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Forging Personal Identity Through Homeschooling: From Dissatisfaction with Educational Systems to the Rise of Neurorights

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the formation of personal identity through homeschooling. Focusing our analysis especially in the United States, we show that identity formation is often taught indirectly by many of the activities performed by families, as it is reflected when the value of their education is compared with the standard, traditional type, being either public or private. Furthermore, in the context of the rise of direct-to-consumer neurotechnologies in the educational environment, we defend the consideration of personal identity as a critical neuroright for the protection of a healthy neurocognitive development in homeschooling.

Keywords: homeschooling, family, personal identity, neurorights, direct-to-consumer neurotechnologies

1. Introduction

"Homeschooling" is education at home or "family education," as Pérez Adán (2022) calls it. It is an educational option that has legal coverage in many countries around the world, not just in the United States. Many famous people like the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright or President Abraham Lincoln never went to school. Characters like Mozart or Jane Austin did not participate in this experience either; however, they were educated very well at home. That

is what later came to be called “homeschooling” or home education. If something has forged the personal identity of these characters and many others, it has been this personalized and careful education in the family. It began as this type of education with special tutors or cultured members of the family itself, which made it a quality of distinguished and wealthy families. Not everyone could afford this type of activity, since not everyone had access to education and basic sustenance was the main concern.

For good or bad, the parents and siblings decisively contribute to forge the individual’s personal identity. People who were raised by their grandparents or other relatives, or family friends, are also influenced by these identity makers. The memories that the individual has of the early formation, of that early education, are those that have ended up shaping the final character of the person. It is known that this early training, including the stay in the womb, is forging identity. Nonetheless, there are many different theories that try to describe and explain what personal is. For the purpose of this article, we adopt a relational view, i.e., “the idea that individual selves are *social* beings, and that this is *compatible* with personal autonomy [...] Relational views take for granted the plausible presumption that the Self is related to others in various ways; who we are and how we identify ourselves is never a practice that is achieved alone” (Lee, 2023, pp. 3-4).

In this paper, we make a historical, empirical, and ethical analysis (especially focused in the United States) to justify the relevance of defending homeschooling, with personal identity as the central axis. First, we describe important milestones and recall influential authors in the history of homeschooling. Second, we explain that guaranteeing the freedom of parents to choose homeschooling is part of freedom of conscience and freedom of education. Third, we highlight the critical role of the family as a shaper of personal identity and list the main reasons given by parents for choosing homeschooling. Fourth, we show empirical evidence that homeschooling offers children equal or better opportunities for happiness and academic success than traditional education. Finally, in the context of the rise of direct-to-consumer neurotechnologies in the educational environment, we defend the consideration of personal identity as a critical neuroright for the protection of a healthy neurocognitive development in homeschooling.

2. History of homeschooling

Homeschooling is a type of education that began to reappear in industrialized nations in the sixties and seventies of the 20th century and was carried out by educators dissatisfied with the established educational system. Compulsory education begins as early as 1852 in New England, specifically in the state of Massachusetts. It is obvious that, before compulsory education, everything would somehow be some kind of home education. Actually, something similar

to "homeschooling" had already started a long time before compulsory schooling, although it will not be until a century later when homeschooling already takes a considerable boom in America. According to the US Department of Education (n.d.),

> In 2012, there were an estimated 1.8 million homeschooled students in the United States, which is an increase from 850,000 in 1999, when estimates were first reported. In addition, the estimated percentage of the school-age population that was homeschooled increased from 1.7 percent in 1999 to 3.4 percent in 2012.

In his book *The School in Your Home*, Berle (1912) comes to say that education since the end of the 19th century has been a disaster at all levels in the United States. In addition, it is not only his perception, but he affirms that he has received hundreds of letters from people who think the same. This widespread dissatisfaction is what leads him to encourage people to renounce compulsory education and focus on educating their children at home. These warnings led many people in rural areas to choose this type of education.

In the sixties, one of the great defenders of homeschooling was Rousas John Rushdoony, born in New York to Armenian parents who came from very religious families. Rushdoony defended this type of education as protection against the increasing secularization of American schools and against the educational reforms of Mann and Dewey. Rushdoony was the expert representing the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) in its legal matters.

The marriage of Raymond and Dorothy Moore has also greatly influenced the perception of this type of education. This couple published the book *Better Late than Early* (Moore & Moore, 1975) and are therefore considered the pioneers of current homeschooling. This work had a great influence, because together with the criticisms that appeared during the seventies to compulsory education by Ivan Illich and Harold Bennet, they gave a considerable impetus to home education. While Illich (1970) radically opposed the idea of compulsory state education, Bennet (1972) offered homeschooling as the solution to be applied at all levels to get out of the educational crisis.

Another person who opposes the compulsory nature of education decreed by some local governments was John Holt, whose thinking is probably the most influential to date. Their theses are explained in detail in his book *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People Do Things Better* (Holt, 1976). With all his educational and revolutionary vision, Holt started the magazine *Growing Without Schooling* in 1977, in which he presented arguments and considerations in favor of homeschooling that ended up convincing many parents, and his popularity led him to be considered the father of homeschooling. Eighteen years after the founding of Holt's magazine, he authored the book *How Children Fail* (Holt, 1995), where he detailed the errors of compulsory education. After that, Patrick Farenga continued Holt's work at Holt Associates and authored *Teach*

Your Own: The John Holt Guide to Homeschooling (Farenga, 2003), where, using Holt's ideas, he explained how to carry out homeschooling on a daily basis.

It is clear that there are things in life that are not learned at school or university. Happiness is one of them, and unfortunately today many virtues are not taught in schools either. Happiness and the virtues that will define the personal identity of individuals are usually learned at home and in relationships with other people at a social level. Perhaps in the past the teaching of the virtues was something that was clearly taken into account in the educational field, but today it is no longer a priority. It might be argued that, many times, schools, colleges, and universities are not what they used to be and that these institutions are not clearly essential nowadays in our lives. There are other ways of training individuals. Many people use a combination of different educational systems or temporarily use homeschooling as one of the possible alternatives.

3. Homeschooling as a matter of freedom

In Europe, homeschooling is gaining more followers every day. It is not clear that education always has to be the responsibility of the public authorities. Many parents no longer trust any public administration and perceive that there is a tendency to "play tricks" with the education of youth. In addition, when the social situation at the educational level is oppressive and difficult, it is necessary to structurally consider the education of the children and make somewhat drastic decisions such as education at home. These types of decisions end up being made when long-term solutions are not seen. As Pérez Adán affirms in one of his latest works:

> I am in favor of educational freedom, of the option of family education, of the guarantor state taking responsibility for minimum surveillance so that at a certain age each infant knows how to communicate properly and what are the current rules of public coexistence (Pérez Adán, 2022, pp. 117-118).

The school choice may be the fairest option when it comes to offering more educational possibilities to parents to educate their children, but homeschooling must be included in that package. In Australia, the possibility of starting any school with federal funds was introduced a few years ago, simply by presenting the faculty and its ideology. This seems the fairest way to finance with everyone's money, because families can directly choose the educational modality they want for their children. Family education is, after all, a matter of freedom against some forms of educational totalitarianism:

> Those powers impose plans, programs, and content, while turning a deaf ear to internal criticism and persecuting dissent. This is combined with complaints against imaginary defects, which they say are detected in those who do not agree or do things in a different way (Pérez Adán, 2022, p. 111).

In many cases, court cases set the stage for the legalization of homeschooling. In the United States, for example, there have been various "legal battles" that have been sculpting the American educational landscape for a century. Perhaps the most notorious case at the Supreme Court of the United States is that of *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 US 205 (1972),[1] by which it was decided that, for religious reasons, children from Amish communities could not be compulsorily enrolled in Secondary Schools after finishing the eighth grade of Primary School in the State of Wisconsin. Another influential case was *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 US 510 (1925),[2] by which the Supreme Court reversed the decision of the State of Oregon that required all students to attend public schools only. Moreover, in the case of *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 US 390 (1923)[3] it was established that parents are the main educators of their children. This is held as a fundamental right, in addition to the right to be able to praise God according to one's own conscience. This is what is at the base of religious freedom and the freedom of education of one's own children in the United States. Nevertheless, although homeschooling is lawful from an educational and legal point of view in all of the States of the country, the legislation that protects it is different in each one of them.

4. Family as shaper of personal identity

It is essential to strengthen the family so that all this can continue to be defended at an educational and social level. To the extent that the family has the freedom and power to act, it may be responsible in its mediation, as suggested by Pérez Adán (2006). This can come from empowerment, which is the recovery of shares of power held by others, and can be done through two lines of action: the general democratization of political and economic systems and the implementation of forms of inclusive democracy. Society must recognize the family as a sovereign subject as well as endow it with a minimum representation, the right to initiative, public protection, and a charter of freedoms and securities. It is necessary to instill a vision of privacy or autonomy including interdependence with others, tradition, nature, and the future.

- Family strangeness is the axis on which social life is structured since we belong to different families that form the social fabric. It is necessary to consider spiritual and transcendent needs such as affection, generational equity, solidarity, and altruism, among others. In the family we are known differently, not equally, with quality criteria that are

[1] Available at: https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep406/usrep406205/usrep406205.pdf
[2] Available at: https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep268/usrep268510/usrep268510.pdf
[3] Available at: https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/262/390/

sometimes immaterial. The division between own and strangers is necessary to ultimately aspire to equality, based on the development of personal capabilities in the family environment, which is where personal identity is usually defined and forged (Pérez Adán, 2006). In many senses, family decisively influences how we define ourselves as people and individuals. This viewpoint places filiation at the center of personal identity and allows advocating for some good reasons to consider homeschooling as a reasonable alternative, such as the following:

- Obtaining a flexible education that allows parents not to depend on a specific educational district or schools that do not offer quality guarantees, especially in economically depressed environments,
- Close care of minors due to health reasons such as diabetes or other types of metabolic diseases, and
- Compatibility between the educational modality and the parents' employment. Some parents choose homeschooling (or a hybrid modality between homeschooling and some localized schooling) because, for work reasons, they have to travel a lot around the country and abroad. This situation makes unfeasible to change their children's schools several times a year.

A study carried out in the 2011-2012 academic year by the US Department of Education (n.d.) shows how frequent are some reasons given by parents to choose homeschooling:

- Concerns about school environment: 91%
- Looking for an Ethics course in school: 77%
- Dissatisfaction with the schools' academic teaching: 74%
- Seeking a Religion course: 64%
- Seeking a non-traditional education: 44%
- Seeking special education: 16%
- Health problems of physical mobility, physical or mental illness, etc.: 15%

Even though families usually offer a healthy environment for the development of personal identity, any program aimed at facilitating/promoting homeschooling must always include structured measures for children that face two important exceptions, namely: (1) they have no families; or (2) they are raised by families with problems of domestic violence, addictions, and/or other socioeconomic issues.

5. Homeschooling vs. traditional education: empirical evidence

In a study conducted by Ray (2003), 71% of 5,253 adults who received more than seven years of education at home socialized in volunteering, sports activities, parishes or neighborhood associations, while only a 37% of adults who attended public or private schools did these things. This study also showed that "59% of the subjects [that received homeschooling] reported that they were 'very happy' with life, with another 39% declaring that they were 'pretty happy'" (Ray, 2003, p. 6). This is significant, since if you are happy with yourself and life in general, you will probably tend to share and socialize more. Furthermore, using the Piers-Harris self-concept scale, Taylor (1986) explored the self-concept of students who study at home and found that the socialization of these students was statistically superior to that of the students who received traditional schooling.

Additionally, there are quite a few studies comparing standardized tests of homeschooling students versus traditional public or private high-schools. According to these studies, homeschooling students have nothing to envy from others. Some important empirical results in this regard are the following:

- Rudner (1999): students who received homeschooling scored 30 to 37 percentile points higher in all subjects than students from traditional schools. Moreover, there were no significant differences between minorities and between genders in the grades of high school students who received home education.
- Wichers (2001): one third of homeschooled students continued in a four-year university program, a 17% continued in a two-year university program, and a 50% went to college. These were higher percentages than those of traditional school students.
- Jones and Gloeckner (2004): nearly 80% of college admissions officers expected home-schoolers to perform equally or better in college than those from traditional high schools.
- Coogan (2010): students coming from homeschooling graduated from university at a higher percentage (67%) than others who came from traditional schools or high-schools (58%) and also obtained a higher average grade in university studies.
- Ray (2010): students between the ages of 5 and 18 who were educated at home scored at least 80 percentile points in the national test, which is higher than the rest.
- Snyder (2013): home-schoolers obtained better grades on national standardized tests and better academic averages at university than other students.

6. Personal identity as a neuroright: protecting neurocognitive development

Currently, the rapid advancement of neurotechnologies gives rise to significant ethical and legal challenges. These types of technologies are capable of monitoring and manipulating neural activity with increasing efficiency and precision. For this reason, several scholars (Ienca & Andorno, 2017; Neurorights Foundation, n.d.) have raised the alarm about how inappropriate or malicious use of neurotechnologies could erode fundamental freedoms and have proposed expanding the current human rights framework by incorporating so-called neurorights. According to Marcello Ienca, one of the main proponents, neurorights are "the ethical, legal, social, or natural principles of freedom or entitlement related to a person's cerebral and mental domain; that is, the fundamental normative rules for the protection and preservation of the human brain and mind" (Ienca, 2021, p. 1).

In the last years, neurorights have prospered in several national and international regulatory proposals, both in binding bills (hard law) and nonbinding resolutions/declarations/charters (soft law). Some of these proposals are the following:

- A constitutional reform in Chile,[4,5]
- Bills in Argentina,[6] Brazil,[7] and France,[8]
- Digital charters of rights in Mexico[9] and Spain,[10]
- International declarations by the International Bioethics Committee of UNESCO,[11] the Latin American Parliament (*Parlatino*),[12] and the OAS Inter-American Juridical Committee,[13] and

[4] Available at: https://www.diariooficial.interior.gob.cl/edicionelectronica/index.php?date=2-5-10-2021&edition=43086-B&v=2

[5] See Muñoz (2019) for a critical perspective of this reform.

[6] Available at: https://www.hcdn.gob.ar/proyectos/proyecto.jsp?exp=0339-D-2022

[7] Available at: https://www.camara.leg.br/propostas-legislativas/2317524

[8] Available at: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/article_jo/JORFARTI000043884401 (see Article 19.2.)

[9] Available at: https://www.infocdmx.org.mx/doctos/2022/Carta_DDigitales.pdf

[10] Available at: https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/presidente/actividades/Documents/2021/1407-21-Carta_Derechos_Digitales_RedEs.pdf (see Article XXVI).

[11] Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378724

[12] Available at: https://parlatino.org/comision-de-seguridad-ciudadana-combate-y-prevencion-al-narcotrafico-terrorismo-y-crimen-organizado/declaracion-neuroderechos/

[13] Available at: https://www.oas.org/en/sla/iajc/current_agenda_Development_of_international_standards_on_neurorights.asp

- A resolution by the United Nations Human Rights Council,[14] which is the most important normative milestone reached so far by neurorights worldwide.

There are currently two main academic proposals for neurorights. The first, by Ienca and Andorno (2017), advocates for the rights to cognitive liberty, mental privacy, mental integrity, and psychological continuity. The second, by the Neurorights Foundation (n.d.), advocates for mental privacy, free will, mental identity, fair access to brain-enhancing technologies, and protection against algorithmic bias. It should be noted that, in addition to mental privacy, both proposals coincide in proposing one or another form of personal identity:

- Psychological continuity: "[A] special neuro-focused instance of the right to identity" that "ultimately tends to preserve personal identity and the coherence of the individual's behavior from unconsented modification by third parties" (Ienca & Andorno, 2017, p. 21).
- Personal identity: "Individuals must have the ability to control their mental integrity and sense of self" (Neurorights Foundation, n.d.)

The freedom of parents to choose the educational option they prefer for their children, and specifically that of those who choose homeschooling, is not exempt from being affected by possible violations of the neuroright to personal identity. A clear example in this regard is a recent project carried out in several Chinese elementary schools, in which electroencephalography (EEG) headsets were used to monitor the children's attention levels in class.[15] This ethically unacceptable use of neurotechnology in minors is, at first sight, a clear threat to the right to mental privacy. However, it is also a threat for personal identity to the extent that children, by knowing they are constantly being watched, can feel anxious and the coherence of their behavior can be disrupted due to the State's surveillance.

Fortunately, the children's parents managed to put pressure to stop this project,[16] which shows the importance of firm convictions to win freedom, even in non-democratic countries. However, the proliferation of so-called direct-to-consumer neurotechnologies (DTCs), which do not require medical approval or supervision and are readily available to citizens, raises concerns that the use of neurotechnological devices in compulsory education could spread in the near

[14] Available at: https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/525/01/PDF/G2252501.pdf?OpenElement

[15] For a detailed explanation of this Chinese project, see the following *Wall Street Journal*'s video report: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMLsHI8aV0g&ab_channel=WallStreetJournal.

[16] See https://www.scmp.com/abacus/news-bites/article/3035951/chinese-parents-stop-school-using-brain-monitoring-headbands

future. In fact, some of the DTC devices are specifically designed for cognitive training and to monitor or manipulate memory (Wexler & Reiner, 2019).

Widespread use of DTCs in compulsory schools could seriously erode family independence and take away more freedoms. State hyper-surveillance over children could not only affect their security and self-esteem, but would also mean an abusive substitution of the paternal role. In addition, memory manipulation could seriously alter children's psychological continuity and sense of self, without families having much ability to intervene. Homeschooling would thus be seen as a more than justified alternative for families who do not want an invasion of their freedom to forge their children's personal identity.

In a previous section we said that family usually plays a crucial role in defininig us as individuals and that filiation is at the center of personal identity. In the end, an adequate family guide, which includes the style of education, is decisive for the cognitive and emotional maturation of minors. Thus, we should seriously consider personal identity as a neuroright critical for the protection of a healthy neurocognitive development. In this sense, explicitly including the mention of this type of development in international declarations could be relevant as suggested by Muñoz and Marinaro (2024, p. 810), who propose "to explore a change in Article 6, Section 2, of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which refers to guaranteeing their normal development, by including the right to healthy neurocognitive development."[17]

7. Final remarks

We began this article by briefly reviewing the history of homeschooling and arguing that guaranteeing it is a way of safeguarding educational freedom. We also explained that the family is usually fundamental to shaping personal identity—which we understand from a relational view—and listed a series of important reasons that families of homeschooled children often cite for adopting this educational modality. Next, we offered some scientific evidence indicating that homeschooling appears to be associated with better academic results, improved socialization skills, greater happiness, and a better self-concept. Finally, we argued that the use of neurotechnologies for hyper-surveillance purposes in education (which has already been tested in some countries) poses a significant threat to (the neuroright to) personal identity.

[17] The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

It is important to note that we have focused exclusively on the United States, which represents a significant limitation of our study. A comparative and integrated analysis of homeschooling in several countries with diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts would undoubtedly help clarify how it affects how personal identity is conceived in different parts of the world.

In any case, although homeschooling is clearly a minority option, there are more and more support resources available to families who choose it. For instance, many homeschooled students in the United States follow the teaching materials provided by the Seton Home Study School, based in Front Royal, VA.[18] This school, which is accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools, has published 134 textbooks and has more than 40 years of teaching activity. All the materials are available online, which is why 17,000 students from 54 countries participate. The Seton Home Study School maintains the academic results of the students and awards Baccalaureate degrees.

In addition to Seton, many families also use teaching materials from Rod and Staff, the Amish homeschool publisher.[19] More basic materials that integrate English phonics, reading, spelling and writing have been prepared by the Protestant publisher Abeka, which is another well-known provider of homeschooling teaching materials.[20] There are also many platforms on the internet that support the work of parents in teaching at home. These platforms are Jewish, Muslim, of different Christian denominations, secular, even non-religious. Thus, homeschooling is compatible with many different ideas, as might be expected.

In the end, even though homeschooling is a minority option, we think that its protection is critical to warrant the freedom of families to help forge the personal identities of their children. By choosing the kind of education they find more appropriate, parents can actively and decisively contribute to a healthy neurocognitive development for their sons and daughters. As a final suggestion, based on the view that personal identity should be considered when training adolescent homeschoolers (McQueen, 2019), we propose to incorporate education on personal identity in the curricula as part of the Character Formation subject.

[18] See https://www.setonhome.org/
[19] See http://www.rodstaff.com/
[20] See https://www.abeka.com/Homeschool/

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