

"Am I Really Qualified to Teach My Own Children?" Some Thoughts on This Common and Provocative Question

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Editor's Note: Two different versions of this article, one slightly revised, originally appeared in *SKOLE: The Journal of Alternative Education and Paths of Learning*. The focus in the article is on parents and addressing a common question parents frequently ask: "Am I *really* qualified to teach my own children?". It appears in this publication because we feel it is quite useful information for professionals helping a family or child who wants to homeschool. This article provides a glimpse into the philosophical discussion about how parents are qualified to teach their children.

There are many kinds of seeds in us, both good and bad. Some were planted during our lifetime, and some were transmitted by our parents, our ancestors, and our society.... Every time we practice mindful living, we plant healthy seeds and strengthen the healthy seeds already in us. Healthy seeds function similarly to antibodies.... If we plant wholesome, healing, refreshing seeds, they will take care of the negative seeds, even without our asking them. To succeed, we need to cultivate a good reserve of refreshing seeds."

-- Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*

"The kids are all learning, all the time. Life is their greatest teacher. The B.A.s and M.A.s and Ph.D.s on the staff are minor actors."

-- Daniel Greenberg, *Free At Last*

Would that homeschooling parents had a dollar for each time that they asked themselves or have been asked by others why they think they are qualified to teach their own. The question is certainly an intriguing one, and, for many homeschooling parents, a pressing one. In this essay, I would like to address some of the "psychological" and "spiritual" concerns

raised by this question, couching this discussion within the context of some crucial links between parent-child teaching and holistic family living. I will be leaving aside concerns such as one's knowledge of the subject matter, one's ability to find important data, and so on; clearly, such concerns are important, but they are beyond the purview of the present paper.

My intention here is to help parents—especially those new to and those thinking about homeschooling—who are struggling with the questions of whether or not they really are both capable of teaching and qualified to teach their own and whether or not they are (or would be) acting responsibly by homeschooling their children. To this end, I offer a discussion of the following personal traits, which, in my nearly twenty years of college teaching, I have come to see as being essential for anyone to possess who desires to be a good teacher, that person's profound knowledge of her subject matter or in-depth training in teaching notwithstanding. (Note: one's being "certified" to teach is not synonymous with one's being "qualified" to teach.) My greatest mentors possessed these traits, although, to the best of my knowledge, none had taken a single course in educational theory or methods. If you yourself have or are striving to have all of these traits (the following list is not meant to be exhaustive), then you are probably fit to teach your own. On the other hand, if you lack *and* have no interest in attaining them, then perhaps you ought not teach either your own or anyone else's children.

1. The willingness to engage in child-led/student-led

learning. Like many homeschooling parents, I've discovered that *meaningful* learning can occur only if the learner *actively* wants to learn, gives her consent to learn from a particular teacher (unless she wants to be self-taught), and initiates the learning process. In other words, although a teacher might certainly inspire a student to want to learn, ultimately the desire to learn comes from within the learner. Moreover, as the output of mass public education demonstrates, one can even do great harm to a learner by trying to make her learn against her will.²

Unless you are willing to let your child lead the way—fully or partly—to her own learning, you might find yourself engaged in a home version of the worst sort of organized schooling, in which teachers force-feed students information that the latter understandably resist learning. In my college classes, I try to help students see that, although I can try to

provide an atmosphere in which they can take some intellectual risks, I cannot learn for them. Only they can learn for themselves.

Before moving on, I should add that, both in the classroom and at home, I have found that some of my best teaching moments occur when, learning along with my students or children, I discover meaning and uncover knowledge *in the process of teaching*. Additionally, I feel that one of my goals as a teacher/parent is to help guide my students/children so that they can teach themselves. Secure self-directed learners know when they don't know something, and they know enough to ask for help when they need or want it. In this regard, my eleven-year-old son, for example, acts no differently from my self-directed college students. When he was five, for instance, he virtually taught himself to write. When he needed help, he asked for it; when he didn't need help, he simply wrote, sometimes laboriously, sometimes not—as is the case with most (if not all) *professional* writers. As Daniel Greenberg and John Taylor Gatto (among others) have suggested, to teach successfully, one must have or cultivate the ability first to recognize a learner's desire to learn something and then to seize the opportunity to help him learn what he wants or needs to learn.³ Thus, if I don't know how to assist my students or children when they ask me for help, I feel that I am duty-bound as their teacher to try to help them discover how they can receive good assistance elsewhere.

2. Real, genuine humility and compassion. I often try to teach my students that they will have achieved much in the way of good critical thinking if they come to realize about themselves what all great thinkers come to realize about *themselves*: to wit, that they have learned enough to know how little they really know. Concerning the present topic, we can say with certainty that someone who lacks genuine humility cannot be satisfactorily compassionate towards others, because she doesn't yet have the inner strength and security to be satisfactorily compassionate towards herself. Such a person, then, is not likely to be a very good teacher—a fact to which anyone can attest who has endured even a day in the classroom of a teacher who lacked compassion for others. In any event, a truly humble, compassionate teacher is often wise enough to lead her students to discover for themselves what they need to know and secure enough to validate those of their insights that are authentic, meaningful, and moral in the highest sense of the word—even if (and perhaps especially if) these insights are quite different from her own. Such a teacher gives her students a precious gift when she shows them

that she is strong enough to be humble and honest concerning what she knows and doesn't know.

Since most of my students have suffered humiliation during their schooling and other training in "socialization," they often have trouble distinguishing humility from self-loathing; in the worst cases, they act in the manner of seriously wounded animals—defensive, protective, and, in the main, wary of showing themselves vulnerable in any way to anyone. Neither I nor anyone else can teach such persons why they should be or how they can be humble; only they can teach themselves these lessons. However, I can and do try to help a number of my students discover their own paths to humility and compassion by helping them see how they themselves might begin healing those damaged parts of their inner selves that they now guard at all costs, those parts of their inner being, if you will, the damage to which the best "alternative" teaching efforts might have helped to prevent.

3. The inner security to teach others freely. Although I don't consider myself a very secure person, I do feel very strongly that, when my students become humble enough and courageous enough to begin drawing out from within themselves their own deepest truths, they also become their own best teachers and thus no longer need me as their principal guide in this endeavor. To extrapolate, I would suggest that, whenever we teach, we should always try to do so freely, so that we can remain lovingly detached from our students' learning obligations, which are always personal. All teachers need to keep in mind that there is a world of difference between our *wanting* to help persons learn for *their* own sake and our *needing* to teach them for *our* own sake (of course, these two conditions need not be mutually exclusive). If the latter is the case, we might be either projecting onto those who learn from us our own insecurities or making them the vehicles by means of which we carry out our own political or social agendas. Using our students/children to fill the narcissistic voids and heal the narcissistic wounds in our own lives could eventually prove quite harmful to both them and us.⁴

One final matter here: I have found that neither my own children nor my college students need me to tell them what is best for them or what they should know; in fact, they often resent (and rightfully so) my occasional, unintended attempts to own their responsibility to make meaningful choices in and for their own lives, especially when I am interfering with their choices to learn or not learn. Often, both my children and a number of my students seem to sense that such moves on my part might

represent controlling, codependent behavior, and they healthily resist these moves. They want to make their own decisions and be responsible for their own mistakes. For my part, I need to recognize when I am hindering learners from reaching rather than helping them to reach their own educational goals. I, too, need to own and learn from my mistakes.

4. The willingness to learn, often from those whom we teach. If there is anything that is obvious in great teachers, it is their willingness to learn, often from their own students. Simply put, one cannot be a good teacher if one has lost the desire to learn, and any teacher unwilling to learn from his students is a teacher whose best days are past. If you have no desire to learn or no willingness to learn along with those whom you teach, or if you don't feel that those who study with you can teach you anything of real value, then you probably ought not be teaching *anyone*.

5. Patience. In the quick-fix, fast-food, narcotizing culture in which we live, patience is a rare commodity. But it is an essential ingredient to good teaching. Since each child learns in her own way and at her own pace, we need to be patient enough to see how our children engage in their own ever-developing and sometimes changing learning processes so that we can help them be active, confident learners. We need to give ourselves permission to allow them to learn differently from the ways in which we learn and from the ways in which other children (including *our* other children) seem to be learning. We need to accept as a perfectly normal state of affairs, for example, the fact that one of our children might want to read at age four but that another might not want to read even at age eleven or twelve. Indeed, not uncommonly, our anxiety concerning what our students/children are or are not learning has to do with us, and not with them. Since we know that they are not learning most things in the world, and yet since we also know that they are always learning all of the time, we might want to ask ourselves why we sometimes feel uneasy about their learning patterns and paths. Ultimately, such an inquiry might help us to discover that what we imagine to be our students' or children's shortcomings often reflect instead our own unresolved, problematic, internal struggles.

In any event, we need to be patient with our children and ourselves as we all struggle to live individually and mutually meaningful lives. Oh, the possible differences in all of our lives had most of our own teachers understood this need for patience in *themselves*!

When you teach your children at home, you are doing far more than "homeschooling" them.⁵ Exercising maximum control over your family's right to do what is in its own best moral interests, you are swimming against a tide of enormously destructive and powerful mediocrity and mainstreaming in your attempts to help your children live meaningful lives as whole, independent beings. You are trying to keep your children from suffering the fate of many of our nation's schooled children, who have been conditioned to be actively uninterested in and sometimes openly hostile to meaningful, shared, participatory communal living, and who, as passive, obedient learners, have little interest in themselves, in the meaning and value of their existence, or in the value of their communities. I have seen many such learners in my college classes. Often lacking good social skills, good study habits, a healthy dose of adult responsibility, and, most conspicuously, the self-motivation and self-reliance recognizable in a confident learner, they are frequently uninterested in and even hostile to learning, especially to learning new or controversial material, even if such material can help them live more meaningful and compassionate lives. More significantly, many of the students in this group who are trying to recondition themselves into becoming active, mature learners have trouble trusting themselves; not a few often seem to believe that their professors, and not they themselves, possess the answers to *their* most important questions.

If I have noticed any common denominator among those of my students who seem disinterested in their own pursuits, in their own learning agendas, sometimes even in their own and others' lives, it is that these kinds of students seem distanced from themselves. This state of being is common among persons who have been conditioned to be passive and whose psyches need to protect them from their being too emotionally harmed. For such students, "know thyself" is as foreign a concept as is the idea that they are responsible for their own learning, for their own *lives*. Self-knowledge and self-respect seem almost anathema to them, cruel reminiscences and temptations of vaguely desirable, ideal personal states of being that, to them, in their present existential dilemma, seem utterly unattainable.

For the record, I don't mean to imply that homeschooling is the right choice for everyone, nor do I think that everyone who homeschools ought necessarily to be doing so. Rather, by presenting and elaborating on what I consider important qualities that every good teacher ought to possess, I am trying to help parents decide whether or not this educational option is right for their own families. I would say, simply, that parents who wish to

isolate their families from the world at large, or those who wish to force-feed their children at home rather than having others force-feed them at school, need not apply. I would also say that parents who envision a larger holistic setting for their families, perhaps one involving an intentional community, might find homeschooling a limiting or otherwise unworkable option, unless such a community were comprised (also) of homeschooling families. Nevertheless, I would hope that such parents would find for their children teachers who possess the personal qualities that I've outlined in this essay. I would ask us all to think about how little we learned from and perhaps how much we hated learning from persons who, despite their immense knowledge of the subject matter, didn't possess these qualities. Conversely, I would ask us to consider how much we learned or enjoyed learning from teachers who did possess them, even if such teachers weren't "experts" in their fields. In short, no teaching and learning environment, including homeschooling and alternative educational environments, is *ipso facto* nurturing and positive. Humble, patient, caring, nurturing, compassionate, learner-centered teachers are a *sine qua non* of any meaningful, healthy learning environment. Without the opportunity to work with such teachers, students are harmed.

Additionally, I do not mean to imply that parents who decide to homeschool their children necessarily will insure that their children will be self-reliant, mature adults who have an unrelenting zest for learning. And I especially don't mean to imply that such parents ought to be homeschooling their children *now* primarily to help insure their children's "success" in the *future*. Rather—and here I want to address prospective homeschooling parents directly—I simply want to clarify what I see as being centrally at stake here: you have both the right and the obligation to advocate for your child's needs, to do what's best for your child, even though the culture at large often makes it difficult for you to do so, and even though you might occasionally have doubts or questions about your educational theories and practices or about your aptitude as a teacher (all good-faith teachers have such doubts or questions). Remember that, for the most part, mass-organized schooling (public or private) sets up learning situations that are convenient not only for textbook publishers, teachers, administrators, and members of school boards, but also for parents unluckily caught in the anti-family, anti-child trap that our culture has laid for us all. On the other hand, holistic family living demands that the parent-teacher (a vibrant and ancient PTA) respond to the learning needs of her or his child by setting up learning situations that meet those needs.

As you wrestle with the central questions at stake here, keep in mind that few persons (if anyone) outside of your family will care as much as you care about meeting your child's needs. Put differently, you know the difference between being with your child and leaving your child with even a warm, loving, devoted caretaker. And you know that your *child* knows the difference, too. With this understanding in mind, think of those children who—as perhaps you once did—at the end of the school year or school cycle, feel utterly relieved finally to have the time to do the things that they find meaningful in their lives, and who can now spend more than a few fleeting moments with the persons who matter most to them. How distressing that we have placed the vast majority of our nation's children in this bind. But how promising that, as caring, nurturing homeschooling parents, you can avoid being a party to such madness.

Notes

1. Often, homeschoolers encounter two questions more than they encounter any others: "What about socialization?" and "Am I *really* qualified to teach my own children?" The first question tends to be posed by persons outside of homeschooling; it is best answered, I think, in Chapter 3 of David Guterson's *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992). Nearly a decade ago, I wrote the present essay because I couldn't find a good answer to the second question, which tends to be posed by persons within homeschooling. The original version of this essay appeared in *SKOLE: The Journal of Alternative Education*, Vol. XII, No. 1 (Winter 1995), pp. 47 – 57. This very slightly revised version appeared in *Paths of Learning* 5 (Summer 2000), pp. 46 – 49.
2. For some excellent discussions of this issue, see Daniel Greenberg's *Free At Last: The Sudbury Valley School* (Framingham, MA: Sudbury Valley School Press, 1987), pp. 15-18 and *passim*, and Herbert Kohl's *I Won't Learn from You! The Role of Assent in Learning* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1991).
3. In a November 1967 *Redbook* article entitled "How Teachers Make Children Hate Reading," John Holt—still a public school educator at the time—analyzes the differences between what I'm calling child-led learning and what I'm calling force-fed learning. His article is reprinted in *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Expository Prose*, ed. by Arthur M. Eastman, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), pp. 224–232.

4. For a detailed discussion concerning these kinds of matters, see Alice Miller's *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*, trans. by Ruth Ward (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

5. For a trenchant critique of the word "homeschooling," see David Guterson's *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense*, *op. cit.*, p. 5ff. One of the most engaging books ever written on homeschooling, Guterson's text provides consistently provocative, insightful discussions of centrally important issues and controversies having to do with homeschooling. I highly recommend this book to prospective homeschooling families, as well as to anyone else who is seriously committed to learning more about homeschooling.

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