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**HOME SCHOOLING:
LEARNING FROM DISSENT**

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It often happens that the universal belief of one age, a belief from which no one…could be free without an extraordinary effort of genius or courage, becomes to a subsequent age, so palpable an absurdity that the only difficulty is to imagine how such an idea could have appeared credible.
- John Stuart Mill

**Introduction**

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, alternatives to public education are many and varied. In most Canadian communities, our children can attend neighbourhood public schools, various alternative schools within the public system, independent schools that receive some public funding, independent schools that are entirely outside the public system, or can remain at home to be taught by their parents. This spectrum of alternatives is offered to us in the name of choice and in the service of the principle of diversity.

As in other public service sectors, the wordsdiversity and choice have moved to the centre of discussions about system reform. The many educational options that have been created to address diverse needs provide answers for everyone who cares to enter the debate but may prevent us from clearly articulating our expectations of the publicly-funded system or making the more fundamental changes that may be needed. By definition, a publicly-funded system -- such as our education, health, or social service system -- is based on principles of universality and aimed at providing common services at a common level. It is indeed a conundrum to provide this common service to a population that we know to be wildly heterogeneous; but does the answer lie in simply creating a multiplicity of systems until we reach some sort of diversity saturation point where everyone can find his or her individuality served in one or another of its forms?

In this paper I will be exploring one alternative to the public education system -- home schooling. While home schooling is at a considerable distance from and runs counter to many of the central principles of the public education system, I believe it has the potential to offer us an important and challenging critique of that system. Rather than dismissing home schooling as a choice that is irrelevant to public school reform, I believe educational reformers, administrators, and teachers have something to learn from parents who choose to teach their children at home.

Although home schooling is heavily reported in the news media as a sort of heretical movement, home schooling has received limited research and scholarly attention. Literature on home schooling falls into three categories -- how-to books, first-person testimonials aimed at convincing readers of the merits of home schooling, and a very few research-based studies that aim at scholarly objectivity. This lack of research may, in part, be due to the fact that home schooling represents an overt challenge to the public school system and is thus not apt to be targeted with public or corporate research dollars. In the absence of a consistent and reliable body of research data, this paper focuses on the ideological foundations of home schooling and its place in the menu of choices that currently defines educational policy in Canada.

**Home Schooling Defined**

According to Patricia Lines, attorney, education researcher, and fellow of the Discovery Institute, "home instruction or home schooling means instruction and learning at least some of which is through planned activity, taking place primarily at home in a family setting with a parent acting as teacher or supervisor, and with one or more pupils who are members of the same family and who are doing K-12 work."(1) While the term home schooling is a contemporary one, it is important to remember that home schooling is not a new phenomenon and that the parent as primary educator was a common role throughout human history. How Gertrude Teaches Her Children, the 1801 work of the Swiss educational theorist Pestalozzi, reminds us that home schooling was the social norm until reasonably recently. This early treatise on child education is addressed to mothers who were seen as the primary educators of children in all but exceptional circumstances (such as royalty and aristocracy who would have tutors for their children). In North America, prior to the introduction of the common school in the mid and late nineteenth century, home schooling was the most usual approach to education for the majority of families.

Current approaches to home schooling are as various as the children and parents involved. Home schooling can include formal lesson plans, responses to a child's interest, correspondence courses, original curriculum, and the variety of educational resources increasingly available through the world wide web. While educational content and approaches are various, the practitioners of home schooling are considerably less diverse. The profile of home schooling families, according to Patricia Lines, is" white, two-parent families, more affluent and educated that average,"(2) a snapshot that is corroborated by Kurt Bauman who concluded that "home-schooled children [are] more likely to be middle income, white, from larger families, and from two-parent families with one parent not working."(3) Home schooling is clearly a privilege that requires the economic resources to allow a parent to take on the role of teacher.

Even with little available data, home schooling researchers have been able to identify distinct trends in parental thinking and choice that lead them to withdraw their children from the public education system. While it is tempting to simply take home schooling guru John Holt at his word when he observes that "most people take their children out of schools not so much for philosophical or political reasons as for the more direct and personal reason…: to prevent the schools from hurting their children, or hurting them more than they already have,"(4) the matter is not so simple. Addressing the complexity of this matter, Jane Van Galen, in her excellent essay, "Ideologues and Pedagogues: Parents Who Teach Their Children At Home,"(5) looks at the values and beliefs of parents who chose to home school their children and sorts their reasons into two large and useful categories -- ideology and pedagogy.

**The Ideologues: The Case Against Content**

Those parents whom Van Galen calls ideologues choose to home school their children for two reasons: they object to what is being taught in school and they seek to strengthen their relationships with their children. The parents in this category are usually fundamentalist Christians who want their children to learn traditional religious doctrine and a conservative political/social agenda. By extension, of course, this also means that they do not want their children to be taught liberal or any other ideas which are not consistent with their own beliefs. Interestingly, Van Galen asserts that what begins as simply stepping out of the mainstream to avoid beliefs that are inconsistent with their own becomes almost a religious mission. Fed by support groups, the ideologues "come to believe that they are following God's will and fulfilling their responsibilities as Christian parents in teaching their own children."(6) Ideologues may begin with a certain concern about the content of schooling, a focus that may get strangely twisted into seeing home schooling as the fulfillment of a divine plan, believing that parents are appointed by God, and that opposition to their right to home school is an effort to undermine the family and Christianity itself. I expect that such extreme and potentially paranoid views do little to encourage those sceptical about home schooling.

**The Pedagogues: The Case Against Method**

If the ideologues are concerned about content, what Van Galen calls the pedagoguesare troubled by the methods used in public schools and it is from those who find fault with the public school system that we have the most to learn. These parents tend to have an interest in education and educational theory and believe that schools manage the business of education badly. "These parents are home schooling because they actively question the professionalization and bureaucratization of modern society and particularly of modern education,"(7) observes Van Galen. Pedagogues tend to value personal independence and be more interested in educating their children outside society's institutions. These parents have deeply-held beliefs about learning, beliefs about which they feel strongly enough to practice at home with their children.

The work of the late John Holt has provided much of the ideological foundation for the pedagogue group of home schoolers. John Holt, whose 1960s classics How Children Learn and How Children Fail analyzed the failures of the school system, had by the late 1970s completely lost faith in the reform of public education and begun to advocate for home schooling. Holt believed that schools simply do not and cannot meet children's needs and that "unhappy adults yoked to difficult, work-focused lives"(8) send their children to public schools in the name of preparing them for that same reality. Holt argues that children learn best unhampered by the authoritarian structure of schools and that they need:

…access to more and more of the real world; plenty of time and space to think over their experiences, and to use fantasy and play to make meaning out of them; and advice, roadmaps, guidebooks, to make it easier for them to get where they want to go…and to find out what they want to find out.(9)

**Home Schooling versus Public Schooling: The Essential Differences**

Many of the criticisms of home schooling and its proponents' answers tell us a lot about both sides of the argument, but also challenge some of our most deeply-held attitudes about public schooling. Critics of home schooling often wonder how parents with no training as teachers can provide schooling to their children and how such children perform academically. John Holt is vociferous on the subject of parents as teachers:

Human beings have been sharing information and skills, and passing along to children whatever they knew, for about a thousand years now. Along the way they have built some very complicated and highly skilled societies. During all those years there were very few teachers in the sense of people whose only work was teaching others what they knew. And until very recently there were no people at all who were trained in teaching as such. People always understood, sensibly enough, that before you could teach something you had to know it yourself. But only very recently did human beings get the extraordinary notion that in order to be able to teach what you knew, you had to spend years being taught how to teach.(10)

After a scathing indictment of teacher training as the development of a bogus professionalism, Holt points out that there is no evidence that parents who are trained are better teachers than those without such training and if we attend to the evidence of the achievement levels of the home schooled it is clear that students suffer not at all by being educated by their untrained parent or parents. Indeed, US studies support Holt’s position as they indicate an "insignificant relationship between the education level of the parent-teacher and the achievement scores of their children."(11) Likewise, other US studies show that "home schooled students' achievement scores are generally equal to or higher than their peers in traditional schools."(12)

Next to the issue of academic achievement, lack of socialization is the primary criticism of home schooling and one which the uninformed would be ready to support. However, it is interesting to discover that improved socialization is in fact one of the reasons that parents give for home schooling(13) and that many parents and children see the social aspect of public schools in a distinctly negative light. John Holt leads this charge when he observes that in a group setting "the social life of children is mean-spirited, competitive, exclusive, status-seeking, snobbish."(14) According to many of the descriptions which appear in personal testimonials about home schooling(15), home schooled children enjoy diverse social interactions with other home schooled children, other parents involved in home schooling, and informal mentors and teachers of different ages. Home schooled children also tend to be involved in extra-curricular activities, sports and such, which involve contact with other children on a regular basis.

**Home Schooling: Democracy versus Individualism**

Perhaps the most compelling and complex argument against home schooling is that home schooling is an inherently asocial and apolitical behaviour in the context of a democratic society. In Susan Douglas Franzosa's essay, "The Best and the Wisest Parent: A Critique of John Holt's Philosophy of Education,"(16) the author provides an important and probing analysis of home schooling that illuminates the essential tension between two opposing ideals -- personal autonomy and social participation. For Holt, "the individual's welfare is not the legitimate concern of the state, one's children can be thought of strictly as one's own, and the individual need feel no responsibility for the good of all"; moreover, "the full growth of the individual is incompatible with any form of institutional control built on community consensus."(17) Franzosa focuses on Holt's view of the "irreconcilable conflict between the natural individual [child] and the oppressive and corrupting effects of organized social life"(18) that takes us right back to Rousseau and the ideological roots of the educational program he delineated in his Emile. What Franzosa identifies in Holt is in fact a romantic individualism that is as much a part of American thought as it is incompatible with social democratic theory. Finally, Franzosa's critique of Holt comes to rest on the gulf between the educational problems we face and the solution he offers:

Holt's advocacy of a single solution to the multiplicity of problems we now face in education is naïve and misleading. Further, the social thesis he uses to support that solution signifies a retreat from any collective consideration of educational ideals and a dismissal of the idea that communities have any educational responsibilities to their members.(19)

These polarities of the individual good and the good of all that Franzosa identifies in Holt's work take us to the heart of a tension that defines the public school system and many of the debates about it. In British Columbia, for example, to look to the prefaces to the School Act and the Independent School Act articulate the admirable but ultimately conflicting objectives being addressed:

WHEREAS it is the goal of a democratic society to ensure that all its members receive an education that enables them to become***personally fulfilled***and***publicly useful,***thereby increasing the strength and contributions to the health and stability of that society;

AND WHEREAS the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners to develop their***individual potential***and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a***healthy, democratic and pluralistic society***and a prosperous and sustainable economy. (emphasis added)(20)

In British Columbia, publicly-funded and publicly-sanctioned education seeks to address both public and private concerns -- on the one hand, develop individual potential and encourage the individual to fulfil him/herself and, on the other, prepare the individual to assume his/her role in society and make a meaningful contribution to it. Clearly, home schooling tips this balance between the personal and social aims of public education in favour of the individual. Unless one can move to the position that individual fulfillment does in fact contribute to the greater good of society, home schooling is clearly moving away from the democratic theory that informs our public education system and in its quiet way presenting a serious challenge to the central tenets of both our educational and political systems.

**Conclusion**

While home schooling is a sign of our growing distrust in social institutions and, perhaps, the belief that there is a common good with which to inculcate children, it is important not to dismiss it as irrelevant to discussions of schools and school reform. Home schooling clearly represents a challenge which reaches beyond debate about curriculum, methods, and objectives to question the very structure of the system; it is for that very reason that educators and policy makers and parents should examine the phenomenon closely in order to learn from home schooling. Clearly, we need more qualitative research to learn more about how parents are teaching their children and on what their success is founded. This research needs to deeply probe the areas in which home schoolers diverge from the public school and its approaches. We need to ask some crucial questions about the conditions for learning, looking beyond the givens of the public school system: can children learn more readily in a non-authoritarian environment? do children learn better through contact with the real world outside the school and classroom? could children benefit from a more leisurely approach to learning where they could consider what they hear and observe in a more contemplative setting? what qualities do parents bring to their teaching that we may not be considering and nurturing when we select and train professional teachers? Is it possible that we have taken for granted the basic structures of the public system -- teacher training, school buildings, classrooms, textbooks and subject-organized curriculum -- to such an extent that we have been unable to even ask these questions effectively? We can hope that home schoolers in the future will open their lives to this kind of research in order, perhaps, to instruct the public school system about some fundamental principles of teaching and learning.

Finally, I offer these words of caution about the concept of choice. Social theorist and critic Christopher Lasch suggests an important distinction between political action and consumer choice when he tell us that popular social scientists, " by redirecting their attention from public policy to consumer tastes…unavoidably help to sustain the illusion that people initiate sweeping changes without resort to politics, merely by exercising their right to make individual decisions as consumers of good, services and ideologies."(21) In the light of this observation, recent efforts to offer citizens more choice -- in education, health care, employment, and other social programs -- are perhaps merely strategies to distract us from larger scale changes that may be taking place in the wings and create the illusion of political participation when in fact we are simply passive and uninformed consumers who mistake our shopping for political engagement.

**Endnotes**

1 Patricia Lines, "Home Instruction: The Size and Growth of the Movement" in Home Schooling: Political, Historical, and Pedagogical Perspectives. Eds. Jane Van Galen and Mary Anne Pitman, Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1991, p. 10.

2 Patricia Lines, "Home Instruction: The Size and Growth of the Movement" in Home Schooling: Political, Historical, and Pedagogical Perspectives. Eds. Jane Van Galen and Mary Anne Pitman, Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1991, p. 16.

3 Kurt J. Bauman. "Homeschooling in the Unites States: Trends and Characteristics." Education Policy Analysis Archives, 10 (26), May 16, 2002. Retrieved September 30 from http://eppa.asu.edu/eppa/v10n26.html, p. 1.

4 John Holt. Teach Your Own: A Hopeful Path For Education. New York, N.Y. : Delacorte Press/ Seymour Lawrence, 1981, p. 26.

5 Jane Van Galen. "Ideologues and Pedagogues: Parents Who Teach Their Children At Home," in Home Schooling: Political, Historical, and Pedagogical Perspectives. Eds. Van Galen and Pittman. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1991, pp. 63-76.

6 Jane Van Galen. "Ideologues and Pedagogues: Parents Who Teach Their Children At Home," in Home Schooling: Political, Historical, and Pedagogical Perspectives. Eds. Van Galen and Pittman. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1991, p. 67.

7 Ibid, p. 72

8 Holt, p. 4.

9 Holt, p. 168.

10 Holt, p. 51.

11 Van Galen, p. 59.

12 Ibid. p. 59.

13 Ibid. p. 45.

14 John Holt, p. 45.

15 Real Lives: Eleven Teenagers Who Don’t Go To School. Ed. Grace Llewellyn. Eugene,Oregon: Lowry House Publishers, 1993 is a good example of this type of narrative.

16 In Home Schooling: Political, Historical, and Pedagogical Perspectives. Eds. Van Galen and Pittman. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1991, pp. 121-135.

17 Ibid, p. 123.

18 Ibid. p. 123.

19 Franzosa, p. 123.

20 Preamble to School Act and Independent School Act. Revised Statutes and Consolidated Regulations of British Columbia(1996).

21 Van Galen and Pitman, p. 134.

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