The Growth of Homeschooling:
A Concise Synopsis on the Impetus Behind its Increasing Popularity

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Homeschooling seems like a fairly recent phenomenon, though one that has certainly been growing rapidly in the last 30 years. The number of “homeschooled” children in 1980 was estimated at just 200,000 while the most recent figures place the number of homeschoolers in 2008-2009 at 2.0 to 2.5 million (www.nhreri.org). However, homeschooling is far from a new idea, it is in fact the original form of schooling children were provided throughout history. Public schooling is actually the newer idea, being only about 150 years old in America. Nevertheless, throughout its short history, public schooling has overtaken every other form of schooling in the United States, accounting for the education of approximately 86% of the school-age population (www.nces.ed.gov). Yet, somewhere in the last half-century, homeschooling has again emerged and presented itself on the educational scene in a force that cannot be disregarded, with formidable statistics to back its increasing status. What has brought it from its place among the outer fringes of the educational landscape where it resided for a century and a half, to its present place as a viable, legally accepted alternative to what had become the “traditional” approach to educating the nation’s youth? This article will trace briefly the changes in the scholastic scene as America moved from a rural, agrarian society to an urban, industrialized one and then once more began to revisit the roots of American character, bringing into focus the very heart and purpose of education.

In early America, the Puritans were some of the first to put an emphasis on a more formal approach to schooling young children, specifically to the end that they could read so they would be able to read the Bible. This was a primary necessity in Puritan belief and thus fueled the determination to raise a generation of literate children. Early Puritan schooling was generally
done in the home by the family, but by 1647 when the colonies were better established, Massachusetts’ law instituted a requirement for all townships with 50 or more families to establish a school for teaching children the basics, especially reading and writing. The law was often referred to as “Ye Old Deluder Satan Act” because the first line of text in the law states that one of the chief projects of “ye old deluder, Satan” is to keep men from a knowledge of the Scriptures by various means. Consequently, it was considered imperative for the spiritual well-being of the people that each one be able to read the Scriptures for himself or herself. It is notable that on this point there was no distinction made between genders as there was in higher forms of schooling. Consequently, boys and girls were expected to be taught the basics of reading and writing, either in the home, or in the schools established in the larger townships.

Because education was originally held to be a private matter and not considered an issue to be addressed by a Federal government, the Constitution makes no mention of it. (Basham, 2001) Thus, it was long treated as a matter for which individual states would determine policy (ibid). Nevertheless, several of the Founding Fathers, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, felt education was vital to create citizens who could operate successfully in a Democracy where the responsibility of government is upon the citizenry. Hence, they felt education should be made available to all children regardless of social status or income level (Thattai, 2001). Jefferson proposed that a system be established for public schooling open to all children. By 1790, Pennsylvania had set up free schooling for children who could not afford private tutoring and by 1805 New York had followed suit, utilizing older students to help teach the younger (Elizabeth, 2010). Other states followed throughout the 19th century, some making elementary education compulsory. Still, the quality and availability of education varied greatly throughout the country.
A nationally administered, formal education system was not developed until the 19th century (Thattai, 2001) when the Department of Education was established in 1867 to help oversee state educational programs. With many states beginning to offer free education to all children and subsequently issuing compulsory education laws, the term “going to school” soon came to mean attending an institution, whether small or large, that had been established solely for the purpose of training children to read, write, do arithmetic and to become productive citizens. Prior to this, vocational training had been compulsory in a number of states and colonies in order that all citizens would develop a trade and be productive. Wilhelm and Firmin (2009) point out the influence of the industrial revolution on education equating the “school bell ringing to change classes with the bell that changed working shifts in the factories” (p. 307). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were significant changes in the population centers of the nation and for the first time in American history more people lived in cities than in the rural farmlands. Accordingly, public schooling expanded rapidly, coalescing into the elementary, middle and high school systems now so well known (and so well debated) throughout America. Although the focus of education subsequently broadened from the original need to simply teach children to read the Bible, a moral foundation of good character, hard work and Biblical principles still governed American education, for these still governed American society. As Wilhelm and Firmin (2009) put it, “American society provided a moral basis on which to relate relevant scruples” (p.305). Even government-sponsored learning was expected to provide education with Biblically-based moral and character value (ibid).

With the social upheavals of the 1960’s and 70’s education was once again affected. Although it was originally the counter-culture that rebelled against institutionalized learning they associated with the government they detested, and many took their children out of schools to
raise them on Communes, the greatest blow to public education came from a very different side. It was during this time period, as well, that “Biblical authority was rejected in the public education system” by three pivotal court decisions (p. 307). Essentially, these Court rulings removed prayer and Bible-reading from public schools. This brought many fundamentalist and evangelical Christian parents to pull their children out of public schooling and create their own Christian-based private schools. The assault on basic moral and character education continued as schools began to mirror the new “values” of society and taught “plurality” and “moral-relativism.” As the results of these and other changes in the focus of education began to emerge, the quality of public schooling degraded. Thus, even though in 1985 it was illegal in 30 states to educate children at home and a jail sentence could accompany a conviction for disregarding state education laws, more and more parents were pulling their children out of schools, or deciding not to enroll them in public schooling at all when they became school-age. Clearly, the driving force behind the trend was not going quietly away.

Studies have placed the impetus behind parental motivation into two broad categories, “ideologues” and “pedagogues” though many parents actually fall into both categories (Thomas, 1998). The “ideologues” feel they can create a better moral environment for their children and consequently enhance the quality of their overall education and character-forming. “Pedagogues” simply feel they can provide a better education for their children than that which is supplied by mass-produced or mass-focused lesson plans and district guidelines that cannot account for individual learning patterns and needs. Throughout the decades since 1980, the advent of homeschooling has grown at a staggering rate and this fueled more and more advocacy for legal rights, materials, resources and most of all for the freedom of parents to take back the responsibility of training their children in the way they felt was best – to fashion intelligent,
creative, responsible citizens of good moral character who would be a credit to their country and to society. Consequently, though regulations vary from state to state on the details, since 1993 it has been made legal in all 50 states to conduct some form of schooling in the home.

Today, the term “homeschooling” evokes a number of images, the most prevalent would undoubtedly be that of a child or children sitting around the kitchen table diligently pursuing their studies under the watchful oversight of the mother. Though this is common enough, the methods of conducting “classes” are actually as varied as the individual reasons behind parents’ decisions to homeschool. Over the last 15 years, much research has been done to determine the effects of this growing segment of American citizenry. In spite of the many factors influencing the different motives and methods, one unifying picture has emerged: homeschooled students consistently outperform their public-schooled peers in nearly every arena, including social stability, community involvement and government participation along with higher test scores on all major state and national tests. Colleges, which once looked narrowly upon the “homeschool” label on potential students, now embrace homeschoolers and have even changed their forms and enrollment procedures to account for these strong learners who enter college generally self-motivated and “already familiar with how to find the information they need” (Aasen, 2010). The numerous surveys taken through the years have indicated that it seems to matter little the income-level, the educational background of the parents beyond a high-school level, the “system” used to conduct classes or the color or gender of the homeschooled student, they consistently fare better. The reason for this is exceedingly simple: the very nature of true homeschooling is based on the courage and dedication of loving parents who have determined that a total investment in their child’s future is worth the time, effort, care and frustration that inevitably accompany such a major undertaking – and the children respond accordingly.
References


