their children's education will also be on the rise. Furthermore, the scope of options for parents to realise this desire will also increase. In the framework of this trend, it is safe to assume that the number of homeschool families will also grow in the future.

Homeschooling as reflected by two approaches

This article has presented two approaches to homeschooling, both of which are found in the Israeli reality. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that it would be easy to project these approaches on to other Western countries, and to examine their homeschooling (a) as a pedagogical move which emphasises parental involvement in their children's education (a common approach to homeschooling); and (b) as a holistic phenomenon that relates to changes in lifestyle of those who homeschool (as seen in the study presented here).

Further to the distinction made by Van Galen (1988), between pedagogical homeschooling and ideological homeschooling, I wish to propose an additional division between: (a) *pedagogical homeschooling*, as presented in this article, or actually ideological homeschooling, as I wish to relate to the viewpoint of the parents on pedagogy as a continuation of a certain ideology. When looking at it in this way, homeschooling could be the result of a certain ideology that dictates a certain pedagogical approach; and (b) *holistic homeschooling* – while pedagogical homeschooling deals with educational/learning aspects of the phenomenon, holistic homeschooling deals with the effects of

the *choice* to homeschool on the lifestyle of those involved. These are two different approaches to homeschooling which explore different questions.

It is important to note that these two approaches do not contradict each other, and it can be assumed that they both exist to a certain degree in the homeschool families. I suggest that an interesting perspective on homeschool research could be the reciprocity between these two approaches in different families. This research could explore questions such as: which approach came first? How do the two approaches affect each other? How do these approaches develop alongside one another? How are these two approaches presented to the outside world? Is there a difference in attitude of the various family members towards the two approaches? What is common to families who put emphasis on the same approach? These are but a few of the questions that could be considered and there are still more to be asked.

In our opinion, viewing the homeschooling phenomena through the prism of the connection between these two approaches is likely to provide an interesting and comprehensive picture.

Another interesting prism, that has to do with the holistic approach to homeschooling, is the 'postmodern versus the premodern' prism. This article views homeschooling as postmodern phenomena, and therefore, researches homeschooling amongst a group of people who lead a postmodern life and hold postmodern values. Nevertheless, it is clear that in Israel, large groups of Jews, Christian Arabs and Moslem Arabs lead a modern or premodern life. In the premodern era, it was common for children not to attend school, and instead to stay at home, or be sent to work, and in this light, one could refer to it as 'homeschooling'. However, I think it represents a totally different phenomenon, which stems from very different values and motivations, and involves different practices.

It is very probable that in Israel, postmodern homeschooling and premodern homeschooling exist side by side, and it might be interesting to conduct a comparative research study of them.

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