

What is Home Education?

By Léo Gaumont

There is a lot of confusion as to what, exactly, a home education entails. The only thing most people can agree on is that a home education usually takes place at home, but assumptions on where, how or what that looks like can vary greatly. This article will attempt to shed some light on the many possibilities for a home education and clarify some of the variants within each approach to the teaching and training of students at home.

A Bit of Background

Education is defined as the process of giving or receiving systematic instruction, especially in a school or institution of higher learning. Even though the majority of people usually accept the idea that students learn best within an institution, not everyone agrees with this notion. The majority opinion is likely created by seeing two different terms, education and learning, as synonymous. Education may be largely restricted to group learning in schools or institutions, but learning is an individually innate characteristic of varying abilities for all humans that occurs at all times, for a lifetime. Confusing these terms and assuming that learning only takes place within an institution tends to neglect the uniqueness of individual students leading to a one-size-fits-all or standardized program and process with corresponding expectations.

Attempting to take student and societal group differences into account within the accepted belief that education (read: learning) can only occur within educational institutions has resulted in some degree of choice, but only as variations within the education system. The Province of Alberta, has long advanced the idea of choice in education and has several options for institutional learning, including public, separate, alternate, charter, private and home schools. All these options advance the belief that students are best trained by professionals both within the structured learning environment of a school or as an online extension of classroom based ideology and programming.

There are certainly a lot of people who are directly or indirectly involved in the field of education. In Alberta, the Ministry of Education budget was approaching eight billion dollars in 2016. This is a lot of money! In fact, Alberta is the highest spender on education per student in Canada and has among the highest per capita spending on education in the world, yet one can legitimately question whether this comparatively high level of expenditure in education is producing better results than jurisdictions spending less per student or offering real alternatives to government monopoly education.

The Common Ground

Everyone involved in education, whether within the Ministry, the bureaucracy, school boards, school administration, school teachers, teachers' unions, clerical staff, custodial staff or related associations, not to mention parents, must have the best possible educational health and welfare of every student as the paramount objective in education.

Education is likely the biggest responsibility any society has. After all, the future well-being of any nation can only be as good as the level of education of its citizens. For that reason, most, if not all nations, take the education of students seriously. Families also, for the most part, take the education of children seriously and that is why it is often assumed that the state and the family are partners in education. Regardless of philosophical differences and debates over the best way to assure that the standards are maintained at as high a level as possible, the educational well-being of each individual student must be the common ground shared by everyone involved in learning and education.

The Point of Disagreement

The biggest area of disagreement among all players in the education arena is rooted in a deep philosophical difference manifesting itself into the question: who actually is best suited to train and teach students? More to the point: who has the authority and corresponding responsibility of making sure the next generation is properly prepared to take on the future?

The issue is clearly divided into two camps of thought. There are those who believe that parents have the paramount claim over all issues respecting their children and there are those who believe that the state has the final say over how its students should be prepared to be productive citizens of our society.

It behooves us all to understand that any position held on anything, is essentially a religious perspective based entirely on the world view foundation of the person, group or institution. Everyone, cognizant or not, bases their position on what they believe to be true. Two opposing positions means two opposing foundational world views. The fundamental presupposition upon which every world view is based is a metaphysical one as world views are essentially founded by variations on a theme of the personal perception and understanding, belief or unbelief, in the existence of God.

Religion is defined as a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices, or a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor. Faith is defined as a strong belief or trust in someone or something, or a system of religious beliefs. Therefore, despite frequent claims to the contrary, there is no such thing as neutrality in world view or religious systems, only variations of degree of tolerance for others. However, on matters of personal importance, it is rare that a person will not defend their presuppositions with a religious ardor and zealous display of unquestioned faith.

Therefore, generally speaking and without going into a lot of debate and conjecture, one should clearly understand that parents, whether openly or covertly religious, will determine the issue of who has authority over children on the basis of their world view, which essentially means that the disagreement remains regardless of “action” designed to convert the other side. Without referencing one’s perception of right or wrong, an irreconcilable difference means that both sides need to make concerted efforts and adjustments in order to understand the other’s point of view.

The Great Debate

Once the irreconcilable point of disagreement over who has authority is clarified, a debate ensues over who, where, how or what is to be taught to the children. In the end, the debate is over the place or venue for the government directed structured learning processes to be applied in the formation of the child.

A general synopsis will indicate that the stronger parents feel about having the paramount authority over their children, the less likely they are to give place to government programming. Even though this is based in world view, it is not necessarily based on the supremacy of God as much as in a personal understanding of the supremacy of parents over government in education. Needless to say, those who would advance a state supremacy in education have generally very little understanding of the other position, since there can be no other position in their minds. Parents claiming responsibility for the education of their children, on the other hand, have likely experienced the state side of the debate and usually have a better grasp of the opposing view.

In keeping with the objective of this essay, it is assumed that everyone has at least a workable knowledge of how the state-based system works. Therefore, the focus will be to show how the non-state-based approach is different and why it philosophically comes in conflict with the status quo belief in government-directed educational programming.

Home Education is More Than an Education at Home

The biggest mistake made by those who lack a clear understanding of what, exactly, a home education entails, is the default presumption to the school model of education. This understanding has become so entrenched and normalized that the home educated are assumed to simply be completing their government programming for school work at home. This is indeed the case when online or distant learning options for school programming are followed, but that is where the similarities end.

Home education entails a gradient of pedagogy with no real line of demarcation between what one would expect to be going on in school, on the one hand, and the potentially extraordinary manifestations of learning technique and procedures used by the parents, on the other hand.

The biggest difference between the two is the likelihood of actually being able to address the diversity of learning abilities, styles and readiness of the individual student. Despite much effort, some in the form of rhetoric, being made by the school to address individual needs, they cannot be met on the super personal level created by a child-parent relationship.

Home education, in whatever format it is delivered, is more than an education delivered at home. It is a matter of the deep personal relationship between the “teacher” and the student, something even the best of classroom teachers finds impossible to accomplish in the classroom setting.

School At Home vs Home Education vs Un-Schooling

Focussing on students who are receiving their teaching or “education” at home, there are generally three groups identifiable by the type of training taking place. Those who bring the school ideology home, whether online or through some other extension of an institutional school, or by recreating the school processes and expectations within the home, are generally referred to as home schooling. This group doesn't present any particular challenges to “school ideologues” as it essentially follows the directives established by a school of some sort, or follows a curriculum that is essentially a variation of that used in the institutional school.

There is another group of parents that do not subscribe to the idea that education can only take place within the confines of, or by creating a facsimile of, a school institution. Collectively referred to as traditional home educators, these people usually believe that parents are not only responsible, but best equipped to teach their children. This group of home educators provides a bit more of a challenge to those who are only familiar with the standardized school system as they simply do not subscribe to the status quo educational processes.

A third and very difficult to understand educational concept for most is often referred to as un-schooling. The best way to describe this group is that they just do not subscribe to or follow the well known pedagogical systematic processes familiar to those who “think school”. The process can go from using a variety of resources to encouraging discovery to completely leaving students to their own devices while presenting opportunities for learning. These students are encouraged to simply learn what interests them in a way and at a rate that fully takes the child’s uniqueness into consideration. Every un-schooling program is unique as each is ascribed to a unique individual. Un-schooling presents the greatest challenge to ideologues who advance school pedagogy as the only possibility for learning.

Once again, when considering the point of disagreement over authority and the debate over what an education should include, where it should take place, how it is to be conducted and who should be ultimately responsible, one needs to understand that not all students can best be educated using a single universal approach. Home education, in all of its variants, is an important and needed option within the bigger objective of providing the best educational opportunities for everyone.

What Are Alberta's Requirements for Home Education Programming?

Recent developments respecting home education in Alberta have clearly indicated that there is much confusion respecting what is assumed to be taking place. Alberta's situation is exacerbated by the fact that it remains one of very few jurisdictions to support home education with public funds. Allowing 25% of base student funding for the home educated, which is actually approximately 12% of what it costs to educate the same child in a public school, the province shows its support for alternatives to the status quo school system. Further stipulating that schools must make at least 50% of the home education funding available to parents towards the purchase of educational supplies and services indicates that the provincial government desires to be actively involved in the home education movement.

The old adage of "he who pays the piper calls the tune" is applicable in this situation. It is agreed that since the government is making funds available to home educating parents through the school in which the student is registered, the government should be able to stipulate what and how this funding is to be spent. The problem is that no rules, directives or guidelines are provided by the government to outline what it deems as an appropriate home education expense. A very few, very generic, vaguely worded directives are included in the Home Education Regulations, but until recently, the interpretation of these rules was generally left up to the discretion of the individual schools.

Beginning a few years ago and culminating in the recent extensive reclamation of schools' funds from the 2014-15 school year by government bureaucrats in the spring of 2016, agencies other than the schools began unilaterally determining what would constitute acceptable educational expenses and what would not. This would normally be respected as reasonable except for the fact that these newly minted expectations were never communicated in advance, but rather created and applied retroactively without notice. Schools, who would have applied any communicated expectations, were surprised to find that what had been unquestioned over the past twenty years was no longer acceptable for no other reason than that someone in the Department of Education had unilaterally determined so. While given no new directives, schools were simply penalized for not having followed "directives" that had never been communicated. This procedure is akin to sending everyone who has exceeded the new speed limit a ticket for violating the speed limit long before the new limit was introduced!

One can certainly understand the need to account for public funds, but the amount of money expended on salaries to reclaim funds from the unsuspecting schools likely far exceeded the actual amount of reclaimed funds, plus the fact that schools also faced extra costs. Since this exercise likely involved more funds than if things had been left as they were, one has to question what the ulterior motive for doing so must have been. Once again, as alluded to earlier in this document, the only explanation is ideological and it likely has little to do with the educational welfare of home educated students.

In fact, this unprecedented exercise of unilaterally and retroactively applying newly minted, unspoken expectations of rules that had not changed in any way, was done with such zeal and ardor that it defied reason. In April, 2016, all private schools offering home education programs were seemingly attacked by bureaucrats at the same time and all paid dearly for the violation of these non-communicated expectations. Schools even wound up being punished with the clawback of the entire home education funding when students successfully advanced to the post-secondary level (in Alberta Institutions only!), even if with a single class paid for by the parents, in spite of being assured of the acceptability of doing so by the Minister of Education. Is the bureaucracy not communicating with the Ministry either?

These events highlighted the need to grasp that what goes on in school may not necessarily go on at home and vice versa. The singular perspective of government exercising authority in educational matters presumes that all programs are the same. However, the institutional and the home approaches to education essentially occupy two different paradigms. One cannot advance presumption as understanding. Bureaucrats need to comprehend the nuances of home education before acting on it.

What Goes On At Home

It is easy to get a reasonable picture of what constitutes a regular school program. It is not so easy to comprehend that individual programs designed to meet the needs of individual children at different places, times and ways that fully incorporate the uniqueness of each child will require items and services reflecting some of the offerings from schools, but often times differing things. That is to be expected since home education is indeed different from school. It is only when it is assumed that all education programs follow the status quo system that mis-understandings are created.

The first observation that needs to be made is that since home educators can truly address the uniqueness of each child, programs, processes, procedure and pedagogy will reflect each child's nature. Not only are children with academic prowess allowed to progress at their own speed, usually accelerated, but artistic, mechanical and other talents can be fully encouraged and mastered. There is no need for home educated students to keep up or slow down to assist classroom management.

Therefore, although insisted upon by most school ideologues, grades become meaningless when the individual is freed from having to conform. It is also imperative that one understands that in the real world, life is not divided into subjects, so home educators often avoid the accumulation of disconnected information by using comprehensive programs or processes that teach several disciplines at a time. Another consideration is that students are allowed to take as much or as little time as needed to master skills, but mastery of them is an expectation. Learning 50% of the concepts is just not acceptable to most home educators. In fact, a study by the Bob Jones University several years ago found that while the home educated spent on average, \$500.00 per student per year to reach the 85th percentile in achievement, the public schools at the time spent over \$5000.00 with the standard expectation of reaching the 50th percentile to consider the subject learned.

Since being at home usually eliminates the possibility of participation in school sponsored arts, physical and technical programs, home educators often have to hire specialists or get involved in groups to make these opportunities available to their children. The use of modern information technology requiring the purchase of expensive equipment is critical in today's home education program. Indeed, modern education may soon involve no more than a computer with internet access.

Understanding that home educators and the home educated think much differently from what is necessarily institutionally standardized thinking helps to see that different approaches will effectively use different resources to accomplish a different goal. Few of the systemic school-based educational processes, procedures and expectations can be applied fairly and equitably to home education.

What is Justifiable as an Educational Expense?

The rules clearly indicate that home educators are free to follow established government programs or alternatives determined by the parents. Home education programs can take many formats and involve different resources, including third party lessons, memberships to educational venues, manipulative and creative supplies, as well as "book learning" with textbooks, workbooks, booklets or DVD and online lessons, all of which can be taken, purchased or provided from anywhere in world.

There is no doubt that public funding should be used appropriately. It is no secret that not every tax dollar is appropriately spent and there have been instances when either parents or home education providers have been willing to "test the limits of integrity", so to speak. These are isolated cases that should be properly dealt with, but to aggressively and retroactively penalize all home education providing schools for the "sins" of a few is a bit of an overreaction.

There are three things that must be taken into account respecting home education funding. Firstly, most home educators would pick freedom over funding. Secondly, there is actually very little money involved in comparison with what is spent to educate students attending government institutions. Lastly, what is spent for educational supplies and services in a home education program must not be compared to how money is spent in institutional systems. These are two different approaches to education that require different expenditures in fulfilling the program plans. There is no doubt that it is a mistake to measure the value of a home education expense against what would constitute a legitimate school expense. It is also impossible to rightly ascertain when a home based purchase will be used for one child or another, or whether the item in question will be used individually, corporately, educationally or personally.

Our organization has long advanced the need for appropriate use of home education grant money made available to parents. We have provided guidelines to help parents understand the difference between what is legitimate as opposed to what requires “creative justification”. Even though we have provided these clear guidelines for our parents, it is impossible to include every possibility in a world as diverse as home education. To that end, parents must first contact our office for prior approval from the school before claiming reimbursement for what may be omitted items or constitute questionable expenditures in meeting with our Educational Expense Guidelines. Please note that these guidelines were created by our agency to provide guidance for reasonable stewardship of grant money to our parents since there has been nothing from the government to whom schools must answer respecting its proper use.

(A copy of our Education Expense Guideline may be provided upon request.)

Assessing the Outcome of Home Education

Home education is not a school education. Even though schools are constantly evaluating and assessing the outcome of learning for their students, it is more a measure of the standardized programming than of student achievement. Standardized evaluations have their place when comparing within a large group or jurisdiction but standardized evaluation is based on a faulty premise of standardized students which does not exist in a world of unique individuals.

It is understandable that a government that is willing to fund a home education option should also desire to see that this money is assuring good results. However, as has been said, “it is not how you run the race that counts as much as how you finish”. Likewise, to attempt to assess and evaluate the ongoing learning of a group as diverse as the home educated is akin to herding cats. No two students do exactly the same thing in the same way which eliminates the likelihood of fair comparison. The best way to measure the success or failure of home education is to look at the final outcomes. Even though the home education constituency is a very small cohort compared to regular institutional learners, the product of this approach to education clearly shows a history of remarkable success.

On a practical note, there are four reasons that attempting to assess the progress of the home educated is largely an exercise in futility. The first reason is that in order to evaluate one has to have a “measuring stick”, which as has been discussed in this essay, cannot be found since measuring the home educated to school expectations, is like comparing apples to oranges. Secondly, the uniqueness of each individual makes the standardization of progress an impossibility. The third reason is that in Alberta, the government mandates that all home education programs be monitored by certificated teachers, which is a condition of home education funding. To require students to be evaluated or assessed beyond the guidance of these professional educators is actually a vote of non-confidence in certified teachers’ competency in ascertaining the educational progress of students. Finally, since the government is generally shying away from ongoing evaluation and assessment in favour of a more universal measure of success, the need to evaluate the success of the home educated becomes moot.

Conclusion

While it is impossible to clearly outline the intricacies of divergent home education processes and procedures, one can make an unquestionable claim. Home education is not and cannot be compared to a school education. They are essentially two different paradigms rooted in two different philosophical positions entirely based on very different world view premises.

The point of disagreement over who holds the authority and responsibility to educate the children is irreconcilably either government or parents; and the debate as to when, where, what and how this education is to be delivered is affected by this position of disagreement.

Since the disagreement and debate is essentially over the place of standardization, disparaging starting points will end in disparaging conclusions. To assume a singular system is to disqualify the differences that must exist if systems are to be truly different.

To evaluate or assess one system through the lens of another creates a great deal of misunderstanding and corresponding misdeeds. Before one agency can exercise authority over another, it has to be cognizant of the other's position in order to avoid conflict. Conflict is a bad position from which to find agreement and so it is suggested that a willingness to understand the nuances of home education programming will go a long way towards finding workable solutions that will gain the respect of both sides.

Government does have its place in the education of its student citizens, but parents have a prior preeminence in that they are the only possible life givers. If the Government of Alberta wants to keep peace in the family of educators, it will have to learn to respect all the players with a degree of freedom appropriate to the choice made by parents respecting the education of their children.

Created and submitted by

Léo Gaumont
www.leogaumont.com

(Léo has been actively involved as a professional educator for over forty years. His experience spans two provinces, nearly every system and general exposure to a variety of grades, subjects and schools. His advanced training as a biologist as well as his bilingualism placed him at the high school level for the majority of his teaching career. Having educated his own children and having been involved in multiple capacities within the home education community makes him uniquely qualified to advance and defend the home education movement.)