

KEEPING ALIVE THE CURIOSITY:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES  
OF A NON-SECTARIAN HOMESCHOOLING SUPPORT GROUP

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS  
in the Faculty  
of  
Education

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

November 1993

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Title of Thesis: Keeping Alive the Curiosity:  
A Phenomenological Study of the  
Pedagogical Practices of a Non-sectarian  
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Keeping Alive the Curiosity: A Phenomenological Study of the Pedagogical

Practices of a Non-sectarian Homeschooling Support Group

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the pedagogical practices of parents in a non-sectarian homeschooling support group. It involves a phenomenological description of these parents' beliefs, attitudes, and pedagogical interactions. The study begins with an overview of how, over the past 150 years, the responsibility for children's education moved from the home to public institutions and how, in some families, it is returning to the home. Data gathered through interviews and observations, and the literature on homeschooling, then form the body of the work. Structured as a narrative, it explores the pedagogical significance of these families' homeschooling practices. As well as examining their attitudes and beliefs about education, homeschooling parents' experiences with institutionalized schooling are described. Major themes emerging include: being attentive to the natural curiosity of children, encouraging child-centred learning, removing the labels, nurturing individuality, and walking side by side.

The pedagogy of homeschooling, illustrated through the daily interactions between these parents and their children, reveals an alternate framework for child-centred learning. The manner in which many home schooled children make their way in the world suggests their parents' child-centred practices offer opportunities for all parents and educators to reflect on the nature of pedagogical action. The thesis concludes with a

suggestion that homeschooling families, public educators, and community members could all benefit from collaboratively examining how we educate our children.

For Christie, Brandon,  
Karelina, Lauren, and those  
yet to come,  
in the hope their curiosity  
never dies.

You are led  
through your lifetime  
by the inner learning creature,  
the playful spiritual being  
that is your real self.

Don't turn away  
from possible futures  
before you're certain you don't have  
anything to learn from them.

You're always free  
to change your mind and  
choose a different future, or  
a different  
past.

(Bach, 1977, n.p.)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although it was not my intended destination, more than anything, this voyage of exploration has led to opportunities for my own growth--as an educator, a parent, a grandparent, and a person. Along the way, many people guided, supported, counselled, and encouraged me. I am grateful to each of them for without their backing this would have been a different journey.

In particular, I am grateful for the guidance, support, and encouragement of my Senior Supervisor, Stephen Smith. Aside from the personal encouragement he provided, through my association with him I came to a deeper understanding of the notion of pedagogy and what it means to search out the essence of a phenomenon. Stephen, in the manner of a pedagogue homeschooler, facilitated and encouraged, and I am indebted to him for the part he played in my academic and personal growth. Thank you, Stephen, for the way you put 'pedagogic thoughtfulness' into action.

In addition, I feel truly fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with Roland Case and Celia Haig-Brown who each brought particular strengths to my committee. Through my association with them I feel I have grown as a writer, researcher, and person. Thank you, Roland, for challenging me to clarify my thinking and be more precise in my presentation. Thank you, Celia, for encouraging me to be more meticulous in my research and more cognizant of the alternate perspective.

I would also like to acknowledge with appreciation the



contributions of the parents and children of the two homeschooling support groups I worked with. Without their contributions, this work would not have been possible. Aside from the friendships I developed with various members of the groups, they all taught me much about parenting, children, and education. I thank them for the ways they have enriched my life and I look forward to continuing this relationship as they pedagogically walk beside their children along the road to maturity.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the contributions of various members of my own family. To my children, Tad, Susan, and Janice who always encouraged and supported their mom, thank you for your love, patience, and understanding as I learned 'on the job' how to be a parent. I wish I knew then what I know now about how children learn. To my grandchildren, Christie, Brandon, Karelina, Lauren, and the one almost here, thank you for reminding me about the awe and wonder of a child's natural curiosity. To my aunt, Josey Beall, who at almost ninety, has never let her natural curiosity wither and who sees only wonder and potential in each child--whether that child is a newborn or an adult--thank you for believing in me. And most of all, to my husband, Douglas, thank you for your love and caring. You provided inspiration and intellectual stimulation as I journeyed along this path that began many years ago. Thank you for helping me appreciate that the journey is not over, but has just begun.

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CHAPTER 1:  
GROWTH OF A MOVEMENT

In 1987, a group of parents was asked "What things are the important things for children to learn?" One of the most frequently given responses concerned learning how to think independently, to reason, and to apply the results of that reasoning (Pitman, 1987, p. 282). The same group of parents listed academic skills, skills needed to work and earn money, self-esteem, and respect for others as favoured responses.

In 1987, a Royal Commission toured British Columbia to listen to what people of the province had to say about their schools. One recommendation of the Commission was that a statement of mandate be created in order to clarify the direction of the school system. The following year the Government declared that "The purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy" (Province of British Columbia, undated, Year 2000: A Framework for Learning; hereafter Year 2000).

Given the apparent compatibility of the above cited parent responses with the mission statement of Year 2000, one might think that these parents were one of the groups who made a representation to the Royal Commission. In fact, the parents were

involved in the homeschooling<sup>1</sup> movement in the United States. If this group of homeschoolers is representative of homeschoolers in general, it would appear that, at least to some extent, homeschool parents and professional educators share similar educational goals. Why, then, do a growing number of parents choose to educate their children at home? Is the homeschooling experience about more than acquiring knowledge and skills, learning how to think independently, to reason, and to apply the results of that reasoning?

Such questions are significant in view of the fact the decision to homeschool moves a family out of the mainstream of their community. As Metz (1990) suggests, society has an image of the public schools as "a national ritual experience that provides us a common background" (p. 142). Consequently rejection of public schooling is seen as more than rejection of organized or formal education. It is a rejection of commonly held values.

For the most part, society views home education as a fringe

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<sup>1</sup> I have found that frequently the terms homeschooling and home education are used interchangeably. Although most people involved in the movement refer to themselves as home educators or their children as home learners, when asked by outsiders why their children are not in school, they respond, "Oh, we homeschool." The children respond in much the same way by telling other children that they are being homeschooled. For many people in the homeschooling community the terms 'home education' and 'home learning' better describe how they view what they are doing, but common usage seems to dictate the continued use of the term "homeschooling". For that reason, that is the term used in this study. However, use of the term "homeschooling" is not meant to imply that all families who educate their children at home do so by doing 'school work' at home.

activity limited to several subgroups within society. Wendy Priesnitz, president of the Canadian Alliance of Home Schoolers, suggests many people see home education as "the domain of societal misfits, leftover flower children preaching left-wing love, and ultra-conservatives plowing fundamentalist religious furrows" (cited in French, 1989). Some associate homeschooling with "fundamentalist Christianity and Fear of Darwin" (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 10).<sup>2</sup> However, Knowles, Marlow, and Muchmore (1992, p. 201) point out that this narrow perspective of homeschooling denies the universal nature of home-based learning, that children learning from their elders is a cross-cultural phenomenon. Often people excuse homeschooling as the only option for parents who, for reasons of distance, are unable to send their children to public school--the assumption being that the decision to keep their children at home is never the parents' first choice. Educators' views of homeschooling range from an option that borders on subversive (Common & MacMullen, 1986; Divoky, 1983; Knowles, 1988a) to one that is illegitimate (Lines, 1987; Pitman, 1987; French, 1989). Given this lack of public and professional approval, what is it about the homeschooling experience that encourages ever increasing numbers of families to turn away from a common experience of most North Americans? Is there something in the homeschooling experience that encompasses more than

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<sup>2</sup> Llewellyn also points out that while many homeschoolers are fundamentalist Christians (which impacts on their pedagogical practices), many others are "agnostics, mellow Christians, Jews, pagans, atheists, and Buddhists" (p. 10).

education as we commonly think of it?

### **Homeschooling Within the Framework of Public Education**

The history of education in North American is like a collection of stories about a changing society, competing values, differing notions about the nature of humans, and most of all, about belief in the power of education to create a better world. The first stories, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, describe homeschool (usually the only option). Now, in the second half of the twentieth century, some of the stories are once again about this form of education. In some respects, homeschooling might be viewed as a pair of bookends encompassing the stories of education. The common thread in all the stories is change: like the society it was designed to serve, schooling has undergone significant changes during the past two centuries.

Children have learned from their elders since early parents and grandparents taught children to hunt and tend the fire.<sup>3</sup> As time passed, those parents who had the ability to do so taught their children to read, write, and do simple arithmetic. Since few parents had this ability many children remained illiterate and innumerate. The public school, once a casual adjunct to the home or to places of apprenticeship (Katz, 1987) was designed to

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<sup>3</sup> Parents still teach their children although many do not see the 'learning for living' lessons (e.g., safety rules, how to do the laundry, who to call when the furnace breaks down, social customs, cultural traditions, etc.) as part of their children's education.



eliminate this inequality. Increasingly education of the young was placed in the hands of professionals and eventually home education was viewed as inferior.

The universal schooling movement in North America began in the United States in the early 1800s.<sup>4</sup> One of the architects of the early public school movement, Horace Mann, believed not only that knowledge is power but that universal education would be the great equalizer of the human condition which could shape the destiny of the United States (Cremin, 1961). To that end, the common school, provided by the state and local community as part of the birthright of every child, sought to instill a common value system in children of all backgrounds.

In Canada, the story of early schooling for children of European ancestry is similar. Beginning with homeschooling, Prentice (1988) outlines the growth of institutionalized schooling in Upper Canada.

The usual and perhaps the fundamental educational institutions were the household, workshop and field, since the vast majority of children learned most of what they needed to know from their parents, or from adults in other families to whom they were bound as servants or apprentices. (Prentice, 1988, p. 15)

Sermons, Sunday schools and camp meetings supplemented this informal education. Education in Upper Canada remained informal until laws passed between 1841 and 1871 established a provincial school system.

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<sup>4</sup> Although viewed as universal schooling, numerous segments of society did not have access to these schools (e.g. slaves, First Nation People, and at times, minority ethnic groups).

Prior to that time, formal education was entirely voluntary and depended upon the will and financial resources of the parents. In the few existing schools, children of all ages gathered in small groups with a single teacher for a few months or years, to learn the three R's and some religious doctrine and morals. Attendance depended upon whether the season prohibited students from walking to school or whether their labour was required at home. Schools, teachers and times of attendance were generally their parents' or guardians' own choosing (p. 16). This voluntarism gradually disappeared by the mid-nineteenth century. The School Act of 1871, made provision of free common schools in each municipality mandatory and compelled all Ontario children between the ages of seven and twelve to attend some school for at least four months of any given school year (pp. 16-17).

The Act signalled a changing relationship between school and state: what was once voluntary was now compulsory. The common school became a public institution in the modern sense--paid for by public funds with publicly defined goals--and became officially known as public school rather than common school (p. 17). With these changes the locus of control gradually moved away from the parents at the local level and schooling took on new character. By 1871, choices of courses of study, school books, school rules and prayers, once the domain of parents, were clearly in the hands of central bodies. So too were the complex rules and regulations governing qualifications, hiring and behaviour of teachers as well as other previously unheard of

elements of a growing public school system. Equally lost to parental control was the regulation of school attendance (p. 18).

Although the shift from homeschooling to public schooling happened as recently as the 19th century, with the help of "school promoters"--religious and political leaders--the value and status of a formal education quickly became accepted by most people. Eventually any rejection of public education was viewed with alarm. Knowles (1988a, p. 10) relates that, in the view of some citizens and school administrators, questioning public schools is to question the very fabric of society. As well as acceptance of public schooling, the school promoters pushed for increasing extension of centralized control of educational matters (Prentice, 1990, p. 170).

In addition to this increasingly centralized control of public education, significant societal changes were emerging in the late 1800s, changes that altered public education first in the United States and eventually in Canada. Various segments of society affected by the changes in North American society fought for school reform--the nature of the reform depended on the believed purpose of schooling (Cremin, 1961). The common school, initially intended to preserve democracy by establishing an educated citizenry, evolved as the vehicle to cure social ills and any national crisis.

In all the stories about re-forming education there is a common theme: schooling was shaped to reflect the needs of society rather than the needs of the individual. Nyberg and Egan

(1981) argue that the role of the school changed from educating to socializing children. They define socialization as "preparation for a life of gainful employment and participation in everyday social, economic, and political activities" while education "refers to a somewhat different and less practical set of dispositions and capabilities to appreciate and enjoy those aspects of one's culture that include a historical perspective and the life of the mind" (p. ix). Friedenberg (1990) suggests that as the shared consensus as to what the basics were and what knowledge was of most worth "became diluted and eroded, the major social function of schooling shifted from instruction toward certification" (p. 184).

While many educators denounce the changes from an education perspective, parents decry the loss of authority to determine the best education for their children. The roots of this growing sentiment can likely be found in the political and social movement aimed at freeing the individual from bureaucratic restraints that swept across North America during the mid-1960s. Early manifestations of these feelings can be seen in the free school movement of the 1970s (i.e., schools without a curriculum set by the state)<sup>5</sup> and the subsequent resurgence of home schooling.

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<sup>5</sup> The free school movement was strongly influenced by A.S. Neill who advocated freedom and non-repression in educating children. His book, Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing which described the British school run according to his theories, was published in North America in 1960.

## **A Shift in Control: The Free School Movement**

Many of the events and trends within society during the 1960s created an agreeable climate for the establishment of alternates to public schooling. Liberal ideology dominated domestic policy (Bacharach, 1990, p. 419). Political and social movements during that decade were aimed at freeing the individual from bureaucratic restraints (Cuban, 1990, p. 138). It was also a decade when critical historians began to overturn the celebratory versions of history in such areas as education (Katz, 1987). It was a time ripe for radical school reform which sought not merely to improve techniques for accomplishing the generally agreed upon goals of schools but to change the system itself.

Within this milieu, a significant number of adults and students began to see dominant school methods as "destructive of intellectual curiosity and emotional growth"; the authoritarian methods of discipline as "degrading and harmful"; and the curriculum as "archaic and irrelevant" (Graubard, 1974). Many of these people who had grown disenchanted with the state of education previously worked inside the public school system for reform of various sorts. However, a growing number despaired over achieving substantial changes within a reasonable time.

Out of this disenchantment emerged a phenomenon known as free schools. For the most part, these were schools established by parents who collectively determined the kind of education they wanted for their children and then set out to provide it. They were schools that were efforts designed to "replace traditional,

authoritarian educational structures with more liberal and democratic ones that were ideographic rather than conformist" (Thomas, 1988, p. 148). "Free" applied to the pedagogy, and not to the tuition (Graubard, 1974, p. 11).

The ideologies underlying the free school movement were actually "a cluster of attitudes, assumptions, and interpreted experiences (not always consistent or clear) about the nature of children, the evaluation of the effects of the dominant school techniques, and the relation of the educational questions to larger social, political, and economic issues" (p. 8). What were seen as the authoritarian techniques of public schools were believed to have a detrimental effect on qualities such as intellectual curiosity (p. 7). School practices like 'tracking' (i.e., early ability grouping resulting in later course restrictions) were perceived as preparing children to fit along social class lines to future job possibilities. Although schools differed considerably, their emphasis was on the process of socialization.

While most people involved in the free school movement did not establish their schools to be openly politically antagonistic, they frequently faced hostility from various groups in the community, especially the local and state officials. Much of the world saw free education as a caricature. Many of the schools did not survive beyond their first few years. Some of the more successful schools within the movement eventually came to be known as "community schools", perhaps partially in an attempt to

shed the stigma that accompanied the term "free school". Some free schools eventually became accepted alternate schools. Many of these exist today.

Generally, free schools were grass-roots efforts by parents to establish the kind of school they wanted for their children. As one free school teacher stated, "If there is any idea that holds us together it is that it is the right and duty of parents to provide for their children the kind of education that they believe in" (cited in Graubard, 1974, p. 141). One of the complaints these parents levelled against the traditional school system was that its teaching methods were emotionally and intellectually stifling. Free schoolers believed that schools should be places where each child could "unfold his [sic] own individuality, while learning skills in a joyful, personal way" (Graubard, 1974, p. 263). Many were inspired by works such as John Holt's How Children Fail and based their notions about school reform on their perceptions about what was wrong with public schools and how marvellous "free learning" could be (p. 9). There was an emphasis on the inherent nature of the child and the child's freedom of choice. Schools were to be places that nourished joyful, self-motivated, and active learning. Often schools tried to make incidental learning a reality by finding work in the community for students (p. 110).

Although there was no one model of a free school, they all conveyed the same messages: children want to learn; adults often get in the way of their learning; children learn to do something

well if they are interested in it (p. 39); the role of adults is to provide an atmosphere and the means for learning; adults should be partners in the learning process; education should help children build a positive self-image, establish an identity, and gain a feeling of adequacy and competence (p. 39); and imposed discipline, lock-step grading, homework, time-period divisions, and report cards hinder learning (p. 40).

Perkinson (1977, cited in Willie & Miller, 1988, p. 92) suggests that the educational reform movement of the 1960s surged forward in three waves. The first wave proposed serious curriculum reforms in the schools, including modification of traditional teaching methods and classroom structures. The second wave of reformists, fighting for radical or structural reform, urged the abolition of the current system of schooling and the establishment of "free schools"--schools free from the inherent constraints to sustain the status quo. Finally, the third wave of reformers, including John Holt<sup>6</sup> and Ivan Illich, proposed the "deschooling" of society. Given that homeschoolers are frequently classified as deschoolers, Perkinson's analysis illustrates one connection between "free schoolers" and "homeschoolers". As well, many of the attitudes held and methods advocated by proponents of free schools can be found in the homeschooling community.

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<sup>6</sup> Holt, originally a school reformer, came to the conclusion schools could not be changed and advocated homeschooling. In his view, children who had been homeschooled might, as adults, have a different understanding of education and work to bring real change to institutionalized schooling.



## **The Shift Continues: the Homeschool Movement**

Because proponents of free schools advocated abolishing the existing school system they were considered revolutionary. It is perhaps indicative that homeschooling is often seen in the same light. Divoky (1983) writes "On a political level, homeschooling is an act both revolutionary and reactionary: revolutionary because it flies in the face of the established social order, reactionary because it means turning one's back on the larger society and the time-honored assumption that parents and society share in the rearing of the young" (p. 397).<sup>7</sup> Van Galen (1988b) suggests that "Parents who choose to teach their children at home are turning their backs on a core economic, cultural, and social institution" (p. 63). It is also her view that this conflict with public officials results in a "hidden curriculum" of home education the core of which contains "lessons about society's tolerance for dissent and lessons about the limitations of the standard curriculum" (p. 65).

From the outset of the homeschooling movement, the conflict between parents and public officials, usually focused on attendance, has been intense. Compulsory attendance was a component of early legislation governing public schools. With compulsory attendance, the relationship between families and

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<sup>7</sup> Involvement in homeschooling also requires a lifestyle decision less common in today's society: one parent (usually, although not always, the mother) must commit to staying home with the children. While in some families both parents continue to pursue career goals, juggling family and outside commitments, these parents are in the minority.

schools changed--the locus of responsibility for the education of children no longer rested with the family. "By yielding to state compulsory attendance laws, parents found themselves increasingly removed from the responsibility for their children's education" (Rakestraw & Rakestraw, 1990, p. 69).

Compulsory schooling should not be mistaken for compulsory education, however. Pitman (1987, p. 284) points out that state compulsory attendance laws do not compel education, they compel attendance. Therefore, over the years parents who elected to educate their own children have been the focus of enforcement procedures. As proof of this point, one needs only examine court documents which outline the instances where school districts have prosecuted parents who opted for homeschooling. While in some cases there may have been evidence to suggest that the education provided by parents could not be deemed "adequate" there are also cases where this does not appear to be so (French, 1989).

To protect what they believed was their right to make all decisions concerning their children, including those in the area of education, many parents went "underground" to avoid prosecution. In rural areas, families kept to themselves. In urban areas, children were kept in the house during 'school hours.' For this reason, it is impossible to accurately document either the beginnings or, in some cases, the size of the current homeschooling movement. Recent estimates of the number of home-schooled students range from in the hundreds of thousands (Pitman, 1987, p. 285) to one and a half million (Gatto, 1990, p.

73) in the United States to about 20,000 families in Canada (French, 1989).

In recent years, most jurisdictions of North America have passed legislation to exempt children from compulsory attendance. In some respects this 'legalizes' (although not legitimizes) home education, but the degree of control exerted by the state varies considerably between jurisdictions. Many states and provinces permit home education with the approval and under the supervision of the local Superintendent of Education. The superintendent must ensure that homeschooled children receive a satisfactory education, although "satisfactory education" is not defined.

In British Columbia parents are required to register their homeschooled children with a public school in their own district, any independent school in the province, or directly with the Ministry. Some parents remain suspicious of earlier enforcement procedures and do not register their children (Bula, 1989a). (To register their children, parents are required to submit the name, age, gender, and address of the 'school aged' child being home schooled.) While registration of homeschooled students may provide a clearer picture of the number of families involved in the movement, there is no assurance that this picture is accurate. Ministry of Education figures indicate there were 3230 homeschooled students registered as of September 30, 1992. Officials acknowledge, however, that it is likely there are many more who are not registered. While failure to register places these parents in breach of the law, they "are suspicious and

recalcitrant about the idea of registering" (Bulla, 1989a). In addition, Ministry officials do not count as homeschoolers any of the 6771 students who take government correspondence courses since, officially, correspondence students are technically enrolled with the public system (Bulla, 1989b).<sup>8</sup> Many of these students consider themselves to be homeschooled.<sup>9</sup> As noted above, in 1989 it was estimated that about 20,000 Canadian families homeschool their children. Since in 1992 the total number of homeschooled students and correspondence students in British Columbia was 10, 001, it is likely the number of Canadian homeschooling families is much higher.

Involvement in the homeschooling movement usually follows several stages. Interest at each stage gains momentum and leads to the next: (1) growing dissatisfaction with public education; (2) hearing about home education and learning that it is legal; (3) actively pursuing information about homeschooling including talking with people who are involved in the movement; (4) committing to homeschooling; and (5) contacting a support group or other homeschoolers. Most homeschoolers, including those who

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<sup>8</sup> Children registered with the public school system as homeschooled are included in the 'homeschool' category. Homeschool children who enroll for a course with the Correspondence Branch are considered correspondence students and therefore part of the public school system.

<sup>9</sup> Homeschoolers disdain the fact that homeschooling students who register for even one correspondence course are no longer considered homeschooled. Parents argue that, on paper, it suggests that another homeschooler has returned to the public system. They further argue that the implications are worth pondering. "When the goal posts are moved, the game changes significantly" (Thea Chapman, Home Education News, April/May, 1993, p. 3).

have never sent their children to public school and those who have removed their children from public school, progress through these stages at least to some extent.

For parents whose children attend public school, dissatisfaction with the school system often begins when parents have specific concerns about their own child. Frequently there are differences with the public school that go unresolved to the parents' satisfaction. These concerns may relate to academic achievement or behaviour. Eventually this leads to questions about the effectiveness of the public school system in general. Homeschool parents whose children have never attended public school voice these concerns but they are based on either their own experiences as students or on the shared experiences of other parents. Dissatisfied parents find support from educators who criticize public education for failing the young.

Many homeschoolers interpret public school educators who speak out against schools to be advocating homeschooling. John Gatto (1990, p. 73), named "1991 New York State Teacher of the Year," argues that "schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant" and claims that "schools don't teach anything except how to obey orders." John Holt, one time educator and outspoken school reformer, argued that schools have "moved steadily and rapidly in the wrong direction" (Holt, 1983b. p. ix). A prolific author who became a leading proponent of homeschooling, Holt (1989, p. 162) asserted that children "learn wherever they are, not just in special learning places" and urged parents to educate

their own children. Wendy Priesnitz, of the Canadian Alliance of Home Schoolers, trained as a teacher before becoming an active deschooler. It is not uncommon to find professional educators homeschooling their own children.<sup>10</sup> Support for home education by educators, either active or implied, encourages parents who may be hesitant to commit to the movement.

Dissatisfaction with the school system also is generated by education practices that conflict with parents' values and attitudes. For example, recent school reforms that call for increased competition and higher standards are viewed negatively by parents who strongly value an egalitarian non-competitive lifestyle. Parents who find their values in opposition to the public school's values feel less constraint about withdrawing their children from the system.

### **Composition of the Homeschooling Movement**

Any attempt to categorize homeschoolers must first recognize the plurality and multidimensions of the homeschooling group (Ray, 1988; Van Galen, 1988a; Lines, 1987; Wright, 1988). However, within this complex and diverse population and separate from those who homeschool for reasons of distance, Van Galen (1988b) observed two general groups: "Ideologues" and

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<sup>10</sup> In at least seven of the families in the support group in this study, one or both parents have worked or currently are working as professional educators. In addition, authors such as Llewellyn, Holt, Baldry, and Gatto who endorse home education have worked in the education system.

"Pedagogues".<sup>11</sup> According to Van Galen, ideologues reject much of what is taught in public schools as opposite to their own beliefs and values. They believe public education is slanted toward a humanistic perspective--in their view, a nontheistic perspective that centres on human values and exalts human free will.

Ideologues teach their children at home not only because they object to what is taught in school but also because they see homeschooling as a way to strengthen their relationship with their children. Van Galen found that while ideologues try to avoid public school values they often embrace conventional school techniques and materials. They frequently rely on workbooks with a religious content focus and a 'read - question - answer' teaching strategy. Some develop an in-home classroom although most conduct lessons wherever it is convenient, most often the kitchen.

On the other hand, pedagogues seek new ways to teach and often shun the traditional practices of conventional schools. They argue that it is the way children are educated within the public school system that is undesirable. While diverse in other aspects of their lives, pedagogues share a respect for children's intellect and creativity, and believe that children learn best when pedagogy taps into, in their view, a child's innate desire

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<sup>11</sup> The terms are somewhat problematic: it cannot be said that ideologues do not have a particular pedagogical framework, nor can it be said that pedagogues do not have an ideological basis for their pedagogical actions. However, since the terms denote two distinct approaches to homeschooling as well as two fundamentally different rationales, they will be used here.

to learn (Van Galen, 1988b). They attempt to avoid a "stereotypical teacher-pupil relationship" (Mischa Sandberg,<sup>12</sup> 1991, p. 3) seeking instead involvement in each child's personal learning experiences, experiences that are based on the child's interests.

Not everyone would agree with Van Galen's observations. Most homeschoolers agree with the notion that there is a continuum between the two positions rather than two distinct groups. Certainly there is a broad range of beliefs and attitudes within each group. In Canada these two broad, yet identifiable, groups are usually labelled 'religious' (or Christian) and 'non-religious' homeschoolers. This is not to imply that all religious or Christian homeschoolers share the same religious beliefs and attitudes. Nor should it be assumed that 'non-religious' homeschoolers are without religious beliefs. These labels refer only to the basic reason for choosing homeschooling as an education alternative. For the purposes of this study, the labels 'ideologues' and 'pedagogues' will be maintained.

Ideologues reject the content, values, and beliefs of the public school system rather than its pedagogical practices. On the other hand, pedagogues find fault with the methods of the public school system--the pedagogic interactions between adults

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<sup>12</sup> Throughout this study, authors cited by given name as well as surname are parents involved in homeschooling. Both names are used as a way of differentiating their comments from those appearing in monographs or academic journals. Many of the parents' comments were intended to be shared with other homeschoolers and are from homeschooling newsletters. Some comments appeared in books these parents have written about their experiences.



and children. Therefore it is assumed that examination of the reasons pedagogues give for choosing to homeschool their children can provide insight into their pedagogical practices.

As Ray (1988) suggests, home education is chosen for various reasons including concerns for both the cognitive development of children, (e.g., to accomplish more academically and to individualize learning to a greater degree) and their affective development (e.g., enhancing self-concepts and avoiding peer pressure). These reasons are rooted in beliefs about education that can be separated into two broad categories: beliefs about the effectiveness of public schools in providing an appropriate education for children, and beliefs about learning environments and development of cognitive and affective domains. Included in the category of learning environments are beliefs about such things as competition among children, the importance of nurturing children, and freedom to explore and learn without the constraints of time and place. Obviously there is considerable overlap between the categories as decisions made in one area will affect another. For example, parents who define an appropriate education as one that stresses individualized, self-directed learning may also believe in the importance of eliminating competition among children and building self-esteem through nurturing.

Few homeschoolers attempt to give a precise definition of what constitutes an appropriate education but, most importantly, they believe that the public school system fails to provide it.

On the other hand, those opposed to homeschooling argue that professional educators clearly state their definition of an appropriate education (e.g., Mission Statement, Year 2000). While not all educators wholeheartedly endorse such statements and criticism is frequently levelled that the statements are little more than general or even vague 'motherhood' statements, the fact remains that many professional educators are suspicious of the lack of unstated goals on the part of homeschoolers and often accuse them of providing an inadequate education for their children. For example, one concern voiced by those opposed to home education is that homeschooled children will be ill-equipped to compete in what they see as the diverse technology-driven society of the 21st century. They argue that parents who home-school do not examine the limitations on individual freedoms (Van Galen, 1988b) and should recognize that taking adequate responsibility for their own child's good requires continued participation in seeking the best education for all (Franzosa, 1984).

Homeschoolers, however, argue that it is a myth that public schools serve children from broad and diverse backgrounds equally. They agree with the criticism by critical pedagogues that the public school curriculum legitimates only limited facets of knowledge and culture and that "commodification of knowledge leaves students ill-equipped to analyze and critique ideologies underlying this curriculum" (Van Galen, 1988b, p. 52). Rather than providing an equalizing opportunity for children, home-

schoolers maintain that the formal and hidden curricula of schools contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities (Van Galen, 1988b) principally through tracking and age-specific grouping. These parents argue that practices such as tracking reinforce the child's belief that he or she is less competent than other students, a feeling that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In this same vein, pedagogues believe that the public school system, by grouping children, labels them with "badges of ability" and prepares them for a limited future (Van Galen, 1988b). Homeschooling parents who hold this view find support for their position in the work of authors such as Collins (1971) who argues that the "main activity of schools is to teach particular status cultures, both inside and outside the classroom" (p. 1010). In addition, Collins contends that, to the extent that they control education, certain status groups may use the classroom to foster control within work organizations (p. 1010).

Pedagogues attack both the learning environment of the public school system and the structure of its curriculum. As homeschoolers, not only are they committed to learning about learning and teaching they also seek to provide the most exciting and beneficial learning environment for their children (Ray, 1988, p. 27). Further, they argue that contemporary school settings are too environmentally restrictive and that the home-school affords greater freedom to learn (Knowles, 1988b). Support for this view is found in a study conducted by Tizard, Hughes,

Carmichael, and Pinkerton (1983) in which it was found that "children seemed to learn very quickly that their role at school is to answer, not ask questions" (cited in Ray, 1988, p. 21).

Homeschoolers not only believe that local public schools do not have the resources for providing appropriate programs, they also maintain that one-on-one teaching is the most important component of educational achievement (Mayberry, 1988). Parents point out that within the home environment they can offer children an holistic approach to education--one that emphasizes involvement in activities that result in experiential learning. In their view, it does not make sense to send children off to school to join others in "a round of activities largely unrelated to their lives at home in order to learn information that can be learned at least as well and probably better in their own home environment" (Pitman, 1987, p. 283).

While it appears that some homeschoolers equate learning 'information' with acquiring knowledge--a goal of homeschoolers and public educators alike--in the parents' view, the knowledge acquired through public schooling has less relevance to children. As well, they argue that the one-to-one informal quality of home-schooling allows greater freedom and flexibility than could be expected in the regular classroom (Wilson, 1988). This form of instruction enables children to complete formal lessons more quickly and with maximal effectiveness thus leaving time and energy for enrichment activities of all kinds (Common & MacMullen, 1986). Within this home environment where children are

offered considerable variation in day-to-day activities, knowledge is not merely subject matter to be consumed. Spontaneity and creativity are more valued than completing a certain number of pages or lessons, and children are encouraged to analyze and criticize (Van Galen, 1988b). Furthermore, the very nature of the homeschool environment provides opportunities to implement strategies that are beyond the realm of the classroom teacher (e.g. homeschoolers are seldom bound by constraints imposed by time, facilities, or group instruction).

Encouraged by the writings of educator John Holt, pedagogues believe that they can provide a learning environment in which activities on the cutting edge of education can be implemented, discarded, or improved upon (Knowles, 1988a). This learning environment is, in effect, a laboratory for the study of children's learning (Holt, 1983a). In fact, many homeschoolers see themselves as being "on the leading edge of education, boldly innovative, and able to perform educational endeavors not possible in traditional schools" (Knowles, 1988a, p. 4).

Finally, pedagogues question the ability of the public school system to provide learning environments conducive to the positive social development of their children. Many homeschoolers cite negative peer influence as a major problem in public education (Mayberry, 1988, p. 38) and claim that home-based education provides a social and educational environment that can enhance self-esteem and balance the effects of peer influence. Several authors make reference to the value that home-

schoolers place on this aspect of affective development. In Charvoz (1988), a parent noted that because of her children's positive self-esteem they often assume leadership positions among their peers, adding that peer leadership is "an indication that self-esteem enhances socialization" (p. 87). In the same article, as evidence of how home schooled students view their experience, Charvoz quoted a 19-year-old college sophomore as saying "I think that [enhanced self-esteem] is probably the biggest thing I see coming out of homeschooling" (p. 89). Ray (1988), in a synthesis of the current research on homeschooling, reported that home educated children appeared to be less "peer oriented" than those in conventional schools (p.25). The term 'peer oriented' refers to the extent of peer influence on actions, reliance on peers for approval, or socializing with peers. Since most homeschool research has focused on surveys or case studies that relied on heavily descriptive statistics for their analysis (Wright, 1988), empirical evidence to support the claim that homeschooling enhances self-esteem is scant. While homeschoolers question the ability of the public school system to provide a learning environment conducive to positive social development, it is difficult to determine from the research whether homeschools are more effective in promoting the desired social development of children.

Although the arguments put forward by pedagogues appear to make a statement against public education, these arguments can be seen more as statements for their children. More than anything

these parents seek to provide a nurturing, safe environment where their children may pursue their own interests according to their own abilities and learning styles. It is especially important to these parents that their children be empowered to determine for themselves the direction they will choose, the path they will follow, and when they will choose to do it. More importantly, each step along the way is valued. Sandy Keane (1992) describes the reactions of her young son, not yet able to write himself, as he dictates stories:

In fact, I'm not sure what will happen to Neal's stories when he starts to have to write them out for himself. When he dictates stories, his eyes light up and he runs and hops and twirls and does somersaults over the back of the couch. It's as if the motion helps the stories to flow, that the creative juices would get dammed up if his energy had to go into sitting still. Even if we didn't find his stories so delightful, watching his unbridled delight in the telling is worth being here for. (p. 9)

Speaking for many homeschoolers, Claudia Beaven (1991) writes "we need to honor and trust our children to learn. They are able to learn in their own way. All we need to do is to guide that learning" (p. 7). Many homeschooling parents who withdraw their children from the public school system do so because they believe that it is the right decision for their child. They believe that they are acknowledging their child's feelings and individual needs. As homeschooling mother Terry-Lyn Drury (1991) states in three of the six reasons she gave for withdrawing her child from public school:

4) The system could not accommodate Adam's individual differences and learning style. 5) We needed to regain our trust in Adam and our belief in ourselves as his parents. 6) Ultimately, Adam was our responsibility. (p. 3)

## **Purpose of This Study**

The continued growth of the present homeschooling movement raises a number of questions.<sup>13</sup> What is it about the homeschooling experience that encourages parents to move out of the main stream of society in order to educate their own children? Is homeschooling about more than acquiring knowledge? Are the shared beliefs of homeschoolers evident in their pedagogical practices and how do these pedagogical practices differ from professional educators? Such questions are timely and important, for if homeschooling is about more than education, attempting to regulate it from an education perspective will not only fail to address homeschooling parents' concerns, but will also leave unexamined the weaknesses of public education made explicit by the continued growth of the homeschooling movement (Van Galen, 1991).

What is it about the homeschooling experience that influences parents to move out of the mainstream of society in order to educate their children at home?

Regardless of the individual reasons pedagogues give for choosing homeschooling most share a number of fundamental beliefs not only about children and how they learn, but also about the role they, as parents, should play in nurturing their children as they grow to adulthood. They believe that ultimately it is their

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<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Education figures for homeschooled children in British Columbia: 1992-93 school year, 3230; 1991-92, 2887; 1990-91, 2497; 1989-90 (first year of registration), 1553 [number of homeschooled children doubled in three years].



responsibility to guide their children along this path since no one knows their child as intimately as they do. Does this view of pedagogy move the homeschooling experience beyond the traditional educator-child relationship?

The purpose of this study is to examine the pedagogical practices of a group of home schooling parents. The intention is to begin to understand the growth of the homeschooling movement by uncovering how homeschooling families experience this phenomenon. More specifically it examines the stories of a number of parents in a non-sectarian homeschooling support group as they talk about their lived experiences as pedagogues. The themes that emerge are not intended to serve as a definitive statement about homeschooling families. Recognizing that each homeschooling family is unique, this study seeks to reveal the nature of the pedagogical relationship that exists between these parents and their children, to explore and share what the homeschooling experience means to them as parents.

### **Overview of This Study**

As an educator and a parent, it was not possible to discuss the pedagogical relationship between homeschooling parents and their children without considerable reflection on my own experiences. That reflection begins in Chapter 2 where my journey into the landscape of the homeschooling community is described. This chapter outlines how the study gradually took shape after I,

as a classroom teacher, first encountered the notion of homeschooling. A number of selections from the literature on homeschooling as well as qualitative research informed and guided my journey.

In addition, Chapter 2 examines the notion of pedagogy as it applies to homeschoolers. The pedagogy of the classroom does not bend and flex in a way that will easily accommodate homeschooling. I discovered that, because of the nature of the parent-child relationship, it was necessary to set aside the notion of pedagogy as it relates to curriculum and instruction and instead focus on the broader notion that pedagogy has to do with guiding the child to maturity (van Manen, 1982). Using this focus, the study moves into the homeschooling parents' stories and descriptions of their homeschooling experiences. These narratives, and the themes that emerge, are related in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Chapter 3 begins with an outline of the parent's belief that all children are naturally curious and have an innate love of learning. If it is true that all children are born learners, what happens to that natural curiosity? How is it best preserved? The study then describes the parents' struggles as they search for an approach to education to reflect their belief. A number of questions are explored to uncover these struggles. What are the specific parental concerns about the public school system that influence their decision to reject the expertise of public educators? What are their experiences with labelling and grouping

children in the classroom? In addition, how have memories of their own childhood school experiences led them to question the ability of an institution to understand each child's individuality? "Who knows my child best?" Chapter 3 explores how homeschooling parents attempt to provide an environment that will nurture children's natural curiosity. In so doing, the parents repudiate the experts' protestations and reclaim their own power to make decisions for their children.

Chapter 4 explores the nature of the pedagogical atmosphere in the homeschool environment. What is it about the home environment that nurtures the child's love of learning? Is it sometimes necessary to make a leap of faith? Stories illustrate how parents seek to encourage, honour, and preserve each child's individuality. This chapter reveals how, instead of following a set curriculum, children are encouraged to explore their own interests as parents endeavour to facilitate these explorations. What if, at some point in the future, homeschooled children have to be tested? What things are important to learn? Parents share their on-going pedagogical reflections as their children travel the road to maturity. The chapter describes how, rather than 'teach' or direct their children, homeschooling parents pedagogically walk beside them as learning partners.

How children move out into the world is the focus of Chapter 5. A number of stories illustrate how the natural curiosity of these young people shifts to a new level. In addition, the chapter reveals ways in which homeschooled children, even at a

young age, appear at ease in the world. How are parents' pedagogical actions connected to a child being at ease in the world? Anecdotes describe how the homeschooling pedagogical atmosphere provides children an opportunity to learn experientially, to learn from living rather than about living. Parents are role models for children to become independent, resourceful self-learners. The manner in which parents value and respect children's ideas and abilities facilitates the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Chapter 6 seeks to recapitulate what the home schooling experience means to these parents. It begins with a summary of the homeschooling movement in the context of education in North America. It then summarizes homeschooling parents' beliefs and attitudes that guide their pedagogical actions. If one isolates specific actions of homeschooling parents in an attempt to understand their pedagogy, one fails to understand the essence of the homeschooling experience. In an endeavour to depict the nature of homeschooling, the study outlines several points that describe what the experience is and is not. In conclusion, it argues that all children could benefit if public educators, homeschoolers, and the community at large would work together as equal partners to transform the way we educate children.

## CHAPTER 2:

## A JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF HOMESCHOOLING

The map of my journey to this place follows a route that while short has many bends in the road and a changing landscape. It begins in school. I am reminded of a quotation from T.S. Eliot,

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
(Eliot, 1942, p. 15)

School was always a happy place for me. As a child it was a place to receive praise and approval. As an adult I eagerly sent my own children off to school with the belief that they would enjoy the same experiences. Although they did not, I did not question the potential for these pleasurable experiences to be theirs. When my children were in school and I decided to become a teacher it was to recreate for other children the happy school experiences of my own childhood. I had the utmost faith and confidence in the system and the people in it.

During my years of teaching I worked hard to make school an exciting place for students and teachers. I presented workshops for other teachers on developing learning centres in the classroom and wrote social studies curriculum materials for a major publishing firm. It is fair to say that I was firmly committed to the public school system.

The day I first heard about homeschooling I was en route to present a workshop. As the open-line voices on the car radio began talking about their homeschooling experiences, I remember rolling my eyes and thinking, "These poor misguided parents. What can they possibly know about teaching children?" For the next hour I listened as parents talked about the kinds of activities they planned for their children--activities that had children out in the community learning first hand. For example, on different days of the week one group of children worked with a local weaver and a retired biologist. Another mother told of her experiences homeschooling her five children, the oldest of whom had entered Simon Fraser University and finished in the top five percent of her first year class. There was an easiness in their voices and, most of all, a sound of confidence, not just in themselves as parents who were making choices for their children, but in their children's futures. During the time it took to reach my destination I found myself becoming less judgmental and increasingly intrigued by what these parents were saying. The thought of children taking charge of their own learning, of being out in the world learning first hand, of not being bound by the clock was all very exciting. The parents began to sound more "reasonable" and not quite so misguided. I was anxious to learn more.

Over the next two years I talked to many teachers about homeschooling only to hear innumerable "horror" stories about how homeschooled children do not learn anything, how they always

suffer when they return to the school system, how they do not learn to socialize with others, how parents isolate the children, how unhappy the children are, and how teachers always have to "pick up the pieces" when parents discover that homeschooling does not work. During this time, too, I began to look carefully, and perhaps more critically, at what actually happens in the classroom.

I began to notice how much time children waste in a school day--waiting until hot dog money is collected, waiting until discipline problems are dealt with, waiting for the teacher to answer individual concerns. It occurred to me that when homeschooled children were pursuing their own interests or working with a parent at their own pace they did not have to wait for their turn to have someone's attention; that they would be a part of the activity even when waiting for siblings to have their turn; that they have a choice to wait or to go away and return later. Somehow it seemed as if, because of the constraints of the institution, children's time does not have the same priority or respect in school as it does at home. I was more aware of the number of times the children and I would be at an exciting part of a project or story only to have to set it aside because it was our time for the gym or some other programmed activity. I remembered that homeschooled children were not constrained by the clock. I also noticed how some children fall through the cracks in the system no matter how hard classroom teachers, learning assistance teachers, and counsellors try. I wondered whether

homeschooled children fell through the cracks in the same way.

I thought about my granddaughter beginning school. She had been such a bright toddler and as a pre-schooler her curiosity knew no bounds. I believed unquestioningly that she would love school as much as I had. At the end of her first week I excitedly asked how she liked going to school. After a very long silence she quietly replied, "I'll get used to it." At not quite six years old she seemed so resigned to her fate. My heart ached as I thought of the twelve years that lay ahead of her. I wondered if homeschooled students felt resigned to their fate.

During the two years I spent re-examining the daily interactions in the classroom, the decision to take a one-year leave of absence from the classroom in order to travel gradually turned into a decision to take early retirement in order to research homeschooling and eventually write curriculum for the homeschooling community. In this way I could combine my interest in how children learn and my love of writing curriculum materials with my new interest in homeschooling. From the earlier radio broadcast, I remembered the level of commitment the homeschooling parents seemed to have. I reasoned that, given my level of expertise in "schooling" and curriculum, I could help them do a better job.

But if I was going to be successful I needed to find out what home schoolers did in the name of education. Classroom pedagogical practices were familiar to me--here pedagogy implied teaching and instruction, formal curriculum and established



methodologies. How were the pedagogical practices of home schoolers different? Was it likely that, in the informal setting of the home, pedagogy would still speak of such structure? Although my intuition told me the classroom pedagogy of curriculum and methodologies was out of place in the home, at this point it was still my intention to discover the pedagogy of homeschooling by looking at the "school-type" activities parents did with their children.<sup>14</sup>

Further exploration of the notion of pedagogy led to van Manen's work.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the structured pedagogical practices of the classroom,<sup>16</sup> van Manen (1991) describes the pedagogical influence that flows between an older person and a younger person --an influence that is "oriented toward the well-being and the increasing maturity and growth of the child" (p. 15), an orientation that has the "pedagogical intent . . . to strengthen the child's contingent possibility for 'being and

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<sup>14</sup> As Agar (1980) contends, my own background was the initial framework used for assessing similarities and differences. It must also be acknowledged that my own questioning of the classroom structure likely had some influence on my early observations. This was possibly less true as I became more fully immersed in the homeschooling community.

<sup>15</sup> Not all of the literature cited in this study is concerned with homeschooling. However, a number of authors, such as van Manen, Bolnow, and van den Berg, speak of the kind of pedagogic relationship apparent in the homeschooling environment.

<sup>16</sup> As a classroom teacher I saw pedagogy as curriculum, lesson plans, and teaching strategies--all teacher directed, 'top down.' Like many teachers I had not identified all the nurturing, supporting, and encouraging that was a daily part of the classroom environment as pedagogy. Somehow, that was 'parenting' and separate from 'teaching.'

becoming'" (p. 17). Did homeschooling rely on this notion of pedagogy? I left the public school system and began my journey.

To provide background information before setting out I undertook a literature search (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 34). Some appreciation of the goals and aspirations of homeschooling parents might serve as a tour book. The limited amount of literature revealed, as stated earlier, the diversity of the homeschooling community (Ray, 1988; Van Galen, 1988a; Lines, 1967; Wright, 1988). I also recognized the two main roads I could follow on my journey, each led to a different kind of homeschooling community, each with a different landscape. One road led to the community of home-schoolers who choose to homeschool for religious reasons, the other to a community of homeschoolers who choose homeschooling for pedagogical reasons (Van Galen, 1988b). Most homeschooling families live along the road between the two communities and the landscape along the way changes and is fashioned by their individual approaches.

Homeschooling families who embrace homeschooling for religious<sup>u</sup> reasons frequently choose to follow a curriculum with a biblical or religious focus. Other homeschooling families, those who adopt home education because they disagree with the way children are taught in school, choose a more eclectic path. Their curriculum materials include such things as library books, text books used in schools and/or purchased workbooks as well as materials and activities that they or their children make. I speculated that homeschoolers who followed a more structured

curriculum might rely more closely on many of the same pedagogical practices found in the classroom. Since I was interested in examining those pedagogical interactions between parents and children less likely to be influenced by the classroom, I elected to investigate the non-sectarian segment of the homeschooling community.

As the earlier literature search also revealed the diversity of the homeschooling community in general, and this group in particular, uncovering any commonality within the group required working inside the community (Marcus & Fischer, 1986). By immersing myself in the culture I hoped to learn about the various methods and materials these homeschooling parents use as well as their goals and needs.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, I wanted to learn how these families interpret the home education experience.<sup>18</sup>

My first step was to make contact with members of the home schooling community (Ellen, 1984, p. 194). That initial contact opened other doors and gradually the route of my journey took

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<sup>17</sup> Marcus and Fischer (1986, p. 18) define ethnography as a research process wherein the researcher closely observes, records, and engages in the daily life of another culture, the written accounts of which emphasize descriptive detail. While it was not my intention to engage fully in the daily lives of homeschoolers, I planned to visit them in their homes and join them in as many of their outside activities as possible, to immerse myself in what I thought, at that time, homeschooling was all about. It was also my intention to represent as fully as possible the way homeschoolers experience their world.

<sup>18</sup> Hymes (1982, p. 26) points out that understanding of community-specific knowledge, much of which may be implicit, can only be realized through participation and observation over time.

shape. Over the course of my travels I undertook and completed the following:

- connected with homeschooling support groups in the lower mainland of British Columbia to investigate the influence of the homeschooling community on parents' pedagogical practices
- subscribed to newsletters from various support groups
- attended support group meetings, outings, and other activities to observe parents and children in pedagogical situations
- contacted as many Lower Mainland home education parents as possible to discuss informally their approach to homeschooling
- interviewed, twice, four home learning families to hear their stories
- participated in/and or attended homeschooling conferences
- continued to read books, newspaper and journal articles about homeschooling
- kept a personal journal (Lederman, 1990, p. 75) of events, personal reactions, and possible directions for exploration

As part of my search for commonalities in pedagogical practices, the research activities were designed to investigate expanding circles of support: the individual family, the local support group, and the provincial/national/international homeschooling community.

## **Making the Connection**

After enactment of the new School Act, which included many of the recommendations of the previously mentioned Royal Commission on Education, made home schooling an alternative for parents, The Vancouver Sun published several articles on the home schooling movement (Bula, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c). Through subsequent contact with the Education Reporter at the paper I obtained names of several people involved in home education including that of the president of the Canadian Home Education Association of British Columbia. In turn, she provided me with a contact in the Greater Vancouver Home Learners Network, a large support group. Involvement with this group eventually led to two other small support groups outside of the metropolitan area. Other contacts came about through conversations with people, some of whom were not homeschoolers but who knew of families who were involved in home education.

Occasionally, in casual conversation with people such as sales clerks, when I made it known that I was interested in home-schooling, I was asked for the name of a contact person. At these times, rather than the end link on the network chain--the one connecting me to the homeschoolers--I became one of the connecting links, something that seemed to please some home-schooling parents. For example, when I brought my daughter-in-law and her friend to a support group meeting, Sharon laughed and said, "Way to bring 'em in, Jan!" Although it was intended as a joke (at which the whole group laughed), it was one of the times

I felt accepted as part of the group. In addition to the informal conversations I had with members of support groups, I also talked with a number of homeschooling parents I met at conferences and other events.

### **Becoming Immersed**

When I contacted the Greater Vancouver Home Learners Network in September, 1991, to ask if I could attend their next meeting, I made it clear that, while I did not have children who were being homeschooled, I was interested in joining the group to find out about homeschooling (Agar, 1980, p. 55). I also made it clear that I was a former teacher who was now involved in post-graduate research leading up to my Master's thesis. The meeting was my first indication that I was entering a different landscape. In both my personal and professional life, I have attended innumerable meetings and served on many executive boards but this meeting was different.

Although they are referred to as meetings, homeschoolers do not have "meetings." I carefully prepared for my first encounter on the first Wednesday in October, 1991. From my written notes I described my background, explained that in my research I was interested in learning about various aspects of homeschooling and discovering what the homeschooling experience is all about for homeschooling families, and asked permission to become part of the group (Agar, 1980, p. 55). I also made it clear that,

although I was a teacher, my interest was not to "check up" on them or gather information to use against homeschooling.

Obviously I placed far more importance on their permission than any of the people involved in the open conversation. After answering a few questions, in particular why so many teachers are opposed to homeschooling, members of the group agreed to have me participate in their activities. My involvement with the group spanned two years (and continues at present) and during that time I 'loosened up' considerably.

Approximately ten families form the core of the group although as many as twenty families may attend any one meeting. As well, while fifteen or twenty families may attend a meeting, the same fifteen or twenty families may not be at the next meeting. Home schooling experience ranges from beginner to more than ten years with newcomers appearing at almost every meeting.

The backgrounds of the people in the group are as varied as their approaches to homeschooling. For example, Colleen and her husband Don, whom she met at university, have four children. Colleen was a competitive swimmer who almost made the Olympic team in her final year of competition. Tall and slim, she moves with a dancer's grace--evidence of her years at the university studying dance. Since Colleen was very young when they started their family, she has not had a career outside of the home. Don, a law student in his university days, went on to work in retail before returning to university for an M.B.A. degree. At present his career revolves around events in the computer world.

Dorothy studied voice and piano in Toronto before going on to university to study science. She met her husband, Gerry, while both were working toward their degrees in physics. When Gerry went on to do a Masters in oceanography, Dorothy went to work in the Arctic as a geo-physics technician. After she and Gerry married and began their family Dorothy stayed home but continued to study part time--recently taking some engineering courses at the university. Gerry and Dorothy began home schooling while living in Newfoundland. They, along with their three children, have been part of the support group for the past two years.

Although Neil and Jean met while teaching, previously both had worked at many other jobs. Before he began his teaching career, Neil was involved professionally in theatre and particularly opera. Among his many other jobs, he worked in sawmills, for the railroad, and as a taxi driver. Jean, before attending university, worked as a secretary and then as a bookkeeper in an financial institution. The pride is evident in Jean's voice when she states that both she and Neil worked their way through university without the benefit of loans or other financial help. Neil and Jean have one daughter, Charlotte.

Although Michael has a Bachelor of Science degree and she attended university for one year (at which time she decided that one was more than enough), Gina did not meet her husband at university. She met Michael while both were working as computer programmers. However, before that time Gina had worked at many other jobs: flag person on a road crew, go-go dancer and "chief



cook and bottle washer" in a night club, as well as clerk in an auto parts store. Michael acquired his computer expertise in university; Gina, on the job after someone bet a fellow employee that he could teach anyone how to program. Gina was hired and the person won his bet.

In most of these homeschooling families, the mother is the 'stay-at-home' parent, but the occupations of the 'breadwinners' in the families are as varied as the families themselves. While many of the parents (both mother and father) have attended university and now work as professionals, a significant number of parents work at other kinds of jobs. Caitlin's husband, Brad, is a bus driver. Donna teaches piano lessons and her husband, Larry, is a postal worker. Christine, a single parent, works part-time in the office of an alternate school and part-time as a birthing coach.

Sharon was a classroom teacher who returned to university for a Master's Degree in counselling. There she met Dave, who was attending university for a year prior to returning to the United States to work on his Master's Degree in environmental physiology. During the five years since he had earned his Bachelor's Degree in biology, Dave had earned his living playing guitar in Vermont. Since they married, they have had two children and Sharon has earned a Ph.D. in educational psychology. Dave is currently working on his Ph.D. in pharmacology. In order to homeschool the two girls, Sharon and Dave juggle their careers and university commitments, occasionally filling in the gaps with

a baby sitter.

In several other families both parents work. Len, who sees clients in the evening, is at home with the children during the day while his wife, Alexis, works as an accountant. Ron and Karen arrange their shifts so that one is home with the children while the other works. While the group may have a higher number of parents with post-secondary education, in general they are not dissimilar--in background, at least--to parents of students in numerous classes I have taught. One noticeable difference, however, (again, based on my observations as a classroom teacher) is the number of fathers actively involved in their children's education.

The informal monthly meetings are a family event--parents provide support for each other by sharing ideas about various topics such as motivating children, ideas for teaching particular concepts, and educational activities while the children play games, work on the computer, or engage in more rambunctious activities outside. The large kitchen table is used to circulate any printed information and serve juice and coffee as well as the contributions of cookies and muffins that mysteriously appear at the beginning of the evening and, not so mysteriously, swiftly disappear as children run in and out. Occasionally a guest speaker will present information about a service or materials that are available for purchase. Aside from this brief group discussion, the rest of the evening is spent in informal conversation in small groups.

Initially I planned to do nothing but listen and observe and talk to individual parents at each meeting. However, since the topics frequently related to my own experiences as either a parent or a classroom teacher,<sup>19</sup> I soon became a participant-observer and entered into discussions--continually moving between the "inside" and "outside" of events (Clifford, 1988). Over the months topics included such things as ways to inform the general public about homeschooling, feelings generated as children grow to maturity and leave home, and choosing subscriptions to children's magazines.

Participants in the discussions come and go, regardless of age, anyone who happens to be within "earshot" and interested comments. Sarah, aged nine, who happened to pass by our small group as we discussed children's magazines commented that she knew the Highlights magazine and liked it but preferred others. Whereupon she left the room to return with copies of World, Ranger Rick, and a magazine her dad used to get, called Dragons. I mentioned to Hillary that Teaching K-8 is also published by the same people who publish Highlights and, although intended for classroom teachers, it might have some useful information for homeschoolers. She welcomed my offer to bring a copy to the next meeting.

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<sup>19</sup> Hymes (1982, p. 29) points out that "the particular characteristics of the ethnographer are themselves an instrument of inquiry." The fact that I was able to enter into many conversations as both a parent and an educator, may have facilitated my acceptance in the group. I believe that sharing our experiences as parents encouraged mutual trust.

From the beginning of my involvement with the group, I was struck by the ease with which the children wandered in and out of the 'meeting room'--often in the finery they donned while playing dress-up--to speak to their parents. Everyone seems to accept these comings and goings matter-of-factly regardless of what the children may be wearing, as when Mellisa came in wearing a ladies' pale pink nylon chiffon shortie night gown (which on her was full length), a foil-covered cardboard crown on her head, and an orange plastic flower lei around her neck, or when Angela, between changes, entered dressed only in her underwear.

In January, 1993, as I neared the end of my research, I became involved with a newly formed support group outside of the metropolitan area. This is a smaller group and consists mainly of newcomers to the homeschooling movement. My son and daughter-in-law, along with their three children, also attend. I had two reasons for connecting with this group. First, since the members of this group did not know each other prior to forming the group, there could be no group consensus about the nature of pedagogical interactions with children. Second, I wanted to see if the homeschooling culture of a more rural group differed from that of a metropolitan group. As with the Greater Vancouver Home Learners Network, I identified myself as a researcher interested in homeschooling and received permission to attend. As with the other support group, the informal monthly meetings are a family affair --parents offering support to each other by sharing ideas and concerns, children playing. They are now (after meeting for ten

months) beginning to organize outings and are planning to start holding monthly theme days in the near future. Although there is no executive, one parent takes notes of the meeting and these are mailed out to the members.

Backgrounds of the people involved in this group are similar to the Greater Vancouver Home Learners Network, although there are fewer professional educators. Charlene and her husband, Art, have three children. and, like many of the other members in the group are relative newcomers to homeschooling. Over the years, Art worked for several financial institutions until recently he returned to school to prepare for the ministry. From a studio in their home, Charlene teaches sewing classes for adults and children.

Peter and Cathy and their three children live on acreage that is about a twenty minute drive from town. Peter is self-employed as an environmental consultant, although sees himself as a 'jack-of-all-trades.' He had a number of occupations, including chimney sweep, prior to becoming involved a number of years ago in environmental work. Before they started their family, Cathy was a journeyman horticulturist. She has also worked as a lab technician in a chemical laboratory, learning her skills on the job.

Pat and Jennifer and their three children also live on acreage, having recently moved from the city. Their home is only a half-hour drive from town, but Pat continues to drive to the city every day. He is employed at an electronics manufacturing

company at the middle management level. The commute is almost two hours each way, but buying the home along the banks of the river was a lifestyle decision oriented to the future.

Detailed field notes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Agar, 1980)) were reconstructed after each meeting with the Greater Vancouver Home Learners Network. A number of the informal interviews were conducted during these events. Less detailed field notes were constructed after meetings with the smaller group. Pseudonyms (Spradley, 1979, 9. 38) used to refer to all adults and children from both groups in this study, along with the ages of the children, are listed in Appendix A.

The focus of my field notes changed over the 18 months. Initially, even though my intention was to concentrate on the pedagogical interactions between parents and children, the classroom teacher in me kept taking over and I found that I looked only for evidence of "schooling," describing in great detail the environment and materials used. This was somewhat in keeping with the notion of pedagogy having to do with "the process of learning," and "the principles of procedure" that are spelled out in course materials and teaching strategies (Stenhouse, 1986, p. 185). Try as I might I had trouble leaving behind my previously held idea that pedagogy has to do with the "pedagogical skills" acquired by the teacher that relate to the planning and presentation of material for students to learn (Walker, 1990, p. 359).

As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p. 146) note, the

compilation of field notes requires continual reassessment of purposes and priorities. Although I reassessed my priorities, I cannot say that it was brought about by such a deliberate effort. It was more likely the result of changes in me. As Greene (1978, p. 2) points out

each of us achieved contact with the world from a particular biography. All of this underlies our present perspectives and affects the way we look at things and talk about things and structure our realities. To be in touch with our landscapes is to be conscious of our evolving experiences, to be aware of the ways in which we encounter our world.

After the first few weeks as my experiences in the homeschooling community evolved, I became more 'parent' and less 'teacher.' I focused less on evidence of "school at home," and more on the pedagogical interactions between parents and children--those "interactions intentionally (though not always deliberately or consciously) engaged in by an adult and a child, directed toward the child's positive being and becoming" (van Manen, 1991, p. 18) and my field notes changed accordingly. Although I often wondered about what I had missed when I looked at the landscape through teacher glasses instead of parent glasses.

In addition to membership in the two support groups, I also joined the Canadian Home Educators' Association (CHEA). This provincial body, while composed mainly of families who have a Christian focus to their homeschooling, is the only province-wide homeschooling organization. As such, it generally speaks for the entire homeschooling community in governmental and legal issues. Its stated purposes are to present a unified voice to the

government and network with and support local home education groups. It has provided support for homeschooling families in legal matters when their right to homeschool has been questioned. CHEA publishes a newsletter quarterly and meets annually.

### **Exploring With the Children**

The Greater Vancouver Home Learners Network organizes outings for every other Friday. Families join together to visit a wide range of places in the community such as the Sikh temple, the U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology, a pumpkin farm, a glass blowing factory, the splash pool at Stanley Park, and Heritage Park in Burnaby. Until recently the group met at an independent school on the alternate Fridays mornings. On these mornings, children participated in group activities such as mask making, signing for the deaf, and environmental studies. On one of the Friday mornings, I tried to adapt a classroom activity about the forest environment that I had written for use with a group of the children. The endeavour enjoyed limited success--I probably learned more than the children did. Certainly I learned that the structure that encompasses pedagogical interactions in the classroom (e.g., children raising their hands before speaking, working on projects that are adult directed, following an adult oriented timetable) is out of place in the homeschooling situation. While on one level I knew this, the old patterns of teacher-student interactions quickly pulled me back and I had to



focus all my energy into putting those patterns of behaviour back into the classroom.

In addition to the planned group activities, parents whose children were interested joined together to hire instructors for classes such as drama or African drumming. Not all children participated in these classes. The classes are presently held during the week. Twice a year the drama group performs at a concert. As well the group performance, individual families perform, parents or children separately or together.

More recently, one 'non-outing' Friday a month is reserved for a theme day which is organized and hosted by one of the parents. Themes include medieval times, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, architecture, and boats. Some parents and children come dressed in appropriate costumes and those who wish make some sort of presentation pertaining to the theme. Often parents and children, including families with "pre-school" aged children, work together to jointly make a presentation. For example, on medieval theme day, Spencer did a presentation by himself, his mother, Dorothy, talked about the use of herbs during that period, and Frances, his five year-old sister, passed around a basket of samples of herbs for people to feel and smell. In other families people work separately. During the presentation time there is extensive interaction. Questions are asked and comments are made by both parents and children. Families bring bag lunches and during the lunch break parents sit around the table engaged in general conversation about home schooling. Some children eat

with their parents, others with their friends.

As with the meetings, detailed field notes were reconstructed after each outing and many informal interviews were conducted during these events. Initially I was discouraged by the content of my field notes; there seemed to be no evidence of "teaching." As the months passed I became more aware of the true nature of the pedagogical interactions between homeschooling adults and their children--pedagogical interactions that are educational without being based on a stated or formal curriculum. The pedagogical interactions of home schoolers are directed toward the personal growth of each child, in all its facets, not the acquisition of content.

### **Donning the Researcher's Garb**

In addition to the numerous informal conversations I held with various members of the homeschooling community, I conducted more formal interviews (Ellen, 1984, p. 230) with four homeschooling families.<sup>20</sup> Members of each family have been given pseudonyms that are listed in Appendix A. The ages of the children also are listed. Each family was interviewed twice. In one of the families both the mother and father were interviewed while in the other three families only the mother was

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<sup>20</sup> The four families interviewed were different in several respects: composition, number or ages of children, or lifestyles. They were selected to represent a range of experiences.

interviewed.<sup>21</sup> Interviews were conducted in their homes, usually in the kitchen.

If previously I had any presumptions about being in control of the interviews, it was based on a mistaken understanding of qualitative research and a naive assumption about interviewing.<sup>22</sup> Any expectation of control quickly disappears when the respondent stops in mid conversation to answer the phone, leaves to get a video for the children (while the interviewer babysits), keeps talking while taking the bread out of the oven, interrupts the flow of conversation to settle a dispute between children, or organizes and sets the ground rules for a play activity for the children. During one of the interviews, one of the children practised her piano lessons in the next room (making for a most interesting transcribing session) while mother, who continued on with the conversation, did not miss a note. Other activities included such things as feeding babies and checking on the plans of children as they went out the door. While these activities are not usually part of a formal interview, I believe that they have enriched the study.

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<sup>21</sup> I had not specified I wanted to interview both parents and since the arrangements were made with the mother, times were arranged at her convenience (usually during the day when the father was at work). In one family I interviewed both parents because at the time the father was working night shift. The fourth family is a single-parent family.

<sup>22</sup> This is one more area in which my own background influenced my research. After several years as a broadcaster/ interviewer where I prepared for and 'controlled' the interview, it was difficult to switch into the less formal ethnographic interview method in the earlier interviews.

At times the children were present for the interviews, although they did not actually participate. In one interview (#8), conversation turned to an interest of one of the children (Barry) and the formal interview shifted while he displayed and explained all of the material he is collecting. All interviews were tape recorded (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 157) and fully transcribed (Ellen, 1984, p. 202). While I acknowledge that it is advisable to make a condensed account during interviews (Spradley, 1979, p. 75), note taking seemed intrusive during these conversations.<sup>23</sup> Consequently I decided to rely solely on transcriptions of the tapes. Subsequently these transcriptions were used for highlighting the themes and metathemes in the data (Tesch, 1987, p. 231).

The formal interviews were approximately one hour, although frequently a more informal conversation continued on for from one-half to more than an hour afterward. In one case I took a casserole for dinner and spent the afternoon and early evening with the family. The conversations outside of the formal interview more closely resembled 'coffee talk' between friends and initially I felt they were not part of my research. However, on reflection I realized that any time I spent in their company added to my understanding of the lived experience of these

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<sup>23</sup> While the presence of the tape recorder did not seem to be intrusive, it is impossible to know for certain how, or if, the parents were affected by it.

families.<sup>24</sup> The interviews and other conversations were, in fact, more than a chance to collect data. As Carson (1986, p. 78) points out, "the nature of the conversational question is quite different from the interview question. . . . The former implicates a revealing of something held in common." All of the conversations provided me with an opportunity to come to a deeper understanding of my own feelings about teaching, parenting, and children. I agree with Weber's (1986, p. 66) contention that the interview is "a mode of learning. Through dialogue we get to think things through, glancing at the mirror the other holds up to us, discovering not only the other, but ourselves." Memories of these shared times make it clear to me that "I am a field note" (Jackson, 1990, p. 21).<sup>25</sup>

During the first interview with each family I explained my purpose, asked if they had any questions, and had participants sign a consent form. The two interviews with each family were spaced almost a year apart, more by happenstance than design. Testimony to my 'broadcaster background,' I began all interviews with an interview schedule, however, in each case the interview

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<sup>24</sup> Agar (1980, p. 90) contends the informal interview, guided not by a list of questions but by "a repertoire of question-asking strategies," is a central form of data that is supplemented by the observations.

<sup>25</sup> While transcriptions of the interviews provide a written account of the dialogue, there are no written records of such things as tone of voice, facial expressions, or other body language. In addition, there is no record of the sometimes imperceptible changes taking place in my understanding of the homeschooling experience. Many of these things are in my memory only, memories that are triggered as I relive the conversations. In that respect, "I am a fieldnote."

took on a life of its own and I ended up giving my prepared questions little more than cursory attention. This was perhaps less the case in the first interview when I went armed with a set of questions (Ellen, 1984, p. 233) that would "help me determine exactly what home schooling parents do," that is, define their pedagogical practices from an educational perspective. This resolve quickly dissipated. By the time the second interview with each family took place, not only had I spent a great deal of time with these people and therefore a list of questions seemed out of place in our conversations, but I was no longer focusing on instructional strategies and curricular decisions. Our conversations were more about parenting and families than 'teaching' in the traditional sense. Although sometimes I consciously directed the conversation, usually topics simply evolved as we jointly shared our experiences as parents.<sup>26</sup> I left the "teacher talk" behind.

### **Linking Up With the Networks**

Almost all of the members of the Greater Vancouver Home Learners' Network as well as many other homeschoolers around the province subscribe to Home Education News (published ten times per year). Each issue contains a list of home schooling support groups, both those with a religious focus and non-sectarian, that

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<sup>26</sup> Weber (1986, p. 65) contends "Through dialogue, the interview becomes a joint reflection on a phenomenon, a deepening of experience for both interviewer and participant."

meet in a various regions. Home Education News publishes articles of interest to home schooling parents (e.g., strategies for teaching subject matter, research information) and children's writing. It is a well established publication. In addition to this newsletter I subscribed to the Victoria Home-Learning Network (published bi-monthly), a recently revived publication informing parents of events and educational opportunities in and around the Greater Victoria area.

In addition to the two newsletters I subscribed to, I borrowed several years of back issues of Growing Without Schools, a newsletter published in the United States by John Holt and Associates. This publication is widely read in both Canada and the United States. Since the early days of the homeschooling movement in the United States it has served as a support network for homeschooling families. Over the years it has carried many articles dealing with legal issues in addition to personal stories from families who are involved in the movement.

These publications connected me with the kinds of information that homeschoolers share with each other. Since the focus is on family life and suggestions for educational activities or methods of presenting concepts to children, these newsletters are a good source of data about pedagogical interactions between homeschooling parents and their children. Perhaps even more importantly, since these parents frequently question their decisions and re-evaluate their approaches to homeschooling, the publications provide a source of moral support

for them.

For the past two years I have subscribed to Home School Researcher, a quarterly publication dedicated to research about home education. To date, all of the research reported has been carried out in the United States. In addition to this publication, I monitored the publication of other articles about home education. As the homeschooling movement continues to grow an increasing number of articles appear in the popular press. The same cannot be said of academic journals. As previously stated, much of the educational establishment considers homeschooling to be a fringe activity. Consequently, the greatest source for current articles about home education, at this point, continues to be 'alternate press' publications.

### **Gathering With the Larger Community of Home Schoolers**

All of the parents I talked to frequently reflect on their homeschooling experiences. They question the way they work with their children, the activities they plan, and the materials and experiences they provide. Regardless of how well something is working in their own family, they are anxious to learn more and seek out ideas from other families. Conferences provide an opportunity for this kind of exchange.

As part of my study I attended two homeschooling conferences. The first, the Washington Homeschool Convention was held June 4, 5, and 6, 1992 in Tacoma, Washington. I travelled to



the convention with three other members of the Greater Vancouver Home Learners Network and, while there, met many other home-schoolers from British Columbia. Approximately 1500 people attend this convention. A building set aside for vendors of educational materials was open to registrants and to the public. Sessions covered a range of topics from "Making the Transition From Conventional to Home Education" and "The Motivation Factor-- Lighting a Fire In the Reluctant Learner" to "'Real Books' Alternatives to Text Books." Some workshops focused on more structured approaches to homeschooling, others discussed a "non-curriculum" approach or how parents could turn the learning over to their children. Parents were able to choose workshops that fit their particular approach to homeschooling.

In addition to the workshops, there were six featured speakers as well as the keynote speakers. The keynote speakers were well known authors David and Mickey Colfax, Californian parents who homeschooled their four boys--three of whom have graduated from or are attending Harvard University. Featured speakers, all of whom have been involved in homeschooling for some time, were from the wider homeschooling community. The Saturday night event was a graduation ceremony for all home-schooling students who were beginning the 'post-secondary' phase of their education (i.e., entering college or technical school, starting their own business).

The second conference, Wondertree Home Learners' Conference, was held February 20 and 21, 1993, in Vancouver. Unlike the

previous convention, this was a family affair. Sessions for parents addressed topics such as evaluation, developing curriculum through the use of themes, and an exchange of learning resource information. During one of the session blocks I presented a paper on my research which was enthusiastically received. Most homeschooling parents appear eager for research data, perhaps as part of their on-going reflecting about their involvement in homeschooling. Some sessions were designed for the whole family, others were meant for children. Participants in these sessions had the opportunity to learn how to juggle, build giant paper airplanes, look at TV more critically, do paper mache, and put on plays, to name only a few. The keynote presentation and panel discussions held on the second day were open to the public. While many homeschoolers are quick to point out that their aim is not to proselytize, there is a generally held view in the homeschooling community that many other parents would homeschool their children if they knew more about it.

Fieldnotes from both of these conferences were supplemented by handouts from the sessions, publishers' information, and registration package materials.

### **Moving from Observer to Participant-Observer**

I began this journey as an observer. My intention was to spend sufficient time with the homeschoolers, watch carefully, and collect data to determine exactly what they did to home-

school their children. Within a very short time I found I was travelling this route as a participant-observer (Clifford, 1988). This position affords one the opportunity to continuously move between the "inside" and "outside" of events, "on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider context" (Clifford, 1988, p. 34). In fact, there were times when I became more participant than observer. Because the activities usually involved things from my own background--parents and children being together, doing everyday things--"selective inattention" (Spradley, 1980, p. 55) was always a threat. In addition, although I was not homeschooling my own children, in the fall of 1992 my son and daughter-in-law decided to home school their 'school-aged' children. As a result I became involved in the home schooling of two of my grandchildren, attending two outings with them as well as searching out materials and experiences that might be of interest to them. During these times I found myself caught up in the events with the children rather than being the researcher.<sup>27</sup> I became an "insider" with two children, looking for ways to render the curious normal.

Although my intention on this journey was to examine what

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<sup>27</sup> Hammersley & Atkinson (1983, p. 102) caution against feeling 'at home.' "If and when all sense of being a 'stranger' is lost, one may have allowed the escape of one's critical, analytic perspective." While, to a large extent this is true, there was much to be gained from experiencing the activity as a homeschooler might.

homeschoolers did in the name of education--their pedagogical practices--it soon became apparent that my notion of pedagogy did not fit the reality of home schooling. As an educator, I saw pedagogy in terms of curriculum and instruction. This narrow view of pedagogy did not fit the interactions between home schooling parents and their children. Through my reading, I realized that I was confusing pedagogy with what pedagogues do (van Manen, 1982, p. 291). A broader view of pedagogy (p. 285) describes it as

something that is cemented deeply in the nature of the relationship between adults and children. In this sense, pedagogy is defined not so much as a certain kind of relationship or a particular kind of doing, but rather pedagogy is something that lets an encounter, a relationship, a situation, or a doing be pedagogic.

As I became familiar with the landscape of homeschooling I realized I needed to set aside my 'teacher glasses' and see pedagogy as parenting--those daily interactions between parents and children that are intended to foster the growth, maturity, and development of the children (van Manen, 1991, p. 28). My original understanding of pedagogy was too narrow. I needed to set it aside in order to be open to the pedagogical influences embedded in the home schooling experience. Rather than curriculum and methodologies, I came to see pedagogy as "the essence of teaching" (van Manen, 1986a, p. 85).

When I set out on this journey I was under the misconception that since I had all this expertise about schooling and curriculum, home schoolers needed my help. I believed that those homeschoolers who were not using correspondence courses would welcome "school" curriculum that could be done at home. All I

needed to do was observe them, talk to a few of them, and I would understand what homeschooling was all about. I was like the tourist who thinks that he or she can understand what a place is like merely by observing the scenery, visiting the cathedrals, and eating the local cuisine. I have learned. I have learned that to truly understand a place you must live as the 'locals' do. True, a visitor learns much from the points of interest, but to understand what a place is like you must experience it. As the following chapters reveal, you must experience the joys and frustrations, hopes and fears, and the specialness and sameness of a place with the inhabitants. Yet even then, as a tourist, what we experience can be only an approximation. Every time I thought I was beginning to understand the essence<sup>28</sup> of the homeschooling experience, once again it would slip through my fingers. The more I questioned and reflected, the more I felt I had asked the wrong questions. Most of all I have learned that a brief journey can never expose fully the depth of the lived experience of homeschooling.

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<sup>28</sup> Van Manen (1984, p. 38) contends that "phenomenological research is the study of essences." Further, he states, "The essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described in language when the description reawakens or shows us the lived meaning or significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner."

## CHAPTER 3:

## CURIOSITY AND THE PEDAGOGICAL ATMOSPHERE

## Curiosity

Tell me, tell me everything!  
 What makes it Winter  
 And then Spring?  
 Which are the children  
 Butterflies?  
 Why do people keep winking their eyes?  
 Where do birds sleep?  
 Do bees like to sting?  
 Tell me, tell me please, everything!

Tell me, tell me, I want to know!  
 What makes leaves grow  
 In the shapes they grow?  
 Why do goldfish  
 Keep chewing? and rabbits  
 Warble their noses?  
 Just from habits?  
 Where does the wind  
 When it goes away go?  
 Tell me! or don't even grown-ups know?

(Behn, 1953, p. 349)

For some time I and others have been saying, . . . that children are by nature smart, energetic, curious, eager to learn, and good at learning; that they do not need to be bribed and bullied to learn; that they learn best when they are happy, active, involved, and interested in what they are doing; that they learn least, or not at all, when they are bored, threatened, humiliated, frightened.

(Holt, 1972, p. 2)

### The "Holy Curiosity of Learning"

What will happen if . . .? "How come it works that way?"

"Why?" From birth children constantly explore and question as a

way of making sense of their world. That is, until they begin school, where many quickly learn they are not to ask questions but to answer them--and correctly, at that. The view of many homeschooling parents, they turn to authors such as John Holt for validation of one of their convictions about the school system. Memories of their own school days are seen as partial evidence that an institution cannot provide the nurturing environment necessary to encourage the daily interactions intended to foster the growth, maturity, and development of children. Most homeschoolers begin to sense what they see as the inadequacy of the school system as they live the pedagogical interactions inherent in the parent-child relationship. They view school as a place where children may receive an education but have their innate love of learning--that "holy curiosity of learning" (Einstein, cited in Arons, 1986, p. 95)--extinguished.

Describing a walk in the woods with his eight-year-old son, Van den Berg (1975, pp. 68-69) writes of this "holy curiosity" and how a gulf has been created between adult and child in terms of how the world can be understood. The child asks about the colour of the leaves in autumn and father, after attempting to rely on scientific knowledge, recognizes that the "true" answer is because they are so beautiful.

There is no truer answer. That is how the leaves are red. An answer which does not invoke questions, which does not lead the child into an endless series of questions, to which each answer is a threshold. The child will hear later on that a chemical reaction occurs in those leaves. It is bad enough then; let us not make the world uninhabitable for the child too soon.

Van den Berg contends that the pedagogic understanding is violated by the incomprehensible answers we give in response to a child's questioning. We do not stop to ask ourselves why the child wants to know, what he or she is thinking at that moment, what is his or her present understanding. We answer from our perspective, devaluing the child. Perhaps the pedagogic understanding is violated because, as adults, we do not understand the distinction between curiosity and clarity. For the adult, curiosity begs enlightenment whereas the child is absorbed with the wonder and awe of it. Curiosity needs to be enjoyed and savoured. It seeks time to think, space to explore, and ownership of the journey. Clarity, and the need for definitive answers, will come when the time is right, when it is time to move beyond wonder. Llewellyn, (1990, p. 31) explains it this way:

Curiosity is an active habit--it needs the freedom to explore and move around and get your hands into lots of pots. It needs the freedom to watch TV with the remote control and flip through the channels at will. It needs the freedom to thumb through Science News and stop only where you want to. It needs the freedom to browse through your library's whole shelf on poetry. It needs the freedom to visit the zoo solo spending an hour with the prairie dog colony and walking right past the giraffes, or vice versa.

Time is an important element of curiosity, time to think and time to be still. In Gina's<sup>29</sup> view, it is time children need:

School sucks up so much of children's time that they don't have a lot of time to just be and think and grow inside themselves. There is very little

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<sup>29</sup> Homeschooling parents and children are cited by given names only except when the quote refers to material they have written in books or newsletters. Authors of these selections are cited by surname and given name.



time for children to really think deeply about philosophical things. And I think kids will naturally do that if they have the time. I think kids are naturally--most of the kids I know are natural philosophers. They want to understand why things happen and they want to understand why they do things themselves. They want to understand social interactions and things like that. Why do people behave the way they do? But if they never get a chance to think about it, they shelve it and it becomes apparent that it's not important to the world so they stop thinking about it and they become much more manipulable, I think.

Walking down the street one day three year old Art, pondering the light rain that is beginning to fall, asks his mother, "When it rains, is God spitting?" Another day, two years later. It is March and his first winter in the interior where the winters are much longer than on the coast. After many grey days the sun begins to shine. Art stands silently looking out the window for perhaps five minutes--a very long time for a five year old. Finally, to no one in particular, he announces, "Summer is peeking through a crack today." He is right. The sun has a brightness that has not been noticeable for some months. It has turned the corner and is about to begin its return. Sunday morning, five years later. It is 7:00 o'clock and his mother notices that not only is Art not in his bed, but he does not seem to be in the house. After some time she finds him on the hillside across the street, lying under the trees observing the wonders of the hidden world with his microscope. She stands at the window, watching silently, and does not call him or disturb him for she is struck by the peace that emanates from him. Over the years, these moments are fewer and farther between as matters at hand

take precedence over the holy curiosity that seeks its own enlightenment. Twenty years later Art's three-year-old daughter, Nicole, begins the cycle again. "Nana, exactly where is God?" Philosophical questions. The wonder and awe of children. Some believe that the natural curiosity of children keeps us in touch with what it means to be human.

Belief in the power of children's natural curiosity not only provides a link between many homeschooling families but, in addition, influences their pedagogical interactions with their children. Their commitment to it along with their determination to nurture it encourages them to turn toward the family and away from public schooling.

### **Yielding to the Professionals**

Although more and more homeschooling parents make the decision to home school before their children are born, this is a recent phenomenon.<sup>30</sup> Even a decade ago such a notion was considered revolutionary. Previously few parents considered the option of not sending their children to school until the children

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<sup>30</sup> Claudia Beaven, in a University of British Columbia lecture to student teachers, stated that it was only near the end of her doctoral dissertation (1990) research that she began to find a number of parents making this decision when their children were still babies. Referring to Gilgoff (M.A. Thesis, University of British Columbia), Beaven used the terms 'committed' to describe parents who make the decision to home school while their children are pre-school age and 'uncommitted' to describe parents who remove their children from school because of problems and feel they have little choice but to home school.

reached school age, and then only as a reaction to what they saw as the unfavourable school situation their children were about to encounter. Other parents made the decision only when their children's school experiences led them to seek out alternatives. Parents seldom questioned whether or not school was a good place for their children. They did not dispute the requirement that they give their children up to the professionals. After all, everyone sent their children to school regardless of how they felt about it. At least it seemed that way.

Gina:

You used to just do things because it was expected of you, including sending your children to school. And people are beginning to say, 'No, wait a minute, just because it's expected of me I'm not going to do that.' When Sarah was really small, I had a dream. It was years before I realized that there was any connection. The dream was that I was taking my baby to this house and we were going to turn it in and get a different one. And this was socially acceptable and I didn't want to do it. People kept saying, 'What's the matter with you. That's ridiculous. Everybody does that. You shouldn't get too attached to them, you know.' And I didn't want to do it. I got there and they were showing me these babies that I could take instead and I kept looking and I would say, 'I don't want that, I want my baby!' . . . it was years before I realized that I was dreaming about schooling. I mean, this is the way people feel when they send their kids off to school. They don't want to do it, but everybody says, 'Well of course you do. Your feeling of not wanting to give this child away to the system is silly. It's common, but it's silly and you'll get over it.' And that's exactly what people are telling me in this dream. It's not legitimate to feel sad when your child is leaving. It's OK the very first day they go off. People all talk about that, but after that you're not supposed to feel that anymore. It's OK to talk about how you feel relieved when your kids go off to school . . . .

The feeling that parents reluctantly give up their children is echoed by Ruth. She tells of seeing a heart-breaking newspaper

picture of a five-year-old boy being sent off to his first day of school. The little boy is looking at his father with a kind of 'how could you betray me' look on his face. "If everyone could have done what their feelings were at the moment, the father would have just said 'forget it, let's go to the park, or come home, or come to work with me, or whatever. You can't help but think that would have been better.'" Knowing that they will "get back a different child"; that whether or not the child is ready for the experience, he or she will be influenced by the group's values, parents feel they have little choice about sending their children off to school:

I guess they do it in a resigned sort of way that they have to -- they feel that this is the best for them or that you have to. And they learn to live without each other. I don't know if they learn to, maybe they just get numb.

Many years ago, when the world was a safer place for children, Phillip finally turned six and his mother walked him to his first day of school. After that first morning Phillip set off each day with his brother and sister and returned home with them each afternoon. Several days into the term, the teacher called mother to ask why Phillip was not in school. "But," said mother, "I am sending him each day. I'll check into this and let you know." Phillip returned in the afternoon as usual. It turned out that Phillip has been playing in the park near the school each day and returning home at the right time. "Phillip, why are you not going to school?" "I tried it for a few days and didn't care for it." "But, Phillip, I took you to school and they wrote your

name down. Once they have written your name down, you have to go every day." "But when do I get to play? When I'm a man?"

### **Reclaiming the Power**

While many parents still make the decision to homeschool as a reaction to current school situations, there is a definite shift in the timing (i.e., ages of children when parents make their decisions). Ruth submits that people are more in touch with their feelings rather than denying them, "more inclined to act on how they feel than on how they're supposed to feel." Undoubtedly an increasing number of parents now seek out home school support groups while their children are under two years of age. These parents see all learning as a natural part of the child growing to maturity, a belief supported by Hawkins' argument "If education were defined, for the moment, to include everything that children have learned since birth, everything that has come to them from living in the natural and the human world, then by any sensible measure, what has come before age five or six would outweigh all the rest" (cited in Holt, 1983b, p. 223). As one mother described it, "Everyone else just stopped teaching their children when they were six, and we just kept on going" (Arons, 1986, p. 93). A sudden change in life is not called for merely because it happens to be the first September after a child's sixth birthday.

There is an increased awareness of the multitude of ways in

which their child is growing and maturing and the perception that growth will be affected by being in a classroom, where school learning is separated from life, where "students read about the rest of the world . . . , but are carefully kept from it" (Arons, 1986, p. 94). Parents begin to question what is best for their family. The degree to which parents were influenced by the growing trend of the past three decades to question public institutions and the status quo appears to be one factor in the timing of the decision to homeschool.

Gina, a woman with strong convictions about social responsibility and the role of government and who describes herself as politically left of centre, made her decision when it was still a radical notion. She jokingly suggests that years ago, when she and Michael discussed the idea of homeschooling, their friends were quite shocked and hostile to the idea and she thinks the only reason they didn't phone the police right away was that "we didn't actually have any children." Her own school days were uppermost in her mind when she stumbled on one of Raymond Moore's books and she remembers that

he talked about not sending kids to school and it immediately seemed like such a wonderful idea to me and it seemed like school was such a waste of time. It just, you know, nothing really happening there. Hours every day just marking time, not acquiring any intellectual achievement, no, not learning to do anything, not learning to think in any organized way, just a waste of time. So it was, I thought it was, a marvellous idea to just skip it.

Talking about her decision to homeschool, Colleen explains that there was no one reason she decided to keep her children at

home, but probably the most significant was that as a child she hated school because she was extremely bored. Although at first she hadn't decided not to send her first child, Kerry, to school, she just kept putting it off, not wanting the same colourless experience for Kerry. Colleen smiles broadly, remembering the relief she felt when she found out that she didn't have to.

While travelling in Europe, Christine, pregnant at the time with Mellisa, realized that she had learned more since graduation than she had in high school. "In a few years I had learned more outside of school than in school and I just knew that I didn't want her going to a public school." At first she considered alternate schools but by the time Mellisa was three years old, after reading a number of books about homeschooling, she realized that she was "sold" on the idea. "It all made so much sense to me --that kids are naturally curious and that, given freedom, they will learn. It's not something that has to be crammed down their throats or into their heads."

Karen and Ron were not looking for homeschooling. Their son Barry had attended an alternate school in another province and they assumed there would be a wealth of alternate schools to choose from in British Columbia. However, when they moved here they were unable to find a suitable school they could afford. Public schools in the neighbourhood were visited and, after careful consideration, they decided they did not want that kind of environment for him. It was not an easy decision. Karen remembers,

And then I got really scared because I knew what I didn't want but it was just that I didn't think I was doing right to try to have him homeschooled. I went through a long time with it. It just consumed me. I was continually thinking about it.

Although now a confirmed homeschooler, sending her children to school was something that Ruth had not questioned. She and her husband Greg, both professionals, had spent a number of years working their way through the various levels of the system. Before her children were born, Ruth worked in a school as a social worker. Trying to find answers to the difficulties experienced by their eldest son Jamie, they worked with teachers within the system.

Initially we tried because he was the first. We tended to accept what the school was saying. We would discuss things with the guidance counsellor and try to sort it out. I think I probably thought he had a problem and I remember going through the possibilities. Was it diet and was he hyperactive -- but he wasn't hyperactive. Trying to go to specialists to see what problem did this child have that he was not fitting in and really feeling that he had a problem.

Their second son, Nathan, was also having troubles in school when Ruth read some of John Holt's work which supported her feelings as well as those of the children. Thinking back to her work in the school, she remembered the files of children who started school with enthusiasm and success but found nothing but failure as they progressed through the system. She began to question how her own children were fitting into this structure. The idea of homeschooling began to grow. "Books like John Holt's and others by people who are critical of the system gave me the idea that teachers didn't know everything and that school is



often a bad place to be, certainly for some kids." Ruth had never seen herself as a rebel until she began questioning the school system but she came to the decision that this was something she had to do. "I remember feeling very excited." Mixed with the excitement and worry about doing the right thing for her children was a feeling of relief. "Just not having to send them, not having someone else tell you about your child, whether they're good or bad or smart or stupid."

### **Removing the Labels**

It is such labelling that many parents fear for they believe that once those in authority determine that their child is 'learning disabled' or not performing up to the standard set by others in the class there is little likelihood that the label will be removed. Homeschooling parents are especially concerned that children whose interests and curiosity lead them in other directions or who are not mature or developmentally ready to perform some of the tasks demanded in the school setting will be 'tracked' for their entire school life.<sup>31</sup> Martz writes of the outcome of the disparity between a child's interests and the

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<sup>31</sup> These labels often 'stick' beyond the school years. Christine recounts the story of two school friends, John was in the highest reading group and Jack in the second highest. "At some point the teacher decided to move Jack up to the highest group, but John, still to this day, thinks of Jack as from the lower group. Even though he was moved up, he still thinks of Jack as being lower because he can remember that Jack was in the lower group. Yet Jack is now doing a Ph. D. in physics at Princeton University, so he's not lower!"

school's demands.

Many schools seem almost to try to make learning painful and unpleasant--to stifle curiosity, demand rote memorization, punish wonder; to make even sex education a bore--but they still can't keep kids from learning. A dropout who can barely write his own name and can't find his country on a globe understands every balletic nuance of Michael Jordan's drive to the basket, recites endless lyrics of rap songs and knows how to operate in complex criminal enterprises where mere survival takes courage, diplomacy and arcane lore. Yet far too many teachers tell themselves and each other that many children are unteachable, that it is somehow acceptable that kids get through high school without achieving functional literacy.

Martz, 1992, p. 17

A note of anguish is evident in her voice as Christine talks of the difficulties her brother faced in grade one because he was developmentally ill-prepared to deal with the tasks assigned to him.<sup>32</sup>

Obviously he wasn't ready to read and then was labelled learning disabled. And they used to take him out of the classroom. Come in, pick him out, and take him out to the remedial room and work with him. It was so obvious. All the other kids knew why he was leaving. He knew he was being singled out for this reason, and I think it really affected his self-esteem. I remember when he read his first book. He never read through school. He faked his book reports and he was, you know, like one of those people who is illiterate all through school but manages to fake it. He could read, but chose not to because it was such a negative experience. I've a picture of him reading his first book on the side of a mountain in France. And he loved it because it was something he had decided in his own time. And now he's a bank manager. And he didn't get there because he's

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<sup>32</sup> This is in keeping with the argument that since all children do not learn to walk and talk at the same age because they develop physically and mentally at different rates there will be differences in the chronological age at which they develop the motor and mental skills necessary to learn to read and write.

learning disabled!

Many homeschooling parents believe that the school system pays little more than lip service to the fact that no two children are exactly alike. They contend that no one expects all children to walk and talk at the same age. As well, children who do not walk and talk as early as some others are not labelled. It does not make sense, therefore, for educators to label children who do not read by the time they are seven years old as having some sort of learning disability. By labelling children who do not conform to the norm, the child's natural rhythm and growth are repudiated.

When he began school three-and-a-half months before his sixth birthday he could not tie his shoes, frequently missed the ball when he tried to catch it, and had trouble fitting the three letters of his name, A-r-t, on a full sheet of paper. The same child who, at three years old, pondered the nature of the light rain and who, at five, understood the essence of summer repeated both grade one and grade two because the letters on the page did not make the same sense to him they did to other children. Within the structure of the system there was no room to appreciate his curiosity and honour the speed with which he travelled his own path to maturity. From an adult perspective, Art was not where he was 'supposed to be.' One searches for the pedagogic understanding in such a design.

For many parents this struggle over conformity is a central issue. Arons (1986), in a study of conflict in American

education, found many parents at odds with the school system when their children did not perform as other students. "The school looks for behavioral patterns in kids, and when the kid departs from what they expect and see the majority doing, then this represents to them some kind of problem and their function then is to identify the problem and develop a program to deal with it" (p. 79). The parents interviewed believed that their own child's individuality and the family's individual values, a strength in the home setting, became a handicap in the school setting.<sup>33</sup>

### **Who Knows My Child Best?**

The dissonance created when parents and educators differ in their assessment of a child leads many parents to challenge whether or not someone outside of the family, someone who does not see the child in his or her own world where a wide range of strengths are more evident, has the right to judge, label, and make decisions for their child. It would be simple to dismiss these parental concerns as the imaginings of an 'over-anxious' mother or father were it not for the obvious heartache that permeates Ruth's voice as she relives the memory.

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<sup>33</sup> Some homeschooling parents recognize that, while educators personally endorse an educational philosophy such as that outlined in Year 2000, a document that acknowledges and supports individual differences, in the view of these homeschoolers, the structure of the school system (e.g., large numbers of children grouped together, classes that stay together for a year, prescribed curriculum, etc.) cannot support it and children will inevitably be grouped according to ability.

Aaron went into school and had a terrible time in kindergarten. I was told by the teacher--she sort of threw up her hands, almost literally--I remember her saying, 'Oh, Aaron!' and listing the things he couldn't do, like, he couldn't turn a somersault, couldn't cut very well, and I remember being dumbfounded, and thinking she was blind! She couldn't see this child.

The frustration in Ron's voice is unmistakable. Describing how teachers pass judgment on your children without trying to understand them, he acknowledges that teachers don't love your children the way you do. In particular, he remembers the time when Mandy's high school science teacher dismissed her as being "an obnoxious, surly person. Period. As far as he's concerned she's not teachable. He's not going to take the time to reach her." There is no acknowledgment of strengths or evidence that the child's natural curiosity survived. As Ron relates the incident, it is difficult to detect, in this encounter, evidence of the basic pedagogical attitude (Bollnow, 1989); valuing the child's present place along the road to maturity and believing the child's potential will be realized. "It is essential for pedagogical action that it surpasses in its hopes and expectations the present and that it rushes into the future, because education means constructive work toward a goal which will be reached in the future, even in a relatively distant future" (p. 46).

Until they make the decision to reclaim their power, these families--children and parents--feel impotent when dealing with the system. Ruth's feelings are indicative of the intensity of the experience.

It was just such a relief to get them away from all the control of people who just didn't know them and didn't care about them even though when we took them out there was a lot of concern about what we were doing. But they hadn't been concerned before. It was a relief to just get, I don't know, the control back. It's not that we were controlling our kids, but just to get it away and back into the family. Or back into their hands, too. The decision about what they would learn rather than some distant people who didn't know them or care about them. I was excited about all the possibilities for their learning.

### Revisiting the Past

Along with concern that the institution does not know their child and is therefore unable to provide a nurturing educational experience, memories of their own school days often strongly influences the decision to homeschool. Although all of the parents interviewed, formally or informally, were successful in whatever level of schooling they undertook, most of them have ambivalent feelings when reminiscing about those days. Like all memories, these reminiscences are real, even if "not identical to what happened in those days" (Van den Berg, 1975, p. 37).

For it should be realized that the past, in its real, alive form, is not the same past which was the present when the incidents occurred. The past, as past, is the past as it appears to us now: what happened then as it speaks to us now. (p. 37)

While not all the homeschooling parents remember their experiences as entirely negative, in conversations several common themes emerge. Plainly, school is remembered as not a pleasant place to be, inordinately boring, and irrelevant. Some recall their intense feelings of guilt, fear, and intimidation, feelings

of resignation and powerlessness to do anything but adapt to the system. Most of all, it is not an experience they want for their own children. The present real or perceived state of public education aside, for many parents the decision to keep their children home evolves out of their own memories of school and their desire to provide a nurturing and intellectually stimulating environment for their children. In addition, they want to ensure that the adult influences in their children's lives will be loving and affirming.

The somewhat fond memories that several parents retain of elementary school are really about their own youthful curiosity and their eagerness to explore a new environment. Specifically, the most cherished memories centre on the creative aspects of elementary school. Perhaps because it was the imaginative opportunities that allowed their natural curiosity to flourish. As Christine remembers it, "there was always a lot going on, lots of art, and colour. We got to play outside. I always enjoyed that." Reflecting on what he remembers as only a small portion of his days in elementary school, Ron recounts how he "really enjoyed doing art work. I was the one who did the art work up on the flashboard and the art fairs. And reading was okay. I liked stories and poems."

Time was also an important factor. Karen, who usually got good grades because she simply memorized everything, even the things she had no interest in--"you know, learned things by heart, took the exam, and that was it!"--really enjoyed the

drawing they did at school, "but that got lost. I ended up not having any time for it because there were too many other things that had to be done in school."

The aspects of school that were pleasurable or exciting were swallowed up by things that held little interest for Karen and many of the other parents. Looking back, they remember that their youthful curiosity was soon overtaken by feelings of boredom that merely increased as the school years passed. Pursuit of their natural love of learning was relegated to spare time.

Ruth:

I think that initially in elementary school I was excited. I remember being very excited about learning to read. And, we had Sally, and Dick and Jane, it wasn't very exciting stuff . . . but learning to read was fun. In grade three . . . I can remember Think and Do books that were pretty boring. I can't remember anything exciting I was learning.

Gina:

I don't look back on my school time as being anything that was really very stimulating or exciting. The things that I remember enjoying were the reading that I did at home and on my own. I got involved in, and loved, historical novels and I read a lot of those, and gradually got more interested in the actual history behind them. But I never enjoyed a history class. They didn't seem to be saying, they didn't seem to be addressing the same points at all. So I didn't actually study history in school with any enthusiasm. But I read a lot of history at home, and memorized all the kings of England and their dates for my own interest which, you know, in the States where I went to school, they didn't even cover that.

Christine:

Just recently when I moved I went through all my papers and I can't believe how many short stories and poems I actually wrote when I was in high school that were unrelated to school. I spent hours after school writing.

Remembering their own school experiences, these parents are determined to find a more empowering way for their children to



grow to maturity.

### **Seeking the Pedagogical Atmosphere**

The pedagogical decisions we make as parents are always influenced, either negatively or positively, directly or indirectly, by our own experiences as children. Nowhere is this more evident than in the attitudes homeschooling parents have about sending their children to a place where they believe another generation will encounter the same stifling experiences they did as children; where because of the nature of the institution, knowledge is fragmented and bureaucratized, crushing a child's ability to find his or her "teacher within" (Arons, 1986). In their experience, school was boring and to be endured. Home was free and a place where one could learn and explore the myriad of experiences that lead to discovering that teacher within. It is this kind of nurturing and free learning environment that homeschooling parents seek to provide.

When asked to describe which elements comprise such a learning environment, at first glance the representation most homeschooling parents portray might be labelled merely nothing more than a loving, supportive family environment. Christine uses phrases such as "nurturing, loving parents that are interested in the child's learning," "an adult that's available a lot of the time," and "a stimulating environment where things are flexible." Within this environment, a parent serves as a facilitator for

learning and provides children with opportunities to interact with people of all ages. For Ruth it is the freedom children have to learn in their own way instead of being forced into a framework that is designed to accommodate a system. Pat MacMillan (1991, p. 9), a home schooling parent, writes of "a structure within which a child is free to learn" and submits that in this positive climate, which is implicit, the child is interested, curious, questioning, and confident. Perhaps the essence of this nurturing learning environment best surfaces in Christine's comment about her own school days: the classes she enjoyed were the ones "where the teachers really acknowledged me." It is a recognition that "One needs strong, affirming voices" (Raine, 1986).

The environment described by these parents goes beyond the family situation where parents usually provide love and support for their children. It speaks of "pedagogic thoughtfulness [which] is sustained by a certain kind of seeing, of listening, of responding" (van Manen, 1986b, p. 12) and reflects their pedagogical intent, the desire that their children fare well in life (van Manen, 1991, p. 21). It is more closely aligned with Bollnow's (1989) concept of the pedagogical atmosphere.

In Bollnow's view, children need to feel trustful of their environment in order to develop properly (p. 37). A human being forms himself or herself according to the opinion of the environment, "the person becomes what the environment believes about him or her, and so the person forms himself or herself

according to this picture" (p. 39). Describing the importance of the pedagogical atmosphere, in particular the confidence a child has in both his or her world and the persons who stand in close relation to the child, he states

I do not have trust only in certain single attributes and virtues of this person, but in the whole person. And this general trust is to be realized in its basic importance as an indispensable prerequisite for education more than any considerations entertained so far. This trust is the basic constitution, the atmospheric condition of all education, (p. 39)

The child becomes what those in his or her world believe to be already true. Homeschooling parents argue that this is precisely the kind of atmosphere or learning environment they are able to provide for their children and which, conversely, the school system is not.

At the same time they would, no doubt, dispute Scheler's contention that "love and education exclude each other in real life because education presumes necessarily the imperfection of the other person, thus contradicting the positive values which the beloved holds for the person" (Scheler, cited in Bollnow, 1989, p. 45). Homeschooling parents would argue that the implication of Scheler's contention is the very message public education conveys to children: What you are now is not quite good enough; when you are finished, educated, grown-up, you could be wonderful; when you are finished you will have a future and be able to accomplish any manner of things; our goal is to finish you, to equip you to be capable, to help you to become useful. Homeschooling parents strive to cultivate in their children a

belief in themselves, that they are capable of exploring, learning, and becoming whatever interests them. Most of all, they are competent and capable of determining what they need to know and when they need to know it. In addition, as proficient learners, they do not need to rely on someone else's timetable. The child becomes what those in his or her world believe to be already true.

Kenny who is about to turn seven has decided that he would like to learn to read, the main reason being that he wants to find out what his almost nine-year-old sister, Nicole, is writing in her diary. He announces that he wants his grandmother to teach him to read because his sister, Nicole, has told him that 'Nana' taught her to read, an phenomenon that is purely a matter of perception. Nicole went to school until the end of grade two and so obviously learned to read there although at home never picked up a book to read for pleasure. When the family began to home-school, her parents encouraged her to read, surrounded her with books, read to her, and hoped that she would begin to read.

The only conversation about reading Nicole ever had with her grandmother took place a few months after she began home-schooling. Although they had gone to the library several times Nicole was never interested in signing out books. She merely walked along the aisles glancing at the shelves to put in time. If Nana suggested a particular book Nicole either said she wasn't interested in it or reluctantly agreed to take it. At those times her grandmother always felt Nicole was humouring her.

Driving in the car on the return from one of those trips, Nana asked Nicole if she didn't like to read because she thought she couldn't read and if she thought she couldn't read because she didn't go to school and that's where you learned to read. After a very long silence Nicole very quietly responded, "Sort of." Nana explained to the child that she already knew how to read and that if she kept reading she would get better and better and learn more and more words. She went on to explain that even she still didn't know lots of words but that as she read she learned more of them. She told Nicole that books could be one of your best friends because they were always there and you could spend happy times with them. No more was said about reading and the conversation turned to talking about the characters in a book they had seen in the library and what it must have been like to be a young girl living in Medieval times. About a month later, Nicole began to read, one novel after the other, some of them at a more difficult reading level than she had ever read before. And yet a little less than a year later, Nicole believes that her Nana taught her to read.

Where did her perception come from? Did Nicole react to what someone she loved and trusted believed to be already true? Does it spring from "a certain kind of seeing, of listening, of responding" that is made more possible in a loving and affirming family environment? Van Manen (1991, p. 54) states that "the pedagogical fact is that children are naturally conservative: They need security, stability, direction, support." They need

safety and security so that they can take risks. A loving environment bestows space and ground for being. And yet, it is somehow more than that. As van Manen (1982, p. 292) points out, by assigning words such as 'security' and 'love' to "pedagogic existentials" we inevitably convert to discrete entities what functions much more dynamically.

The pedagogic existentials that flourish within this pedagogic atmosphere are truly dynamic. Remembering that first year of homeschooling, Ruth describes their powerful effects; effects that were apparent to those outside of the family.

Jamie had been a reader when, as a little guy, he had been very rebellious. The one thing he had done was read. He would just sit out in the school yard by himself at recess and read. That had stopped by the time he got to grade seven. He didn't read much anymore. Nathan always got a headache when he read. Aaron was a non-reader and Becky was really little. But what we did in the beginning was to read aloud and Jamie was soon reading again and Nathan was reading, really almost for the first time for pleasure. It was all really exciting. To see the advantages right away in your own children. . . . One of our neighbours who was supportive and a good friend but very sceptical about what we were doing, said 'They hold their shoulders back and they look you in the eye.' I hadn't noticed that as far as outside. I felt they were happier and their confidence grew. But it was their peace, you know, the anger kind of went.

A loving and affirming family environment, a certain kind of seeing, of listening, of responding" and trust--that indispensable prerequisite for education--"the atmospheric condition of all education."

In addition to the trust, the flexibility of this pedagogic atmosphere grants children the time and space to grow and become;

to find their own teacher within. Christine talks about how important it is for Mellisa to have time to herself in the morning.

She gets up at least an hour before I do. She's always been a happy child and entertained herself very nicely. She gets up and makes herself breakfast and listens to story tapes, either in bed beside me or in the living room. Or she draws or whatever. If I had to hurry her through that time by herself in the morning she'd come to resent me.

It is not solely time to oneself that is important. Even more important is the opportunity to do things in one's own time.

Ruth:

Half way through the first year there was a little boy who was having a terrible time in school. They wanted to demote him from grade three to grade two. His mother was a single parent and didn't know what to do. So we were asked if we would look after him. We tried it for a day and he was a very active child. I said because we weren't into having a program I couldn't promise anything academically, but I'd certainly look after him while she worked. He just hung around with us and made things out of just stuff around the house. He was very artistic. Made airplanes and ran around a lot. I read a lot and he listened to a bit of that. He saw our kids liked to read and commented that he'd never seen kids reading because they wanted to read. For his birthday I gave him a couple of books. We had him for only six months -- from January to June. But by the end of that six months his reading level went up two grades -- from grade two to grade four. And doing nothing. His mother didn't really do anything at home with him. I think they had a bit of a workbook.

### **The Pedagogical Atmosphere and Independence of Mind**

Gina suggests that children who learn in this environment develop an independence of mind. "They learn to have faith in themselves, a clear understanding of who they are and what they

want from life and how to get it." An air of self-confidence, of being connected to an affirming inner voice, permeates this group. It is especially noticeable on outings.

It is just past ten in the morning when Sharon and her two daughters arrive for the homeschoolers' outing. Since the children have been Trick or Treating the night before everyone is a little tired. That could explain why seven-year-old Susan is wearing her housecoat under her ski jacket. Has the family overslept? But when questioned about it by the other parents, Sharon just rolls her eyes and says that Susan really likes her housecoat and that, in fact, she had to do some fast talking to get her to not wear her pyjamas as well. It is immaterial to Susan that no one else is wearing night attire. None of the other children appear to ask questions or tease her. Susan is completely at ease, as if wearing one's housecoat to walk around the Composting Demonstration Garden is a common occurrence. She likes her housecoat. There is no need to be dressed like everyone else.

What they want to wear or what they are curious about -- each follows an individual course. It is a crisp Friday afternoon in December. Parents and children are assembling to tour the Christmas display at Heritage Village, a facility quite accustomed to handling groups of children. But from the beginning it is apparent that this is far from the usual school field trip.

The guide divides everyone into two smaller groups and when she has finished the group quietly rearranges itself. As we move



through the displays, some children are with their parents, others are on their own. Frequently parents quietly discuss with some of the children the artifacts and their usage. Christine and Mellisa are engrossed in a discussion about the dolls and other toys. Donna and her children are contemplating life with wooden stoves and non-electric washing utensils. This is more than one-on-one instruction. This is sharing, pedagogically 'walking beside.'<sup>34</sup>

The tour guide, obviously used to dealing with unruly groups of school children, keeps trying to maintain her version of control by using her best 'classroom management skills.' Assembling the group in the general store, she begins her presentation. Pointing to an antique cheese cutter and explaining how it works, she says, "This machine was made by a company called International Business Machines--IBM. What does IBM make today?" Ryan, standing next to her, responds, "Computers." Tour lady: "What do we do when we have something to say? We raise our hands." She asks the question about IBM again, and not waiting for an answer, says, "That's right, computers." Several mothers exchange glances and smile.

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<sup>34</sup> As I think of the notion of 'pedagogically walking beside' I am reminded of when my children were learning to ride a two-wheel bicycle. I remember how I ran along behind, sometimes holding on to the seat, other times not touching the seat, merely holding my hand ready to assist. The whole time, my child was steering, choosing the direction, and in control (albeit with a mixture of doubt, fear, and exhilaration), with growing self-confidence. It is the same when we pedagogically walk beside--we do not lead or direct, we hold our hand ready to assist, and children grow in self-confidence.

In this group, children seldom raise their hands when they want to speak any more than most adults do in a group. They wait their turn. It is striking how adults assume rules and structures designed for classroom management are universal truths when dealing with children. As the tour guide finishes her presentation she announces that the children may have a cookie on their way out once one of the adults is positioned outside the door to make certain that none of the children "makes a bolt for freedom." Eleven year old Kerry rolls her eyes and says to no one in particular, "Right, let's make a bolt for freedom," hardly likely since these children are free to move where they want, guided mainly by their own curiosity.

Once outside the group disintegrates. Children with or without their parents move on to explore other exhibits: the horse trough, blacksmith shop, steam equipment, Japanese bathhouse, music store, print shop, school house. In the log cabin Christine mentions to Mellisa that this is the kind of house that Laura and her family in the Little House on the Prairie books would have lived in. Loft, ladder, candles on the Christmas tree, oil lamp, stove, all are examined carefully. In the school house, Colleen squats on the floor for a lengthy discussion with Seth about the various miniature figures standing stationary in the creche.

This day is further testimony to the fact that, for these families, learning is not merely a children's activity. In this group, the holy curiosity of learning is not bound by age. It is

evident when Gina orders support texts such as atlases and reference books for the children from the ministry and orders Latin text books for herself. "I've always wanted to learn Latin." When Len volunteers to find some proper graph paper for Gina "as a Christmas present" because the graph paper she has used to faithfully chart daily precipitation for the past two years now covers a good portion of the kitchen wall. When, for Medieval theme day, Dorothy talks to the group about how herbs were used at that time while five-year-old Frances, dressed in suitable peasant garb walks through the group with a basket of herb samples. When Kayla, dressed as a Medieval noble woman, works with her son, dressed as a knight, during his talk. When, for Architecture theme day, Gina researches and talks about how the safety elevator revolutionized height restrictions on buildings; Kayla, with her two boys, talk about triangles and domes, demonstrating their strength in building design; and Melodie helps her son, Denny, with his talk about the various theories on the building of the pyramids. When Gina, at the spring concert, recites The Walrus and the Carpenter, complete with different accents. When parents and children stand together to perform well rehearsed string selections, when families sing together, when the whole group drums and dances together. When adults and children pedagogically walk together.

## **Time and Space for Curiosity**

Within this environment, where children have confidence in their world and are stimulated by the people in it, their curiosity knows no bounds. Writing about the most recent activities of her homeschooled children, Neale Berjer-Scott (1991a, pp. 3-4) first describes their evening and daytime excursions to the bottom of the field where the melting snow has created a perfect spot for newts, frogs, aquatic insects along with the ducks and great blue heron who search for them. Overnight guests are brought home in a bucket and returned the next day. As well, she relates how Sara's interest in deer antlers has led to an opportunity to observe differences in the colour and texture of antlers, a tusk, and a whale tooth. "We noticed how an idea or a question will quickly lead to information, sort of a join-the-dots activity. Sometimes we make a list of questions and research them later at the library." Sara's new enthusiasm for Shakespeare has put the family "on the trail of more such fare." Sam, on the other hand, is enamoured with wood working and invents new projects regularly. He would rather buy tools with his money than candy or plastic toys. Among other things he built a small box out of cedar shakes, complete with metal hinges. He's beginning to show an interest in learning to read.

A few months ago, Sam theorized that if we read him the same book over and over, he'd be able to read it to himself eventually. Well, he revised his thinking, saying that he thought the same story might get boring, so we'll have to shelve that idea for the time being.

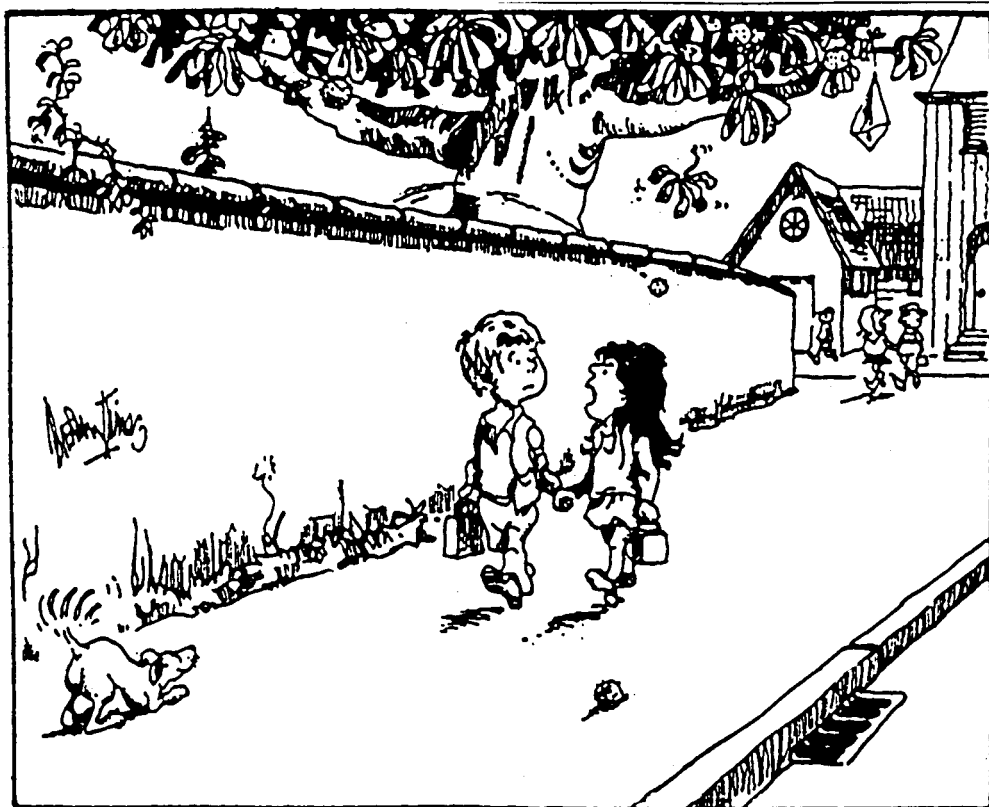
Pedagogic thoughtfulness permeates this learning environment, this pedagogic atmosphere. Neale's kind of seeing, of listening, of responding affirms for Sara and Sam their strengths.

Experiencing adults in their world who pedagogically walking beside them, children find their own power and their natural curiosity flourishes.

## CHAPTER 4

## INDIVIDUALITY AND THE PEDAGOGICAL ATMOSPHERE

"... today I  
learned not  
to dance,  
talk or  
sing when  
I feel  
like it,  
and to  
sit still,  
spell cat  
and count  
to ten  
when I  
don't feel  
like it  
..."



—Bierman, *Victor's Times*

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"And yet every child is an individual with interests and curiosities of his [sic] own. What better way to squelch a child and turn him forever against the delights of learning than by introducing him to a system of learning that denies him his individuality?" ---Issac Asimov

Passing through the kitchen one day, nine-year-old Sarah heard the sounds of an operatic aria emanating from the radio. Caught up in the moment, she listened intently and, when it was

over, exclaimed, "Wow! Is that ever beautiful!" What followed were the kind of dot-to-dot activities previously described by Neale.<sup>35</sup> First a trip to the library to borrow record albums of other operas. This led to video tapes of operas, books about operas, story lines of operas, where operas originated, famous opera houses around the world, costumes, singers--immersion in all facets of the topic. Other family members, not previously interested in opera, shared in some of the activities. As Sarah's mother, Gina, related, "Sarah's interest in opera has actually led me to purchase season's tickets, something no one who knows me would ever have believed likely." A chance moment, but it set in motion a chain of learning experiences of interest to the child. And now Sarah, at ten, has a knowledge of opera many adults could not match.

Six-year-old Susan received several sets of paper dolls for Christmas. The painstaking job of cutting them out--guaranteed to improve scissor handling skills, if nothing else--was the first task. Susan chose to begin with the set depicting Victorian people. As she cut, she became interested in the fashions of the period. Questions about fabric and how the garments were made led to an interest in clothing of different periods. Pictures in books and paintings as well as clothing in stores were closely examined and she began to identify such things as high or low

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<sup>35</sup> Beaven (1990, p. 203) identified this child-centred method of teaching/learning as "Connected Learning." The educational experiences are directed by the child and are connected to his or her interests and daily life experiences.

waisted garments, knickers, and ostrich feathers.

Looking at a picture of Mozart she observed the style of his coat, his shoes with big buckles, and his wig and speculated when he might have lived. The family read and talked about the wigs people wore in earlier times and discovered that the wigs smelled and had insects and even mice living in them. A natural follow-up was a study of Victorian hygiene and Susan learned that, in those days, people believed not washing the skin protected a person from illness. The question of living conditions of peasants and the upper class was also explored. One topic linked to another. An advertisement for the opera piqued Susan's interest in the costumes. This led to a trip to the opera which opened up a new area of interest and led to buying tapes of operas and Susan's determination to reach some of the high notes herself.

Eventually Susan turned her attention to the Colonial Era cutouts. This opened up the topic of the "New World" and she was fascinated to learn about the lives of the people who came to America. Pioneer life, First Nations People, the Gold Rush, children of settlers, one topic led to another. In one year Susan learned about history, art, and music, as well as armor, sewing machines, farming tools and sluice boxes. She worked with fractions while she baked vanity cakes and made soup and bread. And it all began with something many would deem to be a frivolous and innocuous toy. For Susan it was the beginning of a journey of discovery. Most importantly, it was her journey. Although Susan's parents encouraged her, provided opportunities for discovery, and



facilitated her adventure, it was her choice where she travelled and when she reached her destination.

Trevor had been in school for several years. These were not good years, for Trevor, his teachers, or his parents. Finally the decision was made to withdraw Trevor from the public school system and try homeschooling. It mattered not to Trevor for he was as uninterested in learning at home as he was at school. Several months passed and he appeared to be doing nothing. One Friday morning Trevor and his mother joined other homeschoolers on an outing, this one to a ship building yard. During the morning Trevor discovered a small submersible under construction. Fascinated by what it was capable of doing, his curiosity was awakened. He became intrigued by the wonders lying on the ocean floor, waiting to be explored. Suddenly he was absorbed in finding out about shipwrecks, especially the Titanic. He read about other ships and where they sank. Next he moved on to finding out about how ships were affected by the years on the ocean floor. A preoccupation with marine life came next. Trevor, approaching his early teens, was captivated by the secrets of the ocean and now considers a career in marine biology. A child "with interests and curiosities of his own" free to make choices in an environment that does not deny him his individuality.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The story of Trevor was told at one of the homeschooling meetings. I did not personally meet Trevor or his mother as the field trip happened several months before I joined the support group. Two years later, all of the people who were in the group at the time remember the trip and the outcome, but no one is able to correctly identify Trevor. He is probably from one of the families that has moved from the area.

## Honouring and Encouraging Individuality

The children whose stories I have just described operate in the kind of pedagogical atmosphere where a child's individuality is encouraged. Their stories suggest each of them is an enthusiastic learner. For their parents it is proof that, given an atmosphere of trust and respect within which they are free to make choices, children will choose to learn. John Holt (1983b) argues that

man [sic] is by nature a learning animal. Birds fly, fish swim, man thinks and learns. Therefore we do not need to 'motivate' children into learning --all we need to do is . . . give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for, listen respectfully when they are talking; and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest.  
(p. 293)

Although strongly believing that children have the capability to discern for themselves what they need to know and what assistance they require to learn it, there are times when a leap of faith is required for homeschooling parents to carry out their beliefs. In the end, however, their commitment to acting in a pedagogically thoughtful way--valuing and respecting their children's choices--overcomes their doubts. Reflecting on this thoughtfulness we are able to grasp some of the specifics of their pedagogy.

Ruth:

I'm torn between trusting children completely, letting children completely lead their own way, supporting and respecting them and trying to find that fine line between when they may need a little bit of encouragement, or even a push, over something that may be hard they may be resisting. But I'm more comfortable in supporting them than in deciding what it is they need.

The same kind of trust is unmistakable in Ruth's description of how Jamie did not "write much down until he was about 18." She knew that he was learning "an incredible amount" because he "read an incredible amount." She realized that he was taking it in even though he did not actually write. And now in university, Jamie wants to be a writer. Ruth suggests that writing for the sake of writing is like making a speech when you have nothing to say and suggests maybe when Jamie was younger he just didn't have anything to say. Here is an instance of a family trusting that, given the freedom to do so, children are capable of knowing what they need to learn and will choose to do so in their own way.

Gina and Michael have no difficulty making the necessary leap of faith. Believing that their younger daughter, Jessica, will eventually become more interested in reading, they demonstrate the same kind of trust Ruth had:

Jessica has not shown the same interest in learning to read that Sarah did. She did learn her letters at about three and seemed to enjoy that. And then she went through a long spell where she knew some words and knew what they meant, but wouldn't read. She wouldn't try to read, didn't want anyone to discuss reading with her. I don't know what that was about except that I sometimes wonder if she just didn't want to compete with her sister who was more competent at it. But we just left her and she's coming along. She's still not as enthusiastic about it as Sarah was but she's obviously not having any serious trouble with it so we're not worried about it. She has other things on her mind. I think that's what it comes down to.

When asked if she taught any of her children to read Colleen says that she "tried it once or twice in the early years" but that it had not "gone well so she just left it alone." Kerry, her

daughter, is now an avid reader. Eight-year-old Ryan, who "basically taught himself to read" has not been too interested in reading although for some time has been able to read to some extent. However, recently he has taken a great interest in reading novels, in particular the classics. In Colleen's mind her faith in children's ability to decide what they need to know and the assistance they require is confirmed.

As a newcomer to homeschooling, Charlene spent many weeks "arguing" with herself as to how to approach the task. She believed that children are natural learners, but felt compelled to get the children organized and working at the kitchen table every morning right after breakfast. The tasks she set for both Nicole and Kenny often ended in frustration for everyone and simple things seemed to drag out for the whole morning.

Then one morning about two months into the new way of life, Charlene excitedly explains, it all seemed to come together. Nicole was working in a puzzle book. She was looking for words that started with the letters PAN. One of the clues was "a part of the body." Realizing that Nicole would not know the word, Charlene told her the answer was 'pancreas.' When Nicole asked how to spell it, six-year-old Kenny ran for the dictionary while Nicole checked in a book about the body to see if the word was written there. Turning through the section about the eyes, Nicole noticed a sub-title about eyes being wet with tears and remembered that tears are salty. This intrigued Kenny, who wanted to test this statement, so both children worked hard to get their

eyes to water in order to taste their tears. Suddenly Nicole remembered that raw onions make your eyes water. Could they each have a piece of raw onion?

The children cut up onions--a milestone, for it was their first experience using sharp cutting knives--and they investigated various aspects of tears. When Charlene asked the children what they were going to do with all the cut onions Nicole suggested they fry them for lunch. Everyone agreed, but Kenny thought they should add a carrot, which he peeled. While Nicole was stirring the onions she noticed that the pan did not seem as full as it had, the onions seemed to be shrinking. A discussion about the water content of food and evaporation through cooking followed. The morning ended with a lunch featuring fried onions. From Charlene's excitement as she tells the story, it is obvious the experience was as important for her as it was for the children. It re-affirmed her belief about children learning in their own way.

Karen and Ron struggle with this leap of faith required to honour a child's individuality. Although in the end they arrive at the same place, they do not come to the decision from the same perspective. While Ron believes that the important things we learn are the things we teach ourselves, he still seeks more structure and self-discipline. Karen, on the other hand, has moved closer to the position of allowing the children's individuality to guide them. "I think I was concentrating too much on little snippets of 'you do this,' and 'I want you to do

this today.' 'There it is, I can see what we did today.' I wasn't concentrating on the overall you of things." Karen thinks she is now better able to let the children lead:

We have to be careful because lots of times the kids don't do what you would like them to be doing, or what you think they should be doing. This should lead to this, or why aren't you interested in this if you're interested in that. I'm only now starting to just lay back. Because it doesn't work, you know. You try to influence them in something or introduce a topic or get a book from the library. It'll be there for three weeks and if you picked it and they weren't really interested it won't even get opened and it'll go back on the due date. So now it's OK, but before it was frustrating to me.

While Ron sees himself as having more of a struggle when it comes to letting the children take the lead, he concedes that Karen's perspective is important. He suggests that "this dynamic is really making it work. If it was just her or just me, it would be a disaster. But the fact that there are two of us, I think makes it work." The dynamics Ron describes contributes to what others might term the pedagogical atmosphere in this family.

Although Christine believes that "kids will be interested on their own" and holds the opinion it is not necessary for parents to provide direction, along with some other homeschoolers she worries that "maybe we're taking a risk. It's a risky experiment to do on another person by not providing a little bit more direction because there aren't a lot of studies done." But whenever she begins to doubt, to question whether or not she should actually teach Mellisa things that have yet to catch her interest, one of the things she does is turn to authors like John Holt to renew her faith in what she is doing. Her beliefs are

reinforced by such comments as:

I doubt very much if it is possible to teach anyone to understand anything, that is to say, to see how various parts of it relate to all the other parts, to have a model of the structure in one's mind. We can give other people names, and lists, but we cannot give them our mental structures; they must build their own.  
(Holt, 1982, p. 145)

In Christine's mind, firm convictions such as these help to reinforce her commitment to honouring Mellisa's individuality. "I guess he's my main inspiration on homeschooling." Nevertheless, the struggle is never completely over for as much as she believes that children want to learn and will learn if the freedom is given, occasionally she finds herself providing more direction. "I know that every so often I do provide more school things because I panic and question my ability to let her just follow her interests."

### **Struggling to Preserve Children's Individuality**

Concerns like Christine's are not frequently voiced but when they are a common fear is evident. Parents have no doubt their children are learning. Rather the fear is rooted in an apprehension that in the future someone outside the family may misjudge the value of their child's accomplishments. Perhaps the individuality of the child<sup>37</sup>, honoured in the homeschool setting,

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<sup>37</sup> Individuality as it is used in this study refers to the unique combination of dispositions, qualities, strengths, and weaknesses of each person. Some of these characteristics may, in fact, be common to many people but it is the particular combination

will be overlooked as he or she is compared to other children. Parents are torn between honouring the individuality of their child while at the same time protecting the child's freedom to explore that individuality. And so Christine, worrying about the possibility of universal testing of homeschooled children, finds herself teaching Mellisa, at five years old, the names of the provinces and where they are located on the map. When Mellisa questions why she has to learn them Christine responds, "Well, you know, it's nice to know them, just in case." Christine admits that, at times, she feels a pressure to have Mellisa learn things so people will not question her decision to homeschool. "And I guess part of me thinks it'll impress the grandparents. I like them to see that she is learning something that they can see. And I think it reassures them."

Even Gina, a parent totally committed to respecting and encouraging the unique qualities of each of her children, reveals that she tends to be "slightly defensive."

I do tend to feel that maybe somebody's going to challenge me some day, somebody who's actually got some power to do something to me. I want to be able to haul something out and say, "Look, See!" I've got a file folder full of little scraps of drawings and stuff like that. If one of the kids actually sits down and writes something, which is actually fairly rare, I tend to keep that. But if I saved everything they actually did there would be this total pile of stuff and I don't know what whoever was checking on us would do with it.

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that denotes individuality. Just as no two people have identical fingerprints, no two people are exactly the same. Each person is a unique human being. Homeschooling parents endeavour to nurture this individuality, avoiding, if possible, pedagogical actions that result in homogenizing children.



At least it would look like I was trying.

While to date homeschooled children in British Columbia have not been asked to prove what they have learned, there is always an underlying fear for homeschooling parents that there will come a time when they will be forced to conform to society's prescriptions rather than honour their child's individuality. Returning home to the United States after spending a year homeschooling in British Columbia, Joan Miller (1993, p. 8) writes to remind other members of her former support group how fortunate they are to live in the province and to caution them to protect this atmosphere. Writing about her state's laws governing homeschooling, she outlines how she had to submit a timetable, detailed curriculum including evaluation methods, lesson plans, and keep a daily diary of activities along with a portfolio of her child's work. Even attendance records were required. Joan facetiously adds in parentheses the comment, "Max's absence on Friday was covered by a note from his mother." In addition to these requirements, as in many states, Joan's state annually tests all homeschooled children. Having to comply with these stringent requirements, while at the same time making an effort to honour their children's individuality, many parents eventually resort to creatively reinterpreting their children's activities in the language educators expect. Along with a portfolio of her son's work, Joan reports that she "submitted a 2 or 3 page summary of Max's progress at Christmas and a longer one at the end of the year, both couched in the pseudo-education jargon I

was rapidly perfecting."

Three factors intensify the anxiety connected to concerns over universal testing of homeschooled children. One, given the focus of child centred learning and the valuing of each child's individuality, it is not always a simple matter to "prove" what a child has learned. Two, parents have little way of knowing exactly what children will be required to "prove" they have learned. As Arons (1986, p. 112) points out, this uncertainty places the "family at a psychological disadvantage." Three, because what the children do is so much a part of their daily lives, it is not always explicit when they "learn" something new. Gina points out, "Most people have not a clue how integrated into family life homeschooling is. They imagine it as some separate thing we do instead of just being who we are. We've done very little in the way of formally teaching Sarah math, but we talk about math a lot and when we checked what she knew against the curriculum, she was right where she should be for her age."

Since parents are so much a part of this life, especially during what many of them see as the prime hours of the day other children spend in the classroom, they are able to follow each child's growth.

With only two children to work with and observe, it was easy to know exactly what they were doing and how they were feeling about it. Our brains were constantly cataloguing away little facts, consciously or unconsciously, like the words Ishmael misspelled, the new words Vita learned how to read, and the multiplication tables Ishmael found easy or difficult. And, of course, when the kids were happy, we were happy. When they were unhappy, or went through unproductive periods, we always tried to figure out

why, and what could be done about it. (Wallace, 1983, p. 104)

In an article in the homeschooling newsletter, Jan Hunt (1992, p. 4) writes:

Any parent of a preschool child could tell you how many numbers her child can count to, and how many colors he knows -- not through testing, but simply through many hours of listening to his questions and statements and observing his behaviour. In home schooling, this type of observation simply continues on into higher ages and more complex learning.

Sometimes the growth in a child's knowledge or maturity comes as a surprise, like suddenly discovering your children have outgrown their "good" clothes although you had not noticed specifically they were growing. As Gina explains it:

Most of the time I know what they're learning because I'm part of it. I think kids don't necessarily know what they have learned from any experience. Things happen to their base of knowledge that's not necessarily obvious to them. It's true too that observing the children I'm not necessarily aware of what they've learned. I think a lot of home schooling parents have had the experience of trying to teach their kids some particular thing and having it not take--the kid wasn't interested or whatever --and dropping it and finding a year later, without being aware that the child had paid any attention to it at all, that all of a sudden the child has mastered this particular thing, whether it's adding or the beginning of reading or whatever. It's there and you didn't notice when they learned it. That happens quite regularly.

### **Being Open to the Pedagogical Moment**

Rather than focusing on what the child has learned or accomplished (what has been), homeschooling parents focus on the

possibilities, the opportunities (what is possible). As they pedagogically walk beside their children they are open to the moments when a child's curiosity may be aroused or encouraged. In a classroom these times are often referred to as a "teachable moment." In the homeschooling environment, whenever possible, these moments have a priority in the family members' lives.

Van Manen (1991, p. 40) describes a pedagogical moment as a time in the adult-child relation during which something is expected of the adult, a time when "the adult must show, in actions, what is good (and exclude what is not good) for this young child." The essence of the pedagogical moment lies in the action. Sometimes there is an opportunity to reflect on the alternatives before taking action as Gina and Michael, Ruth and Greg, Karen and Ron described. At other times parents are called upon to act on the spur of the moment. Later there is an opportunity for "pedagogical reflection" which is "oriented toward understanding the pedagogical significance of events and situations in children's lives" (p. 41).

Pedagogically reflecting on the event and recalling Holt's contention about the impossibility of teaching anyone "to see how various parts of it relate to all the other parts" the question arises how Pat Muldowney (1993, p. 4) would document what her children learned during a recent unexpected learning experience. On an outing devoted primarily to running routine errands, she and her children chanced upon a store front window where two men sat making dentures. As the family watched, fascinated, the men

moulded the plastic, fit each individual tooth in place, and checked for fit. Pat and her children talked about her own childhood visits to the orthodontist and discussed retainers, impressions, eye teeth, molars, and incisors. More importantly, the children, instead of reading about it in a book, watched someone actually doing a real job. Concluding her article, Pat writes, "My older daughter looked up at me with a beaming smile and said, 'That's what I'm going to do when I grow up!'" What learning outcomes should Pat specify if asked to "prove" what her children have learned? Homeschooling parents question whether it is possible to enumerate the myriad of ways in which a child grows in understanding through experiential learning.

Families of the Greater Vancouver Home Learners group, as part of their contribution to Burnaby's annual Discovery Day fair, ran a mini science fair (Diana Sandberg, 1993). Demonstrations and 'hands-on' activities for kids visiting the fair were set up. During the day homelearning kids wore lab coats with buttons reading "Science Expert" as they helped other kids as well as adults complete the activities. In addition, part of their job was to explain the science involved. Given responsibilities frequently reserved for adults, the unique combination of strengths and abilities of each child were acknowledged.

How do these parents define or measure exactly what their children have learned from this experience? In all probability, if parents agree with Gina that education is "a state of being"

people find when they are open to learning, they are unlikely to see the value in measurements. Gina explains further, "It's not so much that you come from point A and you perform steps and you get to point B, but that you sort of open up and become person B." Karen would agree that this 'becoming,' this unfolding is a crucial element in homeschooling pedagogy:

It helped too when I saw my kids in other situations, out of the house with other kids or adults, and how they conducted themselves. Listening to Barry give directions on the phone to one of his friends, he said "we're east of here" or "west of here." I thought, how did he know that, you know? So it helped when I saw them with other kids and how they behaved in certain situations. I was really proud of them. If they were lacking in any kind of academic things, it was more important that they be good human beings.

Evidence of homeschooling parents' reflection on the importance of nurturing each child's uniqueness emerges both at the support group meetings and in their newsletters. In the April-May newsletter Lucy Bacon (1993, p. 4) shared some thoughts about how her children are learning in their own way. She states "I'm beginning to accept that they really are learning huge amounts all the time, far beyond my own tunnel vision of learning. But it's hard for me to determine what and there's usually little to show for it at the end of the day." As with the other parents in the group, it is an on-going struggle for Lucy:

No, it's not easy, especially for one such as myself who unquestioningly soaked up the kind of conformist-fact reciting which passed for education in the 50's and 60's. It is, rather, a big responsibility, trying to understand how my children learn, how best to facilitate their learning and what the heck they need to know anyway. . . .I've learned a lot since 1984.

Gradually, I'm breaking away from comparisons and descriptions of what my sons "should" be doing at a certain age. Neither of them is a conventional learner. I'm so proud of their uniqueness. Homeschooling is allowing them the freedom and all the time they need to discover their own special magic.

Two things emerge when pedagogically reflecting on these learning opportunities. One, by "concentrating on the overall you of things," the interactions between adults and children are grounded in a special kind of listening, of seeing, of responding. It is a kind of listening and seeing that allows parents to appreciate and honour the breadth of a child's understanding and growth. Rather than trying to make their children measure up to other children, these parents respect each child's individuality, his or her distinctive qualities. Two, the relationship between parents and their children is grounded in trust--trust that children are eager to learn and will learn, without direction, what is important to know. Within this atmosphere, children are free to make choices that explore their own strengths and interests.

While in any relationship adults and children influence each other, van Manen (1991, p. 15) argues that when the influence flowing from the adult is oriented toward the well-being and increasing maturity and growth of the child, any resulting action is, by its very nature, a pedagogical response. Reflection on that action is prerequisite of the pedagogical response and a constant focus of these parents. At the core of their reflecting is a search for the best way to respect and further their

children's individuality. In so doing they extend an invitation to children to question and search for their own answers.

### **Inviting Individuality**

The kind of valuing and respecting of children that encourages them to make choices is noticeable in the freedom children have in making the large or small decisions that affect their lives and contribute to how they see themselves. At the homeschooling meeting, Ruth and Tina are discussing alternate schools. Tina is new to the homeschooling movement and tonight she is looking for information on all aspects of it including registration. Most homeschoolers do not register with the public school system, seeking instead an institution they believe will give them more active encouragement and support in what they are doing. Talk turns to a particular alternate school where Ruth and Marg, another member of the group, have registered their children. Ruth mentions that although Becky is registered at this school as a full time student, she attends only occasionally. It is a school where children have complete freedom to choose what they will learn and when, something that most of the homeschoolers in this group regard as essential components of learning. But Becky, eleven-years-old, finds it too unstructured for her liking. She has decided that if she is going to attend, she would like to have more teaching take place. If very little actual teaching is available, she would rather learn by pursuing



her interests away from the school. Ruth says that since this is Becky's choice, it is unlikely she will register there next year.

For some families even the idea to homeschool originates with the children. Describing the influences on family decisions about education, Arons (1986) recounts the story of how respecting her child brought one mother to the decision to homeschool her daughter.

In the second week of first grade, I was walking Heidi out to wait with her for the school bus and she asked me why she had to go to school. I couldn't think of a single reason that I really agreed with. We just turned right around and came back home, and that was it. (Arons, 1986, p. 93)

Ruth relates a similar incident that brought their family to the same decision. "Nathan had asked why kids have to go to school and I thought I'm going to phone and see. So I phoned the school board to see about homeschooling."

Over the years, listening to and respecting children continued to be a component of the pedagogical decision-making in Ruth's family. Before Aaron was thirteen-years-old he thought he might like to take courses at the high school. Ruth thinks it is important for adults to have "faith in children's ability to decide what they're interested in and ready for." She adds that it is probably a good thing to be able to "taste many different things before you delve into one and decide what it is you want that's really going to be nourishing." On Aaron's behalf, Ruth phoned to inquire but the school said he had to be regulation grade eight age. Eventually he tried some classes there but decided they did not suit him. A year later he helped out when

the alternate school near their house changed locations. Aaron really liked the way the woman who started the school treated him. He announced that the next year he was going to attend the alternate school. He has not missed a day.

Even very young children are part of the decisions affecting their lives. Sharon, arriving at the meeting directly from work, is greeted with a big hug by her younger daughter, Angela, who had arrived earlier with her father. It is January and Angela has just begun pre-school. Although there is some concern that she may have difficulty fitting in with children who have been there since September, she seems to be liking it for the moment.

Attendance will be limited to the days Angela wants to go. I ask her about her favourite part of pre-school today. Not only does she not know, but she cannot remember exactly what she did while there. Sharon asks if she had painted, No; played at the sand table, No; played with the blocks, No; played in the housekeeping centre, No. Then I ask if she had a snack. Yes!! Seemingly a memorable part of her pre-school experience.

Angela, now fortified with lots of hugs from mother, runs off to play again, as Sharon explains that she and Dave struggled with the decision to enrol Angela in pre-school. One of the considerations was her older sister, Susan, a very placid seven-year-old who needed some quiet time away from the more rambunctious four-year-old. Sharon explains that often when Susan is working quietly, Angela is "bouncing off the walls" or when Susan, who likes to think carefully before answering, is asked a

question Angela jumps in with an answer. For the present, Angela's time at the pre-school is meeting the needs of both girls. When the adventure no longer suits Angela, another avenue will be explored. But in the decision, the parents' pedagogic reflection for ways to respect the individuality of both Susan and Angela will be clear.

Certainly the pre-school setting provides one more avenue for Angela to express her exuberant personality. This is apparent in Sharon's description of the four-year-old's first day there. Watching through one-way glass, she noticed that Angela was not at all shy and eagerly played with the other children. When it was time for clean-up Angela was "right in there because she is really good about pitching in to pick up." All of a sudden Angela stopped, put her hand on her hip, and said, "Wait a minute!! I didn't even make any of this mess! Everyone who was playing with this stuff get over here and help clean it up!!" Perhaps because her individuality is respected in the home setting, Angela is not intimidated by the group and appears comfortable expressing herself in this unfamiliar environment. Because her parents appreciate her individuality, she sees herself, at four-years-old, as an autonomous person, someone who has rights as well as responsibilities.

### **Nurturing Individuality**

Within this group of homeschooling parents there is a strong

belief about the importance of not only respecting but nurturing the unique qualities of each child. Christine comments about how Ruth and Greg respect their daughter Becky's shyness rather than trying to force her to overcome it. In Christine's view, rather than putting pressure on Becky to 'get over' her shyness, her parents treat it as part of character, something to be nurtured, something that lets her see the world in her own special way:

They've always respected her shyness and never pushed her and I think it's really going to pay off when Becky gets older. She may have to do scary things but she's always had that respect that she's entitled to. I think it's really neat.

Sarah and her mother, Gina, have been talking about the senior's residence not far from their home. Sarah concludes that she would like to do something for the people who live there. Not knowing what that might be, it is decided that Gina and the two girls will go on an outing to the home and inquire about the kinds of opportunities that might be available for a nine-year-old. When they arrive, Sarah meets with the person in charge of the home and explains why she is there. Trying to get a sense of what the child might be interested in doing, the woman asks Sarah what she can do. Sarah announces that she could play the piano for the residents. Wonderful! There is a Mother's Day tea coming up soon and it is agreed that Sarah will come and play at the tea. Other than agreeing to this, Gina does not comment. She does not tell the woman that her daughter knows how to play only one piece on the piano. Sarah wanted to do some kind of service and feels confident about playing for these people. Gina focuses on

what Sarah can do rather than drawing attention to what she cannot do. In this way Gina nurtures Sarah's exuberance and belief in herself. As Holt (1983b, p. 288) suggests, "It is their desire and determination to do real things, not in the future but right now, that gives children the curiosity, energy, determination, and patience to learn all they learn." Sarah's confidence in moving out of the safe environment of the family is reinforced. Perhaps, from the confidence will come determination and she will decide to learn other pieces to play for the residents.

Not that allowing children to find this determination is always easy. Barry is taking his third year of martial arts classes. Ron wants him to go to classes twice a week and frequently clashes with Barry over this. There is a concern that Barry needs to be more self-disciplined. "It's good for you. You get lots of exercise and you get better at what you're doing," he tells his son. When summer came, Barry wanted to take the summer off because he was tired of going twice a week. He didn't want to give it up entirely but he took the position that he would go either one night a week or not at all. Ron struggled with wanting to put his foot down and insisting Barry go twice a week but agreed that Barry could make the decision. Part of Ron's struggle stemmed from his memories of his own father's "army style of discipline" and how, as a child, he felt about it. But he also remembers when he was young he had not wanted to belong to things and only later realized the importance of them. "I realized what

it meant, how you can improve yourself. I don't want Barry to wander around in a daze like I did for 10 years."

Charlotte, going on 12-years-old, has decided that she wants to go to school this year. With her mother she visits a small private school in downtown Vancouver. It appears that the school is very structured, the work load heavy, and the discipline strict. However, the classes seem to be small and some afternoons are devoted to outside-of-the-school activities. Charlotte takes the lead in the interview with the headmaster and, in the end, she decides she would like to try the school. Charlotte is an extremely independent child and this appears to be a very traditional British style private school. Jean, Charlotte's mother, does not voice her opinion about how Charlotte and the school will each survive the days ahead. In the first few months Charlotte works very hard and is prepared to make many personal sacrifices in order to be successful. Her biggest complaint is that when a topic is introduced there is never enough time to fully explore it. She works overtime to do some of the extras she finds interesting and still meet deadlines. In the end it is the conflict over exploring topics more fully instead of spending time tediously copying exercises that brings the experiment to a close. Charlotte decides she will be better able to challenge herself on her own. She feels that copying sentences that are merely "busy work" is neither challenging nor productive and setting her own tasks will allow her to grow. But respecting her decision, Charlotte's parents nurture her belief in herself. As

Holt (1983b) points out:

A challenge is something that will stretch your powers, with the likelihood of confirming them; you want to take on a challenge because you have confidence enough that you can succeed. A threat is a task that seems beyond your powers to accomplish or cope with. (p. 163)

It may be that a structure focusing on busy work diminishes Charlotte's individuality. Instead she seeks challenges that will confirm her strengths. Her parents, Jean and Neil, honour Charlotte's individuality and respect her ability to make decisions that will provide the challenges that will help her to grow.

Evidence of the ways in which these homeschooling parents nurture each child's uniqueness as a person is also noticeable in the ways they deal with children other than their own. While children do not have "free rein" at support group meetings, they are free to engage in their own activities without undue concern for the "usual" proprieties.

As people began to arrive for the meeting, a mixture of straightback chairs as well as a piano bench stood around the perimeter of the room. The seats along one side of the room were positioned out from the stationary furniture in such a way that a passageway between them was created. I sat talking with Christine and Ruth, the vacant piano bench to my left. Sarah, without speaking to anyone, entered the room, slid aside the piano bench to gain entry to this passageway. She made her way down the passageway through the sliding glass doors out to the front yard and a moment later returned, sliding the piano bench back in

place before she left the room. As she passed by I asked her what she was going to do when someone sat on the bench. She said that it wouldn't happen or she would place tacks on the bench.

The procedure of using the passageway to go outside was repeated several times over the next fifteen minutes. No one commented. Hillary arrived with her baby and sat on the piano bench, by that time the last vacant seat in the room. Shortly after, Sarah returned. Seeing that the piano bench was occupied, she realized that she would have to find another way into her passageway. Undaunted and without a word, she simply removed the chair Christine had just vacated and carried it off down the hallway, leaving a permanent opening into her passageway and eliminating the possibility of someone blocking her access.

When Christine returned I explained the missing chair. Without question or comment she simply sat on the floor. There appeared to be total acceptance of and respect for Sarah's need to carry out whatever activity she was involved in. In her reaction, there was no suggestion that a meeting of adults has more import than children's activities, that children's activities are less significant or somehow frivolous. Van Manen (1991, p. 40) points out that pedagogical action may also include holding back, not taking any action. Perhaps Christine's acceptance was a pedagogical decision. Perhaps it was important to nurture Sarah's individuality. For who can say what Sarah was in the midst of learning?

Events such as meetings and outings are much like those



times when cousins and aunts and uncles gather as an extended family. According to van Manen (1991, p. 34) within a family environment "where the child experiences a profound shelteredness, security, trust" there is an "emotional climate of intimacy [that] sponsors outgoing interests, curiosity, risk, and independence in the child." As a result, the child can "seek and assert its own growing identity." The feelings of security and trust these homeschooled children experience may be centred in the family but these feelings are amplified by the pedagogical thoughtfulness of other adults in the support group. When children are nurtured and treated with dignity their curiosity is kept alive.

By communicating that children's activities and ideas have value and meaning, these adults also convey to children a sense of dignity, a feeling of self-worth. They would agree with Gilbert (1984, p. 167) who contends that learning is play as well as work, that it "defines us" and is "often unorthodox." She sadly relates a story that stands in stark contrast to this belief:

The small boy's name is not important to the story. But he had a toy Koala whose name was poetry. It was Fred Paul Bear, Whose Nickname is Pierre. The boy gave the name matter-of-factly whenever he was asked, and people nodded knowingly. And all was well. Then the two of them took a trip with relatives and something significant happened. Fred Paul Bear, Whose Nickname is Pierre's name was changed. The boy was changed, too, but I'm not sure just how. Maybe he stopped believing in poetry --I don't know. It happened in a restaurant when they were having lunch with their family. A waitress asked the bear's name and laughed loudly when the boy said, "Fred Paul Bear, Whose Nickname

is Pierre." Well, a silence fell on that table, and as the party was leaving the restaurant, the boy solemnly announced the bear's new name: Fluffy. Nobody laughed. (Gilbert, 1984, n. p.)

The pedagogic thoughtfulness missing in this story is unmistakably present in the daily pedagogic interactions between homeschooling parents in this group and their children. Those interactions, a way of being with children, create an atmosphere that is more than security and love. It is an atmosphere which encourages risk taking and supports children as they extend their comfort zone. It is intended to grant children the time and space to follow a path determined by their own natural rhythm of growth. Along this path, parents and children walk side by side.

### **Pedagogically Walking Beside**

While the term pedagogy is usually used to refer to teaching, van Manen (1991, p. 38) argues the original Greek idea of pedagogy has a "significance that still deserves our attention." He contends that this notion of pedagogy "has associated with it the meaning of leading in the sense of accompanying the child and living with the child in such a way as to provide direction and care for his or her life." He further submits that this guiding or leading is often the kind that "walks behind the one who is led." It is grounded in "watchful encouragement," a 'taking by the hand' as the child travels the road to maturity. "My world of adulthood becomes an invitation, a beckoning to the child." But while adulthood may be the

destination, the child does not travel alone. In this notion of pedagogy there is a sense of going with the child rather than giving directions for the journey out of childhood toward maturity. In this sense, homeschooling parents pedagogically walk beside their children.

Pedagogically walking beside, parents and children discover the world and learn together. The monthly theme days and weekly outings are one example of this. Parents and children often make joint presentations for theme days, each segment complementing the other rather than standing separate. Some parents jokingly remark that if the children are not interested in going on the group outings, it is "too bad" because the adults really learn a lot. Watching the adults on these outings, one is struck by their curiosity and eagerness to learn everything possible from the event. Caitlin's enthusiasm is evident in her description of an outing to the beach where "children and adults scattered onto the beach with buckets and magnifying glasses to discover, explore and collect." These parents are not there simply to visit with each other and chaperon the children. And when they pedagogically walk beside their children they become role models, showing children the enjoyment to be derived from learning.

These events, however, are not adult times. The emphasis is on sharing the experience; these are family times. Parents and children learn and discuss together. On an outing to the Sikh temple, Gina and her daughter Sarah examine some of the paintings in the museum and discuss prejudice and religious wars. At the

Composting Demonstration Garden, Len talks with his daughter as they examine some of the herbs in the garden. Parents wander in and out of the room where adults meet at the support group. Some never do make it into the meeting itself--they are too busy at the computers with the children.

Charlene cooks onions with Nicole and Kenny. Pat stands with her children watching dentures being made. Ruth takes her children to help in the neighbourhood day care. Christine frequently takes Mellisa with her when she goes to work. Ron took some classes in wood carving and continued to learn on his own. His son, Barry, showed some interest and they have spent time working together on their carvings. Curiosity, exploring, and learning have a priority in the lives of these families. Parents and children actively learn together as part of the daily life of the family even when that means making accommodations.

Gina:

The main problem I find is that I have trouble leaving enough time open, that when the teachable moment arises I can just chuck other things and do it and still get the rest of my life accomplished. We do that and then I find myself turning the garden in the rain or in the dark, or something like that, because I was sitting down reading books with the kids when it was sunny. I've done that a few times! It's one of those little accommodations that I feel has made me grow.

But whatever the accommodations, the rewards are immeasurable. Dave describes an outing with Susan and Angela to explore the rocks beyond the tidal flats. Overcoming their initial fear about crossing the muddy flats, Dave watched with delight as the children became caught up in the excitement of the

adventure. Dave recounts, "Something in them and myself began to change. In them, the uncomfortable feeling of danger passed as they began to touch and explore, and in myself my fear that I would never get them to love the outdoors subsided as the obvious came to bear."

Not infrequently parents learn from their children. Writing in the support group newsletter, Kelly Nyquist (1993, p. 5) describes working alongside her son one morning doing a math review activity. Although Kelly wanted to check the twelve-year-old's competency with large numbers, her son, Brock, was more interested in fractions because of a game he continually plays. To facilitate playing the game more smoothly Brock had taught himself a quick method of moving the denominator around. Kelly commented that she was glad she has not taught him how to multiply fractions and went on to describe the pleasurable experience:

We spent about three quarters of an hour as we showed each other our individual methods, comparing notes and generally having fun. We actually don't do it that much differently, we just approach things differently - me from the traditional way I learned in school, he from his own inventiveness to learn something he needed in order to play his game. . . .I was curious to see if his knowledge carried over to other practical times, so we had a game of inventing hypothetical situations . . . In other words, we had fun! (p. 5)

Stories such as these abound in the community of home-schoolers. As in all of the stories, two themes emerge: respect for the individuality of the child and the trust and freedom afforded children. Parents respect the uniqueness of each child and are prepared to accommodate it, nurture it, and treat it with

dignity. With that respect comes trust in their children, trust that they are learning and will continue to learn if given love and whatever assistance they request and the freedom to choose what they want to learn. Such a notion suggests that this trust and freedom, something given to children by the adults in their lives, empowers them. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that by honouring a child's individuality and acting with pedagogical thoughtfulness, parents "pedagogically walk beside" their children and, as a result, children find their own power within this pedagogical atmosphere.

## CHAPTER 5:

## KEEPING ALIVE THE CURIOSITY

## LEARNING:

may be untidy  
 is fragile  
 defines us  
   is often unorthodox  
   (irreverent, too)  
   may be inconvenient  
   is not sitting still  
   is not being quiet  
   is letting something inside out  
   wonders  
   makes mistakes  
   makes no sense

waits on self-esteem: I learn only as much as I think I deserve  
 to know.

## It also:

may arrive unannounced  
 won't be put off  
 is play  
 is work  
   is frustration  
   is necessary  
   feels right  
   hurts sometimes  
   changes us  
   can be diverted but not denied  
   is a sceptic  
   needs space  
   needs time  
   asks forbearance  
   can't be taught  
   knows  
   guesses  
   guesses wrong  
   (and knows it's all right)  
   has many disguises  
   believes  
   never stops.  
   (Gilbert, 1984, n.p.)

\* \* \* \* \*

All the people we call "geniuses" are men and women who somehow escaped having to put that curious, wondering child in themselves to sleep. Instead, they devoted their lives to equipping that child with the tools and skills it needed to do its playing on an adult level. Albert Einstein was playing, you know. He was able to make great discoveries precisely because he kept alive the originality and delight of a small child exploring its universe for the first time. (Sher, 1979, p. 9)

The argument could be put forward that it is a simple matter to nurture and encourage the natural curiosity of very young children, and perhaps, even of those up to the age of nine-, ten-, or indeed in some cases, twelve-years-old. Beyond that, according to many who would make this contention, only the Einsteins of the world--those rare individuals, the geniuses--operate from this "wondering child" mind-set. Yet this does not appear to be true for many families within the homeschooling community. Numerous adolescent and young adult children who are homeschooled seem to make their way in the world in a manner that continues to be grounded in curiosity and individuality. Their parents, however, repeatedly describe these children as "only average."

Writing about the activities of homeschooled teenagers, Llewellyn (1991) profiles a number of typical homeschooling parents who do not see their children as exceptional. She recounts the experience of one parent who was visited by education department officials to check on the family's home-schooling operation. As the officials were leaving, impressed by



what they saw, one commented that these were unusual children. The mother responded to the official, "That is where you make your worst mistake." Relating the incident, she adds further, "And I meant it. Our children are 'average.' There is not a genius among them" (p. 345).

Penny Barker, describing her five children, says much the same thing:

[what amazes me about their accomplishments is] that these are not "gifted" children--they spend most of their time doing what they want to do (after chores, that is). In the winter we do structured studies for a couple of hours each morning but that's about it. Most of their learning is completely spontaneous . . . I could go on and on about my average kids and their wonderful growth. It seems they have simply more time to grow and develop than other children I know who probably have more potential but so much less time to realize it . . . (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 345)

The 'average' children she refers to (p. 329) include her daughter, Britt, who first wrote for publication (an article on ponies) at age 12, sold weekly word search puzzles to a local paper at 14, and sold a second article on dairy goats at 15. At 16, deciding to pursue seriously biology and nature art, she travelled across Canada for six weeks with a Canadian nature writer and watercolorist and her field-biology husband as they gathered material for a book (Barker, 1990) on endangered species. Later Britt received a grant to participate as a team member on an Earthwatch Institute expedition to study wolves in Italy. She subsequently wrote a book, Letters Home, about her experiences. Now 22, Britt is a pianist and bush pilot. Her younger sister, Maggie, 17 keeps 30 Alaskan huskies and border

collies, conducts pack dog trekking and dogsledding workshops for ages 11 and up. Dan, 16, is a cellist; Ben, 14, a kayaker and boat builder; and Jonah, 12, a budding mechanic. All of the Barkers work together to run a summer program on their farmstead, where children visit for five days at a time, participating in farm activities.

Llewellyn also writes of a 15-year-old who, having passed the California High School Proficiency Test, now attends junior college at night (p. 343). During the morning he works as a tutor for retarded teenagers. In the afternoon he tutors first and second graders at a local elementary school. He earns \$300 month from each job. He also received money for a short story which was printed in the college pamphlet on how to write.

While this teenager receives a modest salary for the 'caring' work he does, other teenagers become involved on a volunteer basis. In a section of her book encouraging homeschooled teenagers to claim their voice in the world, Llewellyn relates the story of 12-year-old Andrew Holleman,

a Massachusetts school kid who saved a woodland in his community from turning into condominiums. Andrew researched zoning laws and other information, wrote letters to legislators and TV anchor people. He got his neighbors together and told them what was going on, won their support, and circulated a petition. The developers' permit was denied. (p. 320)

Writing a letter to Growing Without Schools, one mother described her 14-year-old daughter's volunteer work at a nearby nursing home.

She works two days a week from 10 AM until 3 PM. The residents adore her and the feeling is mutual.

The nurses have only praise for how well she has fit right in and all think she must be 18. She talks to residents, takes them for walks, holds hands, feeds them. The residents look forward to her coming. Most of all, Lauren loves to hear their stories of the old days. (We also like to talk about the criticism I heard that if my children don't learn to get up to go to school every day, they'll never be disciplined to get up and go to a job when they are older! Balderdash.) (cited in Llewellyn, 1991, p. 299)

Sometimes it is not easy for these young people to move out into the world in a caring way. Brian, a 14-year-old from one of the groups in this study, left school ten months ago. For the past several months he has been volunteering two or three days a week as a docent at an educational facility. He loves his "job" and appreciates that the adults he works with respect his contributions and treat him as an equal. He relates well to the touring school children. But it may soon come to an end. The difficulty began at the start of the new 'school year'. Brian no longer has a valid student transit card and the transit authorities will not accept his homeschooler status. Although he is taking one correspondence course (and therefore registered with the Correspondence Branch), he does not qualify for the student discount. Brian is forced to pay adult fare. As much as he enjoys the volunteer work, he may have to give it up because of the drain on his limited financial resources.

Kevin Sellstrom, 14, another "average" homeschooled adolescent, volunteers at a school for mentally impaired. His academic work includes math, history, English and science, and he takes piano lessons. Kevin is a senior patrol leader at Boy Scouts and also works as a den chief, assisting with a group of

first- through fourth-graders. In addition he rides and repairs bicycles. Outlining his activities, Kevin writes:

I am relatively experienced in repairing gasoline engines on cars, as well as bicycles, tractors, and other mechanical equipment. I learned these skills by watching my dad and other people when they repaired machinery. I like to build power supplies and other electronic and electrical devices that may or may not have particular uses.

In earning my amateur radio license, I had to learn to send and receive Morse Code as well as electronic theory and on-the-air operating techniques. As an amateur, I participate in radio nets as well as talk to other amateurs in person. My dad earned his amateur radio license in the 1950's and still has it and has taught me much of the electrical and electronic theory that I know. He earned his license when he was 15 and I earned mine at the age of 13. (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 342)

Kevin's mother, Bonnie, adds, "I should emphasize that our boys are not gifted. They simply have a curiosity about life and living that we have not tried to squelch. When a question is asked we try to find an answer to meet their needs" (p. 344).

Many would be hard pressed to classify the young people described above as 'average.' Yet within the homeschooling community, although these young people are viewed as innovative and notable, they serve merely as examples or, at best, role models. Why are these young people so highly motivated, resourceful, and self-confident? More importantly, how have these young people kept "that curious, wondering child in themselves" alive? And what part have their parents played in keeping alive that curious, wondering child?

Perhaps the answers to these questions are embedded in the pedagogic thoughtfulness in Dan Raymond's response to the comment that his homeschooled child is just as impressive as any other

homeschooler. He speaks for most homeschooling parents when he replies: "And yet that's not the point, is it? Homeschooling isn't about competition. It's about living a meaningful life" (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 360). The above stories suggest that as homeschooled children reach their teen years, many of them try to put the meaningful life into action as they move out into the world.

### **Goals of the Parents**

Since most of these homeschooling parents do not see themselves as instructors, but rather as facilitators,<sup>38</sup> few of them formulate clear learning goals for their children. It is the parents' opinion that since the children are learning what interests them, it is impossible to determine in advance exactly what will interest them tomorrow, next week, or two months down the road. Instead, parents, acting as tutors and resource assistants, answer questions, encourage creative and cooperative solutions to problems, seek out resources and information, and attempt to illustrate and model, through their own lives, personal growth and the joys of learning. This approach, frequently referred to as "organic home schooling" (Hunt, 1992, p. 5), is governed by the child's current interests. Many see

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<sup>38</sup> Further to van Manen's notion of a pedagogue as someone who "leads from behind," homeschooling parents see the role of facilitator as one who encourages, eases, and assists each child's explorations. In contrast, this suggests that instructors "lead from in front."

this freedom for the children as one of the strengths of home schooling.

Christine believes that the freedom to do what she's interested in doing allows her daughter, Mellisa, to control her own environment. Mellisa does not like a lot of structure and likes to decide what she will do. When asked if she has thought of planning things for Mellisa to learn about, sort of like setting out a 'game plan,' Christine says, "It'd be OK if I treated it properly. There is a difference between imposing and exposing." Christine feels that it is not reasonable to impose any topic or skill merely because someone else thinks Mellisa needs to learn it now that she's six and kids in school are learning that particular thing. On the other hand, exposing her daughter to numerous ideas through reading or various activities does not predetermine what Mellisa 'should' be doing. It allows the six-year-old to choose whatever she thinks she needs to learn. Whether an academic skill or a life skill, homeschooling parents seldom set an agenda for their children; for the most part, children learn what they need to know when the moment arises. When she wonders if she is doing the right thing, Christine looks to Colleen for reassurance:

I watch Colleen with her kids. Two of her kids are older so I can see that it worked. She's following the same basic approach and her kids are so wonderful. They're educated, they know a lot. I see it all the time that they're just always curious, you know, pursuing different things all the time. And Colleen encourages it. If they're interested that means she goes to the library to help them pursue it. If I have worries or doubts, I usually give her a call.

Instead of predetermining pedagogical goals, these parents reflect on whatever is happening with their children and act in a way that will strengthen curiosity and encourage exploration. If any of them have formulated any goals, those goals would be the same unwritten ones of non-home schooling parents: that their children will grow to be happy, well-adjusted, independent adults. As Gina explains it:

We never consciously set goals, sit down and say these are the things. I don't think very many people sit down and decide what their goals for their two year old are going to be. Essentially you let your two year old grow up and if your two year old is tempted to throw things around a lot, your goal is to get him to stop doing that. Your goals tend to be short term and directed to what's going on with your child at the moment. Sarah developed an interest in opera so our goal was to help her find out more about it and learn whatever she could through that interest.

Current interests determine homeschooled children's activities. If the interest is short lived, so be it. Parents believe that children are the best judges of what is important for them to learn, that children's interests will lead them to learn those things necessary to make their way in the world. Since parents do not establish "educational" goals for their children, other factors must be responsible for the fact that most homeschooled adolescents and young adults are motivated and resourceful.

### **Learning from Living**

Although parents' consciously formulated goals are not a

factor in "keeping alive that curious, wondering child," evidence suggests the "pedagogical attitude" (Bollnow, 1989, p. 46) governing their actions does. According to Bollnow, it is that kind of attitude which looks beyond the present and knows that the goal will be reached in the future (even some relatively distant future). It does so with an open mind--"full of trust in the unexpected which the future may bring" (p. 47). An equally important aspect of this attitude is patience. Patience does not want to skip the present in order to get to the goal as fast as possible. Patience "brings the person into harmony with the course of time" (p. 48). It recognizes that "organic or physical growth needs its time and cannot be accelerated by human intervention" (p. 46). Therefore it does not impose expectations on the child beyond those that can be achieved by the child. The pedagogical attitude is also filled with hope, a trust in the future and what it might bring, "the gift of unforeseeable possibilities" (p. 52).

In the context of this pedagogical attitude, examination of the interactions between homeschooling adults and children reveals several significant factors. These factors, in part responsible for the atmosphere predominant in homeschooling families, relate to how the adults perceive their role as parents and how they view children in general. Of course, none of the factors stand alone; each intertwines with another; each correlates to trust, patience, and hope.

Forming the cornerstone of the parents' pedagogical



interactions is, first, their belief that, from birth, children are proficient learners; and second, a trust that children are able to determine what they need to know in order to make their way in the world. Connected to that, parents believe learning never stops and that a child's innate curiosity, unless squelched, will unlock a myriad of learning experiences. In addition, they trust and respect their children as capable, contributing people who are part of the larger world now, not some time in the future. Finally, and the corresponding cornerstone, is the belief that a parent's role is to nurture, support, facilitate, and walk beside rather than lead along a path, and at an adult's chosen speed. The natural growth of the child is honoured and respected. Within this pedagogical atmosphere children learn how to be adults in world.

Christine:

Kids maintain that joy of learning they have as babies, toddlers, and pre-schoolers. Their socialization doesn't happen with two dozen kids exactly the same age. Their socialization comes from people of all ages. Mellisa is around babies with my work and she is around adults with my work. . . . When Mellisa is a little older we're going to start volunteering in a seniors' home. Mellisa is really amazing with seniors. She just has this magic. While other people hold back, she just goes in and takes their hand and has no problem. Doing that kind of work will be good for her. She can be around elderly people more and learn a respect for that age and learn from them because I think we learn so much more from our elders. We separate our seniors and working people from the children in the community. There's no mingling, just no acceptance of children being welcome everywhere.

Because they are part of the outside world, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is easier for homeschooled

children. "Not painless, but somewhat easier," Gina suggests. Remembering back to her own adolescence, she says, "I really didn't know what was going to happen when I got out of school. What was next? I hadn't any idea." She comments that in most societies children are "just there, they're around, they see everything. They see how life is lived, how different jobs are done, and they grow up understanding their place in society." In Gina's opinion most adolescents have no clear idea of how to get from where they are to anywhere else. They are told they must get more education, go to university, in order to get a decent job, but "beyond that they have no real understanding of how to fit into society at all." On the other hand, homeschoolers strive to get their children out into the world to interact with adults in all kinds of situations. Karen agrees that homeschooled children are often around more adults than other children. She thinks that because children go with you when you do certain errands or chores or projects, "they see how you interact with other people."

Having children involved in adult daily life prepares them for adulthood. Gina believes strongly that children raised in the home environment learn to have faith in themselves and grow to be more confident, self-assured people. She adds:

I have to focus on the increments in the self-assurance that children get from being raised in the home and not in institutions. I don't think children can learn how to behave as adults in society if they don't observe adults behaving. If they're excluded from adult society they have to start over. It's just like if you said, "Okay, there's such a thing as reading but we're not going to show you any books. You're going to have to work it out,

somehow, on your own." Kids don't get to see adults being put in awkward situations and dealing with it. Obviously they do see this in families, but people spend less and less time amongst other people in their family life. They spend their time with other kids who are no more socialized than they are. I think a lot of kids rarely see adults coping with problems. The only thing they see is television. The magic solutions that occur on television don't work very well in the real world.

Many of Gina's concerns are reminiscent of a cartoon that appeared in the newspaper a number of years ago. A mother and father are discussing their child's school work. The caption reads: "What bothers me is that Jack, Jane, and Spot never mention inflation, labour-management problems, mortgage interest . . ." (Norris, 1973, p. 4).

One reason the transition from adolescence to adulthood appears to be easier is that homeschooling parents value and respect their children's opinions and talents in much the same way they would another adult's. Homeschooling parents David and Micki Colfax who homesteaded in northern California portray it this way:

[Grant] and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Drew were learning in much the same way that children have for centuries--by listening and by doing. There were days the discussions would go on nonstop . . . we'd developed our own oral traditions. It wasn't as unequal an exchange as we might have assumed. We certainly knew more about politics and world affairs, and art and geography, but when it came to putting together a homestead, the boys could see that we were as much the novices as they were. So we figured out things together--the best place to fell a tree, how to position the house, what was wrong with the generator, where to put the garden. We had the advantage of being able to draw upon the stack of how-to books we'd accumulated, but when it came right down to getting things done, the boys' perspectives generally proved to be every bit as valuable as ours. (Colfax & Colfax, 1992, p. 115)

Parents have the same respect for their children's abilities regardless of the age of the child. Neale Berjer-Scott, (1991b, p. 5) in one of her frequent letters to other homeschoolers, writes:

We have leaped into a new business venture: selling imported Nepalese-made sweaters (yak and sheep wool). Sara has helped out a lot by writing up receipts and making change -- duties she rather enjoys and in fact volunteers for. She's able to match up interest with ability in real-life commerce. Besides the addition and subtraction practice of working with money, we've been dealing with the percentages of provincial sales tax.

The practice that Sara receives not only improves her skill level but also enhances her self-esteem. She is a contributing family member in a real-life situation. A part of the world is brought into the home and Sara is learning the kind of life skills that will help her move out into the world with ease. In addition, like the Colfax boys, Sara is seeing her parents try a new venture, learning as they go. Sara and her parents, Micki and David and their sons, all learning, helping and working together in an atmosphere of respect. Bach (1977, n.p.) writes:

Learning  
is finding out  
what you already know.  
Doing is demonstrating that  
you know it.  
Teaching is reminding others  
that they know just as well as you.  
  
You are all learners,  
doers, teachers.

Nancy Wallace, suggests that we all, children and adults, can benefit from a family structure where everyone works and learns together.

we have to bring more of the "world" back into our homes. Traditionally, homes were busy, productive places where people grew, cooked, ate and preserved wholesome food, doctored and were doctored, taught skills and learned them, produced goods for sale, and even made their own entertainment. If we didn't rely totally on doctors, schools, psychologists, outside employers, television, or possibly even little things like electric can openers, homes could once again become real living centers, satisfying and nurturing places not just for children but for all of us. (Wallace, 1983, p. 27)

Bringing the world back into their homes sometimes provides homeschooled children an opportunity not only to contribute to a situation but, because of the naive manner in which they approach a task, offer ingenious solutions as well. They are not bound by previous tried and true solutions to problems. Like children everywhere they have the potential to "make great discoveries" with "the originality and delight of a small child exploring its universe for the first time" (Sher, 1979, p. 9). But in contrast to many other children, these homeschooled children are taken seriously. Granted the Colfaxes, because of their homesteading experiences, are not representative of all homeschoolers. Nonetheless, while the following incident is exceptional, David's and Micki's attitude toward their children--respecting their opinions and suggestions as valid--is typical of most home-schooling parents.

The Colfax family, after several years of struggling to overcome their water supply problem, finally decided to pipe water from the neighbour's spring. A major undertaking, the pipe had to cross two steep canyons and pass through dense woods. PVC pipe sections had to be glued together and wired to trees along

the face of a steep cliff--one too steep for anyone to get down safely. After discussing the logistics of the problem, Micki and David and the four boys reached the consensus that the line would have to go down the cliff and eventually back up again. Five year old Reed offered another solution. He suggested they lower him on a rope so that he could join the sections of pipe together. After much discussion, a rope was tied to his waist and he was slowly lowered down the face of the embankment. Micki and David describe the scene:

[Reed] held a can of glue in one hand and a clump of rags for cleaning off the pipes in the other, a roll of wire and linesmen pliers in his back pocket. As we held him there, dangling, Grant lowered down the end of the pipeline with another line, and Drew, on the other side of us, let down another section of pipe. Reed pulled in the floating two pieces, wiped the ends clean, applied the glue, and jammed them together. [He then] stuffed the glue and rags into the front of his shirt, twisted around, and took the wire and pliers out of his pocket. It took him only a few minutes to wire the suspended pipe to the base of one of the trees. We [then] pulled him up, moved twenty feet farther along, and lowered him again. (Colfax & Colfax, 1992, p. 129)

Although the circumstances in this situation may be unusual, few parents--homeschoolers or not--would consider letting a five-year-old engage in such a dangerous enterprise. However, the significance of the incident lies not in the "daring deed" itself, but in the pedagogical thoughtfulness of the parents. If we look behind the excitement of the event, what the incident illustrates is an attitude that is commonly held by many home-schooling parents. It is an attitude that tells children they are capable of taking risks and solving problems--real life problems

--and they are capable of doing so now, not sometime in the future. That is not to suggest children do not need adult supervision, someone with more experience to walk beside them. But what it does say to children is: Have faith in your ability to solve problems for yourself, I do. As Bollnow points out, a person becomes what the environment believes about him or her and forms himself/herself according to this picture. Homeschooling parents hold a trust in the whole child. They trust in the child's evolving competencies in all areas of life. Perhaps this is made possible because they are with their children every day and see the child in all kinds of situations. Whatever the facilitating factor may be, the outcome surfacing is a strong sense of independence in these children--an independence that helps children keep alive their curiosity and wonder.

### **Becoming Independent, Resourceful Self-Learners**

As parents trust their children to make sound decisions they also provide them with guidelines that foster feelings of independence. While it is true all parents try to provide their children with the tools needed to keep them safe in the world, many homeschooling parents seem to encourage their children to move about in the world earlier than many other parents. Christine thinks about other children Mellisa's age of her acquaintance and how young they seem: "My friend has a six-year-old and she's very, very young and babied." At those times,

Christine wonders if she should baby Mellisa more, if she is encouraging Mellisa to grow up too quickly. But "then I think no." She concludes that Mellisa "feels very empowered or self-confident" because she is able to do things for herself. The difficulty arises when others don't acknowledge the child's capabilities and level of independence.

Christine:

When Mellisa and I walk down the street she often runs ahead. She knows not to cross the street unless I say, but she will ask, "Can I cross the street by myself?" And if I say, yes, she runs ahead. When she's with a friend of mine, the woman always makes Mellisa stay with her. Mellisa finds that really frustrating because she knows she can do it. She knows what she's capable of and she knows her limits. It's amazing to watch her move on to the next level as well. I'm a volunteer at the Folk Festival and Mellisa volunteers with me so she knows the grounds really, really well. When we were there this summer she met another of the homeschooling kids who's 10. He asked if he could take Mellisa over to the kids' area. I let them go for an hour at a time and they met me. I knew that if Mellisa got separated from her friend she would know what to do. I have the same approach to her being on the ferry. She asks if she can walk around by herself and I say, "Yes, what are the rules?" "Well, I don't stop anywhere and I don't talk to people. I come right back." And she trucks off, feeling just great. "Can I do it again?" And I say, yes. I was just letting the rope out a little bit more. I always wondered how I would know when to let it go, but you do. And they let you know.

Karen and Ron are two other homeschooling parents who have reflected carefully on the question of "letting the rope out." Their struggle involved allowing Barry, not yet eleven-years-old, to move about the city by himself. Some time ago, Barry developed an interest in an activity that takes place a fair distance from their neighbourhood. They have carefully worked out a way to



encourage Barry to be independent. And while it does not stop Karen from worrying, as all parents do, she trusts that Barry is capable of handling the level of independence he has been given.

Karen:

Barry often goes to Gastown to a games workshop. For the first six months or so, Ron would take him down every time he wanted to go. Then he would walk around for a couple of hours or so and pick him up and bring him home. Sometimes he'd have Michelle with him. It was very time consuming. It wasn't so bad when he was just going down to build or paint his models, but sometimes he wants to play games and a game might take anywhere from three to six hours. So Ron started taking him down and leaving him there for the day and picking him up at six o'clock or whenever they close. Now he's gone down twice on his own on a Saturday. I was really nervous about it. Very nervous. It's one bus, but he gets off in an area that's not very nice and walks to the shop. Ron told him to just run if anyone tried to bother him. He goes down on Saturdays, usually, or in the afternoon when it's high traffic. Then one of us will go down and meet him.

Barry proudly tells me that he is the youngest person at the games workshop. Karen says that he spends hours carefully reading the very thick manual that explains the intricacies of the games. He works very hard to participate on an equal footing. The fact that he is increasingly able to do so along with the more recent challenge of getting there on his own have brought about an increase in his self-confidence as well as helped him feel more independent. His parents' trust has encouraged him to be less fearful of the unfamiliar.

The independence these homeschooled children acquire because of the trust their parents place in them is noticeable in other areas of their lives as well. It may, in fact, be an element in why most of them are enthusiastic self-learners. Certainly one

aspect of being a self-learner is the ability to welcome challenges. Heesoon Bai (1991, p. 10) describes how overcoming the uneasiness of not knowing something facilitates becoming a self-learner. She suggests that through repeated encounters with exciting or interesting activities requiring concerted effort, the "learner's capacity to tolerate uncertainty and difficulty will increase;" much "discomfort, or even fear, of them will be replaced by the desire for exploration and discovery." When the learner begins to feel comfortable with uncertainty and challenge and "welcome them for bringing deeply satisfying rewards of knowledge and mastery, he or she has become a self-learner." Unquestionably most homeschoolers seek opportunities for exploration and discovery, many of which have elements of uncertainty.

Certainly Carey Newman, a 14-year-old from British Columbia, welcomes challenges fraught with uncertainty as he pursues a career as an artist. He began at age 12 with a solo show of his wildlife sketches in the Sooke museum gallery. He sold over half his drawings during the two month exhibit. The following year he started on Northwest Coast First Nation<sup>s</sup> art. His father, a First Nation artist, showed him the rules of First Nation design. When his father received an application form for a juried art show, Carey jokingly suggested that he should enter his First Nation designs and silk-screen print them.

My parents turned it from joke to matter and said that I should try. They supported me financially by lending me the money to enter the show, and to buy silkscreening material. An artist friend helped

me to do the silkscreening. Two of my designs were accepted and I went on to sell 59 prints over a period of ten days, bringing in just over \$2,000, from which I paid back my parents and bought more equipment and supplies to continue with this art form. (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 311)

Being open to challenges and uncertainty in life is even more evident as homeschooled children reach later adolescence. Young adults leave themselves open to a number of possibilities rather than setting a pre-determined course of action and are quick to forego those activities which do not offer opportunities for growth. After a number of years of homeschooling, Ruth's son, Jamie, chose to go on to post-secondary education. Describing how her son dealt with the experience, the pride in Ruth's voice is evident but also unmistakable is her admiration for Jamie's attitude toward various aspects of it.

Ruth:

[Many homeschooled young people] haven't any patience for taking something and not learning something from it, just taking it for credit. When Jamie went back to college and then to university, if he wasn't learning anything from a class he made sure he transferred to something where he was learning because he wasn't used to wasting time and getting credit for just being there and for doing the work. He had high standards as far as wanting to get something out of it. That was certainly different from me. I went through university and just wasn't there a lot of the time except for some of the things like literature classes. A lot of it I just put in the time to get the credit and get the degree and you really lose a lot of yourself in the process. I'm very glad these young people are not trapped by that sort of attitude, of selling their time, or a part of themselves, in order to get something.

To decide, as Jamie did, to take responsibility for his education instead of "putting in the time" and "getting credit for just being there," requires self-confidence, a belief that

you know what you need and what is in your best interests. It appears that homeschooling parents' feelings of trust, patience, and hope as well as their pedagogical thoughtfulness--increases the children's feelings of self-confidence and independence. As a result, homeschooled children become resourceful problem solvers. They are not afraid of uncertainty. Their curiosity remains alive. If one door closes, another opens.

After two years of university, Jamie began to feel that his life was on hold. Interested in learning to speak French he decided to leave school and spend a year in France. Where better to become proficient in speaking French! Once on the continent, he discovered that it was easier to find work in England than in France so he chose to live in England for a year and spend some time travelling in France before his return. While he did not become as fluent in French as he had hoped, working and living in London for a year offered other rewards. Currently he is taking fourth year university courses but a new interest, music, has captured his attention. Attending university part time as well as teaching English as a Second Language part time, Jamie is teaching himself to play the trumpet, violin, and saxophone. In addition to the three instruments he recently purchased, he also has several guitars. Jamie is obviously self-motivated to learn whatever interests him and he appears to have the self-discipline to carry any endeavour to whatever conclusion is right for him. Eventually he will complete his degree and have more time to pursue other avenues that arouse his curiosity.

In part, homeschooling parents' own curiosity works to keep alive the natural curiosity of their children. Parents serve as role models when they continue to seek learning opportunities, get excited about things, and are involved in many facets of life. As they walk beside their children, their own questioning and learning become a part of their pedagogical actions.

Describing why he believes this questioning to be of prime importance, Robert Rodale writes:

I now believe, though, that real learning occurs when you become able to ask important questions. Then you are on the doorstep of wisdom, because by asking important questions you project your mind into the exploration of new territory. In my experience, very few people have made a habit of asking them. Even in my own case, I had to wait until I'd almost totally forgotten the experience of schooling to be able to switch my mind into the asking as well as the answering mode. (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 35)

Operating from a mind set that is not afraid to question, that sees questioning as a growth possibility, does much to keep curiosity alive. Homeschoolers operate under the assumption that questioning is part of actively learning, that, in fact, we do not learn if we do not question. Their pedagogical actions are grounded in this belief. Certainly most of them would agree with Holt's contention that "Learning is not the product of teaching. Learning is the product of the activity of learners" (cited in Llewellyn, 1991, p. 38). Llewellyn also promotes this principle when she suggests young people should learn on their own:

anyone who has learned basic skills in reading, writing, and math computation can learn nearly anything they want to, on their own. Books, libraries, generous and knowledgeable people, and other resources make this possible. Young or old, anyone can in fact

become an expert in a field they love. (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 38)

Curiosity is kept alive by questioning, by searching for answers. Brock Nyquist, who wrote the following to the home-schooling support group newsletter, looks for answers that will help him make some decisions.

Dear Editor,

For the last few years I have been interested in becoming a pilot. I have been reading everything I can find on the subject and have learned quite a bit about piloting a plane. I have also learned a lot about the history of planes and flying. I am learning about the aerodynamics of aircraft and have designed several successful gliders. I also build model airplanes.

I am now discovering that there is a lot more to flying a plane than I thought and I need some help. I need to know what else there is to learn about flying a plane. What should I study? What skills do I need? For example, I want to know what a pilot would use math skills for. (Nyquist, B., 1992, p. 3)

This letter in itself is not unusual--young people often write letters to help them make career plans. What sets this letter apart from others is that the eleven-year-old has the opportunity to use the answers he gets to plan his own learning. Brock, his curiosity aroused, will learn many things other children learn, but he will select those things that interest him and lead him in a direction of his own choice. In the process, his independence and level of self-confidence will grow. The child's individuality and strengths will be built upon, nurtured, and take priority over an outside definition of what learning is about. Some of what he learns may look different than what other eleven-year-olds learn, but his parents feel reassured that

whatever Brock learns will stem from his own curiosity.

### **Learning Has Many Disguises**

While Brock's parents may monitor the kinds of things he is learning, ultimately they accept and respect the route he chooses to move into the future. They are not concerned that he may have deficiencies in his education. They would take heart from reading about other homeschoolers such as Joshua Smith (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 347). Joshua, now in college, left school in his junior year. For the first year and a half after he left school, Joshua worked, studied, and travelled. Living in the United States with his parents, he returned to his home in Canada for a visit. In addition, he travelled to several areas of the United States. During this time, he developed an interest in photography and psychology. But in Joshua's mind, something more important happened: "I discovered myself. . . . Leaving school gave me no one to rebel against so I had more time to self reflect and change subtly, to become someone I felt comfortable with." As Ron explains it when speaking about what his son, Barry, needs to learn:

Intuitively I think that education is how to live.  
It's what you want, what you desire in life. So what  
you choose in your life is your education, whatever  
you want to do, you're going to educate yourself in it.

Learning defines us (Gilbert, 1984). Regardless of how convinced homeschooling parents are in their belief, they do not come to this position without reflection and seeking support from

both inside and outside the homeschooling community. They offer as evidence a number of authors who, homeschoolers assert, support the contention that we educate ourselves in those things we need to know.

Resnick (1987), speaking of the discontinuity between learning in school and the nature of cognitive activities outside of school, argues that institutions must find ways to reintroduce key elements of traditional apprenticeship (p. 17). Her contention that school should focus its efforts on preparing people to be good adaptive learners so they can perform effectively in unpredictable situations is seen as lending support to the homeschoolers' position regarding learning from life.

In an article in the CHEA News (Canadian Home Educators' Association of B.C. newsletter), Frank Smith, writer and lecturer on reading, writing, and children's literacy, is quoted as suggesting the people who really teach you to read and write are the authors that you read. According to the article, Smith believes that you can teach yourself to read by reading a newspaper (cited in "One man's guide to better literacy", 1992). To do this you have to read something that you know a good deal about in the first place. For example, if you know a good deal about sports, you read the sports report. He submits that there is a lot of evidence to suggest that is the way kids learn to read and write. In other words, we learn whatever we are interested in finding out about.



Jan Hunt, homeschooling mother, in a letter to the support group newsletter comments that "finding out" is the essence of their homeschooling curriculum:

regardless of what specific topics are covered, our larger curriculum is always "how to learn" and "how to obtain information." In an age of "information explosion," it is no longer meaningful or realistic to require rote memorization of specific facts. Not only are these facts meaningless to the child unless they happen to coincide with his own current unique interests, such facts are simply too numerous and many will, in any case, be outdated by the time he is an adult. But if he knows how to obtain information, he can apply that skill throughout his life. (Hunt, 1992, p. 5)

Regardless of age, curiosity drives the questioning, the finding out. Many homeschoolers would like to see greater access to the community to enable children to find the answers they seek. Karen suggests that it would be helpful if when kids showed an interest or wanted to learn about certain things they could interact more with society. It is sometimes difficult for kids to find out about things whether topic is art, aviation, or offices. "It would be good if children could have someone who would be like a mentor. There's nothing like that."

For homeschoolers, a mentor is not to be confused with a teacher or instructor. Rather a mentor is an adult who shares an interest and has a level of expertise in that area; is respected by other adults; someone who takes a personal interest in the young person; and someone who gives advice, guidance, and support (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 125). It is a relationship that takes time to develop. While the young person learns from the mentor, the relationship is about more than knowledge. Nancy Collins states

that when selecting a mentor, "you should try to choose someone for whom you feel admiration, affection, respect, trust, and even love in the broadest sense" (cited in Llewellyn, 1991, p. 126). The fact that it is sometimes difficult for children to establish mentor relationships simply reinforces the parents' role as a facilitator, someone walking beside.

Parents trust their children will learn what they need to know and, more importantly, will remain curious. Their learning may be unorthodox and have many disguises, but in the end they will make their way in the world with greater ease. The children will become "expert novices" (Glaser, 1987, p. 5). They may not possess sufficient background knowledge in a field, but they will know how to go about gaining that knowledge.

Looking toward the future, 16-year-old Kim Kopel acknowledges that she does not have all the answers to her questions yet, "but as I continue to resolve and find answers, things are falling into place and becoming clear to me" (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 373). As Kim says:

I've realized that it's okay to not have all the answers. I know now that all through my life I'll be growing, and that going through these periods of confusion and frustration is just part of the lifelong process of growing up. Instead of dreading these processes, I should welcome them, because each time I go through another one of them it means I'm moving onto the next stage of my life. (p. 373)

In the minds of many homeschooling parents their own curiosities and interests were swallowed up by the demands of the school system. It is important that this not happen to their own children. They respect the fact that it takes time "to find the

teacher within." Homeschooling parents seek to provide a pedagogic atmosphere based on a number of elements: trust their children are proficient learners; given time and patience, children will unfold as they are meant to; and hope in the future opens endless possibilities for learning. Perhaps Llewellyn sums up the stance that children, by keeping their curiosity alive, by questioning and seeking their own answers, will acquire whatever education they need to successfully make their way in the world:

In the end, the secret to learning is simple: forget about it. Think only about whatever you love. Follow it, do it, dream about it. Then one day you will glance up at your collection of Japanese literature, or trip over the solar oven you built, and it will hit you: learning was there all the time, happening by itself. (Llewellyn, 1991, p. 44)

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## CHAPTER 6:

## THE PEDAGOGY OF LEARNING FROM LIVING

And yet how would one even begin to describe it?  
. . . we are too busy with one another to permit  
the indulgence of such reflection. But now, as I  
attempt to recapture in writing the meaning of  
this experience, I do not doubt that at that time  
I knew the presence of something that was real  
and which is not difficult to recall. (van Manen,  
1982, p. 286)

In an effort to discover the pedagogy of homeschooling, it is relatively easy to journey into the landscape, enumerate the various actions of a group of homeschooling parents, and offer an interpretation of the significance of these actions. A short cut to the destination, if you will. But to do so is to fail to understand the essence of the experience. It is a simple matter to describe the activities and events and recount the conversations. But in so doing there is still the sense that homeschooling is about something more. And so, at the end of this phase of the voyage, there is a reminder that in spite of careful planning, sometimes the route unfolds a journey we could not imagine when we set out.

The purpose of this study was to illuminate, at least in part, what it is about the homeschooling experience that stimulates parents to opt out of mainstream society and educate their children at home. Is there something about homeschooling that is more than education as we commonly think of it? Do

parents' beliefs about how children learn and the kind of assistance they require move the homeschooling experience beyond the traditional educator-child relationship? Perhaps the answers would explain why the number of homeschoolers in British Columbia doubled in the first three years of registration and continues to increase.

To begin the investigation, homeschooling was examined within the framework of education in North America over the past two centuries. Actually it all began with schooling at home although this was eventually regarded as inferior to formal education. In exchange for the promise of a secure future for their children, parents were first encouraged, then compelled, to send their children to public or private schools. As the public school system and its bureaucratic structure grew, parents increasingly relinquished authority to determine the best education for their own children. "Experts" were hired to determine curriculum, ensure standards, and offer certification while assorted interest groups sought to reform schools as a cure for the social ills of the day. Regardless of whether their children were successful in the system or were able to participate fully, few parents openly questioned the system's legitimacy.

During the 1960s, a time of political and social movements in part directed at bureaucratic restraints, revisionist historians began to overturn celebratory versions of history. The education system was not immune. School reformers openly sought

to change the structure of the system rather than merely make changes within it.

One outcome was the free school, established to reclaim parents' right to determine the kind of education they wanted for children. These schools emphasized the child's inherent nature, offered children freedom of choice, and were intended to be places to nourish joyful, self-motivated, active learning. Based on the premise that adults often get in the way of children's desire to learn, the role of adults was to facilitate, rather than teach. In this way children would build positive self-esteem, establish their identity, and gain feelings of adequacy and competency. Although well-intentioned, most of the schools were ill-conceived and faded away. A few endured to become present day alternate schools.

The significance of the free school movement, however, lies not in its success or failure but in two elements that had far reaching consequences. First, parents began to openly question the authority of institutions to determine what was best for their children. Connected to that, critics who initially called for curriculum reforms and then structural reforms began to speak candidly of deschooling. Second, parents began to question whether or not institutions could effectively provide a suitable environment to honour the inherent nature of children, stimulate their innate curiosity, and nourish their self-esteem.

The present day homeschooling movement evolved out of this

free school movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>39</sup> Rather than forming schools, some parents began to keep their children at home to provide educational opportunities similar to those of free schools. Without the protection of school registration, children were seen to be truant. To evade compulsory attendance laws and avoid prosecution, many parents went "underground." As a result, it is impossible to document accurately either the beginning or the size of the early movement.

Eventually homeschooling was legalized in Canada and the United States although not necessarily legitimized. Degree of control varies between jurisdictions. In British Columbia, all parents must register homeschooled children with either their local school district, a private school within the province, or with a regional correspondence centre. Ministry of Education officials concede that the official number of homeschooled children may not be accurate since some parents are still suspicious of government intervention and remain underground.

Within the present movement, homeschoolers fall into two broad categories, each related to beliefs about education. There are, on the one hand, those who choose to homeschool because they disagree with the values and content of public schools and, on the other hand, those who disagree with the way children are taught. The two groups have been labelled "ideologues" and "pedagogues" respectively. Actually, very few homeschoolers fit

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<sup>39</sup> Frequently, proponents of homeschooling are seen as deschoolers and, by some, revolutionary--as were free schoolers.

absolutely into either group. Instead, most would place themselves somewhere along a continuum between the two positions.

The literature indicates pedagogue homeschoolers share beliefs about the value of child-centred learning and respect for children's intellect and creativity. They believe in the importance of individualized learning, freedom to explore, a nurturing environment, and children's innate curiosity. As well, they are convinced that adults should act as facilitators rather than teachers. Since beliefs of the pedagogues focus on how children learn, for the purposes of this study, it was assumed that the pedagogical actions of these home schoolers, while not identical, might have some similarities.

### **Beliefs That Guide Pedagogical Actions**

Homeschoolers are quick to point out that there are as many ways to homeschool as there are families doing it. Every family chooses what is right for their family. In addition, actions chosen are altered to reflect on-going changes in the family. As diverse as the homeschooling community may be, however, one unifying factor is a cluster of beliefs about children and how they learn. These beliefs pertain to a number of concepts: curiosity, freedom, individuality, self-learning, and labelling. As well, many homeschoolers hold similar attitudes about family and institutionalized schooling. All of these beliefs and attitudes influence parents' actions and affect the pedagogical



relationship between parents and children.

The most fundamental conviction of pedagogue homeschoolers centres on their belief in the power of children's innate curiosity. They assert that children are born with a desire to learn and will continue to do so all their lives unless that desire is stifled. To support this contention, homeschooling parents point to the extraordinary amount of knowledge children acquire in the first five years of life. As well, children are proficient learners and, given freedom to explore their own interests, children will become lifelong self-learners. To keep alive children's curiosity, parents expose children to a myriad of learning opportunities. Within this pedagogic atmosphere where children explore their own interests, their inherent curiosity is nourished and children develop their individuality.

Part of allowing children to explore their own interests is permitting them to do it in their own time. Parents strongly believe children will quickly learn anything they are interested in when they are ready, and they will learn it well. For example, if a child does not show interest in learning to read until age eight or nine, most homeschooling parents will accept that it is not time for the child to do so. In the meantime they will continue to read to the child, surround the child with books, offer a range of interesting experiences, and help the child learn in other ways. Parents point out that if such a child was in school, he or she would be labelled 'learning disabled' simply because other children were learning to read. Many homeschooling

parents like to remind people outside of their community that there is no such thing as a learning disabled homeschooled child, simply because these children are not compared to others and learn to do things according to their own timetable.

Discussions about such things as labelling children bring to the surface parents' attitudes about public school. Most of their feelings stem from their own (or family of origin members') childhood experiences. Some who sent their own children to school recount similar negative experiences. All of the participants in the study were successful in school however, for various reasons, they look back on the experience with negative feelings. This obviously lends support to their determination to homeschool their own children.

Within the home learning environment where children have the freedom to explore their own interests according to their own timetable, parents believe in the importance of respecting and honouring each child's individual growth. As part of that belief, parents consider children, regardless of age, to be capable, contributing family members. Because their opinions and talents are valued and respected, children are not segregated from the adult world. Parents earnestly believe children cannot learn to make their way in the adult world if they do not have an opportunity to learn about it, see it in action.

While all homeschooling parents in the support group share these beliefs and attitudes, they do so to varying degrees. In addition, there appears to be a correlation between commitment to

the belief and parents' actions. As well, individual families may combine these beliefs in different ways. For example, one family may believe in children's innate curiosity but believe that, instead of complete freedom, children require some structure to ensure their curiosity will flourish--a belief that would be reflected in their pedagogical decisions. Consequently, as stated earlier, no two families employ exactly the same pedagogical actions.

### **Pedagogical Actions and Homeschooling**

Attempting to isolate specific actions homeschooling parents undertake in the name of education as a way of understanding the pedagogy of homeschooling is an endeavour destined for failure for several reasons. If we think of pedagogy in terms of curriculum and instruction, a carefully planned or structured outline of a topic, a way of guiding the learner through increasingly difficult stages of a skill, we will find little evidence of parents' pedagogical actions. Most homeschooling parents do not plan what their children will learn. If, on the other hand, we view pedagogy as "something that lets an encounter, a relationship, a situation, or a doing be pedagogic" (van Manen, 1982, p. 291), we can begin to see how the homeschooling parent-child relationship itself illustrates their pedagogy. Several elements of the relationship highlight this idea: facilitating learning, walking beside, acting as a role

model, and providing an environment of trust and respect.

When a child indicates interest in a particular topic, parents will help the child explore it. Often the first step will be trips to the library to "find out." If possible, appropriate materials will be purchased. Contact with experts in the community may be arranged and there will be on-going discussions in the family. Rather than dictated, these steps are presented as choices. True, the very selecting and presenting of these choices is a pedagogic action. But unlike the usual notion of pedagogy which suggests an adult guiding the learner through prescribed levels, the homeschooling pedagogical relationship allows children to take the lead. That is not to suggest that parents do not expose their children to certain learning experiences over others, provide some learning opportunities instead of others, or make decisions about which learning materials to purchase. But, generally speaking, when parents offer choices, children are free to reject all suggestions, make alternate suggestions, or move on to another topic. In that case, parents will then help their children explore the new topic.

Another element of homeschooling pedagogy is the notion of walking beside. Parents rarely "teach" their children. Instead they act as facilitators helping children make sense of their world. While walking side by side, although the adult's step may be stronger and more sure footed, the child sets the pace. When children ask questions, parents answer or help children find their own answers. The main focus is on exposing children to as

many experiences and learning opportunities as possible and keeping the curiosity alive. For example, Kayla does not teach Math to her eight-year-old son, Stevie. But when the family watches the baseball World Series on TV and Stevie becomes fascinated with the idea of building a model of a baseball stadium, together they work at measuring and figuring ratios. When the suggestion is made that he is doing math, Stevie becomes very defensive so Kayla is careful to provide only the answers Stevie seeks rather than working from her own agenda.

Homeschooling parents not only walk with their children, they serve as role models. Most parents exhibit the same curiosity about the world as their children do. They follow their own interests whether that is taking music lessons, signing up for courses, or learning on their own about something or how to do something. They believe that if you can read and ask questions you can learn anything. Children see their parents reading, finding out, and learning as a way of being in the world, not as something you do at a certain time or in a certain place. In this way, homeschooling parents existentially guide their children toward maturity.

One of the most far reaching elements of homeschooling pedagogy is the atmosphere parents create. Like any successful learning environment, it provides nurturance, engaging materials, and opportunities for exploration. However, it is the elements of trust in and respect for children as competent and capable learners that appears to be its strength. Homeschooling parents

honour children's abilities and opinions with a respect many other adults reserve for other adults. Treating children as if they are capable of solving problems now, not just at some time in the future, is a powerful pedagogical action that appears to enable homeschooled children to move out into the world with ease. Many homeschooled adolescents start their own business ventures (e.g., raising or producing something for sale or giving lessons). Other activities that move homeschooled young people out into the world include tutoring younger children and volunteer work. Work these young people do in the community is valued not only for the expertise they bring, but also because they are able to volunteer during the day when other young people are attending regular school.

### **Recognizing the Concerns of Others**

While parents become frustrated with people who dismiss homeschooling as at best a misguided endeavour and at worst a dangerous undertaking for children, homeschooling parents also acknowledge the potential for problems. They know that those outside the community are concerned that homeschooled children will not "know the things they are supposed to know"--usually undefined beyond "being able to read and write"--when they are adults. They know, and talk about, stories exposing some parent who has insisted on homeschooling but not allowed his or her children to learn to read or write and learn about the outside

world. They acknowledge there may be parents who try to isolate their children and teach them only the values and beliefs of a particular sect. They know that not all parents share their beliefs about children.<sup>40</sup> They recognize that there may be potential for different kinds of abuse, including the child abuse that originates when an adult pushes a child toward academic excellence ignoring the wants and needs of the child. They concede it may be difficult for some homeschooling children to have access to an appropriate advocate should problems arise. They also know that these problems occur in non-homeschooling families and formal education as well. They recognize the validity of all concerns for children's safety and well-being. But, on the other hand, they know that there is much about the homeschooling experience that appears to enhance children's self-esteem and enables them to make their way in the world successfully.

They do not agree with the concern that homeschooling children receive an education inferior to that of formally schooled children, that this will somehow produce adults who cannot contribute to society (Franzosa, 1984). Nor do these parents accept the argument that homeschooling is an elitist prerogative. They refute the contention that some families cannot afford to have one parent stay home. While some non-homeschoolers

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<sup>40</sup> Not all homeschoolers are followers of John Holt. Ruth tells of a homeschooling meeting she attended where a man dismissed Holt's writings because "Holt believes all children are basically good." Ruth recognized that while she and this man are both homeschoolers, there the similarities end.

would strongly disagree, homeschooling parents argue that the decision to be a one-income family may demand lifestyle changes and sacrifices but ultimately these are the kinds of choices parents must make.

### **"Special Parents"**

Frequently people who come in contact with homeschoolers view these parents as "special" people, as people whose parenting skills are above the norm. While it is true these parents have a different kind of relationship with their children and really enjoy being with their children and sharing in their experiences, homeschooling parents encounter the same kind of parent-child relationship tensions as other parents. The journey to maturity is, at times, a struggle for both children and parents. In conversations, parents reluctantly acknowledge the times they lose their patience, "yell at the kids," feel frustrated, yearn for some time alone, and think about their own needs. They do not see themselves as "special" parents. Rather than "special" or exceptional, they see themselves merely as parents whose decisions and actions put them in the minority. A number of parents find comfort and affirmation through support group meetings and conferences. At workshops, speakers remind parents that focusing entirely on their children and neglecting their own needs leads to parent burnout, always a danger in homeschooling families. In short, these parents raise their voices (and wish



they had not), make mistakes, and worry as all parents do.

But if there is one noticeable difference between homeschooling parents and many other parents it is in their on-going self-reflection--reflection about their role as they 'walk beside' on a child's journey to maturity. Are they doing the right thing? Should they be doing something different? Is there a better way to do this? Most of these parents continuously read about and discuss others' experiences, different approaches to subject matter, and theories about learning. They subscribe to newsletters, attend conferences, and network within the community. They listen, watch, and learn about themselves and what works or does not work for their own children. And they reflect. It is through this pedagogical reflection, "oriented toward understanding the pedagogical significance of events and situations in children's lives" (van Manen, 1991, p. 41) as well as "the pedagogical goodness" of past actions that their family's version of the homeschooling experience takes shape.

And through it all, homeschooling parents recognize that there is still a large segment of society that sees what they are doing as a "fringe activity"--the domain of radicals, 'right-wingers,' religious fanatics, or malcontents. Through their dealings with public educators, they realize that people who see education of children as teaching and programs, goals and evaluation, structure and basic skills cannot easily understand what the homeschooling experience is about.

## **Experiencing Homeschooling**

What the homeschooling experience means to the parents in this study cannot be recaptured in a few words or phrases. It may be that the sum or whole of their homeschooling experience is more than its parts. However, examination of the parts reveals the pedagogical thoughtfulness of these parents, reveals the essence of the pedagogic atmosphere of the home environment, reveals the pedagogic action of walking beside. Such examination also reveals something about what, for these parents, homeschooling is and is not.

Homeschooling is not about education any more than, for those outside of educational institutions, daily life is about education. That is to say, in some respects it is totally unrelated and in other respects, it is inextricably intertwined. Every day people work, socialize, and play. Every day they learn something new: information about a new product, a better way to deal with a client, how to deal with problems in a relationship, a way to improve their tennis, bridge, or golf game. They estimate time, space, financial matters. They join a new group or begin a new hobby. They read, talk, think. They learn. They live and learn. So do homeschooling children and their families.

Homeschooling is about families and priorities. It is about building a strong family base from which all members can venture forth. For these parents it is about taking charge of your life and deciding what is best for your particular family; not someone else's family, your own. No two homeschooling families are

exactly the same; nor do they approach homeschooling in the same way. Each family decides what works for their family.

Homeschooling is about honouring and respecting children; trusting in them and believing that they know best what they need to learn and will do so when they need to learn it. It is about believing that children are natural learners whose curiosity knows no bounds unless it is stifled and then it runs the risk of being extinguished forever.

Homeschooling is about stepping outside the mainstream of society, occasionally looking for affirmation of that decision but mainly turning inward to the family for validation. It is about making the kind of life style decisions that frequently require sacrifices for both the individual and family.

Homeschooling is a way of being with children. It is walking beside children rather than leading them. It is enjoying them as people, as separate individuals appreciated for their own talents and gifts, as learning partners as well as children. Children are valued and respected for where they are in their growth; judged as having something worthwhile to say and contribute. Adults believe they can learn from children just as children can learn from adults.

Homeschooling, within the framework of education in North America, is about parents reclaiming their authority to determine the kind of education they want for their children. It is about believing that children best learn how to be adults by interacting with various adults in the community. It is about

learning from life rather than about life.

### **Moving to the Future**

Because society in general has been slow to legitimize the homeschooling movement, little research has been done on the effects of the pedagogical actions of homeschoolers. To date most of the research has focused on the academic standing (when compared to age related formally schooled children) of homeschooled students. While recently child-centred learning is more often a focus of formal education, it always remains within the structure of a classroom. An examination of the unstructured child-centred learning possible in the homeschooling environment would be a useful comparison. Associated areas for consideration include a study of how homeschooling parents' pedagogical interactions relate to affective areas such as self-esteem and motivation.

In addition, outside of the literature from the home-schooling community, little is known about the long-term effects of homeschooling parents' pedagogical decisions. A longitudinal study of homeschooled children, from both ideologue and pedagogue homeschooling families, would provide information about how these children make their way in the world. Do they live their lives as adults differently from formally schooled adults? How adaptable are they to a changing society? Do homeschooled children have sufficient flexibility in the area of career choices? Does the way children are home-schooled make a difference in how they make

their way in the world as adults?

Most importantly, as parents and educators outside of the homeschooling community, we need to ask ourselves about the citizens we are preparing for the 21st century. Are there some elements of the homeschooling experience that can be adapted to formal education? What can homeschoolers, public educators, and members of the community learn from each other if they work together? To that end, a study of a triad of homeschooling families, school personnel, and community members all working together could offer valuable information for all concerned.

This last would require a new mind set on the part of the various parties. While many homeschoolers might be suspicious of such an alliance, they may be receptive if they were regarded as equal participants. As Jan Hunt wrote in the homeschooling newsletter:

Rather than being threatened by homeschoolers who will always be in a small minority--educators would do well to see us as colleagues and sources of information on the nature of learning and motivation. After all, we spend nearly all our waking hours observing, studying and participating in this fascinating endeavour, and we have in addition the luxury of continuity: we observe learning unfold over many years of sharing our lives with the same children; this helps us to understand the nature of individual intellectual development over the long term.  
(Hunt, 1992, p. 5)

Some would argue that if homeschoolers and public educators worked together and learned from each other, all children would benefit and, in the end, so would society. But such an endeavour requires vision.

Norman Henchey, a professor in the faculty of education at

McGill University thinks we have "reached a fork in the road". He argues that our present school system is "structured and designed in a clearly industrial era; the models of organization, the way we think of subjects, timetables, bells and marks are pure nineteenth century management techniques" (cited in "School System", 1989). In his vision of a future in which we move away from a labour-intensive to a technology-intensive economy, parents will play a greater role in the education of their children.

Vision of the future often depends upon your perspective. Certainly it is common to hear that our education system is in a state of deepening crisis. Some believe that crisis may be resolved only if our education system is transformed rather than reformed.

The Chinese pictograph for crisis combines the symbols for opportunity and danger. A vision of the future that includes homeschoolers having a role in the transformation of education might emphasize one symbol rather than the other. It all depends upon your perspective. Those who believe homeschoolers and public educators could learn from each other might well emphasize the opportunity available from such an approach to the current perceived crisis. Further research into the pedagogical actions of homeschooling parents and the homeschooling experience appears, from this study, to be a useful place to begin.

## APPENDIX A

## CODE NAMES FOR HOMESCHOOLING FAMILIES IN STUDY

Family name:	Parents:	Children:	age <sup>41</sup>
Abbott	Peter Cathy	Holly Shawna Max	12 9 7
Anderson	Pat Jennifer	Christopher Jeremy Barbara	5 3 10 mos
Baker	Neil Jean	Charlotte	13
Beamen	Art Charlene	Nicole Kenny Annie	9 7 3
Bell	Lois	Bobby Carl	14 12
Boyce	Les Paulette	Peter Matthew Paul Rudy Debbie Treena	18 16 14 12 9 16 mos

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<sup>41</sup> Ages indicated here are the ages of the children in November, 1993. These may differ from ages given in the text as the ages given in various stories relate to the child's age at that time.

Carson	Ron	Mandy	21
	Karen	Barry	11
		Kevin	8
		Michelle	2
Carter	Greg	Jamie	22
	Ruth	Nathan	19
		Aaron	15
		Becky	12
Cassidy	Michael	Sarah	10
	Gina	Jessica	7
Crane	Don	Kerry	12
	Colleen	Ryan	10
		Devon	7
		Seth	4
Davis	Frank	Terry	11
	Chantal	Cheri	8
Edwards	Jim	Rose	8
	Rachael	Kim	6
Foster	Dan	Teddy	10
	Claire	Elaine	7
Glazer	Morgan	Shane	20
	Theresa	Brandon	20
		Maggie	13
		Nick	7
Greene	Russ	Leanne	7
	Marg	Trisha	4
Harrison	Rod	Jeff	6
	Patti	Kyle	4



Hawkins	Jim Laura	Bryce Mikey	12 8
Holmes	Ed Melodie	Denny Sharilynn	8 5
Johnstone	Brad Caitlin	Gordie	9
Klyne	Rod Cheryl	Ross Robert	9 8
Lewis	Fred Kayla	Stevie Adam	8 4
Milhouse	Christine	Mellisa	7
Norris	Les Karlene	Ashley Sue-Anne	6 4
Pedersen	Ralph Anna	Lisa-Beth	16
Roberts	Alex Hillary	Esther Elizabeth Mary Charlie	11 8 6 2
Short	Gerry Dorothy	Spencer Frances Laina	9 6 3

Thorne	Dave Sharon	Susan Angela	9 5
Townsend	Larry Donna	Christopher Jeanine	11 6
Walters	Len Alexis	Shasta Krista	10 7

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