

Homeschooling: The History and Philosophy of a Controversial Practice

James G. Dwyer and Shawn F. Peters

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Readers of *Educational Theory*'s book reviews will by now be familiar with the University of Chicago Press's series in History and Philosophy of Education. Each book in this series pairs a historian and a philosopher to write a unified introduction to a relevant issue for contemporary education. By combining expertise in these two important disciplines, the authors are able to provide an account that is attuned to both contextual idiosyncrasies and normative considerations. Dwyer and Peters argue that this cross-disciplinary approach is *especially* useful when considering a phenomenon as complex as homeschooling, which they define as "parent-directed learning in the home that substitutes, partially or completely, for attendance at a regular school."¹ In their words, "The historian aims to understand and describe an infinitely varied phenomenon, and the philosopher seeks neat, normative conclusions about the permissibility of a practice whose consequences and underlying intentions differ considerably from one family to the next" (HS, 2). They further explain that they both approached the assignment of writing this book with no particular policy position in mind (HS, 4). For this reason, they claim, they are able to present a position that is informed by actual historical and philosophical analysis, rather than ideology.

From the very beginning of the book, the authors make it clear that the purpose of their study is not to provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary homeschooling.² Rather, they set themselves one primary goal, to which all other considerations are subordinate: to offer a historically- and philosophically-informed prescription for state policy regarding homeschooling (HS, 2). In other words, they seek to answer first whether, and then how, the liberal democratic state should regulate homeschooling.

The first half of the book covers the history of homeschooling in America, divided into three phases: the colonial era through the rise of common schooling (chapter 1), the resurrection of homeschooling as a self-conscious movement following World War II (chapter 2), and "homeschooling's coming of age" (HS, 84) from the 1990s to the present (chapter 3).

Chapter 1 argues that in early America parents were understood to have a *duty* to God and the state of properly educating their children, rather than a *right* to do with their children as they saw fit. As a result, though most instruction did occur in the home (or on the job, as in apprenticeships), "parents generally did not undertake home instruction with any sense of repudiating the state's authority or expertise in the realm of education" (HS, 9). The state did not necessarily *provide* schooling, but it could enforce parents' educational duties if their efforts were deemed insufficient. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the state gradually came to regulate school attendance and schooling in response to the perceived inadequacies of (especially immigrant) parents. Both immigrants and native White

Protestants generally embraced the growth of common schools, seeing schooling as “a path toward respectability, Americanization, and long-term economic security” (HS, 15). The language of parental rights to resist the state’s authority over their children first appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century. Even so, the state’s control over schooling continued to increase, and consequently the control of parents continued to decrease.

The belief both in the adequacy of schools and in the inadequacy of parents began to be challenged after World War II, as chapter 2 details. The earliest years of the homeschooling movement drew on both the conservative Christian backlash to the secularization of public schools and “a leftist critique of institutionalized learning” (HS, 41); in consequence, chapter 2 is peppered with names that will be familiar to readers of *Educational Theory*, such as Paulo Freire, Jonathan Kozol, A. S. Neill, John Holt, and Ivan Illich (and before them, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey), in addition to less well-known names such as Christian Reconstructionist Rousas J. Rushdoony, Seventh-Day Adventist Raymond Moore, and conservative Evangelical James Dobson. These diverse influences led to early homeschoolers being split into two groups, which are often referred to as “pedagogues” (who focus on the failures of regular schools to promote children’s creativity and individuality) and “ideologues” (who emphasize the authority of parents to pass on their faith to these children). Though these labels can be misleading, they have stuck around because they reflect a real (if far from complete) split within the movement, a split that goes all the way back to the earliest days of the homeschooling movement.³ These “odd bedfellows,” as John Holt referred to early homeschool advocates in 1979 (HS, 49), were united by their distrust of educational experts, and by multiple long battles to legalize homeschooling, which continued into the early 1990s.

These legal battles solidified the predominance of the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), and with it the conservative Christian wing of the homeschooling movement. As the ideologues grew in prominence, pedagogues such as John Holt and even Raymond Moore were increasingly marginalized as leaders of the movement. At the same time, more and more people have turned to homeschooling for both religious and secular reasons, including the prevalence of bullying in schools, the needs of students with autism spectrum disorder, the bureaucratization of schools, and the rise of high-stakes testing. All of these reasons are aided by the plethora of technologies and websites available to homeschoolers. Yet parents can also choose homeschooling for more sinister reasons, such as to cover up for severe abuse; organizations such as Homeschooling’s Invisible Children and the Center for Home Education Policy try to guard against this danger. Dwyer and Peters note that it is extremely difficult to study the effects of homeschooling in any systematic way, and almost all comparative studies between homeschooled and regularly-schooled students suffer from selection bias. They close chapter 3, and their survey of the history of homeschooling, by reminding readers that the homeschooling movement is hardly a “monolith” (HS, 101), and is not without its internal disputes and critics.

Chapter 4 is offered as a transitional chapter, which begins raising normative questions about “what stance the state *ought* to take toward some parents’ desire to keep children at home rather than sending them out to school” (HS, 109, emphasis in original). The major goal of the chapter is to rule out the two “extreme” views regarding homeschooling: that it is “inherently superior” and so should not be *regulated* at all, and that it is “inherently deficient” and should not be *permitted* at all. Dwyer and Peters argue that neither of these positions is tenable due to the great variety of homeschooling experiences that exist in the world today. Specifically, regardless of one’s worldview, it is theoretically possible to craft a homeschooling scenario that would be clearly superior to the education available in regular schools (they give an extended example targeted at a vision of liberal education that is likely held by many readers of this journal); on the other hand, regardless of one’s worldview, there are obviously some homeschooling approaches and situations that are *not* good. They base this latter argument on two factors: the division between child-directed and authoritarian homeschooling (similar to the division between pedagogues and ideologues described above) and the deliberate choice every homeschooling parent has made to raise and educate his or her children in one particular way rather than another.⁴ Even more pointedly, “It would contradict the mantra of homeschoolers — that children do best when their education responds to their individual needs — to stipulate that homeschooling is right for every child (HS, 117). Given this reality, that homeschooling varies enormously and includes both the very bad and the very good, all we can do is wade into the most difficult questions of policy and practice, such as “Is it possible to prevent the bad while facilitating the good?” (HS, 118).

Ultimately, Dwyer and Peters conclude that it *is* possible, and as such the state has a responsibility to both allow and oversee homeschooling. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 present an extremely careful reasoning process intended to justify a particular kind of state oversight of homeschooling. Rather than recount all of the authors’ highly nuanced argument, I highlight two notable points that are often overlooked in discussions of homeschooling: first, they argue that children have a right, even more basic than their right to an education, to remain undisturbed in their own homes (HS, 192–195); and second, they argue (against those who support blanket prohibitions on homeschooling as the only viable means of protecting those children who might be harmed under the guise of homeschooling) that the state is actually capable of identifying those parents who are grossly educationally neglectful, and prohibiting them from homeschooling (HS, 205–206). For these and other reasons, they argue that the state should *permit* homeschooling, and should *regulate* homeschoolers through initial qualifications involving a high school diploma or GED and demonstrated evidence of ability to successfully educate the child in the home; periodic review by means of individualized portfolio and interview, part-time enrollment in school, or some other alternative that involves someone other than the parent regularly seeing and interacting with the child; and a sliding scale of remediation that seeks to supplement parental deficiencies and broaden children’s social horizons (HS, 206–221).

Although they argue extensively for this regulatory proposal, Dwyer and Peters do recognize that it is unlikely to get traction “in the real world” due to the strength of pro-homeschooling advocacy in the United States. So they close by offering “two more realistic recommendations for improving state oversight of homeschools” (HS, 226) — namely, financial support to homeschooling parents who agree to meet the state’s requirements, and advocacy on behalf of homeschooled *children* to match the advocacy on behalf of homeschooling *parents* (HS, 227–228). Yet these practical steps are not the focus of their book; rather, they devote the majority of their energy to expounding what they think the state *ought* to do regarding oversight of homeschooling. Therefore, it is this positive (if idealistic) approach that I focus on in my critical appraisal.

Throughout the book, what I found most compelling is the authors’ consistent emphasis on the child’s personhood and the needs and rights that personhood entails. It is true that many homeschooling parents, especially those of a vocal and activist stripe, see their children as in some sense belonging to them. But at the same time, many *opponents* of home education see children as belonging to the community (and, by extension, the state). I greatly appreciated that the authors pushed aside both of these views in favor of putting the child first (HS, 131–132, 134). This commitment to putting children first is clearly visible in their specific recommendations regarding oversight of homeschoolers (initial qualifications, periodic review, remediation). On the surface, at least, this proposal sounds like a reasonable attempt to guard children’s interests against the encroachments of both parental and societal demands, and for this I wholeheartedly applaud Dwyer and Peters.

At the same time, their argument is not without flaws. I want to raise three concerns in particular: their overreliance on a particular stereotype of homeschoolers, the double standard by which they evaluate parents and the state, and their inconsistent account of the state’s powers. Each of these concerns works against their regulatory proposal, as compelling as it would otherwise be.

First, although Dwyer and Peters recognize the vast diversity of homeschooling practices, and even make this diversity a central part of their argument (specifically, using it to rule out the pro- and anti-homeschooling extremes), they still place considerable focus on homeschoolers of a particular type: religious, conservative, even fundamentalist. For example, they repeatedly raise concerns that hyperconservative parents will forbid their daughters from going to college or aspiring to any role other than homemaking and motherhood (HS, 143–144, 177, 182, 186–187, 204, 213, 228). On the one hand, this dominant focus makes sense if their purpose is to guard against the most severe risks to liberal democracy, regardless of how prevalent those risks are among actual homeschoolers. But on the other hand, regularly bringing up examples of hyper-conservative homeschooling to the near-exclusion of other forms of homeschooling, even while acknowledging that many homeschoolers do not fit this mode, perpetuates a stereotype of homeschoolers that both Dwyer and Peters themselves and other homeschooling researchers recognize is outdated.⁵ The result of this overemphasis on one kind of

example will be to reinforce certain biases regarding homeschooling, even if the authors' *intention* is to present a balanced account of homeschooling in general.

This heightened concern with conservative, religious homeschooling is manifest in their recommended regulatory policy, particularly regarding periodic review and remediation. For example, in describing the kind of periodic review they desire, they comment, "And, needless to say, the state would conduct the same progress review for girls and boys, which would implicitly rule out gender-discriminatory treatment of homeschooled students" (HS, 213). With respect to remediation, they note that remediating "a deliberately induced deficit in knowledge of various conceptions of the good" is especially difficult because "ultraconservative religious parents are not likely to shield their children from awareness of ideological difference; to the contrary, they are wont to warn children about it regularly. They are likely, though, to characterize other worldviews inaccurately and unfairly so that people who hold them appear unreasonable and threatening" (HS, 219). To be clear, I fully recognize that some homeschooling parents do indeed miseducate their children about the wider world, or provide greater opportunities to their sons than they do to their daughters. Furthermore, it would not be accurate to say that concerns about conservative, religious homeschoolers are the only concerns Dwyer and Peters raise in their discussion of regulation. Nevertheless, such concerns get a substantial amount of airtime that may or may not correspond to the extent of the threat. Other potential dangers might include the possibility that supposedly "homeschooled" children may spend all of their time working instead of learning, which they do mention briefly (HS, 212); and indoctrination into nonreligious, nonconservative ideologies (militant Marxism, for example), which they do not consider at all.

Second, and more worryingly, Dwyer and Peters arbitrarily shift between describing an ideal scenario and insisting that we attend to the way things actually are. Specifically, in the case of the *state* they outline the way the wisest and best government would handle regulation of homeschooling, while in the case of *parents* they insist that we pay attention to how real parents in the real world actually conduct their children's education (or fail to do so). Both of these approaches are legitimate, but if we are going to acknowledge the very real possibility of abuse by supposedly homeschooling parents, we should also talk about all the ways state oversight can go wrong (including bias against homeschoolers, secular bias, perverse incentives, and a host of other failures, intentional and unintentional). It is unreasonable to hold homeschooling parents to a higher standard than we hold states and their agents.

Again, their idealism regarding the state and realism regarding parents can be clearly seen in their recommended regulatory policies. Consider especially their description of the periodic review requirement:

This can be accomplished by meetings, perhaps twice yearly, between a family and someone who is properly trained to conduct educational assessments and who is employed by the local school district. Ideally, these assessors would be people who have themselves homeschooled successfully, so that they are both supportive of homeschooling and sufficiently knowledgeable about its particular advantages and challenges to provide constructive feedback. (HS, 212)

I am sure many, if not most, parents who are serious about the job of homeschooling their children would eagerly welcome regular input from someone who is both “supportive” and “knowledgeable” — in an ideal world. But in the real world, the world in which some parents make educational decisions for their children that lead to the need for regulation in the first place, finding such a person is challenging indeed, especially if we add the requirement that they be “employed by the local school district”! (They include this requirement because “homeschoolers have ... made a mockery of legal requirements for assessment in states that permit parents to submit an assessment by a private party of their choice;” *HS*, 213). To their credit, the authors do admit that “it might be difficult in some communities to hire such people” (*HS*, 212). But they only mention this possibility in passing, instead of building it into the very content of their recommended policy. If we are going to build a homeschooling policy around the possibility that parents might engage in various kinds of educational neglect and abuse under the guise of homeschooling, then we should *also* build that policy around the possibility that agents of the state might deliberately or accidentally harm homeschooling children and families in attempting to enact oversight. We cannot be idealists in one case and realists in the other.

My third critique is closely related to the second: Dwyer and Peters seem to have an inconsistent conception of the state’s capabilities. On the one hand, they argue that the state is not able to determine what is true theologically (*HS*, 147–151).⁶ At the same time, however, they also claim that the state can accurately determine what is in children’s best (temporal) interests (*HS*, chapters 6 and 7). Yet why should we rule *in* the ability to do the latter, while simultaneously ruling *out* the ability to do the former? This is not to say that the state can or should determine theological truth (a scenario most of us rightly find terrifying), but rather to raise doubts about its ability to accurately determine children’s best interests, either. Nor do I wish to suggest that children’s interests are *utterly* impossible to determine; then we would have no basis for combatting even the grossest kinds of abuse and neglect. But if we think we should be cautious about involving the state in advancing a particular vision of the good life (which is not equivalent to, but closely related to, particular theological truth-claims), then it seems unreasonable to entrust to it the equally momentous task of determining children’s best interests. Instead, perhaps we could look to local, geographically (and perhaps religiously) based communities, as well as the national and international “community” of homeschoolers facilitated by the Internet, to decide and enforce their own conceptions of the good for both adults and children. After all, most parents — homeschooling or otherwise — are far more likely to welcome the suggestion that they are failing to seek their children’s best interests when it comes, not from a government official whom they see twice a year, but rather from a fellow parent whom they know and interact with regularly.

As interesting as books such as *Homeschooling* can be, they often become merely academic exercises, especially if (as Dwyer and Peters admit) the authors have no real stake in the outcomes of their theorizing. In this case, the armchair nature of the work reveals itself in a lack of clarity about its audience. Given that the book is published by an academic press (University of Chicago) and the

authors are both academics, a plausible audience would be liberal scholars of education, many of whom think homeschooling undermines public schools. And the authors do address such a position at several points in the book. But they also frequently address themselves to homeschooling parents. Yet it simply does not seem plausible to me that homeschooling parents would find Dwyer and Peters's arguments persuasive, whether they believe they have a God-given right (and duty) to homeschool or simply consider themselves the best judges of what sort of education is best for their own children. What we need instead is more scholars who understand *why* homeschooling parents choose to homeschool and respect their goals in doing so, even as they do not hesitate to offer thoughtful criticism of those goals as they observe them in action.⁷ Such sympathetic critique from those able to position themselves as friends of homeschooling, and not the idealism of armchair scholars, will be most likely to affect actual homeschoolers in the real world.

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1. *Homeschooling: The History and Philosophy of a Controversial Practice*, 3. This work will be cited in the text as *HS*.

2. Readers who are interested in such an overview should see Robert Kunzman and Milton Gaither, "Homeschooling: A Comprehensive Survey of the Research," *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives* 2, no. 1 (2013): 4–59.

3. For more discussion of the diverse founders of the homeschooling movement, see Milton Gaither, *Homeschool: An American History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 117–140.

4. However, they do not distinguish between the belief that a certain approach to homeschooling is objectively bad and the belief that, in consequence, the state should forbid parents from homeschooling in that way; it is possible to believe the former without also believing the latter.

5. Kunzman and Gaither, "Homeschooling"; Gaither, *Homeschool*, 201–226; and Robert Kunzman, *Write These Laws on Your Children: Inside the World of Conservative Christian Homeschooling* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 2–3.

6. This is part of a larger argument that the state should not act on the basis of particular religious beliefs. They additionally argue that to do so would be too divisive in our religiously diverse society, *even if* the state were capable of adjudicating theological claims.

7. For an example of such a grounded analysis of homeschooling that both listens sympathetically and critiques understandingly, see Kunzman, *Write These Laws on Your Children*.