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Public School Reform: Potential Lessons from the Truly Departed

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Abstract:

In this article, the authors present data from a small study of 19 families who educate their children at home in rural Pennsylvania. Findings relative to why they opted out of the public education system and whether they would return are analyzed in light of a previously established construct (Ideologue/Pedagogue) before being used to critique and expand it in light of broader cultural concerns. The authors argue, overall, that home educators are asserting their historical option of cultural agency and schooling. (Note 1)

If "school reform" is a bandwagon, then the parade is still in progress. Most of the grand proposals earlier composed by politicians, pundits, policy wonks, and professors have evolved into smaller, more locally pertinent endeavors by actual change participants (educators, students, parents and community members). In the worst case, the continuing accumulation of school reform efforts is understood as succeeding waves of perpetual hassle and silliness which disturb the basic soundness of business-as-usual. In the best case, such efforts become a representation of participants' commitment to the repetitive nature of the learning process: desiring to know and understand - acting upon these desires - making sense of and reflecting upon those actions - identifying new or different desires to know and understand. Thus, in the best case, school reform efforts should be here to stay.

Those who care about examining and acting upon the quality of their local schools seek information from numerous sources, including their own experiences, outside consultants, beliefs

and opinions collected from local, state, and national polls, and "the literature" of academia. But they seldom tap the one segment of their community which may provide the most unique perspective: parents who have opted out of the local public school system. We suspect that this group -- particularly those families who have taken it upon themselves to provide education at home -- may have something important to offer those working to change public education. In this article, we discuss our preliminary foray into the lives of several Pennsylvania home educators in light of public school reform efforts.

Home Education -- A Return to Educational Agency

The philosopher Jane Roland Martin (1996) recently discussed the relationship between a nation's cultural wealth and its commitments to education in the broadest sense. Working from the premise that cultural wealth must be broadly defined to include multiple "conceptions of high, popular, and material culture, and . . . countless other items as well" (p. 6), she suggests that the educational responsibility or agency for transmitting this wealth must return to the breadth it once enjoyed. And for a good deal of time in our history the home bore much of this educational agency.

Prior to the great American experiment of educating all young people in publicly funded schools, most families bore primary responsibility for the education of their children. Support for these efforts in the form of reinforcement, refinement, and reorientation could be counted on from the community, extended family, and the church. While schools existed in our colonial period, they had little to offer the majority of people and little currency as a stand alone educational site. Even during the nineteenth century, the "common school" movement was accompanied by corresponding community located educational efforts (public libraries, agricultural societies, etc.). Slowly, beginning with Massachusetts in 1852 and ending with Mississippi in 1918, the United States became a land of compulsory schooling laws which, Supreme Court decisions in the early 1920s notwithstanding, legitimized schools as the primary educational agency. "It was only in the 20th century," Martin writes, "that schools came to be seen as the sum total of education" (1996, p. 8).

Martin's (1996) overarching point is that "the assets that our culture has placed in school's keep [i.e., preparing young people for their places in the world of politics, work, and the professions] represent one small portion of the [cultural] wealth" of our country (p.8); much of our remaining cultural wealth (largely that which pertains to popular and material culture) was assigned to the educational agency of home. Over time, the primacy of schools as bearers of educational agency and transmitters of dominant, high cultural wealth has overwhelmed the educational agency of the home and its historically gendered role in preserving other forms of cultural wealth.

Social and political activities blossoming in the 1960s helped to tie these "other forms of cultural wealth" directly to public schooling. As the federal government moved into the business of national curriculum development, activists and parents raised questions about the overall relevance of schooling to students' "real lives." The growing movements around people's rights (collective and individual) combined with a deteriorating political environment to produce a general desire to among many to question authority. Humanistic and critical thinking and practices complicated public schools which were caught in the throes of desegregation, while values -- ranging from religious and spiritual to democratic and political -- were noted as absent from the overall school experience. At the same time, new alternatives to the business-as-usual of public schooling began to appear.

The late John Holt embodies the transitional spirit of school reform during these times. From his call for sweeping changes in public schools in 1964 (*How Children Fail*) he came to believe that parents and families, themselves, must re-take control of their children's education.

With the establishment of his magazine, *Growing Without School* in 1977, Holt dedicated the rest of his life to nurturing and supporting the civic-minded educational agency of the home by popularizing home education (Marshall and Sears, 1985).

"Home schooling," the more popular term to describe families who teach their children at home (Litcher & Schmidt, 1991)(Note 2), has grown from roughly 15,000 to 350,000 students within the past ten years (Jeub, 1994; Lines, 1991). While in 1980 only three states had established laws to permit and control home schooling, 34 states have done so to date. Pennsylvania's more liberally enabling home schooling legislation (unanimously passed by both legislative bodies) went into effect in late 1988, following the state's supreme court ruling on the unconstitutionality of its previously confining statute (Klicka, 1990).

We have a long-term interest in learning more about the pedagogical practices and guiding beliefs of these Pennsylvania home educators. In the following section we describe our initial effort to establish lines of communication and develop a sense of their feelings toward education at home and in schools. Perspectives from Pennsylvania Home Educators

Following the passage of this more liberal Pennsylvania legislation, one of us (Jim) became involved with home educators as the "District Evaluator" of their efforts. In addition to his work as an elementary school teacher, his evaluator's job is to see that home-based educational activities concur with the law's requirements. Jim seems a wise choice for this role in that he is a former administrator of a Christian school, a longstanding member of the community, and (alongside his wife) a home educator himself. No less important, perhaps, is his reputation throughout the community as a vocal supporter of home education. When requested, Jim also serves families in the role of "independent evaluator" (an advocate who is personally selected by each home education family) to certify that the family's efforts have been "appropriate" in the eyes of the law. These roles provide him with "official" (though not necessarily intimidating) access to home educators in several school districts, including his own.

Jim's local school district includes about 15,000 people and can be rightfully described as largely rural and conservative. The county's picturesque landscape in southeastern Pennsylvania, once dominated by neatly spaced barns and silos, is increasingly dappled with housing developments -- up from 49 new housing permits in 1980 to 518 in 1990. Most of the district's 2,508 students begin school in one of four elementary buildings, move on to the lone middle school, and eventually matriculate to the central high school.

During the present school year some 55 children from this district are being educated at home -- a number that has risen steadily since 1988. We wondered what has prompted so many families to sidestep the public school system and take on the work of educating their students at home. How might they characterize their motivation for and commitment to the educational agency they have regained as home educators?

As the first step in a larger study designed to explore the curricular understandings and practices of home educators, we contacted all 27 home education families from Jim's district, along with 16 additional families for whom he serves as independent evaluator (a total of 43 families). Each family received a personal letter from Jim, describing and seeking their participation in the larger study, and asking them to complete and return a brief (one side of one page) survey designed to collect preliminary demographic information (number of school-aged children, number of years residing in district, etc.) along with answers to two simple questions. Those considering further participation signed these forms and provided telephone numbers; others remained anonymous.

Nineteen families (44%) responded to our initial inquiry -- a response rate we accepted as adequate for our exploratory purposes, given that many home educators prefer not to interact with interlopers (Clark, 1994). They raise an average of three school-aged children, all of whom are home educated in 15 of these families. Respondents have been Pennsylvanians for an average of more than 23 years (range of 1-45) and have lived within their particular school district for an

average of 10 years. On average, these families have been conducting home education for nearly five years, though they range in this work from one to 11 years.

Compelling Reasons for Home Education. Our survey made two simple, straightforward requests: 1) to describe the most compelling reason(s) for home education and 2) to say whether or not public schooling might again become an option and, if so, under what conditions. In cases where families offered more than one response, we identified their first one as a "primary" response, followed by a "secondary" response, etc.

Our home education families offered at least five different reasons which compel them to teach their children at home. Though recorded by respondents as such, these reasons may not be mutually exclusive. Here, we present them separately.

The least often mentioned reason was "cost." Only three of the 19 families identified home education as a choice resulting from the prohibitive cost of private schooling, though none of these saw cost as a primary reason. These three families identify themselves as having chosen home education for religious reasons as well.

Five respondents specified what we call "family cohesion" as a compelling (though not primary in any case) reason for home education. Here, respondents speak of benefits like "family unity," and "spending time together." These families have been conducting home education from four to nine years, and all who listed family cohesion also identified themselves as religiously motivated home educators.

Some 36% of families (seven) named "peer influence" as a compelling reason for leaving (or never entering) the public schools. This reason, typically expressed as "influences of other students" such as "boy-girl relationships," "drugs, sex, alcohol," and "becoming part of the Tin crowd," cut across the range of respondents in most respects (number of years doing home education, primary reasons for home education, etc.). While only two of those identifying "peer influence" as a compelling reason for home education also included religious reasons, "peer influence" was the sole, primary, or secondary reason noted by all who included it.

Fewer than half (8) of our respondents explicitly stated religious beliefs as a compelling reason for home education, with six of these eight families listing this as their sole or most compelling reason. Representative of such beliefs would be the following statement: "We home school so that our children might receive an education that is consistent with our belief that God created the world and is in control of it." Interestingly, all but two of these families have been home educating for five or more years (the upper end of our range).

Within our sample, the most frequently offered reason for educating children at home pertains to the problematic quality of life and learning found in public schools -- what we call "learning concerns." These concerns ranged from dull academic environments to an over-emphasis on college-bound students; from inappropriate labeling of children to an inability to individualize instruction; from teachers who don't care to administrators "out to get" certain problem kids. Thirteen of our 19 families (68%) found such matters compelling, with seven listing learning concerns as either their sole or primary reason for abandoning public schools. Though this reason was identified by families who have been practicing home-based education from 1-7 years, it is the dominant (i.e., sole or primary) reason among those seven responding families with the fewest (1-3) years of practice in home education.

Among these 19 families, 58% (eleven) identified multiple reasons compelling them to separate themselves from the district's public schools. Six of these eleven families include their religious beliefs as one of those reasons (almost all as a primary or secondary reason), yet only three of those six families list both religious convictions and learning-related concerns (in contrast, for example, to "family cohesion" which is mentioned by five of these six families). Of those eight families who offered but a single compelling reason for electing home education, two were religious and one was peer influence; the remaining five noted "learning concerns."

Returning to the Public School Fold. When asked whether or not they would "ever

consider" returning to public schools and if yes, why, the answer from nearly 75% of our respondents was simply "No." Within this group of parents, seven were unequivocal and emphatic; three would do so only as a result of some personal catastrophe (e.g., illness or death); two would consider such a move only if their children requested it; one would return children to public schools only if the law required it; and one family would consider public schooling again only if the schools somehow changed.

The remaining five families were clearly less strident in their feelings about a possible return to public schools. Two families are among only four from our sample who simultaneously have children attending public schools and, we suspect, see public schools as a viable place for some of their children but not others. In the remaining three cases, one family may consider returning their child to the public schools in order to take advantage of a senior high school vocational-technical career training option, another is considering a return in light of their local school's apparently more enlightened understanding of their child's particular needs (in this case, "hyperactivity"), and the third would consider a return if they felt they were unable to adequately prepare their children for post-high school learning.

Looking at the question differently, nearly 60% of these home educators take the position that nothing short of personal catastrophe or the long arm of the law would get their children back into public schools. Of this group, eight have been practicing home education for five years or more. None of those who have abandoned public schools for religious reasons would return to the public schools, nor would six of the nine families who included learning concerns but not religious beliefs among their reasons to educate their children at home.

The five families that would consider returning their children to the public school fold all say that they left (or decided against ever enrolling in the first place) due to concerns about their children's learning and/or peer influence. All but one of these families have been home educating for three years or less, and all respond to this question with respect to their children. That is, for these families, home education seems to be a choice which has been made in the best interests of (and perhaps in consultation with) their school-aged children. This group of parents, it seems, will "see how it goes" -- for their children at home and with respect to what's happening within their neighborhood public schools.

Ideologues, Pedagogues and Beyond

In light of the extant scholarship on "home schooling," none of this is especially new. Numerous studies have surfaced similar motivating factors (see, for example, Mayberry, 1989; Mayberry & Knowles, 1989), though most find much more significance in the religion factor than we presently do (Lines, 1991). Much of this work has been built on a scaffold developed by Jane Van Galen (1988, 1991) who characterizes parents who teach their children at home as falling into "two broad categories" of home education parents: Ideologues and Pedagogues. Acknowledging "tremendous variation" within and across these groupings, Van Galen (1988) describes Ideologues as those parents, largely conservative Christian in their religious beliefs, who "object to what they believe is being taught in public and private schools and . . . seek to strengthen their relationship with their children." In contrast, Pedagogues believe that "schools teach whatever they teach ineptly" and that, based on their respect for their children's intelligence and creativity, "children learn best when pedagogy taps into the child's innate desire to learn." Thus, Ideologues abandon public schools when they feel that schools teach "a curriculum that directly contradict[s] their own values and beliefs," while Pedagogues opt for home education "because they [believe] that their children would be harmed academically and emotionally by the organization and pedagogy of formal schools" (Van Galen, 1988, p. 55).

In some respects, Van Galen's categories seem to fit our preliminary inquiry. Those Pennsylvanians we contacted who home educate for "religious" reasons are the same parents who

identified "family cohesion" and "prohibitive cost" (each of the three families mentioned Christian schools here) as compelling reasons for sustaining their home education efforts. Thus, we could refer to this collection of eight families as similar to Van Galen's Ideologues. These families constitute the more veteran home schoolers among our respondents -- with half of them pre-dating Pennsylvania's 1988 home education law. Further, while only two families within this group listed religious beliefs as their sole compelling reason for home education, six of the 11 families offering multiple reasons could be characterized as Ideologues. All of this suggests that while religious beliefs may be strong among this group, the concomitant benefit of family cohesion along with the prohibitive cost of private Christian schools help to keep them educating children at home. Only three of these eight families, for example, specifically offered any sort of "learning concern" as a compelling reason for leaving or never even considering the public schools.

Van Galen's "Pedagogue" category also finds strong support from our preliminary findings. With the exception of the three families who listed both religious beliefs (Ideologues) and learning concerns (Pedagogues) as compelling reasons for dismissing public schools, our Pedagogues do, indeed, seem to highlight concerns about academic and/or emotional harm resulting from "the organization and pedagogy of formal schools." Further, this group was unmistakably more willing than their Ideologue counterparts to consider returning their children to public schools under certain circumstances.

What we find problematic about this categorization scheme, however, is its temptation to allow us to reduce what Harris & Fields (1982) call this "outlaw generation" of parents into easily identifiable (and thus, easily disposable) caricatures: Ideologues become right-wing Christian fanatics and Pedagogues become New Age eco-progressives. In short, we risk distancing "them" from "us."

Marginalizing home educators as "them" further serves to support and sustain all the myths which have grown up around this movement -- including myths about who "can" teach, what does and doesn't get taught/learned, and the social isolation of home-educated students (Meighan, 1984). Again, much available information indicates otherwise (see, for example, Calvery and Others, 1992; Frost, 1988; Groover & Endsley, 1988; Ray, 1988; Ray & Wartes, 1991; Stough, 1992; Tipton, 1990; Webb, 1989).

More importantly, however, such myths reinforce the primacy of school as the sole educational agency, particularly when they are perpetuated by professional educators like education professor Robert Slywester, who believes that "Home-schooled children miss important opportunities," and Thomas Shannon, executive director of the National School Boards Association, who believes that "Few [home educating] parents . . . are objectively qualified to do so" (Cohen, 1995, p.7; see, also, Mahan & Ware, 1987).

But exploring and explaining these myths detours our attention to larger and more important matters concerning educational agency and civic-minded public schooling. Arguing that only schools can provide social competence or state certified teachers sidesteps the larger and more immediate questions pertaining to which specific civic and cultural responsibilities belong to and might best be accomplished within schools and how those differ from responsibilities which belong to and might best be addressed within the home and family.

Home and school -- the two primary sites of educational agency -- must, Jane Roland Martin argues, begin to balance and share responsibilities for maintaining our cultural wealth. As Martin puts it:

It is downright irrational to persist in assigning school a function that is defined in relation to and relies on home's educational agency while denying the existence of that very agency. It is also the height of folly to assign what we take to be our one

and only educational agent the task of preparing children for life in the public sphere . . . Besides, given the great changes home has undergoing in recent decades and the importance to both the development of children and the life of society of the cultural wealth that home has been charged with transmitting, to equate education with schooling, yet continue to endorse a function for school that is premised on home's carrying out an opposite but equally important function, is short-sighted in the extreme. (1996, p.9)

Potential Lessons from the Truly Departed

Let us reiterate: Our simple inquiry was not designed in order to construct significant generalizations from a large or unique database. Rather, we hoped to openly and honestly connect with those volunteer families who might later serve as informants for a study of home educators' curriculum and instruction practices. Towards this ultimate end, we posed two simple questions could might permit us to discover certain angles and issues related to home education which might not yet have been developed within this growing body of scholarship, and permit our respondents to remain anonymous or self-identify as a statement of further interest.

While public schools in Pennsylvania and across the United States seem grudgingly headed toward positions of greater interactive support for home educators, they do so, in part, to recoup moneys lost when "home" students do not appear on public school roles. Beyond this mercenary motivation, reconciliation is sought in the name of accountability and control. Maralee Mayberry believes, for example, that "a significant proportion" of home educators who are permitted to have a say in how new relationships get negotiated between themselves and their local public schools will, over time, "accept some guidance and standards from states and public schools" (Cohen, 1995, p.6). Meanwhile, few efforts are made to critically reflect upon what home-based educators have to say "about learning, about educational policy, and about the strength and viability of the institution of schooling" (Van Galen & Pitman, 1991a, p. 5).

We believe that our preliminary inquiry, when seen in light of the existing knowledge about home-based teachers and learners, contains several important inferences of value to those engaged in school reform efforts. To begin, don't oversimplify people and their concerns. Public school curricula remain "godless" in the eyes of primarily religious-motivated home educators (Van Galen's Ideologues). And though issues around the "wall of separation" between the secular and spiritual aspects of public schooling in this country continue to proliferate in all venues of public discourse, our data suggest that such issues are typically interwoven with others having to do with social and pedagogical values. Complex issues like these provide openings where people can explore and attempt to untangle their concerns in an effort to communicate their differences and seek commonalities.

The greatest area of concern registered by the home educators represented here pertains to parents' dissatisfaction with schools in which their children could not learn and grow strong in appropriate ways (Van Galen's Pedagogues). Rather than place their children within environments they characterized as too quick to produce and act according to labels (e.g., behavior problem or slow learner), or too academically challenging or unchallenging, most of these families claim to have given up on the possibility of that ever happening. For these families to dismiss those opportunities which can perhaps best be provided through the educational agency of school is a tragic loss which affects everyone who cares about civic America.

The most complicated and pertinent message about the state of public school affairs we find within our data pertains to home educators' concerns about "peer influence" -- a message all but lost when oversimplifying the Ideologue/Pedagogue categories. Various referred to as concerns about the effects of urbanization and modernization (Mayberry & Knowles, 1989) or the quality of socialization (Mayberry, 1989), parents of all religious, ideological, and social

persuasions in our sample are removing their children from U.S. public schools on the basis of "peer concerns" (for additional support for and elaboration of this position, see Aiex, 1994; Gladin, 1987; Knowles and Others, 1994; Morgan & Rodriguez, 1988; Pike, 1992). The message here is that schools are simultaneously feeding and reflecting broader social and cultural changes which are considered inappropriate by growing numbers of people.

This critique of schools is not new. The 26th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallop Poll of attitudes toward public schools indicates that among the top four problems faced by schools and communities are "fighting/gangs/violence," "lack of discipline," and "drug abuse" (Elam, Rose, & Gallop, 1994). Indeed, concerns about discipline and drugs have been uppermost in the minds of respondents over the past 25 years of such polls (Elam, Rose, and Gallop, 1993).

And while poll respondents carefully complete these Gallop surveys, Pennsylvania's home educators continue in growing numbers to remove their children from socially and culturally complicated public school environments. In our state, the number of school-aged children educated at home doubled between 1990 and 1992 as the number of home education support groups climbed to more than 100 (Richman, 1994).

That our sample of home educators comes from a largely rural Pennsylvania community underscores the need for concerned school reformers to confront the porous nature of the school/community inter-relationship head on -- not in an attempt to more successfully isolate its school inhabitants, but rather in an effort to identify and better understand larger problems, construct and critique desirable alternative visions, and determine appropriate collective actions (Note 3). Such opportunities provide a site where parents, educators and community members struggle through their distinct and reinforcing roles and responsibilities -- a site where the realization that various educational agencies must jointly participate in the transmission of cultures to our youth cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

With so many public school educators diligently at work to bring renegade parent educators back in line in terms of the products of public schooling (test scores, content coverage, minutes on-task, etc.), we believe that those committed to public school reform ought to pay a different sort of attention to them.

Confronting a changing culture is the order of the day for a public school machine slowly becoming obsolete within an increasingly conservative, libertarian effort to ignore an inevitably postmodern world (see Doyle, 1992). In this world, absolutes are fading, demands upon schools have increased to the point where individual learning and development can no longer be taken for granted, and balkanization, fear and ennui have overwhelmed civic-mindedness. And while schools have obvious and crucial educational and cultural responsibilities in light of this world, they are not alone.

To address these issues, Jane Roland Martin urges schools to return to an earlier position wherein they shared their responsibilities with other educational agents -- particularly with the home. This change will require that those who represent schools see themselves, again, as members of "the whole range of cultural custodians" and accept that "school has much to gain from treating other educational agents as partners rather than as humble assistants or else dangerous rivals" (10). Doing so also creates the need for all educational agents to understand, appreciate, and accept responsibility (and thus, be accountable) for the cultural work at hand. In her words: if we can envision an array of institutions, all of which share the tasks of preserving our vast cultural assets, see themselves and are seen by others as legitimate educational agents, and work together to transmit the [cultural] wealth, we will at least have a better idea of what to strive for. (1996, p. 10)

We choose to see home educators as thoughtful and important critics of public schooling

who have decided to assume their responsibilities as what Henry Giroux terms "cultural workers" at great personal cost and uncertainty. Parents who educate their children at home do so at considerable cost (Bishop, 1991; Reynolds & Williams, 1985; Williams and Others, 1984). It is "an arduous option" (Lines, 1983, p.183) to educate one's children at home; as Virginia Seuffert (1990), a home-teaching mother notes, "Home-schooling dominates your time and demands a certain energy level that not everyone has" (p. 74).

Nonetheless, the number of home educators continues to increase nationwide -- a fact that should put everyone committed to the ongoing reformation of public schools on notice. That so many families we contacted in rural Pennsylvania have exited the public schools solely or primarily for "pedagogical" reasons, that more than one third remove their children because of "peer influence" concerns, and that so few parent-teachers can imagine their children returning to those exited public institutions ought to tell us something not only about our neighbors but about ourselves. Perhaps it's time for us to consider the possibility that these "truly departed" represent important voices in our continuing efforts to reform schools in light of our changing world.

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Notes

1. We wish to acknowledge and thank Gary Knowles and Pat Shannon for their helpful and insightful conversations with us as we worked to write and revise this piece.
2. Given the distinction between the general terms "education" and "schooling," wherein the latter is typically associated with bureaucratized and impersonalized institutional arrangements designed to promote the former, we have chosen to employ the term "home education" for our work here.
3. Dr. Betty Beach explores rural home educators' situations in particular. She can be reached via e-mail at bbeach@maine.maine.edu for specific information and dialogue.

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