

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

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The following response to Michael Apple, Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, and Rob Reich, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Ethics in Society at Stanford University, is written in anticipation of their participation in a panel discussion at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association. The other two panel members are Scott Somerville, an attorney with the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), and Brian Ray, founder of the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI). The session is entitled "Educational Choice versus Civic Responsibility: Are Home Schoolers Embracing Their Responsibilities or Fleeing from Them?"¹

Introduction

Perhaps unwisely, I mentioned this paper at a recent family gathering. As soon as I brought up the deregulation of home education, 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 there is a role for the state in the regulation of home education. My direct personal experience as a homeschool mom and homeschool advocate,² 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.

In this paper, I present a multi-dimensional view of "educational choice vs. civic responsibility," one that expands the discussion beyond a "lively and spirited debate" between politically liberal academics and politically conservative homeschool advocates. I point out that three additional voices should be heard. First, conservative academics would provide a new perspective on the regulation of home education by calling into question the efficacy of compulsory attendance statutes. Second, liberal homeschoolers 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, educational historians would remind us that today's political school controversies are not new, but rather have been occurring at least since the advent of compulsory attendance.

¹ Details on the panel may be found at the AERA website:
http://convention.allacademic.com/aera2004/session_info.html?c_session_id=266&part_id1=902480&dtr_id=3311

² 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).

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.

Voices missing from the debate

The homeschooling perspective is represented on this panel by homeschooling parents Scott Somerville and Brian Ray. I share with Scott and Brian a firm commitment to homeschool advocacy. What I do not share with them is their philosophical/religious worldview. I'm concerned that the audience will observe a "lively and spirited debate" only between liberal academics and conservative Christian homeschoolers and thus acquire a polarized view of the topic of homeschool regulation. Additional voices that would help correct this distortion include: (1) conservative academicians, specifically market-based reformers; (2) homeschoolers who espouse liberal political causes, both religiously and non-religiously motivated; and (3) historians of education.

The proposals of market-based reformers seem to shape some of the qualms about homeschooling that panelists Michael Apple and Rob Reich³ share. Both see market-based reforms as promoting a "consumer mentality," a term they use to disparage homeschooling. 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, paragraph 15). Initially, I found this criticism puzzling. I now understand that both Apple and Reich are reacting to proposals of conservative academics for school voucher programs and other market-based reforms.

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

³ Several times since the publication of his "Testing the Boundaries" article (2001), Rob has responded graciously to questions about his views. I appreciate his willingness to do so.

detail,⁴ 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. As the original proponent of school vouchers stated over twenty years ago, "compulsory attendance laws have costs as well as benefits. [I] no longer believe the benefits justify the costs" (Friedman, 1979, p. 163).

Politically liberal homeschoolers are the second voice missing from this debate. Many homeschoolers across the country have much more in common politically with Reich and Apple⁵ than with Somerville and Ray – except for the formers' antagonism toward homeschooling. Frankly, the unsubstantiated assertion that homeschooled children are somehow lacking in proper socialization for citizenship is an affront. Apparently the concerned citizens who approach us realize as much, because they usually mitigate their criticism by saying something such as, "Of course, we're not worried about *you!* But what about all those *other* parents? "

Just who are "all those other parents"? Reich, while concerned about all homeschooling parents, assumes that "most homeschooling parents have religious objections to placing their children in ... a school environment." (2001, p. 7) Apple is more explicit: he focuses his discussion on homeschoolers who are motivated by religious convictions because their motivations raise a number of important ideological issues in his mind (p. 173). While both Apple and Reich acknowledge, in passing, that there are many reasons that parents choose to homeschool, both panelists seem most worried that the "common good" is at risk when religiously motivated parents are allowed to conduct their own children's educations without state monitoring.

Homeschooling parents, however, cannot be sorted in such a dualistic manner.⁶ It's important for analysts and policymakers to appreciate the fact that homeschooling

⁴ A review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper, but I am compiling this information for a book that makes the case against regulation of home education. From what I have found so far, scholars have reached no consensus as to the effect, if any, of compulsory attendance statutes on school attendance. Reporting the results of research that I have not seen refuted in the years since this study was published, Landes and Solmon (1972) found no observable evidence that compulsory attendance laws were responsible for levels of school attendance. In fact, the data can support the hypothesis that these statutes *followed* high enrollment, not vice versa.

⁵ Liberal academicians might be surprised to find that many homeschoolers concur with the position of Stanford professor David Labaree (2000): as concerned citizens, we *do* see ourselves as having a "stake in preserving this public arena [public schools] in a state of good health and social usefulness." We are ready to make a "substantial commitment to the education of other people's children" (p. 129). Our own experience leads us to new ideas about how to achieve the good health of the public arena. For example, many of us are partial to a model of public schools similar to public libraries, available to all at public expense.

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.

families criss-cross the political, religious, socio-economic, and pedagogical spectra.⁷ There is, however, one point toward which the views of virtually all homeschoolers converge: the conviction that the full responsibility for our children's education properly rests with the family, rather than with public officials.

Historians, the third missing voice, would tell us that today's debate about how to educate our future citizens is merely another chapter in the continuing controversy over the topic of the common school and the common good. The perception that America is facing a cultural crisis is not new. Attempts to "fend off ... disintegration and restore a common culture have long pedigrees" (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). Compulsory attendance, although strongly enculturated now, was once a radical new idea.⁸ It may, in the future, be superseded by new methods that better meet the needs of society. 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.

Expanding the analysis to include the history of compulsory attendance

Before I began studying the history of compulsory attendance, 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 review of the historical literature convinced me that the main focus of common school reformers

⁷ Both Reich and Apple make some factual errors in their discussions of homeschooling. Apple's observation that "[r]eligiously motivated home schoolers are currently engaged in exploiting public funding ... in ways that raise serious questions" (p. 187) is simply wrong. His one example deals with California and is based on an erroneous understanding of the California situation, an error that knowledgeable California homeschoolers could clear up for him. 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 ..." (Reich, 2002, paragraphs 10 and 12). 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." As to Apple's "conservative modernization" thesis, Bauman 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 between home educators and the school standards movement," and this tension places homeschoolers 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."

⁸ As historian Richard Brown (1996) notes, parents did not immediately embrace compulsory attendance policies. Although "[r]eformers like Mann ... were prepared to identify themselves as 'good men,' ... no parents came forward to disqualify themselves as 'Vicious' and resign willingly their parental authority to the state." As Brown explains:

The idea of forcing citizens and their children to become informed had a self-contradictory flavor, and it violated widely shared cultural and political assumptions. Exhortation and policies to encourage the institutions that enabled citizens to become informed, rather than coercion, best suited American political and cultural traditions and expectations. (p. 152)

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). Thus, Reich and Apple are part of a long tradition that looks to the common schools to develop a responsible citizenry. Throughout our nation's history, however, "[n]either 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 regarding the schools' social and moral 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.⁹ 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 of decency, civility, and respect, wouldn't 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

⁹ Both Apple (p. 177) and Reich (2002, paragraph 19) employ the "glue" metaphor in their writings.

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 a function of each citizen's correct understanding of the workings of this rationalized and universal cosmos.

Meyer's analysis provided me with a conceptual framework that I could use to make sense of the otherwise inexplicable fears about homeschooling. By not attending school, homeschoolers could be seen to threaten 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 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,¹⁰ both contend that the practice of homeschooling is risky for the public good.¹¹

¹⁰ Apple states:

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).

Reich states:

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 (2002, paragraph 6)

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" (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 the concept of Universal Education helps me place homeschool critics in proper perspective, I fully subscribe to 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.¹²

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 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

¹¹ 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).

¹² 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).

constitutive of proper personhood and relates the child properly to universalized knowledge (p. 211).

As we know from the experience of homeschooling, education and compelled school attendance 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 a necessary or a sufficient component of the effort to produce future citizens who embrace their civic responsibilities.

Conclusion: A shift in perspective is necessary

The focus of our concern about the development of citizenship should be directed to the *actual functioning* of our school system. For policymakers faced with a dearth of information about the real world outcomes of various educational practices, the responsible and ethical response, as Stephen Raudenbush (2002, paragraph 8) reminds us, "is not simply to stick to [their] personal beliefs on these issues, but to do the much harder work of getting the needed empirical evidence." Before the reader assumes that I am suggesting 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" (Reich, 2002, paragraph 19) 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 to acknowledge that "school attendance" and "education" are not equivalent terms and that compelled attendance is not the only way, or even the best way, to produce responsible citizens.

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