

Education Natal Witness

The case for home schooling

by Leendert van Oostrum

MARY Kingsley — the Englishwoman who marched about Africa with her umbrella, collecting specimens for the British Museum, and arguing in the media that African civilisation should be valued and respected — was educated at home. Others in the home schoolers' hall of fame are the medical doctor and poet Louis Leipoldt, General Smuts, Florence Nightingale, John Wesley, Generals George Patton and Douglas MacArthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Booker T. Washington, George Bernard Shaw and John Stuart Mill.

At present, there are roughly 1 260 home schooling families in South Africa. About 600 of these are associated with known support organisations, and it is estimated that at least as many families are home schooling underground. The present rate of growth in South Africa seems to be substantially greater than the international growth rate of 3%.

Like their counterparts in other countries, many of the first wave of home schoolers were primarily motivated by a lack of schools catering for the religious convictions of the family. This is changing fast in South Africa and elsewhere. Most of the present wave of home schoolers seem to be primarily interested in the high quality of education available through this option, although religion remains a consideration. The majority of home schooling families seem to come from rural English speaking communities. A very small number (one or two per cent) adopt home schooling to avoid racially integrated schools.

Home schooling families are diverse, representing almost every population group and religion — from the workers, pensioners, medical doctors and senior lecturers, those who are Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Muslims, those with children who are highly gifted or are mentally or physically disabled.

In South Africa, renewed interest in home schooling appears to be a reaction to changes in our society and in education in particular. This is partly the case, but there is more to it than this. Home schooling is also part of an international trend.

Alvin Toeffler reported this, in 1969 in *Future Shock* and again in *The Third Wave* 15 years later. John Nashbl, in *Motrends*, agreed with Toeffler that home schooling is part of a post modern tendency towards self reliance and diversification. In the United States, home-schooled children increased from about 10 000 in 1980 to more than one million in 1995. The numbers in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom are smaller, but grow at about 30% a year.



Louis Leipoldt and General Jan Smuts ... educated at home



In 1980, only about four American states allowed home schooling. Today, this right is protected in all 50 states, and the battle continues to drive back state interference in education. The very existence of free home schooling has directly and indirectly led to greater independence of private schools and greater parental involvement in state schools as well.

In the process, a demand arose for authoritative research to support the legal claims of home schoolers and to inform legislatures. Hundreds of studies have been published. The repeatedly confirmed results are consistent and uncontested: academically, home-schooled children perform at least as well as and mostly better than children in institutionalised schools — irrespective of the qualifications of the parents and irrespective of whether the state controls home schooling. All Ivy League universities have accepted home-schooled students, and many of the better colleges and universities in their recruitment, target home-schooled graduates. These appear to become highly self-directed, independent and inquiring students, and early results suggest that an extraordinarily large percentage become employers rather than employees.

Repeated studies also confirm that home-schooled children tend to be better socialised than their counterparts in ordinary schools. They tend to know and understand themselves better than their peers, exhibit more functional social behaviour, are more likely to include strangers in a group — and their family relationships are significantly better. Their extracurricular involvement in sports and social activities does not differ from that of their peers.

Astonished researchers, attempting to explain the results, now refer to long established findings that the number of significant interactions between people is inversely proportional to the size of the group they are in. Children in institutional schools were found to engage in few or no significant interactions with people who differ from themselves in age by more than one year. Children in schools live, as a result, in an impoverished social environment limited to people at the same level of development as themselves.

When South Africa went to the polls in 1994, André and Bokkie Meinjies were in jail for educating their children themselves, and their children had been placed in an orphanage. A protest campaign, mounted here and abroad by the Association for Home Schooling, was under way. In response to these protests, the new government released the family, and the children are still at home, currently preparing for their standard eight examinations.

However, though it released the Meinjies family, the new South African Government seems to fear home schooling almost as much as its predecessor did.

The Association for Home Schooling was founded in 1992 in response to the persecution of the Meinjies family and others. Since then, similar associations were founded in Kwazulu Natal and in the Eastern and Western Cape.

Home schoolers have organised themselves internationally. In response to numerous letters from foreign supporters, the new government (in white papers in November 1993 and January 1996) promised to "investigate". On the home front, home schoolers have made numerous submissions to the education authorities both nationally and in various provinces. The results, however, have been unsatisfactory. Government representatives have told home schoolers to take their case to the Constitutional Court.

The current South African Schools Bill, tabled in Parliament in August, establishes a regime of legal uncertainty for home schoolers. Although it is the first time home schooling is recognised, section 39 gives wide discretion to a head of department to refuse to register a child for home schooling. It requires the head of department to be satisfied that home schooling is in the interests of the child and that the education received at home satisfies the minimum requirements of the curriculum at public schools and is not inferior to the standard of education in these schools. The bill also allows the head of department to lay down any other condition he may deem fit. In addition to this, paragraph three of clause 39 states baldly: "The head of department may withdraw the registration."

If Parliament accepts these provisions, the courts will have to be approached to protect the constitutionally and internationally recognised right to freedom in education. Home schoolers are establishing a mutual legal defence fund to share the cost of forging the law in the courts.

Leendert van Oostrum is chairman of the Association for Home Schooling. This article first appeared in the South African Institute of Race Relations' magazine, *Frontiers of Freedom*.