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Justice, Inequality, and Home Schooling

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A NUMBER OF critics of home schooling have suggested that the withdrawal of children from schools reflects and reinforces a broader societal trend. In the past half century, the most educated and affluent citizens have withdrawn en masse first from cities to suburbs, then from public into private spaces, and most recently into electronic networks and controlled-access communities. This position will be referred to as the *privatization argument*. In this article, the implications of the privatization argument for home schooling are explored through philosophical analysis.

Why is it that critics believe that privatization in general and home schooling in particular should be deplored and resisted? Three distinct reasons for concern appear in the literature. The first is that through withdrawal into private pursuits, we are losing our public cohesion, our ability and willingness to work together for common benefit, and that the erosion of that capacity is producing a society that is poorer, meaner, and on balance worse for all its members (Lubienski, 2000). A second is that withdrawal undercuts public authority over the formation of future citizens, which Gutmann (1987), Callan (1997), Curren (2000), and others suggest democratic societies need to sustain themselves. The third is that the trend toward withdrawal exacerbates inequality, allowing the privileged sectors of the society to capitalize on their advantages and to deny similar opportunities to others (Apple, 2000).

In Section II, I examine the basis for each of these concerns. The first two, it turns out, are ineffectual. One depends on an assumption about the effects of home schooling that has not been confirmed by empirical study. The other depends on a definition of democracy that home schoolers probably do not accept. Only the third generates a compelling objection to home schooling, and then

only if one accepts as a requirement of justice a version of equal opportunity, which I shall call *strong equality*. In Section III, I examine the rationale for strong equality and how it would apply to home schooling. In Section IV, I consider two arguments advocates of home schooling might give for not accepting strong equality as a condition of justice.

The aim of this inquiry is to present more clearly than has been done in the past what is at issue in the debate about home schooling and privatization. Philosophical analysis cannot settle factual questions. It cannot determine the effects of home schooling or the proper balance between parental and civic obligations. What it can do is trace the logic that leads people from factual claims to conclusions about how we ought to live and how children ought to be educated. Parties to the debate must then decide whether the factual premises are credible and whether the conclusions conflict with their experience, prior knowledge, or strongly held moral principles. This approach will not resolve the dispute over home schooling, but it is to be hoped that it will cut through some of the hyperbole and circumlocution that have plagued the debate and help parties see why their reasons do not count as reasons for others.

Three Versions of the Argument: A Preliminary Assessment

OF THE THREE versions of the privatization argument, cohesion depends most directly on an empirical claim, namely that home schoolers withdraw from public life and undercut possibilities for cooperation with fellow citizens. It is not impossible that this claim could turn out to be true. Granted, researchers have found that home schoolers join support groups,

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engage in political action, and participate in church and other voluntary activities (Stevens, 2001). There may be others, however, who do not do so, and their isolation might offset the engagement of activists and thus vindicate the critique.

The problem is that evidence of isolation effects has not yet been produced, while evidence of engagement abounds. Moreover, even if such isolation effects are found, there is a further complication. Public school attendance does not guarantee social cohesion. As Coleman et al. (1966) showed, communities vary enormously in social capital, or capacity for cooperative social interaction; schools can foster cooperation, but they cannot be expected to eliminate these differences. On the contrary, Annette Lareau's (2000) study of home-school interaction suggests that schools' efforts to promote parental involvement have very little effect on the extent and intensity of social interconnections in a community. The cohesion critique requires evidence that rebuts this research as well as the findings on home schoolers' sociability. In the present state of knowledge on these matters, it is highly speculative.

The second version of the privatization argument—maintenance of democracy—is not so obviously dependent on an empirical claim. Because many factors affect a state's political character, empirical tests of the sustainability of different types of regimes are extremely difficult to conduct. The argument must therefore be understood as conceptual. From the idea of democracy, we deduce the conditions for sustaining it. Thus, when Gutmann (1987) asks who, in a democratic society, should have authority over the education of future citizens, the answer is understood to be self-evident.

The problem with this approach is that the concept of democracy is malleable, and different versions have different conditions for maintenance. The accounts of Madison, Dahl (1956), and Mansfield (1978) all allow for, and indeed require, considerable dispersal of power, which seems compatible with home schoolers' efforts to control the education of their children. The accounts of Dewey (1927) and Gutmann and Thompson (1996) are less tolerant of the exercise of private power, and therefore less hospitable to home schooling. Critics of home schooling can thus point to several accounts of democracy that support their position, but so can its defenders. The critics must then go on to show that their version of democracy is to be preferred to others. The grounds of debate shift, and the focus of critique is no longer home schooling, but rather a

conception of democracy that critics regard as untenable. Until widespread agreement on these matters is achieved, democratic sustainability will not generate a very compelling objection to home schooling.

The third version of the privatization argument, inequality, is more promising than the others for two reasons. First, proponents of home schooling have long argued that children get a better education at home than in school; the difference in quality is likely to exacerbate inequality. Second, one well-known source of educational inequality is the influence of a student's home background (Fishkin, 1981; Vallentyne, 1989). To some extent, this influence may be counteracted by school attendance; if so, then withdrawing a child from school would make home influence stronger and thus accentuate inequality.

Again, there are difficulties. Home schoolers do seek to provide educational advantages for their children, but not all of these advantages are of the same kind, nor is it clear by what standard they are to be compared with public schools. How, for example, are the ideals favored by Evangelical Christian denominations, and inculcated by some home-schooling parents, to be measured against the intellectual independence cultivated by unschoolers or the conventional academic skills on which school typically focus?

Suppose we do agree on a standard of comparison—standardized test scores or some other measure of performance. It must still be shown that (a) home-schooled students do indeed have an advantage, and (b) this advantage exacerbates rather than ameliorates inequality. This is by no means a trivial exercise.

In the case of (a), much recent research suggests that home schooling may indeed increase academic achievement. These studies, however, are by no means conclusive; all are to some degree subject to self-selection effects. Now suppose these effects can be eliminated, and an academic advantage for home schoolers is conclusively demonstrated. This result would not, in itself, show that home schooling increases inequality. A common measure of educational inequality is the degree to which children's achievement reflects their parents' income and level of education. If, as recent studies suggest, the home school advantage is relatively insensitive to these characteristics, then the effect of home schooling on inequality depends on who decides to home school. Condition (b) is satisfied only when more affluent families home school, because only

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because of what they allow us to do in the future. Their value lies in the opportunities that they generate. To deny parents the opportunity to provide these benefits would be to forbid them to enhance their children's well-being, or for that matter anyone else's or even their own, in any but the most trivial ways.

The separability argument is unlikely to convince egalitarian critics that home schooling is not wrong, unjust, and immoral. It does, however, defeat the responsibility thesis, by showing that it fails in its central aim of holding people responsible for their choices while immunizing them against factors beyond their control. It does so without introducing any new premise that is not widely accepted both by critics and by advocates of public education. Unlike the paternalism argument, it does not depend on empirical assumptions that new evidence might show to be false. Instead, it capitalizes on a basic internal flaw of the egalitarian argument: the assumption that choice, effort, and well-being can be defined in purely individual terms. Unfortunately for egalitarians, it cannot, and so the responsibility thesis collapses under its own weight, and the defense of home schooling against the most plausible version of the privatization argument is secure.

Conclusion

MOST PEOPLE THINK that it is not wrong to keep children out of school if they can be decently educated at home. Since research clearly shows that most home-schooled children are indeed educated decently, and many better than decently, the critics face an uphill battle. They must start from uncontroversial premises and build up an argument, in small steps no one can object to, leading to a controversial conclusion. This strategy is not a peculiarity of egalitarians or educational critics; it is the standard mode of moral argument, and often the only practicable way to convince people with words that something is right or wrong when they do not see it that way based on their experience.

As the different versions of the privatization argument demonstrate, the strategy is not always successful. If key factual premises are unsupported by research or experience, then the argument can be set aside pending new evidence, as in the case of cohesion. If an argument depends on moral premises not shared by those it aims to persuade, it can be dismissed summarily, as democratic maintenance was dismissed. But if, as in the case of strong equality, a

valid argument starts from plausible premises and leads to a conclusion that is deeply disturbing, then it deserves scrutiny. Parties to the home schooling debate ignore such a challenge at their peril. If the argument is valid, one can reject its conclusion only if one is prepared to renounce the premises.

Those sympathetic to home schooling are not likely to accept the critics' conclusion that home schooling is wrong. Nor, as evidence of the benefits of home schooling accumulates, are they likely to argue that children who are home schooled do not thereby receive an advantage. What are they to say, then, to those who assert that this advantage, like other advantages parents bestow on their children, is unearned? Must they give up the belief that people deserve what they work for, and do not deserve that for which they do not work? Must the responsibility thesis be abandoned?

The analysis presented here suggests that what must be sacrificed is not the notion of desert based on choice and effort, but rather the assumption that "choice" means individual choice and "effort" must be unilateral, not coordinated with efforts by others. Our most beneficial projects are cooperative projects, undertaken in voluntary association with others who share our aims and values. Families' efforts to promote their children's well-being are a conspicuous example of such a cooperative project, not least because they would be fruitless if the child didn't cooperate. Home-schooled children deserve the benefits of this enterprise in the same way anyone else deserves the benefits of cooperative effort. That these benefits are enjoyed unequally throughout the population reflects the heterogeneity of families and children, not injustice.

Small-scale cooperation and voluntary action are by definition not public. It is easy to see how any increase in activity of this type could be viewed as privatization. This article has explored several reasons for criticism of privatization, of which the one most relevant to home schooling is that it supports and maintains inequality. Home schooling, like other forms of voluntary cooperation, cannot avoid generating and maintaining inequality. Anyone who supports home schooling should be prepared to explain why the forms of inequality that it generates are not wrong, even though children ordinarily are not fully capable of choosing how they are educated. Anyone who opposes home schooling for egalitarian reasons should be prepared to explain why individual choice and effort are morally superior to coordinated choice and effort, as they must be if we are to

Reading Aloud in Two Home Schools: A Qualitative Study

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ONE OF THE biggest challenges today is to prepare children to understand the nature of the world in which they are living, to find solutions to the personal and social problems they face, and to lead rich and satisfying lives. Some of the solutions to these challenges can be found in education, through programs adults have formulated for the child (e.g., home schools, public schools, private schools, charter schools, and through personalized learning experiences).

One of the most important ways anyone can help children is to teach them how to read. It is through the act of reading that children can enjoy literature, to discover what other people and cultures believe, and to develop ideas and beliefs of their own. Success in reading is also the key to understanding all other curriculum areas (Harrison, 1994). Research has also shown that a positive attitude and motivation toward reading has a direct impact on literacy learning and success (Haverty, 1996; McKenna & Kear, 1990; Winograd & Paris, 1989).

This article focuses on the act of reading aloud in two home schools. First, the researcher will describe the problem and significance of the study. Then the researcher will examine the literature in the field regarding home schooling, attitudes toward reading, and the importance of reading aloud to children. Next, the researcher will describe the methods used for the study, and include descriptions of the home schools settings and structures. Finally, the researcher will discuss the findings of the study, and make recommendations for practice and future research.

Since the beginning of the 1980s there has been a steady increase in the number of home schools in the United States (Farris, 1997; Ray, 1997; Stevens, 2001). Recent studies place the current home school population in the United States at approximately 1.5 million students (Ishizuka, 2000; McCusker, 2002; Paul, 2002).

One important part of the curriculum that is covered in home schools is literacy education, which would include reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Moore & Moore, 1994). Since so many children are

now being educated in home schools, the problem this researcher wanted to address was the following: How do home schools manage literacy education, and in particular, reading aloud to students?

There are many books written on the subject of home schooling, but there is still a dearth of literature in some areas of home school research. Although there have been many quantitative and qualitative research projects regarding public and private school settings, there have been very few research projects conducted in home school settings over a long period of time. Treat (1990) states,

Much more qualitative, in-depth research needs to be directed toward understanding the nature of teaching happening in individual home schools. Reading and writing processes are the very elements of educational growth, and yet thus far, home school research has given minimal attention to these areas. Literacy acquisition through parental teaching represents a new, important dimension of home school research. (p.11)

Review of the Literature

Differences in Home Schools

The term “home schooling” is often given to describe the process by which children learn about the world without going to schools (Holt, 1981). Home schools come in several varieties. Some are more like the traditional “school at home” model. The “school at home” model attempts to duplicate classroom education in the home and uses some of the same techniques as a classroom teacher. In the “school at home” concept, the teachers might use a commercial curriculum or build a curriculum of their own. Other types of home schools include classical education, theme studies, and unschooling. Unschooling is an alternative to the school-at-home approach, promoted and popularized by the late John Holt (Rivero, 2002). Unschooling in its purest form means learning what one wants, when and where one wants to, and for one’s own reasons

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that requires standardized achievement tests, both of the 9-year-olds took the California Achievement Test for the Fourth Grade. The girl's composite reading score was 92% for the nation, and the boy's composite reading score was 93%. The findings for these two children corroborate the national trend of the Rudner (1999) and Ray (1997) studies that show that home school students score consistently higher than their public or private school counterparts in the nation.

Recommendations for Practice

Comparing my results with others in the field of reading and homeschooling, I have formulated the following recommendations for practice: Parents and teachers should often read aloud to children during their preschool and school years. They should hold the children on their laps or seat them "snuggled" next to them. Parents should ask high-level questions about the texts while they are reading aloud to their children. Children should be allowed to read books often and wherever they want to throughout the house. Home school teachers should select high quality literature for their children to read. Television viewing should be limited so reading becomes more important as a means of recreation. Siblings should be encouraged to read aloud to their older and younger brothers and sisters.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the research I conducted as well as that already reported, I recommend the following ideas for further research:

1. Conduct a mixed design of both qualitative and quantitative research that investigates attitudes toward reading of home school students and students in public or private school settings.
2. Conduct qualitative research in home schools for students who are 12 years and older.
3. Conduct longevity studies to follow the academic careers of home schooled students.

Conclusion

RESEARCH HAS SHOWN that attitudes toward reading affect achievement in reading (Haverty, 1996; McKenna & Kear, 1990; Winograd & Paris, 1989). Studies have also shown that a positive environment affects attitudes toward reading (Halpin & Croft, 1963). Those classrooms that exist in nurturing home schools provide a positive atmosphere where there is intellectual and social collaboration between the parents and the children (Treat, 1990). Parents and teachers who read to their children and discuss books with them help create

positive attitudes toward reading (Reutzel & Cooter, 1992; Smith, 1990; Trelease, 1985).

Of all the strategies that exist for improving attitudes toward reading, the most important strategy is to read aloud to children (Cullinan & Galda, 1994; Curry, 1999; Herrold et al., 1989; Trelease, 1985). Curry (1999) maintains that "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p.45). One of the optimal settings for reading aloud is in a home school environment where the parents as teachers, and siblings as teachers actually hold younger children in their laps while they read to them. Siblings also develop special feelings of "family togetherness" when they read to their brothers and sisters. As Trelease (1985) reminds us, next to "hugging," reading aloud is the next best thing you can do for your child. The ideal place to do this is in a nurturing home school where you can actually read aloud and "hug" your child at the same time. The benefits from this activity could be everlasting!

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