

DOSSIÊ: *Homeschooling* e o Direito à Educação

## Homeschooling in the United States: Examining the Rationales for Individualizing Education<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article provides an exploratory overview of the history of homeschooling in the United States in addition to examining some of the claims made by advocacy organizations. There are two broad categories of rationales for homeschooling: (1) empirical — claims of greater efficiency, effectiveness, or pedagogical appropriateness; and (2) ideological – often informed by a religious or political disposition. A detailed discussion of both rationales is provided. First examined are claims made by homeschooling advocates related to effectiveness and efficiency, finding that this rationale does not have the same validity that ideological rationales like religion and safety may have. Finally, these rationales are cast against the backdrop of the aims of education as a mechanism for the collective good or for the individual good.

**Keywords:** homeschooling, homeschooling claims, collective good, individualization

### Introduction

Homeschooling has a long history in the United States – and in human civilization. Prior to the formation of formal public schools, much of a student’s learning took place at home in either formalized practices with a tutor, or, as was more often the case, informally through a child’s learning from their parents or master (in the case of apprentices), often centering around a specialized craft. Homeschooling practices that predate formal public schools represented a form of schooling that was done out of necessity to pass on cultural values and skills-based

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knowledge that could be utilized in the transition from childhood to adulthood. While homeschooling has been a form of educating children in the United States since colonial times (Barnett, 2013), the practice has remained an option for many parents despite the arrival of formal public schooling and has, in fact, become increasingly popular over the past two decades. Broadly conceptualized, homeschooling is the practice of a parent or parents – though it is often the case that one parent takes on the bulk of the homeschooling responsibilities – educating their child or children at home rather than enrolling them in local schools.

Although there are many individualistic reasons why parents choose to homeschool their children, there tend to be two broad categories of rationales for homeschooling: (1) empirical — claims of greater efficiency, effectiveness, or pedagogical appropriateness; and (2) ideological – often informed by a religious or political disposition. In what follows, we provide an overview of these broad rationales while simultaneously highlighting the shortcomings inherent in many of the claims made by homeschooling advocates. We begin with a brief overview of the practice of homeschooling in the United States followed by a robust examination of the empirical claims made by proponents that homeschooling, itself, results in greater academic effectiveness, with greater efficiency, than traditional public schools. We highlight that these claims are generally unwarranted and often ignore inconvenient components related to academic achievement. We then provide a brief overview of the ideological rationale for homeschooling while pointing out that the latter category of empirical claims is often used to further justify what are often religious rationales for schooling one’s children at home.

As will be explicated below, our discussion of the rationales for homeschooling is grounded more in a critique of the empirical claims promoted by advocates than on critiquing, say, religious dispositions related to child rearing. Our focus on this rationale is informed by the fact that the empirical claims made by advocates do not have the same validity as ideological rationales; moreover, empirical rationales and claims are more readily critiqued than personal religious rationales. The United States elevates the importance of religious freedoms and, historically speaking, Americans generally take a hands-off approach to commenting on parental practices except in the case of child abuse.

Our final section is a discussion of what the practice of homeschooling means for a conception of education as an individualistic good versus as a benefit for the collective good. As we will point out, homeschooling is the epitome of conceiving of education as an

individualistic good rather than a process that focuses on or benefits the collective. That is, removing a student from the collective to educate him or her in isolation reinforces the notion that the practice of, and the benefits of, education ought to focus on the individual rather than the collective good. Overall, we suggest that empirical rationales for homeschooling are not as clear or simple as proponents claim and that the practice of homeschooling represents a conception of education as a mechanism for the individual good over the collective good.

## **Homeschooling in the United States**

Approximately 50,100,000 students were attending traditional public schools in the United States at the start of the 2015-2016 academic school year with an additional 4,900,000 students attending private schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). At the same time, there were approximately 2,300,000 students (Ray, 2016) who were not attending public or private schools; rather, they were educated at home.

And while homeschooling in the United States has existed for quite some time, the practice has significantly increased over the past decade. Homeschooling advocate and researcher Brian Ray (2016) suggests that homeschooling “may be the fastest-growing form of education in the United States” and that the practice is growing around the world, including “Australia, Canada, France, Hungary, Japan, Kenya, Russia, Mexico, South Korea, Thailand, and the United Kingdom” (p. 1). Though, while Ray suggests that homeschooling is now a “mainstream” practice, it still remains a relatively small, albeit growing, percentage of educational practices, as 2,200,000 students represent approximately 4% of all students in the United States.

It is central to the practice of homeschooling that, rather than teachers with extensive training and certification to teach various content and subject areas, parents are the formal teachers of their children. That is, parents who educate their children at home generally do not need a degree in education or a specific content knowledge, nor do they need a state license to teach – unlike teachers in traditional public schools. Regulation of homeschooling is a contentious issue within the debates surrounding the practice. Much of the regulation debate ranges from questions about oversight of the curriculum used in homeschooling to

conversations surrounding the lack of teacher credentialing that most homeschooling parents have. Homeschooling advocates regularly make arguments for less government oversight – particularly since researcher advocates suggest there is no correlation between parent certification and homeschooling achievement (a point we take up below). And while there is a vast spectrum of the degree to which state governments regulate homeschooling, the debate renews its intensity on occasion and draws the focus of the media. The Texas Supreme Court, for example, is currently hearing arguments in a case where the parents have been accused of not actually educating their children due to their Christian-evangelical belief in an impending second coming of Jesus Christ (Weissert, 2015). Such cases tend to draw the ire of a non-supportive public while simultaneously reifying, for advocates, the rationale for homeschooling.

While homeschooling advocates typically argue for less government oversight – often citing religious exemption – some homeschooling advocates have pointed out the need for additional oversight in some areas. For example, following a recent unreported death of a homeschooled child, the Coalition for Responsible Home Education has advocated for a change in Florida law to include a required in-person check-in with the homeschooling family from a certified teacher each school year (Rozyła, 2015).

But, given the immensely private nature of homeschooling and the blurring of the lines between a conception of parental rights and the rights of the state, the advent and ascendancy of homeschooling in the United States has sided, and continues to side, with the parent. The legal basis for parents to choose not to send their children to public schools was found in *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1926) and *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925). Both cases concluded that “the state does not have the power to ‘standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only’” (Kunzman, 2012, p. 77) and that parents have a natural – though, not constitutional – right to decide the type of education their children receive. So, while the cases did not mention homeschooling, the rulings that parents could choose not to send their children to public schools is considered by many homeschooling proponents as the legal basis for the establishment of homeschooling.

## **Rationales and Advocacy Claims for Homeschooling**

In this section, we outline the two overarching rationales for homeschooling. Empirical and ideological rationales represent the two large categories for why parents choose to educate their children at home rather than in traditional schools. Religious rationales are by far the largest ideological justification for homeschooling in the United States; though concerns of racial violence and safety have also recently facilitated an increase in homeschooling. Empirical rationales and claims represent not only a reason for many families to homeschool, but serve as ‘evidence’ that justifies continuing the practice – whether the practice began on empirical rationales or ideological rationales. Many parents have chosen to begin or continue homeschooling at the encouragement of influential advocacy organizations like the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) and the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) that promote research seeking to reinforce the practice (Lubienski, Puckett, & Brewer, 2013). Often this research takes on an ideological tone of confirming the assumption of the benefits of homeschooling. Additionally, the HSLDA exerts a great deal of influence over legislation related to homeschooling regulation/deregulation with its ability to mobilize a base of proponents (Huseman, 2015).

### **Empirical Claim – Effectiveness**

In chronicling the modern rise of homeschooling in the United States, the HSLDA paints a picture of families – beginning in the 1970s – as disillusioned both by public schools and by claims that teachers were content experts (Home School Legal Defense Association, [n.d.]a). Fighting decades of legal battles and public scrutiny, the HSLDA claims that the commitment of those families who continued to educate their children at home ushered in a new era of homeschooling as an accepted practice. Despite the decades of legal and public turmoil faced by homeschooling parents, the HSLDA credits the academic achievement of homeschooled students as the continual evidence that homeschooling advocates are correct in their ideology and practice, whereas critics of homeschooling are, therefore, left wanting for justifiable reasons to object. This point-of-view suggests that while there may be ideological disagreements surrounding homeschooling, the empirical data suggesting that homeschooled

students outperform their public school counterparts sufficiently represents proof of the efficacy of homeschooling.

Along those lines, leading NHERI researcher Brian Ray's most recent "Research Facts on Homeschooling" (Ray, 2016) include the following claims related to academic performance of homeschooled students:

1. The home-educated typically score 15 to 30 percentile points above public-school students on standardized academic achievement tests. (The public school average is the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile; scores range from 1 to 99.)
2. Homeschool students score above average on achievement tests regardless of their parents' level of formal education or their family's household income.
3. Whether homeschool parents were ever certified teachers is not related to their children's academic achievement.
4. Degree of state control and regulation of homeschooling is not related to academic achievement.
5. Home-educated students typically score above average on the SAT and ACT tests that colleges consider for admissions.
6. Homeschool students are increasingly being actively recruited by colleges. (p. 2)

According to Rudner (1999), one-fourth of all homeschooled students "are enrolled in one or more grades above their age-level peers" (p. 27) that attend traditional public or private schools, while those homeschooled students in grades 1-4 perform, on average, one full grade level above their non-homeschooled peers. Ray concluded that, while homeschooling has academic benefits, the benefits become cumulative when homeschooling is practiced over multiple years (Ray, 1997). Additionally, homeschooling advocates claim that another academic benefit of homeschooling is that those adults who were homeschooled attend college at a higher rate than the average United States population – 74% and 46%, respectively (Ray, 2003).

While the differences in outcomes between homeschooled students and their public school peers are clear, what is not clear are arguments that there is a causal link between the practice of homeschooling and the higher academic outcomes. For example, the higher rate of college attendance among homeschooled students is likely explained by the vast differences between the two groups (homeschoolers and the entire population of the United States) and some shoddy math. The claim is based on a comparison between a 2003 United States Census survey that had 27,312,000 respondents and a 2003 survey conducted by the HSLDA with 7,300

adults who were homeschooled. Initially, there should be concern for comparing two groups with such an enormous gap between survey participants as the HSLDA survey population represents only 0.03% of the United States Census survey respondents. Moreover, while the HSLDA research concludes that “over 74% of home-educated adults ages 18-24 have taken college-level courses” (Ray, 2003, p. 2), the research reports that 4,129 survey participants were included in the comparison. Accordingly, the percentage of respondents who attended some college is actually closer to 57% (4,129 of the 7,300 surveyed).

While Joseph Murphy (2014) concludes that the research on the differences between homeschooled students and their public school peers is non-definitive because of a lack of experimental research designs, such a research methodology is exceedingly problematic to employ with research on homeschooling. That is, while there can be statistical controls for differences between comparison groups – the control and the treatment group – experimental designs cannot account for the reality that, in the case of homeschooling, parents who homeschool their children have self-selected into the treatment group, thus rendering the treatment and control groups as qualitatively different. It is this very issue of the difference between homeschooling families and non-homeschooling families that likely explains academic differences.

Homeschooling families are, in fact, characterized by a significantly higher median income than families who do not homeschool (Rudner, 1999). Moreover, the demographics of homeschooling families also exhibit characteristics typically associated with higher academic achievement including higher levels of parental educational attainment, married parents, secure employment, and parental involvement (Rudner, 1999). Ray’s (2016) claim that parental educational attainment has no bearing on student educational outcomes does not align with the decades of research concluding otherwise, nor with other pro-homeschooling research that has shown that homeschooled students who tend to have higher scores often have parents who have higher levels of education (Rudner, 1999).

While it is clear that homeschooled students perform well academically – and seemingly outperform their public school peers – what is not clear from the research is a direct causal link between the practice of homeschooling and the outcomes. Students who are homeschooled would, in all likelihood, achieve at the same academic levels while attending a public school as they do within the homeschooling environment given the amount of parent involvement and

higher level of socioeconomic status of the family (Lubienski et al., 2013). Higher socioeconomic status has been correlated to higher academic achievement for decades (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carter & Welner, 2013; Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972; Rothstein, 2004). Thus, a student from a more affluent background would likely do well academically in any educational environment, which says more about the impact of family economics than it does about educational delivery methods.

## **Empirical Claim - Cost Efficiency**

The claim that homeschooled students do better academically is often buttressed by a claim that homeschooling represents a significant cost reduction when compared to local public schools. Accordingly, if homeschooling produces greater or equal academic outcomes (as explicated above) at a fraction of the cost, it represents not only a form of schooling that facilitates greater effectiveness but also represents greater efficiency.

The NHERI suggests that homeschooling families save American taxpayers \$27 billion annually in services not having to be provided to homeschooled students (Ray, 2016) – savings that could, according to the politically conservative Heritage Foundation, be “reallocated to other uses” (Lips & Feinberg, 2008, p. 5). Ray (2016) also makes the claim that “families engaged in home-based education are not dependent on public, tax-funded resources for their children’s education” (p. 1). However, this claim fails to consider the myriad of ways that homeschooled families benefit from public tax dollars. For example, the HSLDA’s *Homeschooling on a Shoestring* series includes stories on how to save money as a homeschooling family by taking advantage of a local public library and librarians (Hood, 2013). While such a recommendation would in fact save the homeschooling family money, it does not represent an example of how homeschooling families are not dependent on public, tax-funded resources. There are other ways in which homeschooling families take advantage of tax-funded resources for their children, such as charter schools that cater to homeschooling families.

The HSLDA suggests that, on the whole, homeschooling is cheaper than public school. Though, the HSLDA does point out that the direct out-of-pocket costs to homeschooling families can be more expensive than sending children to schools. Accordingly, the HSLDA

suggests that the cost to educate three children at home is approximately \$2,030 for curriculum materials, supplies, a home library, etc. for the year (Bentley, 2013). Also among the expenses is a suggested membership fee with the HSLDA; \$120 for one year, \$230 for two years, \$500 for five years, or \$1,000 for a lifetime membership (Home School Legal Defense Association, [n.d.]b). The HSLDA estimates that the cost per child with three children would therefore be around \$677 per year (Bentley, 2013). Also pointed out is that the cost per child decreases as more children are homeschooled since materials and curriculum can be used not only by similar-aged children, but that younger children can reuse them at a later date.

Yet, what is overlooked by the HSLDA in its calculations and estimates on the costs of homeschooling are the *actual* financial costs of homeschooling. While the HSLDA points out that a homeschooling parent will certainly pay more up-front out-of-pocket expenses for curriculum and books (unless the family relies on tax-funded libraries) when compared to the cost of sending children to schools; the HSLDA vastly underestimates the actual total costs. That is, while a parent with three children educated at home may pay \$677 per child per year for resources, the HSLDA ignores the fact that homeschooling requires a significantly larger financial commitment namely in the way of a forgone salary. The parent who homeschools during the day is not able to work outside of the home and therefore the decision to homeschool is a sacrifice of a potential source of income – and for those parents who have left a paid position to homeschool, the actual cost burden is not hypothetical. Moreover, while a forgone salary is the largest overlooked opportunity cost associated with homeschooling, the HSLDA also fails to account for additional costs associated with transportation, lunch, utilities, and expenses associated with participation in extra-curricular activities that would be provided by a traditional public school.

## Ideological Claims – Religion & Safety

One of the largest ideological rationales for homeschooling in the United States is religious. In fact, religious and politically conservative citizens are credited with playing a prominent role in shaping homeschooling policy (Vieux, 2014). Parents who choose to homeschool their children for religious concerns cite, among other things, the desire to use a school curriculum that reinforces their family's religious beliefs (Green-Hennessy, 2014) –

namely, religious objection to the scientific theory of evolution in favor of creationism or a desire to exaggerate the religious beliefs of the Founding Fathers of the United States. Interestingly, both of these ideological interpretations have recently found their way into public school curricula through the Texas State Board of Education (Kopplin, 2014; Shorto, 2010; Stone, 2014). It is also noteworthy that the Texas State Board of Education is now chaired by Donna Bahorich who homeschooled all three of her children (Poppe, 2015).

At times, the confluence of religious rationales to homeschool and related religious-based curricula raises serious questions about the role of religion in education. For example, homeschooling curriculum was brought into the national spotlight following news stories surrounding reality-TV star Josh Duggar from the hit-show *19 Kids and Counting* (a reality show chronicling the lives of the Duggar family and their 19 kids – all of whom are homeschooled) and revelations that he sexually assaulted his sisters (Ohlheiser, 2015). The Duggars, who homeschool their children with curriculum from Alpha Omega (a name that gives a nod to the evangelical Christian nature of the curriculum), reportedly failed to report instances of abuse to law enforcement. Yet, legal discussion about mandatory reporting aside, the Alpha Omega homeschooling curriculum became a central discussion point surrounding the practice of religious-based homeschooling. Specifically, the Alpha Omega worksheet on “Counseling Sexual Abuse” implied that any abuse suffered on earth was temporary and that the most important part of the human body was the spirit – seemingly undermining the importance and severity of sexual abuse (Hathaway, 2015). Moreover, the Alpha Omega worksheet on “Counseling Sexual Abuse” asks the victim of sexual abuse to identify why “God let it [the sexual abuse] happen” with only the following possible answers explaining the abuse: Result of defrauding [sexual abuse] by: (1) Immodest dress; (2) Indecent exposure; (3) Being out from protection of our parents; or (4) Being with evil friends. In all four of the possible answers, in the homeschooling curriculum, the victim of abuse/assault is confronted with the notion that the abuse/assault was a direct response to something the victim did to warrant the attack.

Despite such examples of abuse within a homeschooling environment, religious homeschooling advocates continue to suggest that homeschooling provides a safer alternative to public schools. An article appearing in the evangelical Christian magazine *Christian Living* (Comfort, 2009) sought to make an argument in favor of homeschooling by outlining what homeschoolers ‘miss out’ on by not attending public school. The tongue-in-cheek article

suggested that students who are educated at home rather than at a local public school ‘miss out’ on all of the following: “learning how to communicate using filthy language,” “the use of illegal drugs,” “sexual promiscuity,” “contracting sexually transmitted diseases,” “being bullied,” and “maybe being shot to death” (p. 51). And while research has concluded that homeschooled students are significantly less likely to use illegal drugs, alcohol, or tobacco (Vaughn et al., 2015); there remains concerns about instances of abuse and neglect that go unreported due to the lack of oversight of homeschooling. In fact, the lack of oversight of homeschooling has been associated with egregious cases of child abuse and death. Tyler Barnett (Barnett, 2013) pointed out that a nationwide examination of news stories and articles between 1999 and 2004 linked homeschooling to 116 deaths. These deaths, and the large amount of other instances of abuse and neglect that go unreported may otherwise be subverted when students attend a school where abuses may be realized and reported.

Accompanying the article was a graphic depiction of the perceived difference between the environment of public schools and that of a Christian-based homeschool environment (see Figure 1).

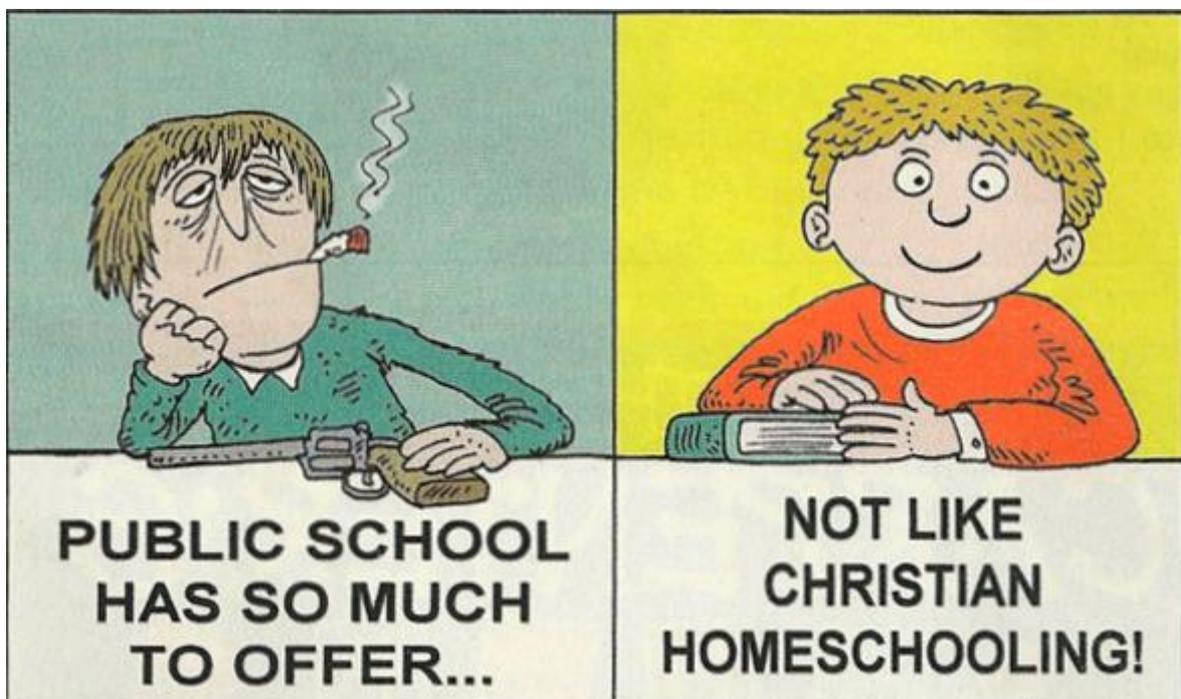


Figure 1. From *Idiot Home School Textbooks* by R. Comfort, cartoon by R. Gunter, 2009, *Christian Living*, 5, p. 51. Reprinted with permission.

Of interest here is that students are far more likely to have access to a gun at home and are far more likely to be victims of gun violence within a home setting (Luo & McIntire, 2013). Also, given that there is a correlation between homeschooling and political conservatism, the Pew Research Center found that politically conservative households reported the highest rates of gun ownership (Morin, 2014).

Similar to the religious argument surrounding safety concerns – for example, the perception that public schools bring students into more contact with guns – the growth of homeschooling among African American families is explained by concerns of safety. Specifically, Mazama and Lundy (2012) argue that the growth of homeschooling among African American families also represents a desire to shield and protect their children from racism in schools. And where there exist growing race-based safety concerns, the growth of homeschooling among African American families may also be the result of a desire for more culturally-relevant curricula among families who find the cannon of public school curricula to be limited on cultural and historical relevance (Mazama & Lundy, 2015).

Whether an African American family chooses to homeschool for curriculum related issues or concerns of racism and racial violence, there remains the similar characteristic that the homeschooling family has the financial means necessary to educate their children at home. In fact, this reality is evident in the circumstances surrounding student achievement. Ray (1997) found that there was no difference between the achievement of White homeschooled students compared to African American homeschooled students – a striking difference compared to the persistent racial achievement gap in traditional United States public schools. Yet, while the lack of a racial achievement gap among homeschooled students is presented by the HSLDA as evidence of the effectiveness of homeschooling, what is ignored is that White and African American families who homeschool share similar socioeconomic characteristics which are far more likely to explain the student outcomes. Interesting, however, is the HSLDA's assertion that Ray's findings indicate that if parents would only “commit themselves to make the necessary sacrifices and tutor their children at home, almost all obstacles present in other school systems disappear” (Home School Legal Defense Association, 2004, para. 4). Not only does this claim represent a logical leap, it also reinforces the oft-held conservative ideology that poverty – and the resulting lower academic achievement associated with it – can be overcome if parents

and students simply put in more effort while simultaneously reinforcing the notion that homeschooling parents therefore represent ‘good’ parents doing the ‘right’ things.

## **Education for the Individual vs for the Collective Good**

While homeschooling is presented as a slightly more expensive out-of-pocket venture for families compared to traditional public schools, the NHERI suggests that, overall, the costs associated with homeschooling come nowhere near the costs associated with traditional schooling. Though, while those claims do not stand up to the empirical reality as we suggested above, we argue here that there are additional ‘costs’ associated with homeschooling that exceed the financial. We now turn to a discussion on the ideological cost associated with educating for the individual rather than for the collective good.

While homeschooling doesn’t fully align with the more common education reforms of neoliberalism (e.g., school vouchers, charter schools, alternative teacher certification, etc.), it does share the characteristic of elevating the individual over the collective good. In fact, in his critique of neoliberalism, Henry Giroux points out that “self-reflection and *collective empowerment*” is “reduced to self-promotion and *self-interest*” [emphasis added] (Giroux, 2004, p. xv). While homeschooling does not necessarily represent a market-oriented approach to education – although, it could be argued that the threat of losing students to homeschooling represents an incentive for public schools to improve – it does embody the market ideology that is oriented toward the individual rather than the collective good in addition to an orientation of elevating the private over the public. Walberg and Bast (2003), in fact, suggest that homeschooling “represents the most extreme form of decentralization and privatization in education” (p. 244). A central goal of market-oriented education reform seeks to “[revive] doctrines of societal self-regulation” (Wagner, 2007, p. 38). In this light, homeschooling may very well be the closest embodiment of neoliberalism as it likely represents the closest form of education that relies on self-regulation, decentralization, and elevation of the individual/private over the collective/public.

Whether a family’s rationale for homeschooling rests along the lines of traditional ideological rationales (religion, libertarianism, etc.), empirical claims of effectiveness or

efficiency, or a combination of the two, a central theme among homeschooling is individuality. This individuality runs counter to the belief in education for the public and common good.

And while we acknowledge that many of the reforms in traditional public schools have elevated individuality and fostered a sense of competition among students and teachers, homeschooling remains the quintessential example of education conceptualized as an individual good. Rather than engaging in the collective effort to educate the next generation, homeschoolers exhibit a practice illustrative of an ideology suggesting that the benefits of education be experienced and realized by the individual rather than as a collective.

Also of concern is the lack of regulation and oversight associated with homeschooling practices in the United States. While proponents vehemently argue that there is no correlation between government regulations on homeschooling (e.g., requiring parents to possess a teaching credential) and academic outcomes, what is often ignored is the general role that schools play in the overseeing of the wellbeing of children. There has been an increase of stories in the United States media about child abuse and deaths that have gone unreported due to a lack of oversight associated with homeschooling (Ferguson, 2015). And while child deaths that go unreported for years because many homeschooled children are not ‘in the system’ certainly represent an extreme, they also raise serious questions about the importance of the public’s ability to ensure child safety along the wide spectrum of abuse and neglect.

This brings the debate full circle to a discussion of the role of parents versus the state in overseeing what is best for children. The ideology that interprets rearing and overseeing childhood as the sole responsibility of the parent may facilitate environments not conducive to child safety or learning – even if rare, the concern still exists. On the other hand, the ideology that elevates the state’s role over the parent likely undermines the natural role of the parent in favor of social mechanisms – a practice that would undermine traditional conceptions of the autonomy of the United States family.

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