

Resisting Bureaucracy: A Case Study of Home Schooling

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Home schooling is a growing U.S. trend, with an estimated 1.1 million students being home schooled (Princiotta, Bielick, & Chapman, 2004). The average home school family in the United States is White, middle class, Christian, and conservative (Masters, 1996), yet home school families are becoming increasingly diverse, and now represent a broad cross-section of the nation's racial, ethnic, religious, political, and ideological diversity (Romanowski, 2001; Welner, 2002). Home schooling has sparked passionate and rancorous debates, yet other than general demographics, relatively little is known about the families who choose to educate their children at home (Welner, 2002).

In the spring of 2002, the authors, all of whom are either professors of education or practicing school administrators, were invited to conduct a study of home schooling in a small, rural midwestern town we refer to by the pseudonym of Wheatland. District leaders were interested in learning why families residing in their district chose to home school and what might encourage them to reconsider sending their children

to their local public schools. Prior to embarking upon the study, we expressed misgivings and preconceived notions about home school parents and their motivations for home schooling their children. We could not understand why taxpaying adults did not take advantage of the local public school system, especially one that was small and highly regarded for its academic achievements. We were skeptical about how much time these parents actually spent educating their children. However, our willingness to set aside our own assumptions and listen to the families tell their personal stories resulted in us coming to see them in a different light. The home school families that participated in the study graciously invited us into their homes, their schools, and gave us a glimpse into their lives. They were candid in their assessment of home schooling and public education, and saw the advantages and disadvantages of both.

We first present findings from the qualitative data collected from the home school families. We then use home schooling as a standpoint from which to examine established educational practices that have been the target of criticisms in recent years. A number of reformers have called for the dismantling of schools' bureaucratic structure and culture (Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1994; Clark & Meloy, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Meeks, Meeks, & Warren, 2000; Senge et al., 2000) and replacing them with environments that are inclusive, caring, learning communities more akin to families than factories (Calderwood, 2000; Eaker-Rich & VanGalen, 1996; Furman, 2004; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Noddings, 1992; Shields, 2000). We hope that our work will lead to a more balanced and less emotionally charged discussion about why parents elect to home school their children and how the practices of parent educators might inform public education.

The Re-emergence of Home Schooling in the United States

Home schooling has a long history in the United States going back to several centuries, but there is general agreement that the contemporary home school movement began in the 1960s and emerged from two different ideological strands (Basham, 2001; Carper, 2000; Lyman, 1998). One strand came about in response to court rulings that codified the separation of church and state. Conservatives who wanted to raise their children in a traditional Christian environment expressed dissatisfaction with what they saw as the increasing secularization of public schools (Welner, 2002). Because they felt public schools no longer taught the beliefs and values they wanted their children to acquire, they turned to their churches and formed overtly Christian home schools and support groups (Carper, 2000; Somerville, 2001). During the same

timeframe, a second strand was fomenting as a growing number of critics were expressing discontent with the quality of education being provided in public schools. In particular, prescribed curriculum and teacher-centered instruction were identified as contributing to a crisis in public education. In the midst of social upheaval during the 1960s, John Holt's (1964; 1967) "unschooling" ideas were appealing to politically active young families who were challenging the efficacy of all public institutions (Basham, 2001).

In spite of the rapid proliferation of home schooling during the 1960s and 1970s, in 1980 home schooling was still illegal in 30 states and children taught at home were in violation of compulsory attendance laws (Basham, 2001). Due primarily to the efforts of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSDLA), an advocacy organization created and led by conservative Christian attorneys, by 1993 it was legal in all 50 states to educate a child at home (Somerville, 2001). The HSDLA has remained vigilant in its work to prevent federal or state governmental organizations from interfering with home schools' autonomy. The organization demonstrated its considerable political clout when it pre-empted an effort to require home schools to comply with the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Klicka, 2003; Smith, 2003). Indeed, the No Child Left Behind Desktop Reference published in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education explicitly states, "Federal control of home schooling is prohibited. Home schools are not subject to NCLB or NCLB assessments" (p. 176). Critics have argued that conservative Christian organizations like HSDLA have appropriated home schooling to serve their own purposes, and the reason they so strongly support home schooling is to further a right wing political agenda that includes the destruction of the U.S. public education system (Berliner, 1997; Lubienski, 2000).

Nonetheless, in a 1998 poll, a majority of Americans agreed that parents have the right to educate their children at home (Lines, 2001). Although home schooling is now legal and most Americans support home schooling as a viable educational alternative, within the ranks of professional educators, home schooling is still seen as a threat to public education (Apple, 2000; Lubienski, 2000; Reich, 2002; Stevens, 2001). Private schools as a form of parental choice do not prompt the type of heated debates that home schooling arouses. What is it about home schooling that raises the hackles of public educators? Basham (2001) concluded that public school administrators and educators should examine how they might be contributing to the loss of students to home schooling, citing inflexible rules and regulations dutifully enforced by professional educators among other attributes typically associated with public education bureaucracies. Therefore, the bureaucratic assumptions that underlie public education provide a useful framework for analysis.

Theoretical Framework: Assumptions about Schooling

Numerous educational researchers have pointed out the bureaucratic assumptions that underpin the way educational organizations are structured and have kept schools from adapting to a rapidly changing society (Astuto et al., 1994; Clark & Meloy, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Senge et al., 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Bureaucratic assumptions about the structural arrangements of schooling are reflected in time-honored practices such as sorting students into classes according to their chronological age and then further sorting them by perceived ability. Secondary school schedules carve up the day into segments with a single subject taught during each time period. The tacit assumption is that educational decisions should be left to expert school administrators, excluding teachers, parents, and community members from having much voice in how schools should operate (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). According to Darling-Hammond (1997), institutionalizing bureaucratic principles meant “decisions about teaching, curriculum, assessment, and learning passed from the hands of teachers, individually and collectively, to administrators, commercial textbook publishers, and test makers who were not swayed by such distractions as the individual needs of students” (pp. 44-45). Standardization of practices across schools and districts via top-down mandates was viewed as both possible and desirable, and most current organizational structures and educational practices have been in place for over a century (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Innovators have periodically attempted to introduce new school practices, but familiar institutional practices have proved remarkably resilient (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Public education is not lacking in innovative ideas, but throughout the years implementation of ideas such as total quality management, curriculum integration, teacher collaboration, inclusion, and most recently learning communities, has proven difficult, and many of these trends have come and gone with little to show for them. Such innovations have never proliferated or been sustained over long periods of time. In this analysis, we examine some of the ways that home schools have created alternative organizational arrangements and instructional practices that traditional schools with entrenched bureaucracies have been unable to accomplish.

Study Context and Methodology

The town of Wheatland has a population of approximately 1800 citizens according to 2000 U.S. Census data, and serves as a bedroom community for a nearby metropolitan area. One of nine independent school districts operating in Milo County, Wheatland Public Schools (WPS) is

comprised of three schools: a K-5 elementary school, a 6-8 middle school, and a 9-12 high school, with an enrollment that has remained stable at about 900 students. The town is predominately White and middle class, with only 23% of students considered to be low income as determined by those who qualify for free and reduced price lunches. Students at all three schools perform well academically and most are college-bound.

We identified a total of 15 families in the Wheatland district who were either presently home schooling their children or who had home schooled within the past two years. Each family was invited to participate in an in-depth interview with one of the authors. Five married couples and five individuals (four women and one man) representing 10 home school families agreed to participate in the study, and during spring 2002 we collected data from 15 individuals. Eight of the ten families interviewed had a total of 28 school-aged children. Two of the families were no longer actively home schooling, but had home-schooled their children in the recent past. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed, and the authors independently read each interview transcript and searched the data for patterns. Data were then inductively analyzed using a constant comparative method, and themes were generated across the set of interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 2002).

A Glimpse into Home Schools in Wheatland

The 15 home school parents who participated in our study in many ways mirrored the typical demographic of home educators: They were White, middle class, regular churchgoers, and professed Christian values. All 10 of the families lived in modest accommodations; none would be considered financially well off, nor did any of the families characterize themselves as politically active. Although they have benefited from the activism of others, these families were not strident in their views or their criticisms of public education. They were more ideologically moderate than the extremist faces and voices often associated with the conservative strand of the home school movement (Stevens, 2001).

The parents' highest level of formal education covered a broad range. One parent had a 10th grade education and two had high school diplomas. Eight of the 15 parents interviewed had at least two years of post-secondary education at a community college or 4-year public or private institution. Four parents had attained bachelor's degrees, but only one had an education degree and had at one time been a public school teacher. In all but one case, the mother provided the home schooling while the father worked outside the home. However, both parents were actively involved in making curriculum and instructional decisions for their children.

The parent educators who participated in this study did not meet the state's qualifications for teacher certification or licensure and would not be considered "highly qualified" according to NCLB requirements. Most did not even have a college degree. Although they were "lay" teachers, they believed they had succeeded with ensuring their children received a good education. Their children were socially well-adjusted, performed well on standardized achievement and college admission tests (e.g., ACT), and had no difficulty making the transition to work or college. Those whose children eventually entered public school were on par with their peers, and in many cases were ahead of the students in their class.

The parents we interviewed shared a variety of reasons for choosing to home school their children. The most reasons cited most often were a desire to explicitly teach Christian values in the curriculum and the wish to tailor their educational program to best meet each child's learning needs and interests. For this sample of families, home schooling was an opportunity to maintain both a Christian-focused curriculum and a child-centered pedagogy, which is consistent with recent studies that have characterized parents' motivations for home schooling as complex, multi-faceted, and not easily categorized (Collum, 2005; Knowles, 1991). Most parents were not critical of the local schools, but were in fact complimentary; as one parent expressed, "For a public school system, I think Wheatland does a good job." These parents merely wanted their personal decision to home school their children to be respected.

Most of the Wheatland families highly valued education and approached home schooling very seriously. One parent described how his family set up a schoolroom in their mobile home to send a message to their children about the importance of education, "We lived in a mobile home and one of the bedrooms—we had a 3-bedroom place—and one of them was the schoolroom so the kids would know this is serious." His wife concurred, and went on to explain, "We try to be real consistent in our work and expecting that ... they have to be pretty sick in order to miss school."

These parents did not take lightly the decision to home school their children and had no regrets about their choices. They did, however, acknowledge their own limitations and expressed some doubts about their abilities to effectively teach the curriculum. One mother was honest in her self-appraisal that she was fearful of "not being able to cover everything," especially when it came to advanced subjects such as "chemistry and algebra and trig." Another mother admitted home schooling was "a lot more work than I thought it would be." One mother summarized the views of many of the parents we interviewed when she said, "We, as home-schoolers, do have our troubles and frustrations and never feel like we have the bull by the horns. ... We're faced with the same things

in education that the public schools are.” These parents were candid in their admission that teaching required a lot of hard work and dedication, and they too experienced failed lesson plans and were sometimes confronted with students who were unmotivated and uncooperative.

Home school parents who failed to rigorously educate their children were especially troubling to the parents we interviewed. One mother stated frankly, “There are bad apples out there that are home schooling.” A father explained his concern, “We can tell you families that don’t stay on track. A year went by and they would only have nine weeks worth of work done. You can’t do that. We do not want to fail our kids by doing that.” These parents recognized that the poor educational practices of a few home educators reflected badly on those who were committed to upholding high academic standards.

Most of the parents interviewed were well aware of the public scrutiny they were under and worked hard to ensure that home schooling was seen in a positive light. One parent stated, “It matters to us what people think and how they view home schooling. We want to give an honest picture and yet a good one.” In spite of their concerns, these home school parents were resolute in their belief that they had made the right decision to home school their children and were able to meet their children’s educational needs in ways that public schools were not.

Overcoming Bureaucratic Barriers

Bureaucratic schools are non-adaptable structures; they are not able to respond to the unique needs and interests of individuals. In other words, students must accept what the school is able to provide, as public schools with large numbers of students must batch process them through a regimented curriculum (Astuto et al., 1994). Several parents indicated that when they first started home schooling they attempted to emulate public school structures and schedules so their home would seem more like a traditional school. One family described how they used bells to signal class periods and recess. Most families, however, quickly abandoned the idea of establishing traditional school structures in their homes, finding them to be more constraining of their efforts than helpful. Instead, they created flexible and responsive educational environments, both within their own homes and in collaboration with other families. They organized and structured the school day and made choices regarding curriculum and instructional strategies they believed were in their children’s best interests. In the next section, we examine the practice of home school parents that run against the grain of bureaucratic assumptions of schooling. These included dynamic and fluid networks, flexible

structures and schedules, responsive pedagogy, tailored curriculum and materials, small classes, and multiage groupings.

Networks of Families

Educational networks have been proposed as a reform explicitly designed to counter bureaucratic school arrangements (Lieberman, 2000; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Pennell & Firestone, 1996). Networks encourage teachers to collaborate and communicate within and across schools, to share resources, and to maximize the use of new technologies. Lieberman characterized the educational networks she studied as “flexible, borderless, and innovative” (p. 221). She might have been describing these home school families, who were not the socially isolated people they are often portrayed (Arai, 1999). The families in our study were loosely organized, but highly interconnected, as they collaborated with like-minded families to share responsibility for educational and recreational activities.

Through their churches or local home school associations, these parent educators found other families with whom to exchange areas of expertise and to provide opportunities for group activities. Describing a home school cooperative in a neighboring town, a parent told us about the many activities parent educators with particular talents and/or expertise shared with other families. She enthused, “We’ve done gym, music class, piano lessons, guitar lessons, basketball, thousands of field trips.” Within this loose coalition of participants, home school families have maintained some of the longstanding traditions and rituals associated with school, such as sports competitions, band and orchestra, and high school graduation ceremonies. The home school support groups were quite fluid, and coalitions of families continuously ebbed and flowed. Families would come together for specific activities and then move on to join other groups as their children’s interests and needs changed.

Home educators also participated in more formal activities and associations both locally and nationally. All but one of the parents regularly attended the home school conference held annually in the nearby city. The conference provides an array of curriculum and instructional materials and offers seminars and workshops designed to help home educators improve their instructional skills. The expansion of home schooling has contributed to the growth of an entire industry devoted to meeting the needs of home educators, which has given them a multitude of resources at their fingertips. The Wheatland families we interviewed all took advantage of the myriad options available to them, as they made informed decisions about curriculum, educational materials, and support services.

Curriculum, Educational Materials, and Support Services

Publishers of textbooks and large-scale assessments have benefited from the trend toward increasing state and national control over educational decisions, which has resulted in a narrowing of options for curriculum, textbooks, and assessments (Spring, 2005). Rather than having decisions about curriculum, books, and other materials foisted upon them by policymakers, educational bureaucrats, or textbook publishers, home school parents have access to a vast array of choices. Several parents mentioned they conducted extensive research in order to find the curriculum that best met their children's educational needs. One parent explained that each of his children "had different curriculum" and that he and his wife "had to go and research for each kid." The explosion of videoconferencing, computer technology, the Internet, and virtual schools has facilitated teaching, especially subjects beyond the parents' knowledge and expertise. A parent explained how his children participated in distance education courses: "Our students sit in front of the TV like they are right in the classroom with the teacher talking to them like they are in the video class."

Families also used the services of businesses that specialized in providing home schools with curriculum, transcripts, grades, and diplomas. One parent described the curriculum she used as an "easy to teach method...because it's developed mainly for home school parents. ... You know what tests to take, what to do, and it's just easy to follow." Parents also employed the services of companies that catered to home and private Christian schools. In addition to providing curriculum and materials, these vendors maintain testing records and transcripts, and issue high school diplomas. A parent enumerated what the company he contracted with offered: "They take care of achievement testing, they take care of grading tests, they keep our transcripts, they keep our report cards; they keep all that kind of thing."

Flexible Structures and Schedules

Home school parents worked to maintain a balance between providing their children with routine and structure while simultaneously allowing their daily schedules to be flexible and adaptive. They did not compartmentalize their lives into school and home; they did not separate learning academic subjects from their daily lives, as one mother phrased it, "Home education is more of a lifestyle than set apart time." Another mother explained, "It's hard to separate school and home. It's our way of life. ... They're not in school just three or four hours a day."

They are learning all the time.” As the comment illustrates, many of the parents articulated a fairly sophisticated philosophy of learning as “our way of life,” something that was happening “all the time,” and not just within the confines of a classroom or a fixed number of hours that constitute a school day.

Because these parent educators recognized that education extended well beyond the boundaries of a classroom, they adjusted their schedules to take advantage of learning opportunities as they arose. One parent explained, “Just to give you an example, we are planning a missions trip through our church this spring in April and because of our home school we can take our kids with us. We will spend a little over a week in Chihuahua, Mexico.” Overnight field trips and opportunities to participate in church-sponsored mission work would not be possible within a traditional public school calendar and would likely not even be seen as educational.

Home schooling occurred year round for most families, and they structured academics around seasonal activities. For instance, in one home spring and summer gardening was used to teach a variety of science concepts. Because their children were involved in educational activities all year long, parent educators did not feel constrained by a 6-hour school day. One mother explained:

Since we do it all year round, I don't say that we have to do 6 hours a day. We can kind of work around our schedule. Plus, they retain a lot more when we don't quit for 3 months. We haven't always done that. We just found out that it's the better way. They're usually interested in something in the summertime, so we ended up doing [school] anyway.

Most home school families followed a daily routine, yet it did not necessarily conform to the pattern of a typical school day where all students move through the same activities at the same time. Instead, home schooling allowed the children to pace themselves. With the low student-teacher ratio, students could be given tasks, work alone, and the parent educator could help as needed.

Responsive Pedagogy

As was evident in the previous section, most parents expressed a child-centered pedagogical philosophy. They had learned through their experiences that allowing children to pursue their interests made teaching easier and learning more enjoyable. These parents saw firsthand how their children bored easily and lost interest in a basic academic curriculum taught using traditional instructional practices. They recognized that tailoring curriculum and instructional strategies to children's interests fostered success and capitalized on their intrinsic motivation.

As one parent put it, "We let them excel in what they are interested in. And we don't have to push them." She went on to say, "They do so much more when it's their idea." Another parent shared that her approach to planning lessons entailed, "Whatever project the kids want to do." Home school families discovered on their own, as one mother put it, "if they're interested in it, boy, they're going to learn it and know it well."

These home school parents desired for their children to pursue their own interests, yet they also expressed that children should have structure and discipline in their lives. This belief was evident in their approach to schoolwork. One parent remarked, "We wanted to teach them discipline - we had a set schedule." Another said, "They have to have their homework done before they can do certain things." Self-governance and self-discipline were also important to these parent educators, as one said, "They are on their own to complete their work." Another mother referred to her child's school day as "self-directed."

Multiage Groupings within and Across Families

Most formal schools organize themselves into grades with students of the same age comprising each grade following the logic of hierarchy and division of labor to increase efficiency of production (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Small schools with not enough students to form separate grades have demonstrated the educational and social benefits of multiage grouping (Veenman, 1996). Likewise, this group of parent educators felt their children were advantaged by the multiage groupings that were naturally created within their own families and across families involved in their networks. One parent explained that his children benefited from relationships that spanned age ranges and even generations: "They have friendships from very old to very young and make the movement between the age groups very easily." Activities and field trips with other families that created larger multiage groups were also seen as advantageous. One parent explained, "You have an age variety; therefore you don't have all 25 of one age. You have first graders with eighth graders." Her husband elaborated, "Big brother is there to take care of little brother, like that." Older students and siblings were responsible for younger ones, breaking down the barriers that often exist between ages, grades, and school buildings.

In summary, the home school families who participated in this study were structured, yet flexible in their approaches to use of time, curriculum, instructional strategies, and groupings. They saw learning as an ongoing, dynamic process that did not occur only when students were completing assignments. They articulated and enacted a child-centered

pedagogical philosophy and tailored lessons and learning activities to maximize multiple ages and family networks. They had access to advanced technology and resources that assisted with teaching as well as the necessary record keeping and paper trail. They have been able to accomplish what most public schools would like to do, but are unable to because of prescribed curriculum, inflexible schedules and structures, and increased pressures to perform well on standardized tests.

Implications for Public Education: Envisioning Alternatives

The contemporary home school movement has prompted a polarizing debate over the merits of home school versus the merits of more traditional places called schools. We do not wish to “take sides” in what we believe is an unproductive argument. Although we acknowledge our study included a small number of home school families, we do believe public education can gain from their insights and home grown educational practices. We agree with Belfield (2004) who observed,

Potentially, home schooling could revolutionize education in the U.S.: instead of regimented, standardized provision delivered within a detailed set of rules and regulations, learning could be much more diverse, open, and flexibly tailored to a child's requirements and responsive to his or her individual development. (p. 18)

Some home school researchers have previously suggested that the growth of the home schooling movement serves as a critique of the formal, institutionalized, and impersonal bureaucracies that characterize most public schools (Bauman, 2005; Belfield, 2004; Hill, 2000; Marshall & Valle, 1996). It is perhaps not surprising that the parent educators in this study either intuitively understood or figured out that traditional school structures were not effective in their home schools. They did not allow themselves to be constrained by the cultural practices associated with outmoded but resilient school practices, as they had the insight and power to make adjustments to the school day, curriculum, and instructional strategies. These parent educators took advantage of multiage groupings and they collaborated with other home school families. Their vast network of resources was impressive. These home educators were committed to improving their teaching practices, but also knew their limitations and found ways to overcome them. Paperwork and many other bureaucratic requirements were outsourced to organizations whose primary function was to keep records and manage information. Doing so gave parents more time to focus on curriculum and instruction.

These parent educators understood that teaching was hard work, but were also motivated and committed to becoming better teachers. They

did not claim to have all the answers, and spent time attending conferences and researching curriculum, materials, and instructional strategies. They found a balance between structure and flexibility; they built lesson plans around children's interests. They sought outside assistance when confronted with subject matter that was beyond their capabilities. Once they abandoned the familiar but unworkable bureaucratic school structure, they created educational environments that fostered learning. They were also critical of home educators they felt were not doing a very good job of teaching. The home educators who participated in this study may have been unusual, but in many ways they exemplify the characteristics of any effective teacher and effective school.

The day-to-day realities, experiences and perspectives of this group of home educators seem at odds with the agendas of conservative political organizations like HSLDA. Ironically, HSLDA leaders who claim to speak for home schools have silenced and marginalized home school families who are not in a position to be heard. Many in the public education arena have vilified the home school movement. It seems that home school families are neither the pawns of the political right, nor do they deserve to be demonized by public education researchers, policymakers, administrators, or teachers. As we gain a deeper understanding about the people behind the demographics of home schooling, a picture emerges of families who want what is best for their children; who desire to be involved with their children's lives and education.

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