

Learning at home: an ethnographic study of a South African home school

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Home schooling may be defined as an alternative to on-site institutionalised schooling. Most education systems accommodate home schooling but such arrangements are regulated in various ways. This article reports on an investigation into home schooling in South Africa as an consequential part of the education system of the country. A literature review of the context, nature, scope and current issues of the home schooling movement, in other countries as well as in South Africa, is presented as background to the empirical investigation. The latter comprised an ethnographic study of a single home-schooling family chosen by judgement sampling. Data were collected during a six-month period of fieldwork employing participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that although home schooling is an effective model of education and is rewarding for many families, it requires extensive commitment, dedication, preparation, emotional involvement and stamina.

Introduction

The home-schooling movement is relatively widespread in countries such as the United States of America (USA), Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. Thus, Lines (2000:74) states: "The rise of home-schooling [sic] is one of the most significant social trends of the past half century." Growing interest in home schooling has led to the emergence of an immense industry offering support and resources to parents who choose to homeschool their children (Lines, 2000: 80). In spite of this, the home-schooling movement remains somewhat controversial throughout the world since home schooling can, by implication, be considered to be a criticism of public education (Meighan, 1997:4).

Home schooling is considered in section 51 of the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996) which states that "A parent may apply to the Head of the Department for the registration of a learner to receive education at the learner's home." Durham (1996:77) asserts that although the South African Schools Act is positive in that it acknowledges home schooling, it is still restrictive in the sense that excessive powers of jurisdiction are given to the provincial authorities. According to the Policy for the Registration of Learners for Home Education published on 23 November 1999 (RSA, 1999) in South Africa, home education refers to a programme of education that parents provide to educate their child at their own home and can include the services of a tutor for specific areas of the curriculum. Thus, home schooling (or home learning as it is referred to in the act) is a legal, independent form of education alternative to attendance at a public or independent school.

The National Coalition of Home Schoolers (NCHS), the largest South African home-schooling association, has estimated that there are approximately 2 000 children being home-schooled, which presents a considerable increase in numbers, compared with previous years (NCHS, 1998). Van Oostrum and Van Oostrum (1997:41) also indicate the presence of a large underground component, that is, parents operating unregistered home schools for fear of prosecution or interference by education authorities.

Aim of the article

This article reports on an ethnographic inquiry into a home school in South Africa. The main research question was formulated as follows: What are the experiences of a home-schooling family? A single case was selected by judgement sampling and data were collected using multiple methods during a six-month period of fieldwork including, participant observation and semistructured interviews. The investigation aimed at understanding, describing and interpreting the expe-

riences of a home-schooling family as a cultural group by uncovering primary data. The research was essentially exploratory and descriptive, thus no endeavour was made to establish cause and effect under experimental conditions, or to predict or establish findings of a generalised nature. A literature review of the nature and scope of the home-schooling movement internationally and in South Africa situated the chosen topic within the relevant body of knowledge.

The home-schooling movement

The home-schooling movement is by no means monolithic: educational backgrounds of parents are diverse; ideological stance and educational philosophy differ widely as do curriculum content, teaching methods and modes of operation (Butler, 2000:45; Mayberry, Knowles, Ray & Marlow, 1995:33; Knowles, 1991:203). However, Lines (2000:78) identifies certain similarities among home schoolers in the USA. In that country, the movement is predominantly middle class, comprising young well-educated parents. Often families are self-employed which allows for the involvement of the parent as educator; religious and spiritual beliefs feature strongly as the motivation for home schooling and the families are generally politically conservative. Van Galen and Pitman (1991:67) add that home schoolers are often highly individualistic and home schooling is symbolic of the family's independence from social institutions.

The decision by parents to homeschool may be based on several factors. Lines (2000:79) categorises the reasons to homeschool as either religious or progressive. Dembitzer (1990:40) adds that many parents choose to homeschool because they have little or no access to conventional education. Van Oostrum (1997:2) identifies pedagogic and social reasons for home schooling. A family may feel that it can provide education of a quality that is superior to that offered by conventional schools, either academically or in terms of providing an environment which offers more advantageous learning conditions. Social reasons comprise situations where parents wish to protect their children from negative peer pressure and social influences or simply wish to strengthen the family bond. Lines (2000:76) explains that there are many home schoolers who "... simply seek the highest quality education for their child, which they believe public and even private schools can no longer provide". In other cases, parents may choose to home-school because they have a child who is unwell or has specific learning difficulties (Lowe & Thomas, 2002:131).

Parents who choose to homeschool their children may have to overcome a number of difficulties. Financial sacrifice may be involved as the family forgoes a possible second income in order to allow the parent educator to stay at home (Butler, 2000:43). Expensive educa-

tional resources, such as books, teaching materials and technology, may need to be purchased (Rudner, 1998:18). The initial commitment to and enthusiasm for home schooling must also be sustained in the face of any emerging difficulties in the household. Moreover, home schooling confines the parent educator to long stretches of time spent at home every day (Butler, 2000:47). The latter may contribute to feelings of isolation, stress and burnout, which are often encountered among home-school families (Moore & Moore, 1994:17). The need to adjust to the particular requirements of the individual child requires careful planning and creativity, which makes heavy demands on the parent educator (Long, 2001:67).

Notwithstanding these difficulties, home schoolers attest to many benefits. Family relationships are strengthened in the intimacy of the home school (Colfax & Colfax, 1988:12); education can be customised to suit the individual child's needs (Butler, 2000:46); learner autonomy over learning is maximised (Butler, 2000:46); opportunities for creativity are enhanced (Barfield, 2002:41); and the curriculum can be largely selected according to the family's educational and personal objectives (Moore & Moore, 1994:23). Long (2001:67) adds that parents who homeschool are able to provide individual attention and appropriate academic freedom allowing children to complete projects at their own pace and engage in in-depth studies of subjects. Similarly, Rudner (1998:23) states that, "Home schools can and do place a greater emphasis on study skills, critical thinking, working independently, and a love for learning."

Yet in spite of these stated advantages, educators and educational authorities are often sharply critical of the home-schooling movement. A summary of the most commonly raised objectives (Meighan, 1997:35) which are also relevant to the South African context (Wayman, 1997; Behr, 1997) follows. Children in a home school may not receive sufficient opportunity to socialise with other children, especially those who are culturally different from themselves, in order to adapt to society; dogmatic parents may impose their rigid pedagogical or ideological ideas on their children; parent educators are frequently not properly qualified to teach; parents may lack adequate time to teach the child in the face of normal domestic chores; and children may be deprived of certain amenities which only schools can provide such as large libraries, sports equipment or expensive technology. Many studies have been conducted in response to these critiques and a body of research evidence has been accumulated around this debate. These studies show that the achievement levels of home-schooled children are high (Andruss, 2001:36; Rudner, 1998:23; Hood, 1990:34); achievement measured by means of standardised tests carried out in the USA shows that home-schooled children perform well in comparison with their counterparts in conventional schools (Marlow, 1994:452) and in college (Klicka, 1998:167). Parent educators in home schools are frequently distinguished by their enthusiasm, commitment and earnestness (Butler, 2000:45). Research has addressed the issue of adequate socialisation of home-school children (Ray & Wartes, 1991; Shyers, 1992), which indicates that home-schooled children are seldom isolated socially. Many home-schooling families network extensively; the home school itself allows for personalised socialising; and the home-schooled children are exposed to diverse environments, such as libraries, theatres, restaurants, churches, youth movements such as Scouts and the neighbourhood, all of which allow the child to socialise (Butler, 2000:46). Furthermore, technological developments, such as E-mail, Internet and CD-ROMS as well as the huge array of curricula providers available provide a battery of rich educational resources (Moore, 2002:148).

Home schooling in South Africa

The home-schooling movement is relatively young in South Africa. The Association for Home Schooling was formed in 1992 and the National Coalition of Home Schoolers (NCHS) in 1996 (Van Oostrum & Van Oostrum, 1997:33). Various provinces also have their own associations (Moore, 2002:14). In addition, the Pestalozzi Trust was founded in 1998 and is a legal defence fund for home schooling. It

offers to represent member families "... from consultation to correspondence and negotiation with local officials, and in court proceedings all the way through the appellate court" (Pestalozzi Trust, 2000). In addition, several curriculum providers exist in the country. For example, the Eastern Cape Home Schooling Association (ECHSA) has identified several approaches and lists providers that fall within these approaches (ECHSA, 2001). Behr (1997:53) also mentions that the number of curricula providers has increased in recent years.

Legislation with key implications for home schooling in South Africa is the South African Schools Act (SASA) (No. 84 of 1996) (RSA, 1996) which acknowledges home schooling as a legitimate schooling option in South Africa. Home schooling is considered pertinently in Section 51 of the SASA (RSA, 1996:27) which states that a learner may be registered by the provincial Head of the Education Department if that person is satisfied that:

- the registration will be in the best interest of the child;
- the requirements of the curriculum in the public schools will be met; and
- the home education will correspond to the minimum standard of education in public schools.

In South African policy documents, the terms *home schooling* as well as *home education* are used. The final Policy for the Registration of Learners for Home Education was passed on 23 November, 1999, hereafter referred to as RSA, 1999). This document defines home education, states conditions for registration of a home school, the duties of the parent educator, guidelines for the withdrawal of registration as well as a *pro forma* application for the registration of a learner for home education. Regarding conditions for registration of a learner (RSA, 1999), the Head of Department must be satisfied that, *inter alia*, home education (or home schooling — as it is more commonly known) meets the following criteria: that it is beneficial to the learner, complies with the fundamental right of the learner to education, and will be taught at least as persistently and to the same standard as in a public school; that the number of learning hours, available learning resources and highest education standard achieved by the learner are declared; that the proposed learning programme is submitted, and the learning programme suits the age and ability of the learner, heeds the minimum requirements of the curriculum and is not of a standard inferior to that of public school education; and that the parent will protect the learner from any form of abuse or unfair discrimination and will not promote racism or religious intolerance within the learner.

The duties of the parent educator as outlined by the Policy for the Registration of Learners for Home Education (RSA, 1999) are as follows:

- keeping a record of attendance; building up a portfolio of a learner's work, including up-to-date records of progress; providing evidence of intervention and educational support; and making all of the above available for inspection by an education official;
- keeping evidence of continuous assessment for a period of three years;
- providing for mandatory assessment of a learner's progress, upon completion of each phase, by an independent and suitably qualified person who has been approved by the department.

The reaction to this policy saw the development of conflict between the various home-schooling associations and the authorities. The main contention was the perception held by the home-schooling association that the authorities had not been involved in adequate consultation with relevant stakeholders nor had they adequate knowledge of home schooling to enable them to pass acceptable legislation. After the publication of the Draft Revised National Curriculum on 30 July 2001, animosity escalated into a confrontation between the home-schooling fraternity and the Minister of Education, Professor K Asmal. The issues of contention revolved mainly around the Social Sciences and Life Orientation Learning Area Statements in Curriculum 2005, which require learners to obtain an understanding of diverse religions and world views (Pestalozzi Trust, 2000).

A recent survey of home schoolers in South Africa (De Waal,

2000:235-236) shows that home schoolers are a diverse group, located throughout the country. The mother is usually the parent responsible for home schooling. Most home schoolers do not have teaching qualifications. Moreover, methods of instruction used by home schoolers also differ widely. Among the reasons for choosing to homeschool in South Africa are certain specific ones. Durham (1996:76) suggests the following reasons why parents choose alternate schooling models: a high teacher-learner ratio; lack of discipline; school violence; perceptions of declining educational standards and the increased costs of schooling. Other reasons stem from religious convictions, the provision of first-language instruction and concern about the implementation of Outcomes-Based Education as the new curriculum for South African schooling (Pestalozzi Trust, 2000; Van Oostrum & Van Oostrum, 1997:11).

Research design

The empirical investigation reported on in this article comprised an ethnography of a South African home school selected by means of judgement sampling. Ethnography may be described as a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or systems. The researcher examines the group's observable and learned patterns of behaviour, customs and ways of life (Hatch, 2002:21). As a process, ethnography involves extended observation of the group, typically through participant observation, in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the members of the group and through one-on-one interviews with them (Miller & Salkind, 2002:158). The duration of the fieldwork is usually six months to a year (Miller & Salkind, 2002:147).

Selection of the home school

According to Wolcott (1999:196), ethnographers must locate a setting in which the study will take place. This usually takes considerable time and the researcher frequently operates through "gate keepers" who can help to gain access to a site and participants. In this study the researcher first determined the following criteria for the selection of a suitable home school: a family in which one of the parents homeschooled their own children without the assistance of a tutor; the decision to homeschool was based on reasons other than geographical ones (location of home in relation to conventional schools) or medical considerations (a sick child who cannot attend a conventional school); and the learners were young enough to require considerable guidance as opposed to an older child who would be able to study independently. The process of identifying an appropriate case took almost a year during which contact was made with several home-school families, who acted as gatekeepers, referring the researcher to several possible contacts. A family, which met the above criteria and promised to offer an information-rich setting was contacted, a relationship of trust established through frequent visits and an agreement reached regarding participation in the research.

Data collection and analysis

The ethnographer develops a description of the culture-sharing group and analyses data for themes that indicate shared patterns (Wolcott, 1999:198). To do this, multiple data collection techniques are used within the natural setting. In this research, fieldwork comprised a period of six months during which the home school was observed for at least three days per week. After the fieldwork was completed, the researcher made two return visits to the home school for purposes of data verification and clarification. Data collection took place primarily through participant observation. Behaviour and interactions were noted in an observation journal and/or observations were described orally by the researcher on a small tape recorder for maximum recall and thereafter transcribed as field notes. Furthermore, data were collected by numerous individual interviews with the mother, the children and the father. These took place naturally during the daily interaction and were recorded on audiotape. Two focus-group interviews were carried out with the whole family present. As many aspects of the

natural setting as possible were observed: the schoolroom, social visits by friends and family, family rituals and events, domestic help, the household routine, domestic pets, interruptions, the father's activities, nature walks, visits to the library, family illnesses, etc.

Data analysis and data collection were conducted simultaneously. The data were analysed manually by repeated examination of the field notes, and interview transcripts, identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data. Extracts from the raw data were selected and paraphrased or quoted to illustrate patterns. Guba's (1997:89) model for trustworthiness of data was followed by adhering to the following criteria:

1. Multiple methods of data collection (participant observation, individual and focus-group interviews and field notes) were used to triangulate methods. Feedback from participants was continually sought during fieldwork and by means of two additional visits to the field to ascertain meaning of statements and behaviour.
2. The findings were discussed with the participants so that they could confirm whether their views were correctly understood.
3. The decision to select a suitable social group for study was carefully made according to stated criteria.
4. A tape recorder and observation journal were used and recorded data were transcribed verbatim. Field observations were immediately recorded in writing or on the tape recorder and full notes written up daily.
5. Two researchers analysed the data to ensure intercoder as well as intracoder reliability.

Researcher role and ethical issues

The ethnographer is sensitive to the impact of the researcher on the site and the people being studied as well as the right of participants to confidentiality. According to ethical standards ethnographers make their presence and purpose known to the participants so that there is no deception about the purpose of the study (Wolcott, 1999:208). These criteria were complied with faithfully in this study. The researcher's role adopted was that of a participant observer (*cf.* Schumacher & Macmillan, 1993:415). Initially the researcher was only an observer but as the participating family became accustomed to her presence, they confided freely in her and invited her to observe most family activities. Thus, the nature of the research was intimate and, as Miller and Salkind (2002:161) point out, an ethnographer spends many hours in the private world of the participants. In addition to the official permission to conduct the research granted by the family, the researcher continually sought consent to record specific incidents and made the meanings attributed to behaviour available to the family both during and after the fieldwork. The identity of the family was protected by using pseudonyms.

Findings and discussion

Ethnographic findings aim to give a description of the entire cultural scene by drawing together all aspects learned about the group and showing its complexity (Miller & Salkind, 2002:161). This description was done according to the following themes which emerged from the data.

The participants and the setting

The family fell within a middle-class income bracket. Although Afrikaans was the home language, English was frequently spoken. Both parents had tertiary education. The mother, Lisa, was the parent educator. She had an Honours degree in Drama but did not have a teaching qualification. The two boys, Harry and Robin, were aged seven and three at the commencement of the study. The father, Alistair, was not directly involved in the teaching activities of the home school. Since he worked from home, he was frequently present in an advisory and supportive role. The family were practising Christians, but the decision to homeschool was not based on religious principles. The home school was located in the family home in a pleasant suburb in a

small town. A special room, attractively decorated and fitted with suitable furniture was allocated as a schoolroom and the children enjoyed a large flower and vegetable garden, outdoor play equipment and several pets.

The decision to homeschool

The decision to homeschool was based on pedagogical and social considerations. Both children had previously been enrolled in conventional schools: the elder child, Harry, in Grade 1 at an independent primary school, and the younger, Robin, in an independent preschool. However, the parents, particularly the mother, was not satisfied with the curriculum, the system of reward and punishment and the school's emphasis on technology. Moreover, Lisa felt that the family's values differed from those of the other families in the school. For example, she did not allow her children to watch television or play computer games and the family valued different social activities. In this sense, home schooling was a response to broader social conditions. As Marlow (1994:441) points out, many parents who homeschool are seeking to protect their values and beliefs through the integrity and autonomy of the family. The family's decision to homeschool elicited strong reaction from the neighbourhood, friends and family. The predominant reaction of neighbours and friends was scepticism and both the mother and the elder child suffered as a result. Lisa illustrated this by saying: "When I told a neighbour that we were homeschooling, she said that my children would end up stupid". In addition, she related that: "Harry didn't want to tell people at first but now his friends envy him because he doesn't go to school. He often tells his brother he's lucky; he won't go to school." Moore and Moore (1994:11) point out that this kind of reaction places stress on the home schooler who must often sustain a generally controversial decision. Close family were startled by the decision but were soon convinced by the family's enthusiasm and commitment to the enterprise. However, the decision to homeschool represented the family's partial withdrawal from an important domain of society. Consequently, the family unit had to find a new place for itself within its immediate community. Unlike other home-schooling families, this family did not network with other home schoolers who may have assisted them to find a new social niche. However, Lisa was adamant that she would overcome any opposition. It was also important to Lisa that "outsiders" did not witness any difficulties she encountered in setting up the home school. This disposition reflects that of other home schoolers who often fear failure and endeavour to achieve the eventual approval of the community (Lines, 2000:83).

The daily routine of the home school

The home school followed an observable routine commencing at roughly 9:00 and lasting until noon. The children started the day with a short ritual of lighting a candle, listening to a Bible story, singing, reading, crafts, and piano playing. A short break was followed by maths and activities, such as gardening, baking, nature walks or a weekly trip to the library. These activities alternated on a regular basis. A second, longer break was followed by art activities in which purely natural materials were used or by learning to play a musical instrument. Lisa was determined to keep to a routine, which included daily practice of maths, reading and writing. However, this daily routine was seen to change considerably during observation and the inability to stick firmly to a routine was a major source of stress to Lisa. Schooling had to fit in with the housework which was done mainly by the mother, initially without help. Since she was the primary parent educator, practical difficulties arose when she was unwell, had a minor operation and when family members made two extended visits to the home-schooling family. In the latter case, Lisa was adamant that schooling should continue as usual yet she experienced considerable pressure to keep to this commitment at the time. She also admitted that she resented having to forego the company of the visitors when she was occupied with schooling the children. These anecdotes illustrate the ongoing dedication and self-discipline that are required of the home-schooling family in the face of a household's normal functioning

(Klicka, 1998:133). The parent educator cannot take time off from his or her "job" and this places restrictions on personal freedom and the use of time (Butler, 2000:47).

The curriculum

In this context the curriculum refers to the study material and approaches to teaching followed within the home school. The curriculum in a home school often discloses much about the unique nature of the home schooler's philosophical view of his or her world (Moore & Moore, 1994:32). The approach to the curriculum followed by this family changed quite markedly within the period of observation and these changes are described in this section. Lisa planned her lessons thoroughly and kept a daily journal of her planning and what had been accomplished each day. She explained that this "helped me to focus on what needs to be done." Prior to the commencement of the home school, she had done considerable reading on the approaches used by various eminent advocates of home schooling as this comment shows: "I've read quite a bit — John Holt, Charlotte Mason, etc., and have decided to use a combination of approaches." Initially, the researcher was struck by the powerful emphasis on creativity and the eclecticism of the curriculum. Later a three-fold focus emerged: the arts (music, art, literature, drama), nature study and religion. The family did not subscribe to any of the home-school curriculum providers and made use of the town's library as their main learning resource. Observations during the weekly visit to the library showed that many spontaneous, happy and worthwhile learning experiences for both mother and children occurred in the library. Religion, although not the main reason for home schooling, was introduced spontaneously throughout the lessons, which were strongly infused with family values.

After a short time a significant direction with regard to the curriculum emerged. As a result of Lisa's interest in art and the use of exclusively natural materials in art projects, she became interested in the Waldorf approach to education. The Waldorf school was founded by Rudolf Steiner and is based on anthroposophy or humanistic philosophy. It follows a distinctive and unique approach which is aimed at promoting the education of the whole child. There is a juxtaposition of academic subjects and practical and artistic activities. Waldorf schools operate independently in several countries and are autonomous in terms of administration, but recognised associations of Waldorf schools promote the movement by providing, for example, resources, publications and sponsoring conferences (*cf.* Steiner, 1967). Initially Lisa incorporated elements of the Waldorf approach without encompassing the pedagogy as a whole. A visit to a Waldorf school in a nearby city engendered even greater enthusiasm for this approach. As a result Lisa lengthened the school day, stressed art and gardening activities, only used only natural materials, shunned technology and a main lesson or theme was introduced for a period of two weeks at a time. These changes were very positively experienced by the children. However, as Colfax and Colfax (1988:44) suggest, the home schooler's liberty to choose diverse teaching material and approaches can be both exciting and overwhelming. A home schooler, especially one who is not a qualified teacher, could be daunted by the possibilities and the effort required to implement different approaches single-handedly. This was corroborated by the research because Lisa was later compelled to revert to her initial, more conservative teaching approaches. She reluctantly abandoned many aspects advocated by the Waldorf school. She explained this with frustration, saying that the Waldorf approach made constant demands on her creativity and required intense preparation. At this stage of the fieldwork, Lisa was increasingly showing signs of stress and burnout.

Difficulties arising from home schooling

Several difficulties were experienced by the home-schooling family during the period of observation.

1. *Providing teaching equipment*

Home schooling requires considerable financial commitment. Tea-

ching equipment was found to be both expensive and difficult to obtain in the small town in which the family lived. Since the family did not network with other home schoolers, the effort to source teaching materials was considerable. Lisa was adamant that only the best quality materials should be used for arts and crafts. For example, she insisted on using water-colour paper that was expensive and could have been replaced with a cheaper brand. As a result, the same kind of art materials were used repetitively. The children often complained about being bored with the same activities and there was constant pressure for the mother to devise novel ideas. After the home school adopted the Waldorf approach, the materials used became even more important: for example, the children used only beeswax crayons. Discrepancies in Lisa's beliefs about the use of natural materials, thus avoiding any kind of synthetic material such as plastic toys and the complete absence of technology eventually emerged. In early discussions, Lisa commented that: "Children ought to play naturally and anything that comes with a plug on it is bad for a child's development". This view was espoused in spite of the vast array of modern appliances in the home. Furthermore, although the watching of television was discouraged, there were occasions when the family watched videos.

2. *Maintaining the parameters between family life and school*

The parameters between family life and the home school were difficult to maintain. During the afternoons the children were informally supervised by their father but this often meant that they continued with activities which had formed part of the morning lessons. There was seldom a break from educational activities for both parents and children. In addition, the parents would describe the weekends in terms of educational rather than social activities. All social and family events came to be evaluated for their educational contribution. Thus, the boundary between the home school and normal family life became increasingly blurred and this was an increasing source of stress to the family members.

3. *Role conflict*

Role conflict results when there is a compulsion to play more than one role at a time (Baron & Byrne, 1991: 441). Role conflict was experienced by Lisa, the parent educator, who in this case had to fulfill the dual role of a teacher and of a mother. In this regard, Mendoza and Cegelka's tabulation (in Lemmer, 2002:12) of some fundamental differences between teaching and parenting is useful. A classroom teacher is focused on a group of learners, whilst the parents are only concerned with the progress of their own child. The parent has intimate knowledge of the child's entire history, i.e. his or her physical, emotional and social development, which the teacher lacks. The parent is deeply and subjectively attached to the child, whilst the teacher's concern for the child obviously lacks these elemental and enduring parental bonds. Therefore, teachers can assess the child more abstractly and distance themselves from the child, his or her progress, and problems. Lisa's emotional involvement with her children had an impact on her role as the parent educator. This was predominantly positive, nevertheless taxing, as this comment evinces:

I am a very tired mummy. We're late [for the library] because Harry had a recorder lesson at 9:30 and he hadn't finished all his work, so we had to go home for him to finish it before we came to the library. He's very cross with me, but these things must be done!

Lisa did not enjoy the relative degree of emotional neutrality towards her children that a classroom teacher tends to have. Moreover, Lisa had no break from the stresses of motherhood and the pressure of the combined role of mother and teacher became increasingly evident during the observation.

In addition to the roles of teacher and mother, Lisa was also homemaker, wife, and part-time drama coach. In all these areas, she was very accomplished. When she assumed the added role of home schooler, she had to fulfil a new set of expectations for which there were no clearly delineated parameters. Discussions showed that she

felt inadequate to meet all the demands made on her and experienced a degree of role ambiguity. Role ambiguity occurs in the workplace when goals or objectives are blurred. Dissatisfaction can occur, which could lead to decreased self-esteem and sometimes, even depression (Louw, Edwards, Foster, Gilbert, Louw, Norton, Plub, Shuttleworth-Jordan & Spangenberg, 1997:114). Alistair, the father, empathised with Lisa and the parents actively sought new patterns of coping. To address these problems, the family hired a domestic helper later in the year when the tasks of homemaking and teaching became too much for Lisa.

4. *Feelings of insecurity*

Institutionalised schooling releases parents from the onus of formally educating their children (Klicka, 1998:11). The re-appropriation of the task of formal education is frequently accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and a burden of responsibility (Prystowsky, 2000:46). Lisa also experienced feelings of insecurity with regard to her teaching strategies and her ability to teach effectively. It is not uncommon for home educators to experience this because as they are often acting in comparative isolation and miss the presence of other teaching staff who can provide advice and feedback (Moore & Moore, 1994: 17). The researcher observed that this insecurity related mainly to Lisa's perceptions of her abilities rather than to her actual competency. This feeling echoes in the following comments made by Lisa at various stages in the fieldwork:

- "Teaching English reading is a problem for me as I don't know all the phonics."
- "Mathematics is problematic. I don't have a syllabus and I'm working from *Moderne basiese wiskunde*."
- "When people ask me what I'm going to do about sport and extramural activities, I just say that I don't know. I'm taking one day at a time and going on intuition. I'm doing what is right for now."
- "I often worry about whether I'm doing enough [covering sufficient content], but I suppose I can't push the children."

Advantages of home schooling that became evident through the study

Several advantages to home schooling became evident through the study. In the first place Lisa was able to adapt her lessons to the children's abilities. Butler (2000:46) agrees and asserts that the ability to customise the curriculum to meet the individual needs of the learner is one of home schooling's major benefits. Thus, when Harry returned to formal schooling, his reading ability was ahead of his peers in both English and Afrikaans. This is consistent with the research which indicates that the achievement levels of home-schooled learners are excellent (Rudner, 1998:23; Butler, 2000:45; Marlow, 1994:452). Moreover, Harry had developed a real love of reading and literature. The researcher also observed that the adaptability inherent in home schooling meant that the learner's interest can be quickly established and focused on. For example, when Harry asked a question about how Moses had written, Lisa used the visit to the library to focus on this area of interest. They consulted several books, spoke about ink and papyrus, looked at Egyptian writing and how the symbols developed and eventually discussed recent events in the Middle East. Thus Lisa was able to integrate several subjects. Any weaknesses the children experienced in their learning were also more easily established and rectified. The actual school time that is required is far less than in a conventional school and this frees children to pursue areas of interest to them. In addition, the home environment is non-threatening and thus highly conducive to positive learning experiences.

Interpersonal relationships within the home school

The home school substantially added to and changed the dynamics of the interpersonal relationships among family members. An advantage of the home school is the close bond that forms within families (Colfax & Colfax, 1988:12). However, while acting as a cohesive factor, it placed a strain on relationships. As previously mentioned, the home

school brought about an added dimension to the relationship between the mother and sons, that of a teacher and learners. At first Lisa had concerns about her relationship with Harry but it was the relationship with Robin that ultimately deteriorated. Robin, the younger child, encountered specific problems in the context of the home school. In the light of the demands made by her older child, Lisa was unable to provide much formal teaching adjusted to Robin's developmental level and he was somewhat neglected. His contributions to a learning activity were frequently stifled by his older and more adept brother. He was often experienced as a nuisance, a hindrance to the smooth flow of more formal teaching and he consequently demanded attention by being difficult and demanding. As a result, he was often fractious. This situation was frequently and sensitively discussed by the parents but they were unable to find a suitable solution. Thus, the home school reflected many difficulties inherent in a single teacher teaching a multi-grade class. Lisa was aware from the outset of possible problems that she might encounter with Robin. She remarked that when the decision was made to homeschool, a friend told her that Robin would be a "problem". It became a formidable task for Lisa to teach Harry while contending with Robin's continual demand for attention. Generally Lisa managed patiently and with tolerance. Nevertheless, she confessed to the researcher that she hid or internalised much of her frustration.

Moreover, the home school created a new setting in which principles of child discipline had to be applied. Lisa and Alistair had to cope with a new dimension to normal parental discipline. Lisa adopted an authoritative parenting style: she upheld definite rules and standards. However, the boys were encouraged to think independently and made to feel that their opinions were valued. From the beginning, Lisa tried to establish boundaries in the home school. She had decided that she was not going to "fight" with Harry about learning. She taught by moral authority and the children were expected to respect that authority and the responsibility for learning was placed on Harry. But in some respects, Lisa appeared overambitious in her expectations, considering Harry's age. Roberts (1999:81) states that, whilst parents know their individual children better than anyone else, school staff in early childhood settings have a wide sweep of experience. This experience, with their theoretical knowledge, allows them to have a better perspective on what is "normal" and what is "special" in children's development (Roberts, 1999:81). Thus, the home-schooling parent has to guard against exaggerated expectations to avoid overwhelming the child.

Harry participated happily in the activities of the home school but it was clear that he missed the company of and, above all, competition with peers. He often sought encouragement outside the home school, frequently appealing to the researcher for recognition and praise for his work. This feeling was vividly illustrated when he complained bitterly that he had no-one to run races with or compete with during physical exercise. Once he openly rebelled against competing with his mother during learning games. Interestingly, Lisa also found it frustrating when she had to fulfil the role that a classmate would have taken. In spite of a positive mother-child relationship, a mother can only fulfil the role of playmate to a degree and ultimately Lisa tired of having to do what she described as "acting silly". Finally, normal sibling rivalry also assumed additional meaning within the home-school context. Roberts (1999:36) observes that most siblings play together well and ignore each other; love and hate each other; agree and argue with each other. However, in the close circle of the home school, sibling competition for adult attention, differing needs and sibling rivalry were magnified and added stress to the process of home schooling.

The transition to institutionalised schooling

Commonly, home schoolers consciously plan to homeschool for a particular period and to reintroduce their children to institutionalised schooling at a later stage (Lowe & Thomas, 2002:7). After six months, Robin returned to preschool. Lisa had found his presence too disruptive during the home-schooling process and he was very difficult to

manage. Harry returned to a public primary school after a year. The researcher had already left the field but, upon hearing the news, she returned to interview the family. Lisa provided the following reasons: Robin's need for a suitable setting for his own age; the children's boredom; and the problems of managing home and school. Lisa felt that she had tried to do the best for her children, but ultimately the home school wore her out emotionally and physically. Lisa explained that

In the end I realised that I was trying to be a super-human being. A friend of mine told me afterwards that she thought I was a freak because I was managing to do so much. I was so torn by trying to be perfect and I continually had to suppress feelings of losing my cool.

By "surrendering" her children to a conventional school, Lisa regained some of her former identity, as well as a measure of control over her life. She experienced a sense of relief in delegating the responsibility for educating her children. It was Lisa who made the decision to return the children to school; Alistair fully supported her in this. This reflected their respective involvement in and responsibility for the home school.

Robin's return to preschool took place smoothly. The family considered carefully where to send Harry and decided upon a local public school. However, the procedure for registering Harry posed some difficulties. Lisa met the principal who, she found, "was very cross with me for having homeschooled Harry". She said: "I felt like a naughty child in the headmaster's office being chastised for doing something terribly irresponsible." Initially, the principal wanted to test Harry to assess his abilities. Although Lisa agreed, this did not take place.

Both children adapted easily to the return to public schools. Lisa said that Robin became less aggressive, calmer and more like his former self. He enjoyed the contact with children of his own age. During the focus-group interview held after Harry's transition to conventional schooling, the boy told the researcher that he was pleased about his return to school. He now enjoyed singing in the choir and playing rugby. He commented: "It's nice at school but we just have to sit for a very long time and my bottom gets sore. But it's nice to have lots of friends and to do all the things after school." Harry also pointed out astutely to the researcher that he was a little behind in maths, yet he found he had covered other topics that his peers had not done. His classroom teacher had noted that Harry's reading, spelling and English were considerably ahead of the other learners in his class and had commented on his exceptional general knowledge. His handwriting (penmanship), however, was poor in comparison with the other children's.

In retrospect, Lisa remained positive about home schooling. However, she did not believe that it suited every family. She explained:

I still believe that home schooling is good, but not in every situation. If you're out of town, it's fine, but Harry realised that he was different and he didn't like being different ... I also discovered that you can't alienate a child by not allowing him to watch television or videos or play with plastic toys. If he's not allowed to do those things, then he just doesn't fit in.

Furthermore, the home school had represented a withdrawal from mainstream society. But ultimately the parents felt that they did not want the family to be isolated socially or to be different from the social norm. Baron and Byrne (1991:323) indicate that most people find the social disapproval aimed at them unpleasant when they deviate from the norms of the group; many conform in order to avoid this social disapproval. But it had taken considerable honesty and strength of character to return the children to school. Lisa summed it up by saying, "It was the hardest decision on earth to admit that I'd made a mistake and didn't want to homeschool anymore. I just know it's the best thing for them."

Conclusion

Home schooling represents a viable educational alternative to institu-

tionalised education but ultimately did not suit the requirements of the particular family. However, the research also shows that each home school is unique and that the particular self-identities of its participants, as well as the way in which each interacts, will have a significant bearing on the nature of the home school. This uniqueness will contribute to the degree of success or failure of the home school. Although home schooling is a growing social trend, it is nevertheless not always an easy option. Families who homeschool, elect to depart for the norms of mainstream society. The ethnographic study of a home school showed that, while it can be a rewarding model for many families, it does require extensive commitment, preparation, emotional involvement and stamina.

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