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to promote the quality, access, and fairness all parents seek. Indeed, framing the core debate in a false for/against dichotomy, or choosing dichotomous analytic tools to analyze the issue, may unintentionally advance the interests of those who benefit from polarizing and paralyzing public discourse as central to their political strategy, and disguise common solutions that can advance shared public goods.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to wrestle along with our colleagues with some of these hard questions, and hope that our readers can benefit from considering them with us in such good company.

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Author biographies

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Homeschooling: A response to Ahlberg, Howell, and Justice

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We are grateful to the reviewers both for devoting time to read and comment on our book and for their thoughtfulness.

All the reviewers of *Homeschooling* call attention to a likely liberal point of resistance to the book's normative analysis – that is, its subordinating statist interests to the

individual child's interests. It is indicative of a widespread denigration of children in our society that thinking about childrearing so readily takes a turn toward instrumental treatment. The thought process seems to be,

Adults necessarily have power over children's lives. That could be used to create the kind of society and citizenry we think best. Having a citizenry of a certain sort is a legitimate state interest. Therefore, the state may – perhaps, even, is entitled to – use its power over children to achieve that statist aim.

The first three of these sentences are empirical claims, and we believe they are true. But the fourth sentence is a normative conclusion that does not follow from those empirical claims.

Some normative major premise is missing, and it should be sufficiently general in its terms so as not to arbitrarily single out children for instrumental treatment. For example, 'Whenever the state can exert power over any aspect of a person's life, it may – perhaps is entitled to – exert such power to serve any legitimate collective ends'. Would any liberal endorse that general principle? If not, what rational basis is there for narrowing the major premise so that it still supports instrumental treatment of children in connection with their education but not forms of instrumental treatment of persons that liberals deem objectionable?

As Howell notes, we would ask why normatively we should not first target autonomous adults, who are more capable of objecting if harmed, for use in the service of collective aims – for example, deciding for them what kind of higher education they will receive or even assigning them to particular jobs with little or no regard for their preferences, in order to create the optimal labor force. In other words, it is not enough to say 'the State has an interest' in order to justify a balancing of interests that could entail some departure from what is best for an individual child, just as it doesn't suffice to point out that parents have interests at stake in children's education.

Not every interest that anyone might have, individually or collectively, in some decision must factor into that decision; sometimes some interests simply do not count. If choice among available educational alternatives is something adults are entitled to make for themselves based solely on their own interests, then children are presumptively entitled to have a proxy for them make a comparable decision for them based solely on their (the children's) interests. The burden on both liberal statist and champions of parental rights is to rebut that presumption by appeal to defensible general principles rather than to ad hoc assertions.

Fortunately, as Ahlberg observes, this point about normative framework for decision making might not have great practical significance in contemporary Western society, because the interests of individual children generally coincide with liberal state aims. For example, society collectively wants future citizens to be cooperative, tolerant, mutually respectful, and civically and civilly engaged – all traits that serve the individual well also. Conversely, it is difficult to imagine an educational choice for a child that would be in the child's best interests but harmful to a liberal society.

One concern regarding our policy prescription, articulated by Howell, is that assessment of homeschools must either be so subjective as to be arbitrary or so rigid as to

'enforce an educational orthodoxy' and ignore 'developmental differences, learning styles, or the impact of disabilities'. Howell suggests this dilemma is best resolved by permitting anyone and everyone to homeschool regardless of whether they are providing any instruction and using assessment merely to provide information. That dilemma presumably would exist for every form of education; there is nothing unique about homeschooling in this regard, except perhaps the degree to which parents might be displeased by either subjectivity or constraint, and in the normative framework of the book, parents' pleasure has no direct relevance.

The same line of reasoning might apply in physical care of children as well; we risk being too subjective or too rigid in judging how parents feed, clothe, discipline, medicate, and house their children, so we should shut down child protection agencies, or transform their function to one of solely offering guidance, never coercing parents or removing children from parental custody. Would any reasonable person endorse that solution to the dilemma? If not, how is physical care of a child relevantly different from education?

Our policy prescription would leave homeschooling parents great flexibility to choose what content to teach and which basic skills to emphasize at different times, taking into account any individual characteristics of their children they think significant, but would require that parents periodically demonstrate that their children are progressing in some areas of knowledge and in basic skills to a degree commensurate with their abilities, broadly conceived. It is minimalist and open-minded, and homeschoolers should appreciate that. At the same time, it provides some safeguard for those children whose parents, perhaps because of mental illness or mental disability or a desire to hide serious physical abuse, would keep them out of regular school despite being unable or disinclined to provide any minimally adequate form of instruction. *Homeschooling*, we think, demonstrates the necessity and reasonableness of this safeguard. Howell is right to point out the dilemma, however, and those charged with evaluating individual homeschools should be mindful of it.

The reviewers have little quarrel with the historical part of the book. Benjamin Justice seems to suggest children of slaves experienced no learning from their caregivers, and to fault the book for not acknowledging this. But how else would those children have learned anything? Surely not by attending schools.

We note (*HS*, p. 7) not only that slaves were forbidden from learning to read but also that some enslaved adults would try, with their children, to study books. Enslaved parents and other caregivers would also, naturally, have taught the young many skills for work and survival. The book notes as well (*HS*, pp. 84–85) the role racial integration of public schools played in the decision of many White parents to substitute homeschooling, and it identifies (*HS*, pp. 94–95) a multitude of special reasons African American parents might have for choosing to homeschool. Moreover, there is no suggestion in the description of contemporary homeschooling that the reasons why parents in general choose to homeschool, including religious reasons, are applicable only to White families.

We do hope to see in the future more ethnographic and other social scientific study of Black families who are homeschooling. The currently extant literature is, unfortunately, quite limited.

Author biographies

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