What Can We Learn From Homeschooling?

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Homeschooling - parents teaching their children at home instead of enrolling them in an institution - could be called the oldest method of education. In tribal and agrarian societies children learned from those they lived with while experiencing the world around them. This of course doesn't make it "better" than formal schooling in an absolute sense - after all, most of us don't live in tribal or agrarian societies - but rather, it should make us consider how formal schooling came about, how it works, and whether we can do better. Why do parents choose to home school their children? Why do many of them outperform their publicly schooled peers academically even when the parents have no teacher training? [1] Is there something about the way formal schooling works that leads some parents to believe it's giving their children inadequate education? What does homeschooling do right, and can we incorporate any of its positive features into our formal schools?

Gatto's Hidden Curriculum

To learn more about homeschooling and to look for answers to these questions, I've interviewed 2 people who have been involved in homeschooling and have read the writings of John Taylor Gatto, a former teacher and author who has written very critically against the institution of school. In his book "Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling" [2], Gatto lists 7 problems inherent in the school system. (Although his points are specific to American schools, many of them are evident in Canada as well if not universally.)

1. Confusion due to the rigid schedule. The flow of education doesn't go according to what needs to be learned, but to make a topic of a particular subject fit into a block of time. Knowledge is fragmented into categories, which is problematic because the ability to synthesize knowledge across different categories is increasingly valuable in a world where machines can do the more narrow tasks.
2. Age segregation. People have a position in a certain class and must stay in that class. There's a rank within the class and attaining good grades will move you to the next class. In the early days of school this was less of an issue, when students could be kept in groups according to the stage of education they've reached (and in one room schoolhouses, it was non-existent). Now, with the inability to fail students in NB, the age segregation is complete.
3. Indifference. Projects and topics are left until later and aren't finished to completion, sending the message that it isn't necessary to follow through on work. This is related to point 1 where students have to suddenly stop working on a task because the bell rings or the time slot for a particular subject is elapsed.
4. Emotional Dependency. Students are trained to want to please the teacher, to be on their best behaviour and to want privileges, rather than to be independent.
5. Intellectual dependency - good students listen to their teacher, and need to be told what to do, instead of thinking for themselves. This leaves them ill-prepared for life, when they will no longer have someone to tell them what they have to do - except for those who would take advantage of their dependence, such as corporations advertising to them. According to Gatto, the economy depends on these graduates who need to buy products or services because they can't do things themselves.

6. Provisional self-esteem - children being judged on whether they're good enough by someone else, instead of assessing themselves. This is sort of a combination of points 4 and 5.
7. Lack of privacy. Because of homework, students are never free of the demands that school can place on them, or never have time for their own private endeavours. At school, their behaviour is constantly under surveillance, which causes children to conform to a standard for behaviour and prevents them from deviating, effectively making them more the same as each other than they would be without school - which is alarming, given the value of biodiversity.

In summary, Gatto's points can be grouped into 3 primary problems in the hidden curriculum of school: a rigid and artificial structure which reduces education quality (points 1, 2 and 3), becoming dependent on the teacher or the school system (points 4, 5 and 6), and too much control over children's lives (point 7).

First Interview

The parents I interviewed uncovered more issues. The first parent I interviewed has just begun homeschooling his 6 year old daughter. His motivation to do homeschooling began with his experience of school. He struggled in school due to specific learning disabilities that the school didn't address - his reading ability was excellent, but his mathematical ability was quite poor, so he reached higher grades but lacked certain pieces of mathematical foundation to understand the math in his current grade. He eventually quit high school, feeling it was a waste of time, and took his education into his own hands. After watching his son struggle in school

with similar issues, as well as with bullying, he decided he wanted something better for his daughter so has decided to homeschool her. She doesn't have the same learning issues and is extremely intelligent (above a grade 5 reading level, despite being only 6 years old). It is felt that the work done at school might be too mundane for her, and she says she enjoys doing home schooling, and that public school certainly sounds worse to her.

In terms of curriculum they follow the NB curriculum as a bare minimum. They also incorporate the curricula of other countries which are rated as having the best education systems in the world. In terms of math she works on a lot of worksheets, but they try to choose material about a grade ahead of her age in terms of topics and outcomes. There is a lot of nature incorporated into the curriculum, such as keeping track of bird migrations, edible plants, and watching documentaries (productive screen time) for science. There are a lot of real world applications and cross-curricular connections, such as talking about fractions while baking a pie, or using money to do math.

The time period during which the daughter is engaged in home schooling is generally morning and afternoon, similar to regular school, except it's not according to a rigid schedule. It depends more on what she's working on and how she feels each day.

This parent's thoughts on the advantages of home schooling are similar to Gatto's objections to public school, with a few more interesting points. The biggest advantage he points out is that the one-to-one class size ratio produces huge educational benefits. All the rigid structures that Gatto criticizes, the bells, the division into subjects and blocks of time, the surveillance, the grouping into classes, and the rules are primarily introduced so that one teacher can manage many students. When the teacher only has to manage one student, this artificial overhead goes away. As this parent put it, there's no "gap" in which his daughter isn't learning.

There's no need to review material from the previous year to put the whole class all on the same page, except in precisely those situations where she can benefit from it. Conversely, there's no need for the teacher to go too fast for her to be able to keep up, because there are no other students in the class who are ready to move on to greater challenges. He can go at precisely the appropriate pace that's right for his daughter.

Relatedly, not only is there no need to follow a strict schedule, but he doesn't want his children to be taught to fit a schedule either. He isn't a fan of the Monday to Friday, 9-5 office world, and what's more, that world is becoming obsolete in the 21st century. Businesses are moving away from the office model, so education should too. There are many different ways to make a living under many different schedules and it's problematic for children to feel like they're a "cog in a wheel" of the economic machine. Greater flexibility is needed in the working world, for workers to avoid being replaced by machines.

As an example of the problems with rigid schedules, he described the situation of the daughter of a friend of his. This girl is doing very well in school, and hasn't had any unusual behaviour issues, but has been getting in trouble for doing her homework for one subject while it's time for another subject. This is something I used to do as well, so I understand the motivation: there are many periods of the day when I didn't need to be involved with what the teacher was involved in or was teaching in order to learn and to pass the assessments, so I wanted to efficiently use my time to get my homework done and give myself more time at home later. The fact that this is what the more academically strong students are doing in school drives home this particular problem with the system: we need to find ways for it to be OK for different students to be engaged in things that are more specifically relevant to them, rather than expecting everyone to always be learning the same things.

Another big motivation for this parent is the moral development aspect to education. He wants his daughter to be taught empathy and compassion, and he sees this as missing from school because it's missing from society. For example, peers at school judge each other on whether they have the newest clothes or laptop (in his time – these days it might be whether they have the newest phone). Although school does try to instill values in children, in his opinion they're the wrong values, particularly obedience rather than developing an independent ethical sense. Since moral values develop in the elementary school age, it is critical that they develop properly and therefore it is of the utmost importance that they don't develop in the negative ways they typically develop in school.

Finally, there's another important point he made which Gatto left out: one purpose of education is to prepare children for the future, and schools are failing to do that. In North America in particular, he points out that schools aim for mediocrity, or trying to ensure that the most people pass some minimum standard, whereas in other countries the goal is academic excellence. This will leave children ill-prepared for a future globally connected world. Another, perhaps more significant way in which schools fail to prepare students for the future is with the threat of societal collapse: our economy and lifestyle are not sustainable (since we depend on large interconnected but finite systems), but the school curriculum pretends that the world of our children will be the same world we grew up in. This means developing self-reliance and basic skills like growing food, navigation, construction, and wilderness survival are of far more importance than schools give them credit for. A world in which artificial intelligence becomes closer to or surpasses human intelligence is another potential future that is being almost completely ignored by education, even though many researchers say it will happen in our lifetimes.

Socialization opportunities are a common concern with homeschooling. The daughter currently is involved in several extracurricular clubs which provide her with some of these opportunities, such as dance club, swimming club, and archery club. Other children in these clubs think it's really cool that she does home schooling, which likely helps her with socialization opportunities. The homeschooling group they're involved in is also trying to organize regular get-togethers with other home schooling parents once in a while, with activities such as scavenger hunts.

The father points out that although school provides *more* socialization opportunities, it isn't always good *quality* socialization. In particular (aside from bullying and the peer judgment mentioned above), school assumes that kids will get along with kids exactly the same age as them and groups them accordingly, but in reality kids make friends the same as adults, without these artificial boundaries.

In general, this parent's concerns encompass Gatto's 3 categories of objections to the hidden curriculum of school (rigid structure, dependency, and control), and raises a few additional valid concerns.

Second interview

I then interviewed a parent whose wife homeschooled their 3 children many years ago. This parent is a principal and his wife is a teacher, and their approach is more similar to the education received in school. In their case their oldest child was gifted, so it seemed his educational needs likely wouldn't be met in school, and their middle child had an allergy to the carpet in the school. Since the mother wasn't working at that time anyway, but had a degree in education, she decided it made sense to do homeschooling. Their oldest child was

homeschooled from grades 3-5, the middle from grades 1-4, and the youngest for kindergarten only, before she went back to teach in schools as a job.

They followed the same New Brunswick curriculum as public schools, but the kids only had to do school from 9am-noon – the small class size meant that they could meet their academic goals much faster than in a regular classroom. Unlike the first parent I interviewed, he believes that the discipline / obedience taught in schools is important, and their children are taught the same sorts of morals. He feels that the structure and routine is valuable, even though the small class size removes the need for much classroom management (I wasn't sure exactly why the structure and routine is still valuable in this case).

Socialization for their children was similar to the daughter of the first parent – they were involved in several clubs, and also their homeschooling network had a weekly get-together. He also pointed out that the socialization in school can be negative, especially with things like bullying for some children.

One interesting point he made was that most children who do homeschooling are only homeschooled for elementary and middle school, then go to public high school. This is often simply because the parents don't feel qualified to teach every high school subject. It also has benefits for the child's career, because this way they get a regular high school diploma and don't have any issues with showing evidence that they have an adequate education for universities or jobs. As well, I think there's a motivation for parents to have more control over children's moral development, which is formed more in the early years than in high school.

I was curious about the religious orientation of parents who do homeschooling, since in my searches it seemed like a lot of them are Christians who want to ensure that their children are brought up according to Christian ideals rather than the secular ideals in school. Although this

family is Christian, the father said that isn't a motivation for them, and that the moral training they want for their children is the same as that done in schools. In terms of educational goals, he said that it's important for children to become compassionate individuals, and not just be productive members of society. His hope is for his children to see that the world is bigger than them and to be aware of the needs of others around the world, rather than just their own.

Recommendations

I generally agree that the problems pointed out by Gatto and the first parent are negative aspects to the hidden curriculum of school. I notice that most of the children of the parents I interviewed had specific needs that weren't being addressed by school. These needs are supposed to be addressed by inclusion in New Brunswick, but it would appear that there either isn't enough will or enough support staff to do so. I think there are many people who don't like the rigid structures that Gatto rails against, but that in practice they're present just because of financial necessity. Schools only have enough money to hire enough teachers to have a 1:15 or 1:20 class size ratio at best, and divisions into schedules, bells, and age groups just make it feasible to manage an otherwise unmanageable group of students.

However, when reflecting on the role of the parent in home schooling, I notice something interesting. Parents generally aren't trained teachers, but their children can generally meet or surpass academic outcomes without doing as much work as they would have to do in public schools. [1] This seems to happen despite the many varied ways in which parents teach their children. Could this be because the children's learning happens in primarily a self-directed way? It can't be the case that homeschooling parents are lecturing their children all morning – rather, I expect they would normally set a task for them to do, and then set them up to do it on their own for a while.

But if that's true, then the parent has several long time slices available while the child is working. Why then couldn't this same approach be used in a class of several children? If each child was doing something individually suited to them, it seems like the teacher could still have time to circulate between the students and set each of them in the right direction, either helping them with what they're currently working on or setting them on a new task. It's possible that this would be too much work for teachers given the current number of teachers and class sizes (in terms of assessing and planning for each student separately), but with a small enough class size it seems like it should be possible.

But I think there's more to the structure of school than just the need to accommodate large class sizes. I think there's a sense in which somebody (whether it be parents, teachers, or the government) wants to ensure that children all learn the same things and participate in the same activities. This is odd when we think about the big picture: in the working world, specialization in a particular niche area is often what causes people to be valuable to an employer, and in nature biodiversity is more resilient than one common type of organism that can be wiped out all at once by a particular phenomenon.

Sometimes the curriculum is blamed for the need for everybody to be learning the same things: the teacher complains "I can't let them each do their own thing because it's my job to teach them the curriculum." But both homeschooling parents I interviewed also chose to teach the New Brunswick curriculum (as a minimum standard) so their children also ended up learning the same things in an individual way. Classrooms in different schools also end up learning the same curriculum with different lessons, further refuting the idea that everyone needs to do the same things in order to learn the curriculum.

If we could allow children to each learn individual content, then Gatto's first point about the rigid schedule could be solved. It would become OK for one student to keep working on what's important for them to be learning even after the time slot would normally say it's time for a new category of knowledge. Since students could keep working on their individual tasks to completion, they wouldn't have the same interruptions and task-switching that Gatto claims prevents them from valuing their work. Once there are no longer rigid time slots for particular subjects, cross-curricular activities would become more natural as well.

The key here, I think, is to allow children to learn required outcomes in a way they choose. Class-wide activities are fine for students who don't have specific ideas about activities they want to do, but too often teachers think they need to provide specific direction to everybody in the class. If some students find another method by which they can learn the same outcomes, possibly in a different order than the planned activities, they what's the harm in allowing them to do so? People tend to learn and remember much better if they have an inward motivation to learn something, so we need to take advantage of situations where they have this motivation. Giving them choice could also go a long way towards addressing the dependency issues Gatto decries – they largely seem to result from teachers who make choices for their students instead of being driven by what their students are interested in.

The rigid schedule probably can't be completely removed, however, in schools with many children, due to school buses and teacher work hours. So children would still have to leave their work at the end of the day and pick it up the next day. But if the arrival and departure times of school were the only restrictions, I don't see this as much of a concern, and indeed not much different than similar scheduling in everyday life. It could still be a big improvement over what we have now.

Age segregation is a separate issue that isn't really related to class size. More generally this is the problem of socialization. Traditional classrooms were not age segregated, but consisted of students at many different grade levels each working on different tasks. We then began to group children into their grades, a natural progression as funding allowed for better student-to-teacher ratios. But now, students always move onto the next grade after exactly a year regardless of their academic level. A main motivation for the "no-fail" policy seems to be to keep children with their "peers", so that they can develop socially at the appropriate rate, but why should we assume that "peers" are people of exactly the same age? Won't their social issues be at least as bad if they're kept in a group of children all their age but at different developmental levels cognitively? Is the real motivation that we feel bad about failing students or that we don't want them to feel bad about failing, or don't want to affect their future? But it seems like they will have the same self-esteem issues if they're in a class where they're always confused and behind, and the same career challenges if their grades are the lowest in a class of students who weren't allowed to fail.

Of course, whether to allow students to fail is already a controversial issue that has been and is being discussed in school administration and by parents, but I think this is only one way in which age segregation takes place. The more general issue is that academic levels are categorized in yearly cycles. It would be much more ideal if students could move on to the next level of learning precisely when they're ready to. This includes not only grade levels but also specific topics: if a student already knows a topic, they shouldn't need to spend time learning it with the rest of the class, but should be able to spend that time on a topic that they need more time for. Again, this is difficult in the current model of school, but only because we have the idea that every student needs to be learning and doing the same things. If we're willing to let go

of this restriction, then we could, for example, have different learning centres or mini-lessons, each led by a different teacher, and students could go to the centre(s) that are most applicable to them. Students could also cross classrooms to visit the centres from a higher or lower classroom as needed. I strongly feel that the boundaries that keep students within a class of students all their age and unable to leave those boundaries are arbitrary and unwarranted.

The only one of Gatto's points that I don't think we can fully solve in public schools is the lack of privacy. This is because I think it's important to protect students from each other, and to prevent bullying and conflict, which is difficult to prevent unless teachers are closely monitoring student interactions. However, even if we're always watching students, we don't need to be always interfering and correcting their behaviour. If someone is always under surveillance, but their freedom is never restricted with rules or commands, does the surveillance really bother them? Do people who fear the surveillance of an authority really fear the surveillance itself, or the presumed restrictions on what they'll be able to do? I think many, if not most, people fall into the latter category, so if we could just get rid of pointless school rules about hats, chewing gum, or talking in the hallways, then maybe children would *feel* like they have more privacy. Many rules of that sort are simply archaic and are still in place merely to preserve traditions. But the tradition of schooling in Canada is Christian nuns trying to train children to be what they believed to be proper Christian citizens. Is that really a tradition we want to preserve? I strongly believe that if we remove the rules that don't really teach morals, then children will be more willing to listen when we introduce rules that try to teach them real morals. This could help address the moral development concerns of many parents.

Homework is another way in which children never really escape from the "surveillance" of school. I think it can also be addressed by the individualized methods of learning described

previously - if each student is learning the material in different ways and at different times, and if they're being given tasks to complete on their own, then there isn't much difference between these individualized tasks and "homework". Or rather, their real "homework" is to learn the material in the individual way they choose, and they're done their work once they can show they've learned it. The default should be to allow enough time for this to happen in class; if students need extra time, or if they're wasting their time in class not working, then they may have to finish some of these tasks at home, but I think the unfair workload Gatto describes would be lifted with this approach.

Relatedly, assessment is another cause of the lack of privacy. Too much standardized assessment has few educational benefits and only serves to try to measure the performance of one school or education system against another. This is a large topic that is already being discussed heavily in education, but one point that we can take from homeschooling is that homeschooled children regularly do fine on standardized tests when they re-enter the public school system or university. [1] This suggests not only that we can afford to let up on the intensity of our standardized testing, but more to the point, that our obsession with testing also stems from our idea that every child has to learn the same things in the same way. Once we let go of that idea, it no longer makes sense to be assessing each student's every move, and the feeling of constant surveillance can be lifted yet more.

Finally, the first parent I interviewed had the concern of preparing children for the future by teaching them knowledge that will be relevant to the future they're likely to live in. I think this can be addressed in a relatively straightforward way by simply changing the content taught for a particular subject. For example, that parent gave his daughter a field guide of edible plants as a book to read to develop her literacy. In school, the same literacy skills might be taught with

a crossword puzzle about the Easter bunny. The content of the Easter bunny is useless content knowledge for the children's futures, and serves only to teach them the skills of literacy, while the field guide teaches both useful content and the skill of reading. So as teachers all we need to do to prepare students for the future is replace the content with relevant content, while still satisfying the same NB curriculum outcomes, as that parent is doing. Any teacher can do this, simply by choosing good content, if they just let go of the traditional lesson plans whose content is no longer relevant.

So in summary, I suggest the following changes that could be made by administration:

1. Remove the need to spend specific amounts of time on specific subjects.
2. Allow children to fail, to skip grades, and to participate in activities from different classrooms.
3. Remove school rules that have no purpose in protecting children from each other or from danger. (Moral training should be the responsibility of teachers, not of rules.)
4. Reduce the standardized testing required, and allow students to take tests at different times, rather than testing a whole class at once. (This means the nature of tests will have to change.)

And these changes can be made by individual teachers, even without administrative changes:

1. Take into account individual ways that students suggest or want to learn material (within reason - it still must be educative). Use choice-based and project-based work to help facilitate this, and give enough class time to make it possible to finish these activities in class instead of assigning them as homework.

2. Let students skip topics that they already know, spending more time on topics that they haven't mastered yet, especially critical topics.
3. When the development of a skill requires content, choose content that will be valuable to their lives, and in particular to the world of the future, rather than arbitrary meaningless content that develops the skill.
4. Teach moral reasoning instead of obedience to rules. Get children to think about what rules should exist and why.
5. Watching children as much as possible is a good thing, but don't use it as an opportunity to correct every small mistake you notice them doing. Filter your corrections and discipline to include only what's essential to protect them from each other, keep them safe, and teach genuine moral lessons (and not arbitrary rules).

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