

Home is Where Education Begins:

Exploring the Historical, Philosophical, and Social Beliefs of Homeschooling in America

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Since the beginning of American history, the home has been a foundational structure of children's education. Throughout time, homeschooling, or educating one's child at home, has evolved from being a necessity for the family to an alternative to traditional schooling's status quo. As homeschooling practices have evolved, so have the historical, philosophical, and social beliefs surrounding the purpose, merit, and vices of the practice. As of January 2020, an estimated 2 million children were being homeschooled in America (HSLDA, 2020). That is a small fraction, 3-4%, of the school population; in 2019, it was estimated that there were 56.6 million children in the school population ("NCES Fast Facts," 2020). The recent emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has garnered newfound attention to homeschooling and the beliefs surrounding it. It is estimated that the number of homeschooled students will increase by 10% to roughly 8.5 million nationwide by Fall 2020 (Werth, 2020). The pandemic forced many families and parents back to the roots of American education: home education. In light of homeschooling's resurgence, this paper will identify and discuss some of the historical, philosophical, and social beliefs surrounding home education and its positionality in 21st-century education.

Homeschooling: Historical Beliefs

The home has been used to educate children from the beginning of American history. According to historian Milton Gaither (2017), a driving motivation of the Pilgrims to come to the New World was to educate their children and build a family state, a characteristic they adopted from their home country. Based on their beliefs, the Pilgrims did not have schools for the first forty years of the colony's existence. Gaither (2017) notes that instruction was conducted in the

home by mothers and fathers who provided lessons in values, manners, literacy, and vocational skills. While the Pilgrims were some of the earliest North Americans to homeschool, they were not the first.

Native Americans were the first inhabitants of North America to educate their children domestically. According to Urban, Wagoner, & Gaither (2019), hundreds of native tribes had distinct ways of living; this included distinctive languages, terrain, and traditions. Two categories of education were emphasized, especially among children: knowledge of land and tribal traditions. Knowledge of land included survival skills: hunting, fishing, gathering and harvesting food, plant recognition, and the natural world. Knowledge of tribal traditions included language, sacred rites, spiritual stories, and lessons on life and death (Urban, Wagoner, & Gaither, 2019). As Gaither (2017) points out, native tribes have educated the next generation in traditional ways for millennia. Like the Pilgrims, the family state was vital to tribal families. The family as the primary educators of native tribes changed once natives were driven from the land and adopted into Anglo society. “In 1619 Virginia passed a law requiring each town in the colony to take a certain number of Indian children into their homes so as to ‘advance their civilization’” (Gaither, 2017, p. 4). At that point, homeschooling was primarily facilitated by the colonizers.

In Europe, the family played the lead role in children's academic and religious life; the New World colonial family continued with that role. The colony's success was highly dependent upon the success of its families (Gaither, 2017). According to Cremin (1970), educational responsibilities were intensified for families when they came to the New World. The colonists were used to the Renaissance traditions of Europe. Upon coming to the New World, they found themselves with less access to the educational institutions that aided in teaching. The limited access resulted in increased familial responsibility for education. Statues were put in place

“compelling households to do what in England they had long been accustomed to doing” (Cremin, 1970, p. 124). In 1642, Massachusetts mandated selectmen; selectmen were officials who took account of the parents, children, and towns people's ability to read and understand the country's principle laws (Gaither, 2017; Cremin, 1970). Cremin (1970) notes, “the statute was more than an affirmation of the values of education per se; it came as part of a vigorous legislative effort to increase the political and economic self-sufficiency of the colony” (p. 125). From 1650-1671, similar laws and mandates were passed in Connecticut, New Haven, New York, and Plymouth. In 1683, Pennsylvania mandated that all parents and guardians should teach the children how to read and write in order that the child would be able to read the Bible and write by the age of twelve. Additionally, the child had to be taught some form of trade or skill to be self-sufficient and not poor later in life (Gaither, 2017; Cremin, 1970). The laws carried fines and other penalties for parents who failed in their educational duties. Homeschooling was not an option during this time in history; it was a necessity. Gaither (2017) explains that failure to properly school children

...would have been an economic disaster, for the contributions of children to domestic economy was crucial for the survival of all. It was the household that provided both the substance for a living and the education for making that living possible. (p. 6)

The colonial household proved to be a more critical agent of education than it had been in England; each household served as an economic unit that contributed to the stability of the government (Gaither, 2017; Cremin, 1970). By the end of the seventeenth century, most children received their formal education and most learning experiences in the home (Gaither, 2017). A significant change in the schooling structure would not be seen until the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-Century: Homeschooling Turning Point

By the early nineteenth century, American families had become isolated from one another, more independent, and less dependent on the community. Capitalism transformed towns and farms. The location of children's education was not as significant as children getting an education that covered specific content. Whether taught at home, by a tutor, or a common school, students were taught the same things because of the common goal of "forging a common American identity from the disparate groups that made up the population" (Gaither, 2017, p. 26). A rise in domestic education manuals spearheaded a domestic education movement of antebellum America that focused on mothers and women continuing to teach lessons in Christianity and morality. Gaither (2017) states that the domestic education movement of antebellum America "was a conservative reaction against the materialism and individualism of an emerging industrial order and political life of rampant corruption and coarseness. It wanted to keep women at home, children good, and the nation well-mannered and pious" (p. 34). Antebellum Americans wanted to be Christians and capitalist that served God and their own desires for wealth, segregation, and inequity. When immigration increased by 240 percent between 1840 and 1850, it was clear to Anglo-Americans that an institution had to be put in place that would allow for them to have autonomy for their cultural practices and beliefs. The institution created was public schools (Gaither, 2017).

Public schools were established with the backing and advocacy of evangelical Protestants. Schoolhouses were situated in a central location as close to the home as possible. The idea was for school and home to still work together as a united front; mothers trained the child up at home in Christian beliefs and principles, and the schoolteacher gave the students an American and Protestant orientation via textbooks (Gaither, 2017). By the nineteenth century, schools were a common practice for most American children, but many families continued to

homeschool. Some of the families that continued homeschooling did so due to location or convenience. Others did so out of dissatisfaction with public schools. Many Americans did not share the same sentiments for homeschooling their children, and public school became the primary means of education. Homeschooling would see a new movement in the 20th century.

Twentieth Century: Homeschool Movement

By the middle part of the twentieth century, homeschooling had become a rarity; millions of students attended formal school, and the national consensus was students belonged amongst their peers (Dwyer & Peters, 2019). Increasingly, issues arose with the structure of public schooling. Critics argued that the education system did not engage students in science and scholarship, standardized testing resulted in the "dumbing-down" of students, and academic rigor was none existent. Court cases like *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Engel v. Vitale* further added to the criticism of public schooling structure. Individuals were becoming more concerned with how much control the state had in education legislation and decisions (Dwyer & Peters, 2019; Gaither, 2017). Dissatisfaction with the public-school system structure led to a movement by several homeschool pioneers, including John Holt, Raymond and Dorothy Moore, and Rousas Rushdoony (Dwyer & Peters, 2019; Gaither, 2017). Holt and the Moores' contributed to several well-known publications that attacked formal education and described the natural education that children received in the home before formal schooling took over. All the publications were highly regarded and placed the pioneers' advocacy in greater demand (Dwyer & Peters, 2019; Gaither, 2017). Rushdoony was a huge proponent of using the American legal system to advocate for educational freedom among Christian families, which resulted in the creation of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) (Gaither, 2017). Rushdoony also largely

influenced much of the Christian curriculum created. Rushdoony, along with Holt and Moore, was the catalyst for what is now modern homeschooling.

Twenty-First Century: Homeschooling Resurgence

The twenty-first century presented a movement that saw a rise in the number of families that opted to homeschool their children. Dissatisfaction with public school education, government involvement, children's unique needs, and the desire to school children with Christian curriculum all played significant roles in the rapid expansion of homeschooling (Dwyer & Peters, 2019; Gaither, 2017). Gaither (2017) discusses three groups of homeschoolers that emerged: Sectarians, Romantics, and Pragmatics. Sectarians are motivated by the belief that homeschooling is a God-ordained option for educating children to be godly adults. Romantics are motivated by their movement against modern aspects and the belief that homeschool education is always to be catered to the "individual" child. Pragmatics are not motivated by religious beliefs or notions of child liberation; they homeschool because it works best under the present circumstance. All three groups subscribe to different pedagogies and methods and have legal backing to make such decisions.

With the support of Republican legislators and the HSLDA, one of the most outstanding homeschool movement achievements was accomplished by the early 1990s: homeschooling was legalized in all 50 states (Gaither, 2017). Historians note the significance of this accomplishment: there are no obstacles for parents' not sending their children to school and doing whatever they choose to or not to do as far as instruction at home. New York is the only state that requires parents to annually provide some form of proof of homeschooling (Dwyer & Peters, 2019). Curriculum is not standardized; parents can opt to use whatever tools they find beneficial in their children's schooling. While Christian curriculum remains highly used, some

parents create their curriculum while others have begun using virtual home-based education (Gaither, 2017). The COVID-19 Pandemic has added a new dynamic to homeschooling, resulting in a surge of virtual home-based education. According to Burbio, which aggregates school and community calendars nationwide, 52% of students will go to school virtually only this fall, and just 25% will attend every day (Liesman, 2020). At present, homeschooling is seeing its highest numbers since the eighteenth century. As the historical beliefs of homeschooling have evolved, so have the philosophical beliefs.

Homeschooling: Philosophical Beliefs

Coinciding with homeschooling's historical beliefs is the philosophical belief that homeschooling should not be an option for children's education or that homeschooling is the superior option for schooling. Dywer & Peters (2019) note that the normative philosophical views about homeschooling regulation have become polarized and must be closely analyzed.

Homeschooling is "bad" or "good"

There are the philosophical beliefs that homeschooling is either inherently bad or always good. Homeschool critics argue that homeschooling is inherently "bad" on the whole of a child. In their view, homeschooling presents deficiencies in students' education and values and should have strict guidelines and mandates (Dywer & Peters, 2019). Deficiencies present themselves in most schooling practices. As Dywer & Peters (2019) point out, no one has yet to create a standard of "bad" and demonstrate how homeschooling presents deficiencies to fall below that standard. "In short, it is difficult to identify the way in which homeschooling is *inherently* different from regular schooling, and if there is an inherent difference it is not clear that it counts against homeschooling rather in favor for it" (Dywer & Peters, 2019, p. 113). The capacious nature of homeschooling makes the view of it being inherently "bad" challenging to argue.

Homeschool advocates view homeschooling as a superior option for schooling and believe homeschooling should not be governed by the state (Dywer & Peters, 2019). Many advocates believe that homeschools are better than public or private schools. Despite the superiority belief, “there is ample anecdotal evidence of actual homeschools that are bad by almost everyone’s standards” (Dywer & Peters, 2019, p. 113). Homeschools are generally deemed bad when they conform to liberal aims, do not provide valuable instruction, or when they are used as a cover for abuse or neglect. Issues exist in the divide between the use of ideologues and pedagogies. Many homeschool families struggle to identify or choose a pedagogical approach. In contrast, some chosen approaches are antithetical to one another based on assumptions about the child's nature and the values the child should develop. As asserted by Dywer & Peters (2019), to argue that homeschooling is “all” good “...would have to rest on the belief that whatever any parents do with their children is ipso facto good for the children” (p. 115). Such an argument is both blanket and illogical. Ideally, homeschooling has strengths and weaknesses, much like that of public or private schooling. It works exceptionally well for some families and lends to being the best option for their circumstances.

Homeschooling and Rights

There are varying philosophical views on the role of rights within homeschooling. At the core of the philosophical debate is the question: who has the right to determine the best schooling options for children? There are conflicting views on where homeschooling rights begin and end. When considering the question of rights, the parents, state, and children are all of consideration. Contemporary philosophers argue that homeschooling falls within a parent or guardians' moral rights to control their children’s lives free of state scrutiny. There should be limited legal power by the state, and the state should defer all “...powers to dictate whether a child receives various

benefits the state offers, rights to others not interfering in their interactions with their child, and a legal privilege to treat the child physically and psychologically in ways that otherwise would be prohibited...” (Dywer & Peters, 2019, p. 124). Opponents of this notion, often political philosophers, argue that the state must govern homeschooling rules and legalities. The state has a legal right to protect children, especially children who cannot protect themselves, and a part of the state’s legal right is ensuring that a child receives a certain standard of education. Additionally, the state can determine what rights are bestowed on a parent, including the right to school a child in the home. For those that argue the rights of the parent or state, little attention is given to the argument on the children's rights to homeschool.

Despite the debate on the parents' and states' rights, most philosophers assert that children have moral rights, one being the right to a good education. Homeschool parents argue that their children have a moral right to choose to homeschool over other schooling forms. Adults generally govern children, so what rights they can or cannot assert are still outside of their control. What should be considered regarding children's right to homeschool is Dywer & Peters (2019) argument of children being distinct persons. Dywer & Peters (2019) assert that children's separate personhood is rarely considered in discussing educational rights despite children having the greatest interests at stake in their schooling. By disregarding children's rights, the option of schooling becomes less about their interest and more about what is best for parents or the state. Some children need and have the right to an individually tailored education that homeschool can provide. The fact that homeschool provides the right to tailor education has resulted in numerous societal beliefs and stigmas concerning the practice.

Homeschooling: Social Beliefs

For centuries, homeschooling was the societal norm, and most of its beliefs centered on the merit of the practice for the state of the country and family structure. As many children began to attend public and private schools, homeschooled children became an outlier of the American education structure. Homeschooling practices became stigmatized; lawmakers, educators, community leaders, and parents began to question if homeschooling could provide comparable education to public schooling. As more families fought to homeschool based on their religious freedoms, social beliefs began to emerge regarding homeschooling, many that still exist. Of particular interest are the social beliefs that (1) homeschooled children lack socialization skills; (2) parents are not qualified to teach their children; and (3) religion is the primary reason that individuals homeschool.

Homeschooled Children and Socialization

One of the more prevalent social beliefs surrounding homeschool is that homeschooled children lack socialization skills. This belief is largely based on the structure of public schooling, which entails children socializing amongst a larger populace of peers their age. Ray (2015) states that "...the unstated assumption that age-segregated, group education by certified teachers is the normative way to learn to function socially and emotionally in modern U.S. society" (n.p.). Contrary to popular belief, research has shown that homeschool children are not at risk for socialization risks (Ray, 2015). Homeschooled children often participate in activities that foster socialization, including sports, church activities, co-operative groups, volunteer work or community service, and, most importantly, sibling and family interactions. Parents are a vital component of their children's socialization skills, whether they are homeschooled or not. There has been very little evidence to support the claim that homeschool children lack socialization skills.

Parent Qualifications

Another social belief about homeschooling centers around parents and their ability to educate their children. Parents are their children's first teacher(s). Parents are deemed competent to teach their children life skills like talking, walking, dressing themselves, and are often responsible for aiding their children's knowledge acquisition outside the classroom by helping with homework and other school taskings. As mentioned previously, the normative view of schooling suggests that a certified teacher is a proper agent for facilitating a child's education. While some states require that parents have at least a high school diploma or GED to homeschool, many states have no educational requirements for parents to homeschool. Parents have numerous tools and options to assist in homeschooling. Dywer & Peters (2019) note the following:

Not only do parents aim for their children's education vary, but there is also a great variation with respect to parents' own educational level and talent for teaching, employment of instructors other than the parents (e.g., online correspondence programs, music lessons, homeschool co-ops), connection to a parent network or homeschooling organization that provides guidance, interaction where regular schools (e.g., participation in team sports), opportunities for nonschool educational experiences given location and financial resources (e.g., museums, travel), arranged interactions with peers outside the family, and types of curriculum materials used (if any). (p. 110)

Based on the child(ren) and the reason for homeschooling, parents may incorporate various instruction modes outside of themselves.

Reasons for Homeschooling

While some homeschoolers are motivated by the desire to provide moral and religious-based instruction, families opt to homeschool for various reasons. Research obtained by Dywer & Peters (2019) highlights various interrelated factors that make families choose to homeschool. Parents are often concerned about environmental factors like drugs, negative peer pressure, and safety. Safety is a significant factor that is prevalent in the recent surge of homeschooling amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Other factors that lend to families homeschooling are dissatisfaction and distrust with public school instruction. Homeschooling allows parents to cater to learning specific to their children, especially children with embodied learning conditions that may require specialized instruction methods. Lastly, homeschooling addressed the concerns of equitable education for some families. For some African American families with concerns over racial disparity, insufficient school funding, and inequitable learning conditions, homeschooling has been an empowering alternative to the status quo (Dywer & Peters, 2019).

Conclusion

While home education has not always looked the same throughout American history, it has always been present. Throughout time, the historical, philosophical, and social beliefs of homeschooling have varied. With the recent surge in the number of homeschooled children amid the COVID-19 pandemic, new discussions, beliefs, and historical markers are emerging. With public schools moving to virtual platforms, homeschooling is taking on a new meaning and dynamic for many. For all that has changed about homeschool over the years, one thing remains the same: whether language, values, traditions, religion, or self-care, children learn from their home environment. Thankfully, the option remains to extend that learning by homeschooling. Homeschooling is a vital option of American education, and as present circumstances show, it will continue to be so in the future.

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