

Home Schooling: Education Outside the Box

The State did not own men so entirely, even when it could send them to the stake, as it sometimes does now where it can send them to the elementary school.

—G.K. Chesterton

For a growing minority of Australians, it seems only yesterday that they found themselves facing the mortified reactions of friends and family when they heard the news.

You're going to home educate? Is that legal? How can you give Jack a good education when you're not a professional? What about socialisation?

But these mothers did it. They guided chubby little hands around their first alphabet. They watched happiness dawn on the face of a child to whom maths was nearly magic. They luxuriated in the reverent silence of a house full of bookworms. They've battled through illness, special needs, an unsupportive or suspicious community, and children asking halfway through dinner prep what "home ec" is and why Sally down the street thinks you need to go to school to learn it.

Now their children are starting businesses, doing apprenticeships, going to university, or even beginning the adventure of home education in their own families. They've won recognition, support, and the acknowledgment that home education isn't just for hippies, anarchists and theocrats. These days, everyone knows someone who home educates.

Including famous politicians. In the United States, preselection for the next presidential election saw Rick Santorum, a Republican candidate, making his bid to install a home educating First Family in the White House. Nor would he have been the first: John Adams's wife Abigail taught their children and some of their grandchildren. Ron Paul, another Republican candidate, is a vocal home education supporter. According to his website, he "believes no nation can remain free when the state has greater influence over the knowledge and values transmitted to children than the family does".

In Australia, home education may still be keep-

ing a low profile. But not for long. According to Australian Christian Home Schooling, there are over 10,000 Australian children currently registered for home education, and there may be as many as 15,000 more being home-educated without registration. And that's not counting preschool children or the young home educated adults who have now entered university or the workforce.

With the growth of home education in Australia has come an equal and opposite reaction, generally towards greater government involvement. In 2006, the Victorian Parliament passed the game-changing Education and Training Reform Act. Before, Victorian parents had only to show that their children were receiving "regular and efficient instruction". Now they must register and show that their children are receiving instruction in eight key areas including "studies of society and environment", all of which must be taught in a manner consistent with six principles that include "the values of openness and tolerance". More informal responses to the home education phenomenon include a feature on January 29, 2012, on ABC Radio's *Background Briefing* titled "Thousands of Parents Illegally Homeschooling".

Home educated opinion on the clash between home educators and government varies as widely as personal views and pedagogy. Many registered home educators would agree that the government has a role in overseeing education, while others feel coerced. Glenda Jackson, who did her PhD on home education at Monash University, has highlighted a sense of governmental distrust: "It's like they don't want us to exist."

I spoke to a number of home educating mothers about their decision not to place their children in a state school—the ultimate in state oversight of education. One mother said the socialism she was taught at school and later rejected was a factor in her decision to home educate her children. Suzannah, a mother who underwent both some state schooling and some home education, also had

concerns about government control. "Schools are governed by their curriculum, which is controlled by the state's agenda."

Tracey, an ex-teacher, told me about the emphasis she received in her teacher training on "the good of society" and "building a better nation": "It seems that a lot of time, effort and focus is given to moulding and influencing the future generation, leaving the individual child, which may be mine, uneducated, unnoticed and undervalued."

Although some may see value in state-funded education, home educators simply want the option to say no. They want the privilege of teaching their children: not because they are the best people, but because they are the parents.

Here's what Victorian MP Jacinta Allan, supporter of the Education and Training Reform Act, said to home educators in 2006: "Education is clearly the Minister's responsibility. It always has been." Always? Is the Minister for Education the latest in a venerable line of pooh-bahs tracing their ancestry back to a protoplasmal primordial atomic globule?

More importantly, who is *really* responsible for education? Parents or state?

In ancient Greece, education was by the community, for the community. "The Greeks," according to H.D.F. Kitto, "thought of the polis as an active, formative thing, training the minds and characters of the citizens." Although philosophers like Socrates and Plato challenged some aspects of Greek culture, they emphasised that education serves the polis; the highest good is the good of the state. In the *Republic*, Plato argued that the good of the state took precedence over trivial little things like truth: "To the rulers of the state, then, if to any, it belongs of right to use falsehood, to deceive either enemies or their own citizens, for the good of the state."

Aristotle agreed in the *Politics*. The young citizen must be moulded to suit the government. Education, a state affair, should be under legal regulation. "Neither must we suppose that any one of the citizens belongs to himself." Education, aimed at producing compliant citizens with the desired civic virtues, was never intended to do the citizens themselves any good save incidentally as a by-product of political security.

Not surprisingly, where education is *not* primarily designed for the good of the state, the government takes a back seat to parents. The emergence of Christendom was a shock to the ancient world, which literally worshipped its kings and emperors as gods. In the view of Saint Augustine the state was the protector of the church and family, the

punisher of wrongs, but no more. It had its own sphere of sovereignty, and there were bounds past which it could not pass; it could not trespass upon the limited authority of the family, the church, or the individual.

Overwhelmingly, Christians placed primary responsibility for education with the family. Education during the heyday of Christendom was optional but, where available, punishingly rigorous. Scholarly progress was not tied to age. University required no Year 12 certificate; boys could and did enter university at the age of twelve or thirteen, with no more education than that provided by parents or a parish school.

In colonial America, influenced as it had been by settlers who had come to find religious and political liberty, education was the family's responsibility, and the father's in particular. Colonial literature on parenting was addressed to fathers, who as the primary parent were considered responsible for their children's religious and intellectual training.

In those pre-Industrial Revolution times, fathers and children were fully integrated into the life of the home. The father operated the family business or calling out of the home, often with his children as his apprentices and his wife as his helper. Clergyman Robert Cleaver called the household "a little commonwealth"—a state with its own sphere of authority. Under New England law, fathers were tasked to instruct children in an honest vocation, while whole congregations covenanted together to "reform our families ... educating, instructing, and charging our children and our households to keep the ways of the Lord".

Harvard College was established in 1636, not long after the Puritans arrived in New England. Schools proliferated, providing a rigorous education to those whose parents were unable to teach them personally. Although these schools were community efforts, they were not state schools as we know them and attendance was optional: not because education was unimportant, but because parents, not the government, were responsible for it. In his introduction to the 1647 edition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Thomas Manton declared: "It is bad parents and bad masters that make bad children and bad servants; and we cannot blame so much their untowardness, as our own negligence in their education." Instead of teaching children their duty to the state, parents were to teach them their duty to God.

The result? In the late 1700s, a group of fiercely literate men started what George III called the "Presbyterian parson's rebellion". Historian George Grant says, "The American Revolution was drawn from covenantal concepts that held the king in

check and required action for justice when the king stepped beyond his bounds." Colonial parents knew that religious liberty required educational liberty. And their children and pupils could tell when the state overstepped its bounds. Educational liberty had borne fruit.

But this was not to last. John Taylor Gatto, 1991 New York State Teacher of the Year turned compulsory-schooling whistleblower, identifies 1806, the year Napoleon beat Prussian soldiers at the battle of Jena, as the origin of compulsory schooling. The nationalist vision for a Germany ruled by Prussia provided an additional incentive for Prussian monarchs to develop an educational system which would turn out (in Gatto's words, from his essay "The Public School Nightmare") "obedient soldiers to the army; obedient workers to the mines; well subordinated civil servants to government; well subordinated clerks to industry; citizens who thought alike about major issues". Accordingly, in 1819, Prussian compulsory schooling began. Gatto goes on to say:

In Prussia the purpose of the Volksschule, which educated 92 percent of the children, was not intellectual development at all, but socialization in obedience and subordination. Thinking was left to the Real Schulen, in which 8 percent of the kids participated. But for the great mass, intellectual development was regarded with managerial horror, as something that caused armies to lose battles.

Liberty and the War for Independence resulted from an educational model overseen by parents. A different kind of war resulted from the Prussian system, which quickly became the model for state schooling worldwide during the nineteenth century. Erich Remarque blamed the First World War, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer the Second, on Prussian schools—"the inevitable product of good schooling", Bonhoeffer said of Nazi Germany.

Australia was among the first countries in the world to adopt a similar system. "From the beginning," Susan Wight argues in her 2003 article "Australian Schooling: A History of Social Control", "the purpose of schooling was to control the population." Since most colonial children were born to convicts, it became desirable to remove them "from the destructive connexions and examples of their dissolute parents", in the words of Governor King. As in Prussia and later America, schooling was designed to remove ambition and the capacity to think independently, to create a perpetual class of obedient workers. Political loyalty and social

conformity were the new curriculum. "How much cheaper to provide schools than to build gaols," said Henry Parkes, Australia's "parent of public education".

Frank Tate, the first Victorian Director of Education, began a more concerted effort to copy Prussian-style schooling in the early 1900s, pointing to the Prussian educational system as the key to that state's meteoric rise in world politics. As Susan Wight goes on to show in her fine article, Tate invited American pedagogues to the Australian public school debate in order to more fully incorporate the Prussian ideal and reinforce the state's monopoly of schooling in Australia.

Why did we think this was a good idea? Secular humanists like John Dewey, who brought Prussian schooling to America and influenced many Australian educators, still believe that the best way to bring about a humanist paradise is to isolate children in institutions, away from their parents' neuroses. According to Lawrence Casler, "It is supposed that the principles of ethical, productive, and happy living will be learned more readily when children are free of the insecurities, engendered chiefly by parents, that ordinarily obstruct the internalization of these modes of thought." This sounds vaguely benevolent, until you think about the kind of child-raising the pedagogical supremos prefer: according to Gatto, John Dewey

advocated that the phonics method of teaching reading be abandoned and replaced by the whole word method, not because the latter was more efficient (he admitted that it was less efficient) but because independent thinkers were produced by hard books, thinkers who cannot be socialized very easily.

Ignorance is therefore bliss, and teachers are the providers of ignorance for the good of the state. John J. Dunphy characterises teachers as "ministers of another sort" which must "convey humanist values in whatever subject they teach". And Patricia Hill Collins points out that "teaching has political implications that reach far beyond the classroom".

With this damning evidence, there's no wonder so many parents are opting out of state schools in Australia. The only mystery is why more of them aren't doing it.

But is home education the answer? When asking questions about home education, most people want to see the statistics—but there can be no statistics for an educational underground embracing pedagogical methods ranging from unschooling to school-at-home packages to rigorous classical

education based on the great books of Western civilisation; for a movement where curriculum might change not just from family to family, but also from year to year and child to child; for a movement embracing children home educated for a couple of months or years as well as children who have never set foot inside a school; for a movement with no accreditation, no certificates, and no registering body that can hope to catch everyone. A comprehensive study of home education is as fraught with impossibilities as a comprehensive study of Australian amateur gardening or dog training.

But of course, with the same impulse that sends men to climb Mount Everest, a number of studies have been made. Glenda Jackson's *Summary of Australian Research on Home Education* (2011) arrives at a number of conclusions based on the available research: Home-educated students in Australia do as well academically or better than their schooled peers; are able to acquire social skills and recover from bad social experiences at school; come from a variety of backgrounds and income levels, none of which has an impact on the quality of their education; and are generally happy about being educated at home. Jeff Richardson of Monash University has said that home-educated students perform "extremely well, above average" in universities, no matter what form their education took: "On any measure you like, socially or academically, they will do better."

I talked to a number of home educators to find out what motivated them not just to buck the cultural norm but also to reject the social conditioning many of them had received at school. For the men and women I spoke to, home education fulfilled many functions: it was a way to escape the socio-political agenda of secular humanism; it allowed them to enjoy their children's precious childhood; it assured them that a child with special needs would have the most loving and dedicated teacher possible; it safeguarded their children's religious, educational or political liberty; it provided the best way to give their children a truly rigorous and comprehensive education.

I spoke to mothers with chronic illnesses and children with special needs; to high-school dropouts, ex-teachers, and second-generation home educators passing on a vision they'd received from their own parents: compulsory state schooling is built upon sand.

Does home education offer hope? Apart from

the studies mentioned above, the answer must be a resounding *yes*.

One of the questions home educators get is how they can give their children a good education if they don't have a teacher's degree. In some states of the USA home education is prohibited unless the mother has an education degree. None of those I spoke to—from Peirce, working on his master's degree in linguistics, to Ellen, who never finished high school owing to ill-health—agreed that this was necessary. One mother asked why, if she was given such a good education by the public school she attended, she should be considered unfit to teach her own children. Others pointed out the advantage that a mother has over a teacher: a greater understanding of the child, and a much higher motivation to see him do well.

Some even advised me that the home educating mother should avoid an education degree. Tracey, an ex-teacher, says hers was more of a hindrance than a help, making her think inside the box rather than letting her children learn at their own pace. "Teaching school and teaching your own children at home are quite different tasks. Teaching school is about crowd control, behaviour management, and working towards the good of society." According to Tracey, her training focused on these skills above teaching on the foundational learning skills.

It is telling that the most common question home educators hear is, "What about socialisation?" Everyone asks it, old or young—and the home-educated are tired of hearing it. One mother I spoke to joked, "Yes, socialisation is a problem—I have to have a diary just to keep up with it all!" You can even get T-shirts with snappy comebacks like, "Socialisation? Yes, I can spell that!" or "Oh, no! I forgot to socialise the kids!"

The very ubiquity of the socialisation question is no coincidence, but a natural result of compulsory state education. After all, nobody worries that the home educated may be missing out on a basic education. They worry about socialisation because the main point of compulsory schooling throughout the ages has not necessarily been the transmission of truth and facts, but the manufacturing of compliant citizens: not education at all, but socialisation. The purpose behind state schooling has always been the good of the state; the desired effect has always been socialisation at the expense of education, like Plato's

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citizens who were to be denied the truth at the state's convenience, or Germany's obedient soldiery. The same thing is occurring at state schools today, and the population has internalised this standard to the point where if a parent withdraws his child from school, that child's socialisation suddenly becomes a national concern.

Home educators, however, do take this question seriously. In their own school days, many of them experienced peer pressure, bullying, ridicule for being "different", daily exposure to bad language, or being labelled as a certain kind of learner. They want to ensure that their children are protected from these things, but do realise that an adult that cannot interact socially is greatly disadvantaged, and want to ensure that their children have the best socialisation available. For home educators, this does not mean closeting their children in a room with twenty children of the same age for most of their waking hours. Instead, it means living an active life in the family and in the community, surrounded by responsible and well-socialised people of every age and walk in life.

One mother I spoke to pointed out that the purpose of socialisation at schools is not to help the individual child to become kind, respectful and helpful in real-life situations. Instead, it is to turn out children who are just like everyone else: children who fit in. For many home educators, this is a result to be avoided. They hope their children will be more confident, less peer-dependent, more comfortable with a wide range of different friends, and better at thinking critically about what they're told.

Home educators stress the importance of a close family life conducted within the larger community. They organise play groups, music lessons, sports days and volunteer work. One home-educating mother, Katie, attended a prestigious private school in Melbourne. Like many others, she stresses the artificiality of the school social environment:

I believe it is vastly more important that children learn to interact widely across many different age groups, cultures, and life circumstances, than that they know how to act in order to be accepted by their state/private-schooled peers. These same peers often struggle outside their own age group and culture.

Tracey told me how impressed she has been with home educated children: "They seem mature beyond their years, yet retain their childish innocence." They are happy to play with any child, regardless of gender, age, ability or nationality. By contrast, Tracey says, children only recently withdrawn from school seem shy in home educating play groups,

more likely to form cliques or engage in bullying. Meanwhile, the biggest social challenge for home educators is managing their options! "I would guess that homeschoolers have more opportunities to socialise than school children, who are stuck with the same children, whether they enjoy their company or not, day in and out for several years."

If home educators are to be believed, the movement is the answer to our educational problems. They point to the history of social control that still inspires compulsory state schooling. They point out that they have far more of an interest in their children's success than anyone else, even teachers. They cite the damaging social environment of schools, rife with peer pressure, bullying and obscenity. But they aren't just naysayers: they will tell you that home education is a vision far bigger than "regular and efficient instruction". When I asked what the most rewarding aspect of home education is, the answers were unanimous: the biggest reward of home education is the strong family relationships it builds. Every hour of the day is quality time when the whole family is learning, exploring, building and adventuring together. Siblings learn to put aside their differences, operate as part of a team, and accomplish great things together.

Aren't there any drawbacks? Of course, said those I spoke to. No parent and no child is perfect; everyone has to learn and we're just as likely to make mistakes as any other parent. You have to be creative to circumvent the unexpected in a society where everyone assumes your children attend school. You must get by on one income. You must keep going in the face of cultural disapproval and government regulation.

But is it worth it? Second-generation home educators told me how much they valued the memories and the closeness their family enjoyed; the laughter over failed science experiments, the family relationships that they carried into their adult lives. "I can't express enough gratitude to my parents for training and educating me themselves," says Charmagne, who plans to home educate her own children. "It's worth working through every struggle, fear and doubt."

The critics are right: the Australian home education movement is alive and growing. But that should only worry the sort of people, who, in H.L. Mencken's words, lie awake at night haunted by the fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.

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