Explaining Home Education: Parents' Accounts of Their Decisions to Teach Their Own Children

Jane A. Van Galen

This paper analyzes the reasons that parents choose to teach their children at home. From data collected over 18 months of qualitative research in a state in the southeast, three broad explanations for choosing home schooling emerged. First, the parents believe that home education will strengthen their families. Second, many home-schooling parents (particularly those who are fundamentalist Christians) believe that schools teach values and beliefs that directly contradict those they want their children to learn. Third, many of the parents believe that only they, as parents, understand their children's unique educational needs well enough to effectively teach them. The failure of educational policy makers to consider the extraeducational issues raised by home-schooling parents is then discussed.

While the growing phenomena of home education is beginning to receive some attention in the professional literature, research has generally been limited to demographic surveys of home-schooling families that sometimes also describe materials and methods used in instruction (Gustavson, 1980), case studies of daily routines in home schools (Williams, Arnoldsen, and Reynolds, 1984), or quasi-experimental comparisons of academic tests scores of home-schooled and traditionally educated children. While these studies offer informative glimpses into the workings of individual home schools, they provide only a limited perspective of home schooling by addressing primarily academic questions.

The study on which this paper is based approached home education from a slightly different perspective. The goals were to examine the home-schooling movement as a phenomena of sociological and educational importance. The research began with the hypothesis that home schooling is not simply a matter of pedagogical preference but instead could also be viewed as an integral component of the family’s broader lifestyle and value system and a public declaration of those values.

THE STUDY

The study involved participant observation at state, regional, and local meetings of home schoolers over a period of eighteen months. I met most often
with Central Christian Academy, an organization of fifteen to twenty families in one of the state’s larger cities. I also periodically met with a second local group that was just beginning to organize in a nearby community.

Besides these state, local, and regional meetings, I also accompanied home schoolers as they met with representatives from other groups to discuss legislation, as they conducted informational meetings in which they explained home schooling to others, and as they attended public functions in which educational or other concerns were the topic of discussion. I attended a total of 16 meetings at these various levels. Additionally, I transcribed, coded, and analyzed audio tapes of an additional four state meetings that took place before I began the study and nine national meetings of home educators that I did not attend.

I conducted interviews with a total of twenty-three parents from sixteen home-schooling families. At the parents’ suggestion, I interviewed both the father and the mother. If no such suggestion was made when I requested an interview, I interviewed only the mothers because in nearly all the families that I met, the mother was the primary teacher. Thirteen of these families described themselves as conservative Christians, and the other three families had no religious affiliation. Of the 16 mothers that I interviewed, one had a master’s degree and six had bachelor’s degrees. Five of the mothers had attended college but had not completed degrees, and the remaining mothers had all graduated from high school. Six of the fathers had graduate degrees and six others had bachelor’s degrees. Two had attended college without completing a degree, and one father had not completed high school. Five of the mothers had some college coursework in education, and one mother and one father had been certified teachers.

Only one of the mothers was working outside of the home during the study, and this mother worked in the office of a relative. Her children accompanied her to this job. Four of the fathers held blue-collar jobs. Two owned small businesses. Two of the fathers were unemployed at the time of the study, one was a graduate student, and the remainder worked in a variety of professional and managerial positions.

I interviewed two families during their first year of home schooling and three more at the end of their first year. Five of the families were at the end of their second year, and four families were at the end of their third year. One of the families had been teaching at home for five years, and one family had not begun formal teaching with their five year old son. Children from approximately one-fourth of the families I interviewed had withdrawn directly from public schools to begin home schooling. Half of the children who had withdrawn from private schools to begin home schooling had also attended public schools at one time.

All but two of these interviews took place in the families’ homes, and all the interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim.

I conducted ten additional interviews with state and local education officials and others who are involved with monitoring or regulating home schooling in