

HOME-BASED EDUCATION IN CANADA

AN INVESTIGATION

RESEARCH BY WENDY PRIESNITZ

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A STUDY OF HOME-BASED EDUCATION IN CANADA

research by Wendy Priesnitz

written by

Wendy Priesnitz

At a time when the majority of parents are relying heavily on the school system to help raise their children, a small band of parents is reversing the process. In increasing numbers, and for many reasons, parents across Canada are literally taking their children's education into their own hands.

Home-based education, although legal in all provinces and territories, is greatly misunderstood by many educational administrators and the general public. And in spite of the fact that U.S. research, as well as experience, indicate that the home education experience is a positive one, resulting in well-adjusted, academically adept, confident and self-reliant children, there is little Canadian data to back this up. In an attempt to remedy this situation, this study was undertaken as the first part of an on-going research project by The Canadian Alliance of Home Schoolers (C.A.H.S.), founded as a support and information service in 1979.

One thousand families were sent questionnaires in the summer and fall of 1989. Given current estimates of approximately 30,000 home educating families in Canada, this sampling is considered to be of good size..

This first survey was designed to create a profile of these pioneering families. Future research will attempt to document both academic achievement and parental attitudes towards achievement.

THE HOME EDUCATING FAMILY

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

The survey results show that home-based education is not limited to one socio-economic group. Nor is it limited to people with an academic or post-secondary education background. Although two-thirds of the families surveyed have at least one parent with college or university education, 26 per cent of parents have only high school diplomas and a few parents didn't even graduate from high school.

Although some parents in this sampling have teaching certificates, most do not (teacher certification of parents is not a prerequisite for home education). In fact, less than one quarter are teachers, librarians or professors. The remaining parents are employed in various fields ranging from technology and trades to agriculture and sales. Twenty-nine per cent are self-employed, many in home-based businesses, allowing for flexibility and child participation in the business.

Half of the home educating families surveyed are in annual income brackets at or below \$30,000 (considered low by Canadian standards). In non-self-employed families, only one parent holds a full-time job outside the home in over 90% of cases. Most families fall into a mid-range bracket and only eight per cent of the families questioned earn over \$60,000 per year.

The split between rural and urban living is fairly equal, slightly favouring a rural environment. Fifty-nine per cent live in small towns or in the country, and 41 per cent live in suburbs or cities.

POLITICAL/RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION

The political views of home educating parents appear to be as varied as any other sector of society, with support for all three major political parties represented equally along with an equal number of individuals professing to have no particular political affiliation.

Religious commitment is fundamental to the lives of 53 per cent of the home educators questioned. Another 13 per cent said religion has "some influence" on their lives and 12 per cent said they value some type of spiritual beliefs but have no specific organized religious affiliation or practices. Just less than one quarter of the families claimed to have no religious or spiritual commitment at all.

MOTIVATION FOR HOME-BASED EDUCATION

"I dislike the 'status quo' indoctrination of public school – in particular Christianity, capitalism and consumerism. Also the school yard is a terrible place for a child, very negative, repressive and destructive. We have different values about family and self-sufficiency, etc. We would like our son to survive the mess the world is in!"

"The Lord gave us our children and it is our responsibility to raise and train them."

"I like my kids. They have fun at home. They're intelligent and learn readily without enforced instruction. They are free to learn what they want when they are ready."

As is demonstrated by the above comments from respondents, there is a wide variety of reasons why parents chose home-based education for their children. Nearly three quarters of the parents attribute their choice to academic concerns or philosophical beliefs. These range from concerns about peer pressure, lack of individual instruction and insufficient stimulation, to wanting to spend more time with young children and enjoying watching them grow up. The remaining one quarter of parents keep their children out of regular schools for religious reasons. These parents feel they are better equipped than the school to teach their children the values and morals that are fundamental to their religion, and at the same time can avoid what they see as the negative influences of the secular humanism that they feel permeates public school systems.

RELATIONS WITH THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

"Public schools are great places of business for salaried teachers, unions, administrators, janitors, bus drivers, textbook corporations, building contractors, cafeteria workers, etc., but no place for bright, curious children."

"The public school system serves a need for most Canadian citizens. The alternative choice should be available to all."

"As a teacher in the public school system for 10 years, I know that the system is only as good as the individual teacher."

Although home educators have rejected the services of public school systems, not all are especially negative about them. Thirty-one per cent of those questioned expressed indifferent or conditionally positive attitudes towards public schools. And, in fact, many parents recognize that although schools are undesirable to them for a variety of reasons, some individual teachers make real efforts to cater to the specific needs of their students. Some parents feel the public school system is necessary, but not appropriate for all and therefore attendance and/or enrollment should be optional.

Of the 55 per cent of respondents who expressed negative feelings about public school systems, almost half cite such philosophical reasons such as inadequate religious instruction, overcrowding and the breeding of mediocrity. Six per cent attributed their negative attitudes to specific bad experiences, while a total of 18 per cent of the parents surveyed have had some kind of conflict with public educational authorities.

TESTING

"If the results of standardized tests are not abused, there is nothing wrong with the procedure."

"I don't want to give up my responsibility and my preference for guiding my children's lives as I see fit to some standardized system which substitutes conformity for love and information for the pursuit of wisdom."

"All of my children had standardized testing at the last school they attended. Two of them scored one to two grades higher than their age placement; the youngest child scored too high to rate."

"The school said he had a behaviour problem. Psychological tests showed he was extremely bright and bored with school."

Only 36 per cent of the children in the survey have undergone standardized testing. Of those, the vast majority (88 per cent) scored above average results for their equivalent grade level. In some cases the testing was thought by the parents to be necessary and was therefore voluntary; in most instances it was forced by a monitoring school system. Sixty-four per cent of the children surveyed have never written standardized tests.

A little more than one third of the parents said they didn't mind the idea of standardized testing, while the majority (38 per cent) feel it is not necessary. Twenty-six per cent of respondents are firmly against it and expressed the opinion that it can actually be harmful. Some parents noted that standardized academic testing may be irrelevant or contrary to the home-based learning experience and others expressed the concern that both types of testing can become self-fulfilling prophecies and lead to the incorrect labelling of children.

In addition, fifteen per cent of the children have been psychologically tested for a variety of reasons ranging from behavioural problems to learning difficulties.

CURRICULUM

Sixty-eight percent of those questioned characterize their home education style as informal. Almost half of those said their style was "unstructured", and another 20 per cent called theirs "child directed", while 18 per cent use a combination of all three. This informal style is very different from highly structured school systems and often a reaction to that structure. These parents feel their children enjoy learning more if it is spontaneous and not forced, with children allowed to choose what they want to learn as the need arises.

Many families use some type of home study program, but on a part-time or casual basis, or for reference purposes only. Many of the home-based educators surveyed called this type of learning "more natural". Of the 58 per cent of families using home study programs, only a third use the curriculum and workbooks as a formal method of teaching. Such programs are often used as a way of keeping the children at grade level in case they decide to re-enter the system, or for the purposes of testing. Just over a quarter of the programs being used were identified as "Christian". Five per cent use correspondence courses and 11 per cent loosely follow their provincial curriculum. Another 11 per cent use various other structured programs.

SUMMARY OF SELECTED STATISTICAL QUESTIONS

PARENTS' EDUCATION:	high school graduation	26%
	at least one with college graduation	66%
	at least one without high school graduation	7%
OCCUPATION OF EMPLOYED PARENTS:	self-employed	29%
	librarian/teacher	6%
	professor	21%
	technology & trades	20%
	farmer	3%
	armed forces	2%
	entertainer/artist/writer	7%
	sales/service	5%
	pastor/missionary	4%
ANNUAL FAMILY INCOME:	less than \$30,000	51%
	\$31,000 to \$60,000	41%
	more than \$61,000	8%
LOCATION:	urban (city)	41%
	rural (country, small town, village)	59%
	outside of Canada	2%
RELIGION:	some commitment to formal religion	13%
	formal religion as major influence	53%
	spiritual beliefs, no organized religion	12%
	no commitment or religious beliefs	22%
MAIN REASON FOR HOME EDUCATION:	academic/philosophical	72%
	religious	25%
	location	3%
ATTITUDE TOWARDS PUBLIC SYSTEM:	against - philosophical	49%
	against - bad experience	6%
	indifferent/neutral	31%
	no opinion	10%
CONFLICTS WITH PUBLIC SYSTEM:	yes	18%
	no	82%
CHILDREN UNDERGONE PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTING:	yes	15%
	no	85%

CHILDREN UNDERGONE STANDARDIZED ACADEMIC TESTING:	yes - above average	32%
	yes - below average	4%
	no	64%
FEELINGS ABOUT STANDARDIZED TESTING:	unnecessary	38%
	harmful/inaccurate	26%
	indifferent/in favour	36%
USE OF HOME STUDY PROGRAM:	no	42%
	Christian	30%
	provincial correspondence	5%
	other	22%
HOME EDUCATION STYLE:	formal	32%
	unstructured	30%
	child-directed	20%
	combination of formal/informal	18%

(Note: the above percentages may not add up to 100% in all cases, due to rounding off of numbers and multiple answers to individual questions.)