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Home Schooling in New Zealand: An Alternative to

Mainstream Education?ÆSZ1LI,ØLIØ

By

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ÆNJØÆFLØÆJUØThe purpose of this paper is to report on the emerging phenomenon of home schooling in New Zealand and to examine its significance as an alternative to conventional schooling. Discussion draws upon findings from two recent case studies. The first reports the experiences of a Christian family with ideological reasons for educating its children at home. The second family chose home schooling for predominantly pedagogical reasons, namely to better meet the educational needs of their intellectually gifted child who had responded negatively to conventional schooling over five years.

ABSTRACT

The position advanced in the paper is that home schooling can be a viable educational alternative, worthy of serious attention by mainstream educational researchers. When the providers of home schooling are energetic and well educated, then this form of educational provision can have two beneficial effects: (i) it caters well for individuals who have particular special needs difficult to meet in main stream education; and (ii) it can provide a highly dynamic and flexible environment within which to implement principles and strategies that experience and research have shown to be educationally effective.

The paper is organised in three parts: (i) brief discussion of the trend towards, and key dimensions of, home schooling; (ii) the two case studies which illustrate ideological and pedagogical reasons for, and approaches to, home schooling; and (iii) discussion of implications and conclusions regarding directions for, and qualifications about, the future of home schooling in New Zealand.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Australia and New Zealand, home schooling is, for a significant minority of parents, a matter of necessity rather than choice. For instance, many thousands of farming families and families involved in farm related occupations, reside in places where there are no schools. In these circumstances, parents but notably mothers, accept the responsibility for educating their children at home. In both countries, they are supported by the Government funded correspondence school service. None the less, the responsibility for providing education, especially for primary school aged children, rests squarely with the parents. The question of whether or not children educated in the home school mode fare better or worse than their peers is, doubtless, a matter of some concern to all the people involved - parents, educators, policy makers and, ultimately, the children themselves.

An increasing number of parents, critical of formal schooling, are now choosing home schooling as the preferred means by which to educate their children. Home schooling initiatives in New Zealand appear to be a part of a worldwide trend. For instance, Schmidt (1989) estimated that during the 1980s over one million children were educated at home in the United States. Even more dramatically, Lines (1991) estimated that approximately one third of this number (between 248,500 and 353,500 children covering grades K to 12) were educated at home during the North American school year of 1990-91. A similar incidence of home schooling has been reported in Australia, Canada (Common and MacMullen, 1986) and Great Britain (Meighan, 1984).

In New Zealand, the parents of approximately 1500 children choose to teach from home. Seventy percent of these families make this decision primarily on the basis of religious and philosophical reasons (Nichol 1989). The remaining thirty percent wish to provide a learning environment that is secular but caters better than state controlled education does for the

special needs of their children (Smith, 1990 and Van Galen 1987).

Research has uncovered seven identifiable reasons why parents may choose home schooling as the preferred form of educational provision:

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(i) formal schooling tends to undermine the contribution that families make to the development of children in terms of cherished attitudes, beliefs and values (Van Galen, 1987; Ray, 1989);

(ii) the existing school system cannot provide a sufficiently healthy and secure learning environment for many children (McMillan, 1985; Kilgore, 1987);

(iii) parents wish to exercise greater control over their children's learning and development (Kilgore, 1987);

(iv) children need to explore widely without the inhibitions of the classroom and, in the process, to experience quality personal adult-to-child interactions (Van Galen, 1987);

(v) home education provides a high degree of value consistency and caters better for children's special educational needs (Van Galen, 1987; Schmidt, 1989);

(vi) home schooling is better able than schools to implement educationally effective teaching strategies, e.g. children setting their own learning goals and achieving them, the use of achievement portfolios to measure progress, the use of vertical age grouping and flexible scheduling, and friendships and supportive relationships with adults (McMillan, 1985; Sheffer 1989); and

(vii) the family shelters children from the negative influences of other children and society (Sheffer 1989).

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ÆMDB00Home Schoolers: Ideologues and Pedagogues

ÆMDNM0While home schooling may be chosen for all, or only some, of the seven reasons listed above, Van Galen (1988) suggests that home school parents tend to fall within two general categories - "ideologues" and "pedagogues":

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1. Ideological parents protest against the right and presumed competency of public school educators to exclusively determine the knowledge, beliefs and values that children will learn at school, especially when the two parties disagree over fundamental issues.

2. Pedagogical parents teach their children essentially what schools

would teach, but object to education being conducted in the bureaucratised, and unnatural environment of schools.

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On the face of it, the distinction between ideological and pedagogical home schoolers identified elsewhere also applies in New Zealand. In both cases, home schooling is the outcome of a principled power struggle between home school parents on the one hand and schools, officials and parents of school children on the other. Each holds a different view about the direction and form that the education of children should take (Van Galen, 1987; 1988).

ÆMDBOØTHE CASE STUDIES

ÆMDNMØThe following case studies report the experiences of two families in teaching their children at home. They worked within the context of a loosely organised New Zealand home school organisation, made up of other home schoolers with similar goals and objectives. One family lives in a medium sized provincial city and the other family lives on a farm in a small rural community. Their motives for taking the home school option are largely consistent with the list of reasons outlined above.

ÆMDBOØMethod

ÆMDNMØData for each case study were collected through the use of in-depth interviews, document analysis, direct observation and, in the case of the Christian family, a visual record was made in the form of 35mm photographs of critical events and processes. The case studies provide summary accounts based upon the data. The incorporation of interview extracts in the text, signified by the use of quotation marks, serves to illustrate main points and to provide evidence of the point of view of the participants and of key events and processes.

ÆMDBOØCase Study 1 - Ideological Home Schooling

ÆMDNMØThe home schooling of Case Study 1 is conducted in the context of a "fervent" religious family by parents who openly acknowledge that they are "born again Christians". Like many home schoolers elsewhere, the parents are well educated, possessing university and professional qualifications. They are both well read, articulate and capable of confidently defending their point of view and advocating it to others. Together, the parents have produced, and published, a variety of pamphlets and articles on the general topic of home schooling. The father, in particular, has a public profile and his views on education have received extensive media coverage.

Consistent with the ideological concept of home schooling identified by Van Galen (1987), the principal motive behind the decision to home school, in this case, is to counteract the dominant social and secular ideology of state schooling. The latter is perceived by the parents as portraying a

false view of the world and the place of human beings within it. The basic position they take is that:

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Teaching love and fear of God and his commandments provides an understanding of, and a meaning for, humanity on earth. God's commandments are the rules of life; they guide what is taught and how the practices of Christians and non-Christians should be understood (paraphrase, parent interview).

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More specifically, both parents challenge the expectation that their children should be required to attend state schools and enter into social, work and family relationships which do not affirm their Christian beliefs and values. They see state schooling as actively undermining the relationship Christian parents believe they should have with their children within the family. In Bourdieu's terms (Harker, 1992), home schooling enables these parents to equip their children with "cultural capital" of a kind that is: (i) consistent with their particular religious values and perspective; and (ii) more likely than secular knowledge and attitudes to help them live in, and cope with, the society of today.

The content of the home school curriculum is similar to that of the conventional school curriculum in that it covers the core subjects of English, geography, history, science and mathematics, but is taught within the Christian perspective and according to the "Christian imperative". In this way, the parents argue that their children would be able to practice Christianity and relate all aspects of their life, academic, occupational and social to God. The christian "imperative" is thought to give direction, meaning and coherence to the curriculum. For example, history is taught as "the history and concerns of Christians as a group". The children also learn to distinguish between cultures which are aligned with Christ and those which rebel against him!

Within this curriculum framework, the father assumes principal responsibility for teaching the children, while the mother plays a supporting role. This division of labour is justified in biblical terms:

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"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:1,4); and

"My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother" (Proverbs 1:8).

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Following these biblical injunctions, the father, in particular, argues that "it is the parents' duty to train their own children. It is the children's duty to obey their parents".

The father reported that this training is achieved through a combination of formal instruction, by the father, on the one hand, and appropriate role

modeling by both parents on the other. The mother has an important nurturing and socialising role, but appears to do little formal teaching. She takes principal responsibility for carrying out the administrative and business work of the family.

Initially, the father built a separate classroom with desks and blackboard with which to conduct teaching and learning activities. He found his children unreceptive to this "formal approach" to instruction.

The following examples of teaching and learning illustrate the pedagogical approach which the father argued "evolved as a positive outcome of home schooling".

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(i) Home school learning is an extension of pre-school parenting responsibilities and, as such, is a twenty four hour job.

(ii) Learning is pervasive; it can happen as a result of formal instruction but it frequently happens incidentally and informally around the dining table, crowded around an arm chair or through play. As the father commented, "People believe learning will ÆMDBOØonlyÆMDNMØ occur at school, we know differently".

(iii) Learning is meaningful because it is based in everyday real-life events and routines ranging across household tasks, paid work outside the home, family trips and excursions, school projects, polytechnic courses, Church, formal teaching and the total immersion of children in Christian life. An average school day is unstructured, apart from meals which are valued as important family time.

(iv) Learning opportunities are "taken on board" as they arise and are continued until their conclusion, or as they develop into new areas of study such as, for example, capturing a rat behind the fridge one evening, dissecting it the next day as a lesson in biology, then using this experience to write an English composition.

(v) Learning is student-centred in the sense that the children are encouraged to develop their own interests and discover things for themselves. The argument here is that if children are given the tools to learn (e.g., reading, writing, maths and the freedom to ask questions), they will naturally learn and make discoveries of their own. As a general rule, the father appeared to act as a facilitator of learning by helping the children organise learning experiences and activities, by responding to questions and by guiding inquiry.

(vi) Learning is effective because the children help each other to learn, notably the eldest child appears to play an important role peer teaching and socialising her younger brothers and sister.

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Overall, the pedagogical approach appears to be dynamic, interactive and integrated. The children are provided with frequent opportunities for stimulating learning experiences, they share their discoveries and help each other to learn, using learning styles which they prefer and which appear to work best for them. The results of this learning are not measured by tests of any kind, but the children are encouraged to take formal school examinations. These are seen by the parents as providing an external measure of, and validation for, what their children know and can do in an academic sense.

Ideologically, the value system of home schooling reported in Case Study 1 stands in contrast with the secular value system of State schools. As Mayberry (1989) points out, critics claim that this particular form of home schooling does not prepare children for the real world and shelters them from reality. The position of the parents, in this case study, is that this criticism is made from the secular concept of reality which does not include God as the creator and sustainer of the universe. From their point of view, Christian home schoolers can more effectively prepare children to grapple with the fundamental issues of life because they ask, and seek to answer, the questions, "who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?"

Case Study 2 - Pedagogical Home Schooling

Case Study 2 reports the home schooling experience of farming parents, but notably the mother, who educated an only child at home up to the age of fourteen years. In his fifteenth year, a family decision was made for the mother and child to move to Palmerston North where the child could complete a Massey University BSc Degree, which he had started extramurally at age ten.

The following account describes the home schooling of a gifted child. Because of their isolated situation, the parents never fully realised the extent of their child's giftedness in the pre-school years. The mother commented, however, that:

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"he was a demanding child from a very early age, always asking questions Parenting was a very intensive process ... a continuous dialogue even to the extent of precluding conversation with friends"

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Attendance at school brought home to the parents the true extent of their child's giftedness. Unlike other children he was quickly identified as an advanced reader.

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"By the age of five, he could read and understand computer manuals He had an entirely different view on life from that of his age peers, he chose to become a vegetarian and developed a code of ethics for the treatment of animals ..."

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Following the advice of education officials, the parents persisted with

sending their child to school until age ten. The mother reported that the officials and teachers

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"treated school like a carrot under our noses, telling us that, given time, he would learn to fit in".

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As with similar cases reported elsewhere (Van Galen, 1987), the school constantly argued that withdrawal from school would deny the child opportunities for essential socialisation. From the parents perspective, however, their child had

ÆLM15DI0ÆRM65DI0"passed through the stage of boredom and became so desperate that he would hide up a tree so as to avoid going to school ... It got to the point where we had to give him a day off a week so that he could learn ... As time went on he spent less and less time at school ... Finally, it became obvious to us that the school could not provide for his needs and the school also came to the realisation that AMDB00itAMDNM0 could not cope..".

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As in Case Study 1, the parents were well educated and well read. Even before the birth of their child, the mother, in particular, had developed a strong interest in educational theory and research. She drew upon the ideas of various theorists to inform her home schooling practice. In attempting to come to terms with how best to provide for her child's education she was

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"constantly seeking an answer to (her) child's giftedness ... What was he entitled to educationally? ... What should schools provide? In effect, it became obvious that schools had no obligations to teach in any special way!"

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The mother was saying, in essence, that her child was being required to fit the needs and requirements of the school rather than the school adapting its programmes and teaching methods to meet the needs and requirements of the child. By default, home schooling was adopted as the only means by which the needs of this child could be adequately met. In this case, the parents' decision to home school was made on pedagogical grounds.

In carrying out home schooling, the family division of labour tended to conform with the more traditional pattern. The mother took on the role of primary care giver and teacher, although she also did work outside the home too. The father took on the role of provider. He worked the farm but also contributed to his son's education by teaching history and farm work.

The mother had developed a broad concept of the curriculum that would best meet her son's educational and personal development needs. The concept incorporated a diversity of subjects, topics and ideas ranging from mathematics and Science (the two areas in which her son was most interested and eager to learn) to English, literature, history, and physical education. The latter was in the form of demanding physical activity around the farm rather than conventional sports in which her son showed

little interest.

Within this broad definition, the curriculum-in-action was:

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(i) interest-based, building upon specific topics and interests that were intrinsically motivating;

(ii) negotiated, thus permitting an active role for mother and son both to play in determining the form and content of learning; and

(iii) systematically organised to ensure that while interests were pursued, this was not at the expense of a balanced education.

ÆIPØDI,ØDIØInitially, adult supervision was required to select topics worth pursuing, develop self-discipline and acquire the organisational skills necessary for self directed learning. The first year of home schooling was ÆLM15DIØÆRM65DIØ

"a bit of a muddle, he got out of work habits. It took one year to become self disciplined and motivated although there was never a time when he was unmotivated about the things he was interested in learning."

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Typically, both parties would each state what topics should be covered and how particular goals might be achieved. Solutions were negotiated in the sense of discussing the pros and cons and making a mutually acceptable decision. The mother's role became more and more that of facilitator as her son developed the ability to work things out for himself. The mother reported that she was:

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"always tossing up whether or not to try and get him to do things he didn't want to do or trust in his ability to do what he wanted although it seemed a narrow view"; and

"always feeling I was running after him (in the sense of trying to keep up with him intellectually) because there were very few areas where I felt I could teach ... he was streets ahead of me in most areas ... I felt stupid to pretend that I could teach him, he was so intelligent ... The one thing that I felt I could teach him was English (and the strategy was to) identify authors (e.g. Lewis Carrol and George Orwell) who he perceived as logicians and was prepared to read (and enjoy)".

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At age ten, this home schooled child, assisted by his mother, had made key decisions about the path his future education would take, culminating with completion of his BSc degree, on campus at Massey University, at the end his fifteenth year in 1992. During the intervening period, he progressively took responsibility for the organisation and management of his own learning programme and by the age of fourteen had accepted full responsibility for all aspects.

For her part, the mother commented in mid-1992 that:

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"If I had a normal child that was averagely intelligent, I would probably

home school for value reasons now. All of this experience has made me aware of the limitations of schooling -- If parents enjoy the company of their children they should home school. Everyday I felt home school was right for him, for us ... How can teachers do a better job for children than their parents?"

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ÆMDB00IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Teaching Processes

ÆMDNM0In the home schooling situations reported in this paper, parents were observed to play a diversity of teaching roles ranging across explicit teaching of knowledge content, orchestrator of group discussions, provider of one-to-one instruction, guide and facilitator of learning, mentor and friend, and organizer of activities and projects.

It is more than a little interesting that many of the strategies and techniques used are the same as those that educational researchers and theorists (e.g. Bernstein, 1971; Bloom, 1984; Bruner, 1966; Cummings et al, 1985; Hunter, 1985; Kleinfeld et al, and others) have consistently reported as producing desirable educational results in effective primary and secondary schools.

ÆMDB00The Covert Curriculum

ÆMDNM0While the home schooling experiences reported here reflect favourably of the capacity of home schoolers to effectively address the "how to educate" aspect, they leave open the question of "what" to include in the educational programme. The "what" aspect of home schooling has the potential to be closed as much as it has the potential to be open in its effects on the formation of attitudes towards truth seeking, the development of a broad cognitive perspective and the pursuit of worthwhile activities that Richard Peters (1973, 1981) once argued are the key characteristics of an educated mind!

In this respect, the home schooling situation appears to develop a hidden curriculum much the same as that which operates in schools. For instance, the first case study illustrates the rights of parents to exercise control over the form and direction of their children's education. But it leaves unaddressed the rights of ÆMDB00childrenÆMDNM0 to exercise a choice in this regard. Given the parents attitudes towards sex roles and authority, it seems likely that the children might be denied the opportunity to question authority or to experience, and learn about, other ways of thinking and kinds of relationships that have the potential to enhance personal development and suggest life style alternatives between which ÆMDB00theyÆMDNM0 might choose.

In the second case, home schooling became a necessity. The curriculum here, like that of Case study 1, seemed to be pedagogically effective. The hidden curriculum was less discernible. There is little doubt that it was in operation, however, in respect to the formation of attitudes, the establishment of a sex role identity and the development of an understanding of the importance of taking charge of one's own life and accepting responsibility for the consequences of decisions. In this process significant others, such as parents, have an important role to play as facilitators of learning, as mentors and as sympathetic sources of support in helping to deal with difficulties and solve problems.

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ÆMDBOØResults

ÆMDNMØNorth American research on the effects of home schooling indicate that children educated in the home school environment will generally do as well, or better, than their conventional school peers. The vast majority of home school students score well above average on achievement tests. Likewise, the available empirical data suggest that home school youth are doing at least as well as youth in conventional schools in terms of affective outcomes (Ray, 1986 & 1990; Tipton, 1990). At worst, it can be said that home schooled children are neither academically nor socially disadvantaged by their experience of education at home (Frost and Morris, 1988).

On a somewhat less positive note, Williams (1991) reported that children at school tend to score better than home schooled children on Torrance Tests of Creativity. With the former, test scores were positively correlated with the number of years children had spent in school, with household income and with the home teacher's age and educational level. With the latter, the scores were negatively correlated with the number of years that these children had been home schooled. Despite the limitations of home schooling in promoting creativity, however, the value consistency provided by family-based schooling seems to create conditions -- an educational resource niche (Ray, 1990) -- for above average academic achievement and successful social development. In support of this claim, Webb (1989) reported that children from home schooling families are generally successful in higher education, that there is no evidence of prejudice regarding employment, and that the socialization of home-educated students is often better than that of their schooled peers.

ÆMDBOØOfficial Support

ÆMDNMØIn both the home schooling case studies reported here, the parents taught their children with only nominal support from the school system. Yet, the children appear to have produced results at least comparable with, and possibly better than, they might have achieved had they attended school. They certainly performed as well as their age counterparts at

school.

Thus, the right of home school parents to State provided educational resources and services remains an issue, especially since home schooling is the preferred educational option for an increasing minority of this Nation's children. It is worth mentioning that successive Education Acts since 1877 in New Zealand have included the right of citizens to educate their own children, provided that a standard of education similar to that available in a State school is maintained. An Amendment to the 1989 Education Act formalised the right of parents to receive a home-based schooling allowance, i.e. a sum of money as distinct from professional advice, based on that currently given to the parents of correspondence school students.

Beyond this allowance, there is little further recognition, however, of the value of home school education and of the very considerable responsibility that home school parents take for the education of their children. Positively stated, there appear to be grounds for arguing that home schooling deserves more substantial recognition and support as an acceptable, and a viable, alternative form of educational provision. One way of demonstrating this acceptance and support is for the Ministry of Education to follow the lead of other countries which have put in place cooperation and support mechanisms (Rakestraw and Rakestraw, 1990). These include access to curriculum resources and teaching materials, the provision of professional advice and services, and attendance at school on an as-needs-basis for specialist teaching.

The establishment of such mechanisms would provide, on the one hand, tangible evidence that the Government is honoring its commitment to the principle of equality of educational opportunity for all. On the other hand, it would go some way towards acknowledging that diversity of educational provision may serve to enhance the general quality of education in New Zealand better than formal schooling alone.

Although on the face of it, such a policy may seem somewhat radical, it should be remembered that a great many families living in remote regions (e.g. the outback in Australia) have long been required to be home schoolers. They have received support from the correspondence school service and the evidence is that they do at least as well academically, and in other ways, as their counterparts who attend school. It seems but a small step to extend the same educational support services to other families that choose the home schooling option. The evidence shows that such an option not only works well but that it may be superior, in many ways, to conventional schooling. Home schooling parents know this to be the case and they commit a great deal of time, energy and family resources to ensuring the success of the enterprise.

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