

Through the Lens of Homeschooling: A Response to Michael Apple and Rob Reich

Nicky Hardenbergh - September 2004

Michael Apple and Rob Reich speculate that the practice of homeschooling will have negative consequences for our society. Apple contends homeschooling contributes to the “withering” of our “very sense of public responsibility,” and Reich speaks of “the civic perils of homeschooling.”¹ Michael Apple is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, and Rob Reich is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Ethics in Society at Stanford University. Both men were scheduled as participants² in a panel discussion held at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association. The session was entitled, “[Educational Choice versus Civic Responsibility: Are Home Schoolers Embracing Their Responsibilities or Fleeing from Them?](#)” I wrote this article in anticipation of their participation on that panel. The other two panel members were Scott Somerville, an attorney with the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), and Brian Ray, founder of the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI).

This paper and my current email appears on my website: <http://otherwiseinstructed.com>

Introduction

Perhaps unwisely, I broached the topic of deregulation of home education at a recent family gathering. At the mention of the word “deregulation,” my sister-in-law gasped and exclaimed, “You’ve become a Republican!” Her comment amused me. I still consider myself a liberal, but I no longer believe that the state should have a role in the regulation of home education. My direct personal experience as a homeschool mom and homeschool advocate,³ coupled with my continuing explorations of the history and philosophy of education, provide me with a new lens -- the homeschool lens -- through which to view school issues.

¹ Michael Apple’s contentions appear in his book entitled, *Educating the “Right” Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (2001):

While it is quite probable that some specific children and families will gain from homeschooling, my concerns are larger. As in my previous chapters, these concerns are connected to the more extensive restructuring of this society that I believe is quite dangerous and to the manner in which our very sense of public responsibility is withering in ways that will lead to even further social inequities (p. 172).

Rob Reich’s article entitled “The Civic Perils of Homeschooling” (2002) contains his assertion that:

Customizing education may permit schooling to be tailored for each individual student, but total customization also threatens to insulate students from exposure to diverse ideas and people and thereby to shield them from the vibrancy of a pluralistic democracy. These risks are perhaps greatest for homeschoolers (p. 56)

² Michael Apple was prevented by family illness from participating in the panel discussion.

³ My husband and I decided to homeschool our children because we recalled being bored all day in school. We began as an experiment and continued until both our children had entered college. Over the past ten years, I have served on the boards of the Massachusetts Home Education Association (mhla.org) and the National Home Education Network (nhen.org).

From my homeschooling perspective, the question of the role of the public schools in developing civic responsibility becomes a complex, multi-dimensional topic, a topic much broader than the one-dimensional debate between politically liberal academics and politically conservative homeschool advocates, such as that staged through the AERA panel discussion.⁴ In this paper I delineate three groups whose contributions would expand the discussion in other dimensions. First, the voices of conservative academics, particularly market-based reformers, would provide a new perspective on the regulation of home education by calling into question the efficacy of compulsory attendance statutes. Second, the voices of liberal homeschoolers, both religiously and non-religiously motivated, would paint a more accurate picture of the diversity of homeschoolers and would confirm that virtually all homeschoolers, not just religious conservatives, regard the education of their children as a family's, not the government's, responsibility. Third, the voices of educational historians would remind us that today's school controversies are not new but rather have been part of the political fabric of our country at least since the advent of compulsory attendance.

I then turn to a brief examination of the history of compulsory attendance legislation. I note that the proponents of compulsory attendance remain firmly attached to the unexamined hypothesis that public schools function as the "glue" of our society and are therefore necessary in order to promote common values. I show that such non-empirical convictions as to the necessity of public schools and compulsory attendance can be viewed as tenets of the faith of "Universal Education." I contend that homeschoolers share this faith, with one important exception: they do not equate "education" with "school attendance."

In conclusion, I urge academics and policymakers to focus their research efforts not on the putative deficiencies of home education, but rather on the observable outcomes of the system in which they would compel all of our children to participate. This shift of focus would benefit children in public schools, as well as children being homeschooled.

Voices missing from the debate

The phenomenon of homeschooling today is truly multi-faceted. A dialogue about homeschooling limited only to the voices of liberal academic critics and conservative Christian advocates will, however, only generates a uni-dimensional, erroneous portrait. Education professionals who seek an accurate understanding of home education need to hear other voices, including liberal homeschoolers, conservative academics, and historians of education; expanding the conversation in this way will help policymakers become aware of the diversity of the homeschool community, as well as the diversity of academic assessment of the efficacy of compulsory school attendance. As various scholars question the notion of compulsory attendance in light of the results of their empirical research findings, homeschooling parents, guided by their own experience, are re-examining the traditional assumption that compulsory school attendance is essential for the common good.

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Parents who teach their children at home are affronted by the unsubstantiated assertion that their homeschooled children are somehow deficient in proper socialization for citizenship. Friends, relatives, and complete strangers who express concerns about the negative effects of homeschooling usually seek to mitigate their criticism by saying something such as, "Of course, we're not worried about *your children!* But what about the children of all those *other* parents?"

Just who are "all those other parents?" For Rob Reich⁵, Michael Apple, and others commentators, the parents to be concerned about are religiously motivated. While both Apple and Reich acknowledge, in passing, that there are many reasons that parents choose to homeschool, both of these critics seem most worried that the common good is at risk when religiously motivated parents are permitted to control their own children's educations. Apple explicitly singles out homeschoolers who are motivated by religious convictions because their motivations raise a number of important ideological issues (p. 173). Reich assumes that "most homeschooling parents have religious objections to placing their children in . . . a school environment." (2001, p. 7)

Those who imagine homeschoolers to be isolationists might be surprised to discover that many homeschooling parents *do* see themselves as having a stake in preserving the vitality of public schools. Many of us *are* ready to make what Stanford professor David Labaree (2000) terms a "substantial commitment to the education of other people's children" (p. 129). Furthermore, homeschoolers, may be able to provide some fresh ideas for reform of the educational system. For example, many of us are partial to a model of non-compulsory public schools similar to public libraries, providing educational opportunities to all at public expense. By choosing to educate our children at home, we have not chosen to ignore our public responsibilities.

Homeschooling parents simply cannot be categorized in any simplistic manner, and attempting to do so results in analytical errors.⁶ Virtually all homeschoolers share the

⁵ Several times since the publication of his "Testing the Boundaries" article (2001), Rob Reich has responded graciously to questions about his views. I appreciate his willingness to do so.

⁶ As a 1999 U. S. Department of Education survey indicates, parents have multiple reasons for homeschooling. Respondents to the survey were asked to select all the responses that fit their situation. The most cited reason for homeschooling, 48.9%, was "can give child a better education at home," followed by "religious reasons" at 38.4%, and "poor learning environment at school," at 25.6% (Bielick, 2001, p. 10). An important fact that this survey does not record is that homeschooling motivations shift and develop over the time that a family homeschools. Many parents begin with the motivation of improving their child's learning environment and then subsequently discover immense benefit to their entire family life. Reich mistakenly divides homeschoolers into two groups: a larger group, "the Christian right.... [who] wish to avoid the public school at all costs," and a smaller group that "practices a different kind of homeschooling ... [and seeks] partnerships with public schools ..." (2002, p. 57). Yet there are religiously motivated parents who wish to participate in public school programs, and non-religiously motivated parents who vigorously object to the participation of *any* homeschoolers in public programs. Homeschoolers simply cannot be classified easily on the topic of participation in school programs, or any other topic. As Kurt J. Bauman (2002) of the United States Census Bureau indicates, "No simple division exists between religiously motivated and academically motivated parents." [Bauman's online article does not contain page numbers, but his citations may be found by a text search in the document.]

Bauman mentions Apple's work and observes that "home schooling may not be linked to a unified conservative agenda in quite the way he describes." Bauman correctly notes that "[t]here is a true tension

conviction that the full responsibility for our children's education properly rests with the family, rather than with public officials. Beyond that one point of convergence, homeschoolers diverge to criss-cross the political, religious, socio-economic, and pedagogical spectra.

Academic scholars, too, span the political spectrum, and conservative academics should be heard in this discussion of homeschooling. When Apple and Reich express qualms about the “consumer mentality” of homeschooling, they seem to be reacting less to the reality of homeschooling and more to their academic colleagues who support market-based reform of education. Apple (2002) calls market-based reformers "neoliberals" who, in combination with other conservative forces, pose "substantial threats to the vitality of our nation, our schools, our teachers, and our children" (p. 5). Similarly, Reich expresses the concern, surprisingly phrased, that "[c]ustomizing a child's education through homeschooling represents the victory of a consumer mentality within education, that the only purpose that education should serve is to please and satisfy the preferences of the consumer" (2002, p. 58).

Initially, I found this criticism puzzling. I now understand that both Apple and Reich are concerned about the effect on public schools if the proposals of conservative academics for school voucher programs and other market-based reforms were to become the norm. In one important respect, Apple and Reich correctly link homeschoolers and market-based reformers: market-based reformers, as it turns out, share with homeschoolers the discovery of the ineffectiveness of compulsory attendance laws. Economists have studied the costs and benefits of compulsory attendance laws in some detail, and the results of their studies are germane to the debate over home education regulation because those statutes provide the basis for the regulation of home education.

Scholars have reached no consensus as to the effect, if any, of compulsory attendance statutes on school attendance. A landmark 1972 study (Landes and Solmon) found no observable evidence that compulsory attendance laws were responsible for levels of school attendance. In fact, the researchers concluded that the data could support the hypothesis that these statutes *followed* high enrollment, not vice versa (p. 84). Economists since that time have debated the validity of various statistical measures, but even those who discover a correlation between the statutes and school attendance find only a very modest correspondence. In a study seeking to determine the soaring rates of secondary school enrollments between the years of 1910 and 1939, researchers found that less than 5 percent of the increase could be attributed to compulsory attendance and child labor laws combined (Goldin and Katz, 2003). There seems to be no valid reason to conclude that, without compulsory attendance laws, we would have an uneducated populace. As Milton Friedman (the original proponent of school vouchers) stated over twenty years ago: "[C]ompulsory attendance laws have costs as well as benefits. [I] no longer believe the benefits justify the costs" (1979, p. 163).

between home educators and the school standards movement," Homeschoolers, in my experience, are philosophically opposed, for a variety of reasons, to national testing and nationally imposed standards. In this respect, at least, most homeschoolers are at odds with the conservative agenda as outlined by Apple. Bauman is right when he suggests that, rather than acting from any particular political or religious motivation, homeschooling parents may simply wish to "reclaim the schooling process."

Historians provide yet a third perspective on today's debate about how to educate our future citizens; their work shows us that today's controversies are not new. A review of the documentary evidence reveals a long record of attempts to "restore a common culture" through a common school curriculum (Massaro, 1993, p. 8). As David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) remind us, "[r]eforming the public schools has long been a favorite way of improving not just education but society" (p. 1). Indeed, from its inception, compulsory school attendance has been expected to remedy any number of intractable social problems.

Expanding the analysis to include the history of compulsory attendance

The push for the passage of compulsory attendance occurred over several decades, beginning in Massachusetts in 1852. By 1918, all states had passed some form of compulsory attendance. These laws, however, were not immediately embraced by all parents. As historian Richard Brown (1996) notes, the new policy of forcing school attendance "violated widely shared cultural and political assumptions." American traditions up to that point had promoted "policies to encourage the institutions [such as free schools, libraries, newspapers] that enabled citizens to become informed." Coercion was seen to be antithetical to the development of autonomous, informed citizens (p. 152).

The notion that compulsory attendance was not an immediately popular policy was a surprise to me. Before I began studying the history of the topic, I supported attendance requirements because I was under the illusion that without them we would not have an educated populace. Perhaps Reich and Apple operate under a similar illusion. A search of the historical literature convinced me, however, that the main focus of common school reformers was upon moral education, not academic preparation. Reformers "drew on and appealed to a pervasive Protestant-republican ideology that held that proper education could bring about a secular millennium, could make the United States quite literally God's country" (Tyack, p. 16). The concept that common schools would develop responsible citizenry may have achieved general acceptance, but the details of implementation were always a source of contention. "Neither the form, the substance, nor the financing of public education could command unanimous agreement" (Brown, p.86).

Unanimous agreement on these topics still eludes us. Even though common schools and compulsory attendance policies are firmly established, no reform group has achieved a lasting consensus as to the schools' curricula. Continuing disagreements affect all efforts at education reform, even those targeted at the very youngest children. Historians report, for example, that, "though preschool educators and parents have always thought preschools should help socialize young children, in the past as today they disagree as to how and to what norms." (Beatty, p. 204)

Nonetheless, a surprisingly strong consensus does exist in favor of the conviction that school "socialization" is a prerequisite for good citizenship. Does this proposition have empirical support? While researchers have demonstrated that both higher income and higher civic participation correlate with a higher level of education, no research results that I have seen indicate that public school attendance is a significant independent variable. On the reverse side, we have incontrovertible evidence that school attendance is no guarantee of social responsibility. Common school proponents, nevertheless, hold

tenaciously to their idea that public schools are the "glue" of the society, without which our nation would be in serious trouble.⁷ The speculative nature and the illogic of this "glue" argument puzzled me for years.

Specifically, I could make no sense of the contentions of reformers who champion the merits of the common school while at the same time decry the current lack of civic virtue. The advocates of schooling overlook the crucial fact that virtually all of today's adult population attended public school. If the schools were instilling the "glue" values, the "common values [of] decency, civility, and respect" (Reich, 2002, paragraph 19), one would expect that those qualities be widespread in our society. If the "glue" has not "set" despite decades of endeavors by the schools, why then do reformers continue to assert that school attendance will indeed usher in the millennium? Recently I came upon the work of sociologist John Meyer (2000). His concept of "education as transcendence" enabled me to solve this puzzle. Borrowing from Meyer, I call my analysis "education as transcendental glue."

Education as transcendental glue

John Meyer observes that "education is the secular religion of a modern society" and contends that the description is more than an analogy. Our modern educational system, in his view, "can usefully be conceived as a transcendental or religious institution" (p. 208). The shared transcendent values that cut across all modern educational systems can be traced to the Enlightenment, the period when Europeans began to place great faith in the instrument of reason as the tool with which to comprehend the "lawful and rationalizable Nature" as created by a "high God" (p. 209).

Achievement of the common good, according to this analysis, depends on each and every individual's being connected with this universal cosmos. In old world European countries, either a powerful monarch or an aristocracy watched over the common good. In the new American republic, however, "individual persons – not communities and states – were to be the carriers of the common good" (p. 210). Education and educational reform became central to the promotion of the common good, since the common good was dependent on each citizen's correct understanding of the workings of this rationalized and universal cosmos.

By not attending school, homeschoolers could be seen as threatening the universality of educational participation. Simply by virtue of their education's not being regulated by an authority other than their parents, homeschooled children are a threat to the dominance of the faith of Universal Education. Put another way, they have not been properly initiated. Meyer explains the initiation concept:

Unusual among modern social rights, education is at once an entitlement of young persons, a compulsory obligation, and the obligation of the state to provide (and parents to permit). In this, educational participation is very distinct from rights to vote, to receive welfare protections, and to be treated with due process. It is much

⁷ Both Apple (p. 177) and Reich (2002, p. 58) employ the "glue" metaphor in their writings.

more similar to the status of baptism in a Universal Church: a badge, initiation rite, or ceremony of compulsory personhood, linking the ordinary individual to wider truths and laws (p. 211).

At last all those questions of "what about their socialization?" make sense. If school enrollment is analogous to an initiation rite linking my child to wider truths, naturally other members of the Universal Church are concerned that my children are excluded from its ceremonial protection. Given Meyer's analysis, it is not surprising that Apple and Reich, even while conceding the probability that individual children may benefit from it, both regard homeschooling as a practice to be discouraged, either through strict regulation or through encouraging families back to the public school system.⁸

Meyer's analysis also explains the surprising lack of empirical evidence in both Reich's and Apple's assessments. Meyer observes that "the substantive nature of the [educational] conflicts ... tend to be curiously unrelated to real social functioning and very closely related to transcendent matters" (p. 220). Certainly Reich's argument seems "unrelated to real social functioning." For example, he aims to insure, among other factors, that children develop the quality of "minimal autonomy" that is necessary for "self-governance" and "participat[ion], if he or she chooses, in political dialogue with others (2001, p. 21). Yet this very quality of "autonomy" cannot actually be measured or tested, as Reich himself acknowledges. Undeterred, he states that because "the empirical measurement of autonomy, especially in children," would be "an exceptionally difficult and probably quixotic quest," he wishes "to approach the question somewhat more *abstractly*" [emphasis added] (2001, p. 28-29). As Meyer shows, abstraction is a hallmark of many school controversies: empirical data are irrelevant if the conflict is fundamentally *not* about the concrete functioning of the school system, but instead about adherence to the faith of Universal Education.

Surprisingly, while Meyer's analysis helps me place homeschool critics in proper perspective, it also highlights my fundamental agreement with the two basic principles of this faith as Meyer outlines them: first, that "physically, biologically, socially, and psychologically" the universe functions on "coherent, lawful, universal, general principles," and, second, that individuals can comprehend these general principles (p. 217). Both tenets seem uncontroversial and would, I predict, garner broad agreement among homeschoolers.

Regrettably, Meyer makes no distinction between the system of universal education and the practice of compulsory attendance. In his analysis, "modern educational systems are built on norms . . . of universal participation" (p. 210) and include rules of compulsion. Meyer does, however, provide a penetrating analysis of how bizarre compulsory attendance statutes can seem when viewed from an outsider's perspective:

Note how odd this is, given modern emphases on individual freedoms and rights. Without due process, or any demonstration of the failure or

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While Reich specifically recommends regulation "with vigilance" of home education (2001, p. 4), Apple seems mainly concerned with stopping the trend to homeschooling by building schools where "both teachers and students want to be" (p. 190).

incompetence of children, we feel free and obligated to imprison them in state or public institutions for many years: a practice that, applied to any other category of persons, would be in gross violation of elementary human rights standards. The right and duty to do this to the young reflects the transcending status of education, which is constitutive of proper personhood and relates the child properly to universalized knowledge (p. 211).⁹

As we know from the experience of homeschooling, compelled school attendance and education are notions that can be uncoupled. The civic values that are of concern (and that warrant the heightened protection that the courts reserve for the government's interests in education) could be served in ways other than by requiring all children to attend school. Compulsory school attendance statutes have been in effect for over a century, yet school attendance has not been shown (and, I predict, will never *be* shown) to be either necessary or sufficient to produce future citizens who embrace their civic responsibilities. Compelled attendance, although strongly enculturated now, was once a radical new reform. It may, in the future, be superseded by new methods that better meet the needs of society.

Conclusion: A shift in perspective is necessary

When we look through the lens of homeschooling, we view compulsory common school attendance not as part of the inevitable sweep of progress, but rather as a social experiment that should be re-evaluated in light of 150 years of experience.

In re-evaluating the effect of school attendance on the development of citizenship, our focus of concern should be directed to the *actual functioning* of our school system. We need detailed information about the real world outcomes of various educational practices. Until replicable and reliable data exists, the responsible and ethical response, as Stephen Raudenbush (2002, paragraph 8) reminds us, "is not simply to stick to our personal beliefs on these issues, but to do the much harder work of getting the needed empirical evidence." Before the reader assumes I am suggesting that research scrutiny be focused on homeschoolers, let me hasten to explain. I am calling on academics and policymakers to focus their research efforts on evaluating and improving the quality of the system to which our children would be consigned. The goal of reformers must be to fashion remedies that respond to actual functional deficiencies. Without a finding that the common values of decency, civility, and respect are being reliably cultivated *in the school system*, there is no reason to assume that school attendance is a material variable, let alone a causal factor, in the process of developing good citizenship. Reformers need

⁹ I recommend Meyer's entire essay. He makes a compelling argument that the components of our educational system, which we take for granted, actually make little sense unless seen as a function of transcendent values. We assume, for example, that all children should receive an equal education. In our own experience, we are not surprised that "higher status people give personal advantages to their children or that later in life the empowered can pay the disempowered to tend their gardens, hair, and toes ... Is it not more surprising that there is a sustained worldwide effort, built on the strongest norms, to create standardized ceremonial equality?" (p. 212).

to acknowledge that "school attendance" and "education" are not equivalent expressions and that compelled attendance is not the only way, or even the best way, to produce responsible citizens.

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