

Home education: the third option

The Canadian School Executive, April 1987

Tunya Audain, Co-ordinator, Education Advisory, West Vancouver, B.C.

An advocate of education in the home lays out the rationale – and forces us to think again about how children's needs might best be served.

Home education is as old as the hills, yet it has become a concern among educators. Why? The reason is that, next to the option of private schooling, home education is now coming on strong as a challenge to the near monopoly that public schools now enjoy (95% of school-age children in Canada attend public schools). Increasing numbers of parents, especially young parents, are looking into home education. They are making informed choices concerning their children's education, rather than using the local neighborhood school automatically.

To better understand the home education movement, it is helpful to consider its imperatives, the approaches that may be taken, its feasibility, its benefits, and its future.

When parents' concerns are ignored, they seek alternatives.

Imperatives

Two imperatives drive the movement:

- **The negative exit impulse**, whereby parents are driven to escape the traditional, institutionalized, formal systems – state or independent. Parents are increasingly getting fed-up with the politics, the hidden agendas, the lack of responsiveness, the vague standards. Their concerns over discipline, abuse, incompetence, malpractice, strikes, and other disruptions are largely ignored. Since parents are not structured into the decision-making of their schools, no-one really listens to them on either quality or content questions. Some families actually feel diminished and some say they have been made to feel inadequate as parents after some school meetings. Thus, to preserve family integrity and pursue their children's best interests in the acquisition of education, skills and knowledge, parents opt for the home education route.
- **The positive entry impulse** moves parents to home education because they see it as their natural role and an extension of what they do anyway with their children as they grow up. Much of modern child raising theory supports this strong parental presence. They prefer the nurturing path to education in contrast to the schooling approach with its often lopsided emphasis on socialization and custodial care.

Parents' conversion to HE

Parents generally go through the following stages in becoming convinced that home education is a viable route:

- First, they become aware of it as an option. It is amazing how many parents do not even know that home education is a choice. Both society and the school system seem to conspire to keep consumers from this knowledge.
- Second, they find out it is legal and legitimate and that many parents are doing it. Many parents still have to contend with impeding officials but, as they network with others, they become firm in their resolve.
- Third, parents begin to see education as a parental duty—more than a mere right. Not only do they see it as a moral and natural duty but also as a legal duty. And in this they are supported by the School Acts across North America that mandate this. It is here that parents must see clearly the distinction between education—which the state requires—and public schooling, which the state provides for those parents who do not take charge of their

children's education. Public schools are a back-up service for parents, not the main system of education as they are in totalitarian countries.

- Fourth, parents come to see home education as the desirable and ideal way to educate in that there is a one-to-one relationship and quick feedback on progress. Those things they see as desirable for the child, for the family, and for society.

Approaches to home education

- First, one may use correspondence courses from the Ministry of Education. These are excellent courses and provide parents with parallel programs to the schools', with the advantage that parents actually see their kids reading and writing. They know the content of the courses and students can progress at their own pace. Parents can easily supplement or enrich as the child's interest leads.
- Second, one may use other structured programs which are commercially and readily available. There are at least twenty such programs, many of these being Christian-based and are listed in reference books and newsletters in this field.
- Third, parents might design their own programs, usually after having tried the correspondence route and having gained confidence in their own abilities. Some of these parents share materials and information and learn from each other. Many supermarkets, department stores, and book stores carry school-style workbooks and parents can pick them up as easily as they do copies of the latest magazines. Besides that, specialist stores that carry teaching supplies are as easily accessible to parents as they are to teachers and are listed in the Yellow Pages. Many parents also hunt second-hand book stores for a wealth of inexpensive, used school texts and classics.

Feasibility

Generally, **parents face the following objections** from their neighbors, relatives, and officials - but each can be countered.

- **It's not legal.**
Yes, of course it's legal, and that was addressed above.
- **Parents aren't qualified.**
Any adult with commitment and interest can help a child learn. There are ample resources and supports to build confidence and skill.
- **Children won't be socialized.**
Well, there are two kinds of socialization that cause parents to withdraw their children:
(a) **negative socialization:** peer pressures (drugs, sex, bullying), regimentation, poor discipline, etc. and
(b) **political socialization:** the political agendas being foisted on the schools to change society, rectify social ills, alter human nature, etc.

To answer the socialization question, parents do care about their children's social skills, and home educating parents pay particular attention to this by doing a number of things: enrolling their children in scouts, guides, 4-H clubs, church activities, having more family events, sports, and taking on volunteer community work such as with the SPCA or visiting senior citizens. As parent support groups grow, they also organize regular socials such as pot-lucks, picnics, field trips, and community projects.

- **They won't be able to go to college or university.**
Most home-educated students are self-starters; they know how to learn; they are disciplined, independent researchers; and they have little trouble in institutions of higher learning. They usually enter a college as a mature student or on some trial basis and, if they achieve good marks, have no trouble continuing. If students decide to return to school, they are usually placed with age-mates in the related grades.

- **Parents can't keep up to the latest in education.**

True, there is much to know that's complicated **if** parents want to keep up with the latest fad. But most parents aren't intrigued by the latest fads. They are practical and want to get on with it. Nevertheless, parents don't want to short-change their children, and most home-educating parents are very earnest in keeping up. They eagerly read books on home education, they form parent support groups, and they get on mailing lists for information. There are increasingly more materials, services, resources, and events for parents to tap into. An interesting aside to this question is that some parents are seeing the schools as particularly *backward* in application of latest research and technology, and for these parents home becomes an instant lab to apply effective new techniques in the lifetime of their children – in contrast to the typical one- or two- generation gap between theory and practice in school systems.

Education is compulsory – but not public schooling

Benefits to society

For people in policy or advocacy positions it is also necessary to see the general good that flows from home education – apart from the benefits to family and child. While a separate article would better describe this dimension, the following points touch on some of the values to society.

- **The statutory requirement is met;** that is, public education of the young is achieved. These children may be “unschooled” but few can find fault with their “education”.
- **It's an antidote to the heavy intrusion of the state in our lives.** Canada is, next to Denmark and Sweden, the western world's most institutionalized country. The seductiveness of the collective state-helpful but predatory says Revel -needs some escape hatches for those who see the dangers. Despite the warnings of Illich in the 70s, who saw the schools as the tools of habituation to institutions, we now have those who promote life-long learning in institutions from infancy to old age.
- **Demystification follows naturally from deinstitutionalization.** Home education tutors and students find no special expertise is required for the job. In their transformation from compliance with public school attendance “requirements” to option-seeking consumers, parents find it helpful to remember “professionals” are just that – people who “profess” or claim some special knowledge.
- **The lag between theory and practice can be considerably shortened** in home education settings or the small home-schools that are also arising. In most cases these settings are laboratories for learning. The experiences are consumer intensive, not capital or labor intensive as in schooling and teaching. There are fewer obstacles to application of new techniques or technology than when scarce funding or union demands are a consideration.
- **Choice is worthy of support in any democracy,** and certainly in education as it has a ratcheting-up effect on standards. With 95% of students in Canada in public schools, the concentration of power in the monopoly system is counterproductive to all the principles of responsiveness and accountability that we hold important in our society. The making and maintaining of captive audiences serves more to prop up systems for indoctrination than to serve education or achieve high standards.

Educators' responses

Most conventional educators are leery of the trend to home education. They see an erosion of their job security and power. Many actively try to discourage parents from this option.

Some breakthroughs do occur, especially as a result of the endorsements by popular magazines and high profile broadcasters such as Dr. James Dobson and his influential religious programs that focus on the family. Some public school principals are co-operating with home educating parents by allowing use of school facilities such as libraries and science labs. Others invite home education students on field trips and sports days and are available to parents for consultation. These types of collaboration are fruitful for both school people and families.

We must not forget the entrepreneurial educator – the one who is disaffected by the school system. A good number of these are now starting their own small schools, where they can apply their skills, knowledge, and love of learning, unfettered by bureaucracy and other constraints.

The future

The State is seen as predatory.

Home education is here to stay. Far from being discouraged, it should be viewed as a desirable addition to the ways in which people obtain education.

While some bureaucrats and educators feel threatened by home education and seek greater limits on this movement, it is inconceivable that legislation would be proposed anywhere in the free world to shut the gates on home education.

The only question that requires debate and resolution is how home education families can gain access to some of the funds that are collected for the purposes of public education. For example, computers are expensive items that are just as necessary in home education as in public education. Vouchers and other ‘fair access’ mechanisms will be the subject of more discussion and policy review in the future.

As far as trends go, home education is certainly part of the self-help, decentralization. “small-is-beautiful” movements described by contemporary futurists. But even more insistently, some parents see home education as a survival technique – as one of the few ways to preserve freedom in an increasingly regimented and homogenized society. John Holt, the high profile leader of the world-wide (unorganized) home education movement, said:

***Today freedom has different enemies. It must be fought for in different ways.
It will take very different qualities of mind and heart to save it.***

Already a group of devoted parents is working to place his books (*How Children Fail, The Underachieving School, Teach Your Own, etc.*) in public libraries across Canada. Other “freedom-fighters” see home education and the promotion of it as part of a two-fold mission to generally retrieve individual responsibility from “disabling professionals” (Illich) and the “predatory state” (Revel).

Finally, to all the above persuasive reasons, one other must be added: costs. The costs of schooling are exorbitant. As models of economy and effectiveness, home educating families, even though less than one percent of school-age families, may be the example we need. Perhaps these pioneers may be the trigger, albeit for overtly economic reasons, to restore parents to their central role in the education of the young.

References

- Illich, I. *Tools for Conviviality*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973
Moore, R. *School Can Wait*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young Univ. Press. 1979
Revel, J. *How Democracies Perish*. Doubleday. 1983

Benefits to child and family

Parents can easily list 101 reasons for home education. Only a few are listed below:

- **Familyness** - Family values are respected and implemented. Family cohesiveness is strengthened. Often fathers participate meaningfully in child raising and education.
- **Child health** - Children do not suffer school phobia nor are they exposed to the raft of school-specific “occupational” hazards of childhood diseases, allergies, fluorescent lighting, noxious asbestos insulation, noise, intrusive public address systems, etc.
- **Basics assured** - The 3 R’s plus mastery of other skills and subjects can be seen, as opposed to the frequent parent complaint of vagueness in school reporting. Students with special needs—slow, fast, learning disabled, gifted, talented—can be accommodated with individualized pacing and outside tutors if necessary.
- **Maturity respected** - Children are not infantilized when stuck with 25-30 age-mates nor is their maturity prematurely forced. Dr. Raymond Moore, one of the leaders in the home education movement, uses research to show that most children are damaged before age 10 when they are institutionalized. (See his book, *School Can Wait*)
- **Character development** - The criteria for strong personality formation can be applied and achieved, often intuitively: self-esteem, self-confidence, individuality, and uniqueness, sharing and caring, responsibility, resourcefulness, adaptability, etc.
- **Work habits achieved** - Not only do home settings aim at achieving good study skills, but many families integrate family chores and events (e.g. cooking, purchasing, building a dog house. etc) into learning experiences. Also, some families are choosing cottage industries as a lifestyle and income option—learning and earning together.
- **Community as extension of learning** - Resources such as recreational facilities, libraries, museums, natural habitats, etc. are utilized for valuable learning experiences.
- **Citizenship** - Home educators usually instill, in theory and practice, responsible citizenship—a subject that is largely ignored in schools. Many families adopt a worthwhile community project (e.g. visiting senior citizens) and convey principles of democracy in numerous ways.
- **Parents’ efforts are focused** - Instead of being diverted and wasted in superficial busywork of fruitless “channels of communication”, parents’ energy has direct and immediate application for the benefit of the child. They retain their confidence and integrity as a family.
- **Flexibility** - Schedules can be flexible: education can take place half days, all week, all year, etc. In fact, education becomes a lifelong pursuit for the family and educational institutions can be used as resource centers, not compulsory attendance centers.
- **Lower costs** - Kids don’t need designer jeans or purple book bags at home.

(Reprinted with permission from: The Canadian School Executive, Education Administration, The University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada)