

## **The Homeschool Choice: Parents and the Privatization of Education**

*By Kate Henley Averett*

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Homeschooling as a viable educational option is on the rise in many countries around the world; and even more prolifically following temporary closure of many schools during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eggleston & Fields, 2021). Kate Henley Averett's "The Homeschooling Choice" therefore presents a timely insight into, and scrutiny of, this significant cultural phenomenon. The book has emerged from the author's extensive research between 2013-2016 with over 600 homeschooling families by survey, 46 in-depth family interviews, and attendance at five homeschooling conferences. The result is a rich, multifaceted, and nuanced picture of modern homeschooling. While situated in the US state of Texas, the issues raised in this book transcend the American context and are salient for a global audience. Importantly, the key driver of this text is not to provide yet another snapshot of homeschooling, but to raise fundamental questions about whether the choice to homeschool exercised by increasing numbers of parents is problematic.

The author's work extends upon a number of scholars who situate homeschooling as an outworking of neoliberal ideology, and within this, the ideology of "school choice", whereby state education is increasingly privatized to offer "consumer choice" (Apple, 2000; Lubienski, 2003). It is this wider societal acceptance of school choice as the "norm" – the author argues – that underpins not only the rise of homeschooling, but education more broadly in modern American schooling.

The chapters move through a range of lenses to scrutinise and make sense of the many stories of homeschoolers, showing how a range of competing views are often raised by parents and proponents as motivations for, and philosophical foundations of, homeschooling. These include competing views on gender and sexuality, the role of children and childhood, catering to the "unique child", the role of government in education, and models of motherhood and the gendered labour of homeschooling. Through each lens, the author presents nuanced and compassionate insights into diverse family experiences, set within a wider picture of different (often diametrically opposed) homeschooling cultures, such as religiously conservative through to liberal. Importantly, moving beyond the often polar views expressed by participants, the author presents the argument that ultimately, these disparate viewpoints collectively arise from the same entrenched/unacknowledged neoliberal ideology that has promoted individual choice regarding the needs of individual children as a societal norm and hallmark of good parenting. Consequently, the text ultimately paints homeschooling as "perhaps" problematic (Henley Averett, 2021, p. 188), in

that it “leads parents to prioritize their own children’s unique needs over the needs of other children, and of society as a whole” (p. 63).

School choice, she argues, reinforces gender inequality through the intensive requirements usually placed upon women who typically bear the majority of responsibility, perpetuates social and racial inequality through ongoing segregation, and contributes to the unhealthy restriction of some children’s agentic experience when their exposure to broader ideas in a democratic and pluralist society is potentially limited. As such, proponents of homeschooling will understandably find this text challenging, likely even infuriating, for the conclusions it ultimately draws. The position of the author regarding the ways that homeschooling perpetuates inequality are paradoxically opposed to the views of some advocates who promote homeschooling as a form of resistance to dominant social forces that have long contributed to educational inequality (Puga, 2019).

What was largely missing in this text in response to the “problem” of school choice and homeschooling, was an answer to the dilemma that leads so many parents to adopt homeschooling. When children are oppressed, harmed or hindered by the current schooling system, what is an appropriate response from parents and society that values both children as individuals and as part of society? The problem with school choice and how it leads parents to prioritize their own children’s needs is raised convincingly in the text, but an alternative is not. Understandably, this is not a problem with a simple answer. “The Homeschool Choice” asserts that it is the larger systems that are flawed, and for true change to be enacted, the system itself needs to change. However, it’s likely that many who read the text will see that the dilemma remains unsolved for parents who undeniably care about the experience and development of their children while also caring about how individual actions contribute to a collective experience.

Overall, “The Homeschool Choice” is compelling, eminently readable research that will be challenging and worthwhile reading for parents, educators and sociologists. It presents an important contribution to debates around schooling, educational access and rising inequality, and an opportunity for discussion and debate regarding the potential sociological outcomes of these differing viewpoints on childhood, education and society.

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