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Homeschooling Reconsidered

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Article abstract

Homeschooling was occasionally a subject of popular interest pre-COVID, when media reported horrific cases of child abuse under the guise of homeschooling, or when controversies erupted over efforts in state legislatures or local school boards to introduce very modest oversight measures. COVID made homeschooling something nearly every parent considered as a long-term educational option for their children, and something arguably – depending on one's definition of homeschooling – nearly all experienced. This article extracts from the societal experience of forced remote learning, challenging theoretical questions about the distinction between homeschooling and “regular schooling”; the wisdom of traditional brick-and-mortar, multi-service schooling; and the appropriateness of state officials passing judgement on any private form of schooling.

Homeschooling Reconsidered

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Homeschooling was occasionally a subject of popular interest pre-COVID, when media reported horrific cases of child abuse under the guise of homeschooling, or when controversies erupted over efforts in state legislatures or local school boards to introduce very modest oversight measures. COVID made homeschooling something nearly every parent considered as a long-term educational option for their children, and something arguably – depending on one’s definition of homeschooling – nearly all experienced. This article extracts from the societal experience of forced remote learning, challenging theoretical questions about the distinction between homeschooling and “regular schooling”; the wisdom of traditional brick-and-mortar, multi-service schooling; and the appropriateness of state officials passing judgement on any private form of schooling.

Then and Now

In early 2020, Elizabeth Bartholet and I were planning a summit on homeschooling to be held that June at Harvard Law School. Its purpose was to deliberate about an ideal form of state oversight of this practice, for which there is now, in most of the English-speaking world, near complete absence of public control and accountability – that is, of such measures as competence requirements for parents, review of progress by public education officials, and mandatory contact with someone outside the home capable of independently assessing a child’s well-being. Before COVID, already a significant portion of children in the United States – nearly 4% – were being homeschooled (see Bartholet, 2020, pp. 1, 9 [compiling data sources]). In Canada, in contrast, less than 1% of children were being homeschooled in 2019, though the number had been rising steadily in the prior decade (see Fraser Institute Blog, 2021). We hoped the summit would generate a “white paper” and model legislation we could disseminate to policy makers and education organizations.

When our universities abruptly switched to online instruction in March of 2020, we decided to postpone by a year. We did so in part hoping it would make an in-person meeting still feasible, but also because the pandemic was changing most children’s educational experience and the public’s perception of education and school systems. Suddenly all children were receiving only home-based education, and we anticipated significant lessons would emerge from that. In addition, the national mood regarding children’s education seemed to have shifted in such a way that we believed we would find no receptivity among elected officials to any legislative proposal that implied criticism of homeschooling. Specifically, a substantial portion of parents and other people, at least in the US, were profoundly disappointed in the performance of public school systems in a time of crisis. For many children, perhaps most, virtual schooling amounted to virtually no schooling, little more than a brief check-in a few times per week. The institution and the professionals whose mission is to develop in young people the skills they need to flourish in an increasingly dynamic economy and social world proved themselves incapable of adapting to new circumstances (cf. Ceres, 2021). Many parents who had the means switched to private schools, which in the United States largely operated in-person in the 2020 to 2021 school year (see Ingraham, 2021). Their children might never return to the public system.

Meanwhile, the homeschooling community was on high alert. Before the pandemic, it saw itself as perpetually threatened by Big Brother, despite the consistent success that an American coalition led

by the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) had had in knocking out one regulation after another. They feared that a bad experience with home-based learning among children who had been attending “regular school” would be popularly assumed to reflect some inherent deficiency with homeschooling, thus leading to new calls to impose additional restrictions on homeschoolers. In numerous blog posts, editorials, and interviews, homeschoolers insisted that what these other children were doing was not homeschooling but rather school-directed remote learning (see De Jesús, 2020; McDonald, 2020). Over the course of the pandemic, their fears gave way to reassurance and then elation, as surveys began to show that a significant percentage of parents forced to try home-based education had realized the relative virtues of homeschooling and planned to continue homeschooling even after the pandemic. HSLDA might have anticipated a doubling or tripling of its membership (cf. Dentel, 2021). Now, as public schools have returned to in-person instruction, the number of parents with this plan appears to have declined substantially, but it is still likely that the post-pandemic number of homeschooled children will far exceed the pre-pandemic number, perhaps constituting as much as 6% of all school-aged children in the United States (cf. De Fusco, 2021).

At the same time, much of the adult world also experienced a new lifestyle in which they mostly worked at home rather than commuting daily to work in a building together with colleagues, and most were loving it. Employers in every sector were forced to experiment with something long discussed in the business world that many had feared to try: having much of their workforce stay home and interact by computer. A substantial portion have declared the experiment a success, seeing a drop in costs but not in productivity, and now intend to make remote work, for some employees some of the time, the norm (see Saad & Wigert, 2021). Thus, much of the adult world now recognizes that, after pandemic-related travel restrictions go away, they could be anywhere in the world while working, so long as their children’s schooling does not tie them down to a particular location. There is no need for anyone in the family to be “in the box.” Even if they stay in one place, working at home simply makes homeschooling more feasible, for those who find the idea attractive. For some, of course, having children at home while also trying to work there is not a good mix, even if there is another parent supervising the children, so increased telecommuting will not have a one-sided effect vis-à-vis homeschooling.

When our summit finally occurred, online in June 2021, many participants expressed the view that no proposal for increased state-imposed academic accountability would have a chance politically for some time, and that at most one might succeed in getting some safeguard against homeschooling by parents with a history of substantiated physical abuse or neglect – for example, some version of “Raylee’s Law,” proposed legislation in West Virginia that would prevent parents with a history of child maltreatment from homeschooling.¹ Once the pandemic subsided and children returned to school, the public might be made aware, by reports on numbers of children who had been suffering undetected maltreatment, of the danger to children that isolation at home with parents presents. They would then see the vital importance for homeschooled children to have some contact with professionals outside the home – teachers and/or doctors – who are trained to identify and required to report physical maltreatment.

Increased maltreatment was suspected in part because children were spending much more time at home with parents. Those who had been suffering maltreatment before the pandemic, such as sexual abuse, would now be isolated with their abusers 24/7. Adolescents who ordinarily derived needed positive socializing and support from peers might be at heightened risk not only of self-harm but also of negative parental response to their unhappiness or self-expression, a particular concern with LGBTQ youth. In addition, abusers had less reason to worry about detection, as teachers are primary reporters. Above all, parental stress was expected to skyrocket, with so many experiencing job loss, daycare shutdown, disruption of social life, increased expectations for involvement in their children’s schooling, loss of the free meals public schools provided, and lack of respite from childcare. On the other hand, the greater presence of mothers in the home might have been a protective factor, providing some check

¹ See West Virginia Legislature, 2020 regular session, Introduced: House Bill 4440, wvlegislature.gov/Bill_Status/bills_text.cfm?billdoc=HB4440%20INTR.htm&yr=2020&sesstype=RS&i=4440

against the physical and sexual abuse committed disproportionately by mothers' male partners when left alone with children.

Thus far, there is evidence of substantially increased rates during the pandemic of a) parental stress, b) child emergency-department visits following abuse or neglect and requiring hospitalization, c) domestic violence, and d) murders, all of which suggest heightened dangers for children when they remain home full-time with parents (see Bullinger, et al., 2021; Preidt & Mundell, 2021; Kluger, 2021; Gosangi, et al., 2020). It might be some time, though, before we have a clear and complete picture of the prevalence of child maltreatment during the pandemic, and of what that suggests for homeschooling.

An additional concern during the pandemic was children's socialization. As with homeschooling, home-based education for children enrolled in regular schools has entailed greater isolation from peers and others outside the family. Some, especially, adolescents, have suffered greatly from this. Others, though, experienced relief from bullying, and still others – particularly younger children – were largely indifferent, happy to have more time with family and neighbours and more time to play games or read books they themselves chose.

Some Lessons Derived from All This

We have no clear conception of homeschooling as a distinct phenomenon. If homeschooling means receiving some instruction at home, then there are very few children in the world who are not homeschooled. Even children who attend public school will have spent some years at home before reaching school age, and during school years will spend roughly 75% of their awake hours outside of school and largely under parental supervision. During that enormous amount of time, any minimally functional parents will at times be instructing their children in some way. Conversely, if homeschooling means not receiving any instruction from sources other than parents, then the great majority of people who considered themselves homeschoolers pre-pandemic in fact were not, because most take advantage of online courses, classes at libraries and museums, homeschool cooperatives in which parents trade off different expertise, partial enrollment in classes or extracurriculars at the local public school, and other outside sources of learning. Homeschoolers tend to emphasize this reality in response to criticisms of their lack of teaching qualification or accusations of social isolation. Philosophers of education might grapple with this conceptual challenge of defining homeschooling as a distinct approach to education, perhaps using as a point of departure homeschoolers' claim that education at home led via video interactions by certified teachers does not constitute homeschooling.

The adult world is now, more than ever, thinking outside the box. Amazon taught us many years ago that shopping does not need to take place in a building in which one hunts through aisles for items needed and then waits in line to pay. There is a far more efficient way to purchase things. Now, employers en masse are learning the same lesson about work productivity; it can be achieved more efficiently from some employees – in particular, those with a suitable home environment and requisite degree of self-discipline whose work can in substantial part be done without in-person contact with coworkers or clients – by taking advantage of technology. And many parents are also seeing for the first time that their children can acquire in a few hours at home as much learning as the public school provides in a day. A belief that big box schools with certified teachers provide something qualitatively better academically than what parents can provide at home, if they have the time and resources, might be declining as a reason why parents send their children to school. Instead, it is for many simply a form of daycare and a site of (hopefully positive) socialization, though those benefits can also be acquired otherwise. Philosophers might endeavour to articulate what exactly traditional schools offer that differs inherently from what children can receive in other settings. Is it the special training of certified teachers? Or does technology make that consideration obsolete? If theorists conclude there is little or nothing in this category of “goods only attainable in traditional schools,” they might reason about whether traditional schooling is superior in any ways to other vehicles for delivering the goods – for example, by being more effective or efficient. Or should the state financially support acquisition of the desired goods by other means, shifting the state

education budget to subsidizing a variety of alternatives? Is experience in any other service sector relevant, providing a model that education could follow?

What we call “school” is actually a multi-service agency. The anxiety within the world of child welfare about increased maltreatment during the pandemic highlighted the centrality of schools in the detection and reporting of abuse and neglect. But that is not the only additional function schools carry out, beyond instruction. The pandemic also highlighted the role of schools in providing basic nutrition to children. Suddenly, millions of families were not receiving the free and reduced breakfasts and lunches on which they depended. Many school districts were quick to adjust to new circumstances in this respect; soon after shutdown, they were delivering free meals for children to neighbourhood sites. Further, schools provide professional counselling, nursing, recreation teams, social events, and special-interest clubs, all additions to the original form of school limited to academic instruction. Philosophers have, as far as I know, yet to examine and evaluate this multiplication of the roles played by schools. Is it desirable to have all these functions channelled into a single institution? Is it fair to school operators and teachers? Is it optimal for child development? If optimal, what are homeschooled children losing? What can explain this trend to have more and more of a child’s life tied to a school? Is it simply because school attendance is the only thing the law currently requires all children to do, and it would be difficult to add any new mandates? Should homeschooled children lose out on all those other school-provided benefits because their parents opt out of the instructional component? Perhaps it is time to think about reassigning some functions to other sites or providers, and mandating that homeschooled students participate in one or more of them. With respect to health and safety, we might consider something like the regime in many Länder (states) of Germany, where parents are legally required to bring their children to a pediatrician once or twice per year. Well-child visits here are common but not mandatory, and children living in abusive or neglectful households are least likely to receive them. Why do we rely on teachers to identify and secure care for them?

“Heal thyself” is a pervasive manner of thinking about state oversight of child-rearing. The homeschool world had long criticized public schooling for its perceived rigidity, homogeneity, unhealthy peer interactions, moral relativism, and so forth. The response, when anyone expressed concern about children learning from people unqualified to teach or about the dangers attending the isolation of homeschooled children, would be something to the effect of “the state should fix its own schools instead of harassing us.” The pandemic gave homeschoolers more fodder, as many public school systems and teachers seemed inept to much of the American public – not just homeschoolers. They could not get online schooling up and running within a reasonable period of time, and when they did, many parents – effectively invited into the classroom to an unprecedented extent – were unimpressed. So, proposals to impose academic accountability measures on homeschoolers would now likely meet resistance, or at best skeptical indifference, not only from homeschooling families but also from a great portion of the rest of the citizenry. On the surface, this “heal thyself” argument appears illogical; the state can and arguably should simultaneously address concerns in both public operations and their private analogues. Some theorizing on this might be welcome, though. Is there some internal logic to this mindset? Does the state lack “standing,” so to speak, to criticize and endeavour to constrain homeschooling, if it cannot show itself consistently capable of providing in its own schools what it might demand of private providers? Or should the state for some other reason prioritize fixing problems in public schools over doing so in the private sectors of education?

The Unknown Future Political Climate

Next to sickness and death, perhaps the most discussed impact of the pandemic has been public school shutdowns. Such trauma to the institution serving the vast majority of school-aged children in North America was bound also to affect private schooling and homeschooling in some ways, at least indirectly. Private schooling in general appears clearly to have gained, in reputation and patronage. Homeschoolers remain uncertain how it will impact them in the long run: Will public attitudes toward them be more or less favourable after this is over? Will their numbers swell long-term, or only short-term, and if so by how much? If the proportion of homeschoolers who exited the public school system suddenly becomes massively larger, relative to the portion who chose to homeschool from the outset, what effect might that have on the policies that homeschool organizations and legislators favour, or on the political power wielded by particular branches of homeschooling or by homeschoolers collectively? Does it depend on the predominant ideological outlook among the new homeschoolers – for example, if they are mostly mainstream liberals rather than evangelicals? From a child advocacy standpoint, the pandemic has certainly delayed the possibility of bringing about any legal reforms to protect the unknown number of children for whom homeschooling is detrimental. But the pandemic might also generate lessons and data that make such advocacy more informed and effective.

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