

# **Is This the Educational System You Wanted?: Feminism and Homeschooling<sup>i</sup>**

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**With Jesse Cordes Selbin and Zoe Cordes Selbin<sup>ii</sup>**

The stereotypes are familiar to many of you, no doubt: homeschooling equals fundamentalist Christians, or else bunkered survivalists at their most threatening or hippy-dippy “back-to-the-earth types” at best. Another stereotype—perhaps no less pernicious—is that those of us committed to community, to feminism, to activism are necessarily committed to the public school system, commonly if often misleadingly read as a signifier of diversity. These notions helped form our view of homeschooling before we—Eric Selbin, a political science professor, and Helen Cordes, a freelance journalist and author—started homeschooling our daughters Jesse (13) and Zoe (7) three years ago.

Whatever grains of “truth” may be embedded in such stereotypes, they are little more than misleading caricatures which ill-serve anyone who cares about children, about education, about community, and about change. In our three-years-and-running educational experiment, we’ve found that rather than narrowing our children’s sense of community, homeschooling has greatly expanded it for them and for us. In our “N of 2” we’ve found homeschooling to be a tremendously female-empowering experience, defined in part by activism and rife with the diversity and creativity largely absent from the public schools where we live (and those in much of the rest of the United States as well). As our daughters continue to realize more of the power and potential that should be every girl’s (and boy’s) birthright, we have come to view homeschooling as part of our

activism: helping one-by-one to create new feminists, activist feminists cognizant of and committed to changing themselves and the world around them.

Our own experience and our research on homeschooling in the United States and abroad has shown that the most common stereotypes about homeschoolers are seriously flawed. The reason behind the widespread notion that conservative Christians make up the bulk of homeschoolers is a deliberate and aggressive campaign led by the domineering national fundamentalist Christian homeschool group, which seeks to monopolize control and public perceptions of homeschooling to further an ultraconservative political agenda.<sup>iii</sup> In reality, parents who homeschool for non-religious reasons are now the majority of the estimated two million homeschoolers, a group growing at an estimated fifteen percent per year. Parents report that their decision to homeschool hinges on reasons including dissatisfaction with academic quality, and concerns about safety, drugs, and adverse peer pressure.<sup>iv</sup> Our initial reasons had little to do with unhappiness with local schools, but our homeschooling decision sharpened our sense that the undeniably fundamental problems of institutionalized schools—public, private, even well-thought-out and well-intentioned charter schools—need to be radically reimagined, restructured, and reconsidered.

To be fair, some kids do “well” at school. There are large numbers of wonderful and dedicated teachers out there (we had some and we have met some), and obviously staff and other support people are committed to public schools. What we want to raise here are questions about what people might find if they examined the “big picture” and questioned some of the basic assumptions about the structure and content of education that we all carry with us. In our view, and that of many educational critics, these often

crowded institutions deemed critical for children's socialization have evolved into places primarily devoted to system maintenance, crowd control,<sup>v</sup> and the production of "model" consumers.<sup>vi</sup>

And as for the stereotype that only the privileged can afford to homeschool, we are well aware of and grateful for the privileges that allow our family some leverage—one steady and two reliable incomes from two professions with some time flexibility and that enjoy credibility in many people's minds.<sup>vii</sup> However, we've observed that homeschooling can be much more accessible than many assume. Like many homeschoolers, we've downscaled our consumption expectations, trading added income for added time with and more opportunities for our children. Among the options we see regularly are parents who juggle their schedules to have one adult at home or those who choose jobs with hours that allow more at-home presence. Some parents telecommute or start home-based businesses. Many homeschoolers establish formal and informal learning and childcare co-ops. We have, by this time, seen an impressive array of variations; there is no "right way," but simply ways that you and your children discover and uncover as you go along. While the economics may be a struggle, as with the progressive homeschooling movement in general, the only limits are to one's imagination.

Thus, we want to suggest—and will try to outline for you here—how and why homeschooling can be feminist in theory and practice, reflect political action and efforts to make change,<sup>viii</sup> and be women-centered and transnational.<sup>ix</sup> We would add that the practice(s) of homeschooling are necessarily transitional and may well be, whether consciously and intentionally or not, transformative. In keeping with the premise and

promise of these two volumes, we want to help “build better theory and . . . persuade activists that theory is not merely ‘academic.’”<sup>x</sup> Perhaps most presumptuously, we believe that we can enable and ennoble the emergence of happier and healthier people and hence the broader society we all live in.

That, at least, is our hope, our dream, our aspiration. Here is our story and what we’ve found.

Helen is a lifelong feminist (of farm stock) and Eric’s feminism evolved in stages (albeit fast-forwarded by Helen). We both agree that having a daughter, and then another, puts a visceral and urgent edge to feminism’s fundamental necessity. Creating a “baby woman” in a world hostile in all too many ways to her very existence brings, after the initial joy and delight, simultaneous waves of grief and relief. While much has changed for the better in our society just in our own lifetimes, many thorny problems remain for our children to suffer and struggle with, including their growing knowledge that while many gender issues have been at least superficially addressed in our society, girls in other parts of the world are still subjected to overwhelming sexism and horrifying abuse.

We have tried, and perhaps immodestly believe we’ve somewhat succeeded, in educating our daughters from early on about the realities of a female-hating culture and their abilities to change it, and also in “inoculating” them against its effects. We high-fived when Jess told her kindergarten teacher that the song about “ten little Indian boys” was both sexist and racist; grinned as Zoe, then barely four years old, scathingly deconstructed sexist toy ads with (yes, still!) active boys and deferring girls. More importantly, we have watched them try not only to embody the notion that “girls can do

(and be) anything” but also to educate their often skeptical pint-sized Texas peers on the concept.

It was while Helen was writing her books on “girl power”<sup>xi</sup> that a course of events began that made the decision to homeschool inevitable. It was nothing dramatic; the sad part is that everything that happened is so “normal.” During her 4th and 5th grade years at the local public school, Jess was becoming more and more discouraged because, basically, she didn’t fit in. No overt cruelty or exclusion dogged her. She was even “friends” with some of the most popular girls. Yet she was consistently shadowed by the sense that the person she was—a book-loving, kids-game-loving nine-year-old—was simply not so acceptable and worthy as the “ideal” informally but insistently enforced by her peers: girls (and boys) immersed in and obsessed with endless talk of boyfriends and girlfriends; makeup; the most popular TV shows, movies, music, and clothes; and acquisition of the latest kid-consumer items. Sadly, these kids were afraid to “act their age” of nine or ten. Instead they were intent on imitating teens and adults in the attitudes and trappings of what they’d constructed as their avenue to feelings of power and autonomy.

At the same time, Helen observed in Jess’s classrooms variants of the problems she’d been researching for the Girl Power books. By the time they had reached 4th and 5th grades, girls had clearly internalized the lesson that looks equaled worth and, amid talk of diets and too-big butts, had created a beauty pecking order. Girls we knew who had been outspoken at earlier ages—including Jesse—had begun the self-silencing process documented by Lyn Mikel Brown, Carol Gilligan, and others, growing reluctant to answer questions and offer opinions in classes.<sup>xiii</sup> Boys sometimes received more of

the teacher's attention, consistent with the research of Myra and David Sadker, either through negative attention resulting from acting out or from teachers who favored boys by spending more time challenging them to higher achievement and allowing them more leeway than girls in their classroom behavior.<sup>xiii</sup> We were also troubled by curricula and learning approaches that were uninspiring and chauvinistic—for example, the state-mandated veneration of the Alamo that starts in first grade.<sup>xiv</sup>

Troubled by these factors and our daughter's unhappiness, we discussed our thoughts and observations about the situation with her. At the same time, we did what we could to help her fit in, such as getting her some of the faddy clothes and CDs she "wanted." (Now she can admit that she did not enjoy them but merely wanted them for the potential popularity-boost or even just to "fit in.") But nearly every day after school, Jesse would reveal her anxiety and frustration in the time-honored way of children and, let's be honest, of adults: being sad and/or irritable to her family, whom she knew would love her unconditionally.<sup>xv</sup>

The situation came to a head as we considered her imminent passage to middle school, where we knew the peer pressure and thus, most likely, her misery, would only intensify. Helen investigated Jesse's designated middle school, visiting for lunch weekly as a mentor to an 8th grade girl enrolled there. She could see, both through her mentee's experiences and from what she observed, that 6th graders were jockeying—armed with blasé demeanors and skin-tight outfits—over who was most like 8th graders. Helen routinely heard children dissed and shamed by others; while adults were absent or not inclined to interfere. Also, the school principal's reputation and stated preference for an

orderly school (read: crowd control and discipline) over innovative academics furthered our resistance to the middle school option.

We briefly considered private schools (though we doubted they'd be much different), but there aren't any private schools in our area except for a few conservative Christian schools. They weren't an option for a pair of thoughtful and articulate feminist Jewish/pagan kids with liberal/progressive leanings—or for their parents.<sup>xvi</sup> A friend had homeschooled her children for a few years, and enthused about it to us.<sup>xvii</sup> Yet while it seemed “do-able,” we agonized over taking our kids out of public schools because both of us are strong believers in public education. Our friends almost uniformly posed the “but how can you stop supporting the public schools” question whenever we mentioned the possibility of homeschooling. This was no small issue, especially for Eric, a proud product of the notoriously dreadful Louisiana public education system. He had attended during a period when staying in the public schools was a profound political statement symbolizing a family's commitment to integration, to redressing class inequities, and to a strong commitment to the community.

After much discussion between us and with Jesse, some clarity emerged. We realized that even if we homeschooled, we could still be public school advocates. We had been active parents throughout our daughters' school careers, both in public schools and in a local Montessori school that offered education through third grade. We had acquired familiarity with the school system and we had known, supported, and worked with principals, teachers, and others invested in the public schools.<sup>xviii</sup> This encouraged and gave us a basis from which to question some of what we all “know” about them: is it really true that the schools represent a melting pot (and is it a good thing if they do?),

designed to break down or at least familiarize students with difference and diversity while building strong community bonds? Perhaps not: in the local schools we observed that color and class lines were all but physically drawn. Also, national research shows that while desegregation has been the law for decades, schools are in fact more segregated (formally and informally) now than at any time in the past thirty-five years.<sup>xix</sup> And is it true that schoolchildren are inspired and motivated by having peers like Jess whom they perceive as more advanced in the classroom? Both our experience and Jess's was not hopeful—some of the kids disliked her for getting good grades; others seemed resigned to although not happy about never being able to be “a smart kid like Jesse.”

To the argument intimated or articulated by some of our friends, family, and peers—“we all toughed it out; going through school will arm her for the ‘real world’”—we wondered why we should willingly subject our daughter to a situation that any adult would leave at the earliest opportunity. Picture a workplace where employees are made to feel unvalued by coworkers, the work is uninspiring, and everyone is forced to work on the same level (often with the same material and at the same pace) as office-mates. What if, in addition, you were discriminated against as a woman and bombarded with quasi-official religion — is it time to get a lawyer? While neither of us had been traumatized by our school years (rather amazing given our respective experiences in a small, rural Catholic school and Louisiana public schools), we pondered whether we might have had a better education and a better time if we hadn't had to “tough it out” against the effects of being too shy/smart/mouthy/Jewish/dorky/not-whatever-was-in-style.

As we worked toward a decision, Helen and the girls checked out the local resources. The most important was the main social support group for non-religiously motivated homeschoolers (or, as they're popularly known, "inclusive" groups that, unlike many fundamentalist homeschool support groups, don't require a "statement of faith" or impose other restrictions on participants). Our findings were encouraging: kids met together regularly on occasions, including twice-weekly informal soccer/chatting sessions, theater classes, chess club, "park days," and other activities. They seemed relaxed and happy, with kids of different ages and genders often interacting.

Consumerism was considerably muted—unlike Jess's schoolmates' apparent fixation with Hilfiger, not one kid sported the logo. We were particularly relieved by interactions with girls around Jess's age: talk tended toward eclectic books and movies, homeschool projects, or general kid silliness. Even teenagers weren't embarrassed to play the occasional game of "chase" or dress-up or engage in spontaneous drama. There was a lot of hugging, a lot of laughing (and the requisite giggling), a generosity of spirit with younger children (especially younger girls), and a lot of conversation.

Jess remained hesitant about the homeschooling prospect. "It seemed to me then that if we homeschooled, I would lose all my friends, structure in learning, and sources for finding out what was 'in,'" Jesse recalls. That summer we asked her regularly how she felt about homeschooling. She would respond in percentages, which slowly inched up from 25 to 47 and finally, after attending a get-acquainted-with-middle-school gathering a few nights before school started, 50. Zoe seemed satisfied and even a little relieved about the decision. She had not been looking forward to the longer day required by the Montessori school for students at her level.

With bated breath, we began our homeschooling adventure. But in retrospect, no one expected “the polls” to rise so rapidly. After four months, Jesse was happier than she’d been for several years, finding better—more thoughtful and self-aware—friends than those she’d had during six previous years of school. Because our daughters’ homeschooling peers have generally been exposed to diverse viewpoints, our children are able to share more of their lives and interests with them without feeling a need to be cautious and self-censoring. For example, when Zoe (then five) proudly reported her participation in “The Vagina Monologues” performances at Southwestern University and explained author Eve Ensler’s motivation for her landmark production, her young peers and their parents weren’t shocked and disapproving as we’d warned the girls that some in our community might be. When we hosted a gala coming of age/13th- birthday celebration for Jesse, her homeschool friends were already versed in the reasons behind the growing trend to honor and celebrate a girl’s menarche as the time when she joins the sisterhood of women.

The homeschool kids, including our daughters’ close friends, aren’t cut off from popular culture—some of them occasionally express concern about their appearance, and some are fans of Britney Spears and N’Sync. But they are also animated about Shakespeare, local and national issues such as light rail and the ethics of vegetarianism, Indian movies, the “game of questions” from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, chess, and, well, we could go on and on and on.

Quite simply, our primary motivations for homeschooling—our concerns about Jesse’s unhappiness and our wish that she be able to develop her own interests—have been vindicated. Our fears that she’d become another statistic in the trend documented in

the Girl Power books and other writings that chart girls' plummeting self-esteem, particularly at middle-school ages, have dissolved. Jesse's self-confidence and self-esteem have soared, a phenomenon observed in other homeschooled girls.<sup>xx</sup> She's rarely reluctant to offer opinions and provide answers in groups or settings of any kind. And Zoe, who seemed to personify self-esteem from day one, now has the opportunity to offer her many intriguing opinions and narratives to even wider audiences.

As our homeschooling continued, so has the blossoming of our favorite homeschool component, the ever-mushrooming and often interacting circles of communities growing around our daughters and turbocharging both their learning experiences and self-esteem. Our two homeschool support groups, a large 300-family group in Austin and a smaller group of families nearer our home in Georgetown, give our children much more regular and interactive contact with a far more diverse group than they had found at school.<sup>xxi</sup> There's ethnic diversity (African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and various multi-ethnic mixes); diversity in social and economic class as well as parents' occupations (reggae musicians to software engineers, firefighters to architects, and much more); and, given our locale, a surprising array of political perspectives (Democrats, Republicans, Greens, Libertarians, Socialists, and apoliticals). There also is a delightful range of spiritual beliefs: Hindus, pagans, Jews, Sufis, along with (this being Texas) plenty of Christians, who in this group, are generally of the liberal variety and definitely not proselytizers.

We particularly enjoy the communities of differing ages, ones that schoolchildren rarely experience in their grade-only peer boxes. There's the mixed-age interplay common to homeschool get-togethers, with younger children looking up to Jesse and

older ones protective and fond of Zoe, and many parents who give informal and formal guidance and mentorship through career fairs and volunteering opportunities. Our daughters also have many “peers” at Eric’s campus—students, professors, and staff who know them well. Jess, and sometimes Zoe, too has been thrilled to be invited to sit in on lectures, symposiums, concerts, and plays. The girls have been able to meet and talk with visiting activists and scholars like Rigoberto Menchu, Carlos Fuentes, and bell hooks. Jess has been generously allowed to attend some courses, currently one focusing on Shakespeare, previously another on acting methodology. Both girls have been in campus theater productions including “The Vagina Monologues” and Lillian Hellman’s “Watch on the Rhine.” They’ve also performed in several plays—including four by Shakespeare—put on by the local theater guild and by a leading Austin theater which offers a challenging homeschool drama program. Also, Jess has enjoyed a writing course taught by an English professor from Austin Community College as well as a course on the Middle East. Both girls have had wonderful experiences in writing clubs. “I learned, and continue to learn, a lot in these classes that I very likely wouldn’t have learned at school,” says Jesse. “And in classes like the Middle East one, we explore lots of different aspects and viewpoints. At school, I might just get the teacher or textbook’s one-sided point of view.”

Since homeschooling’s “schedule” is quite flexible, the children have been able to volunteer much more than they ever had before. They’ve volunteered and participated in two “Girl Day” all-day workshops designed to empower girls, as well as a goal-setting workshop Helen put on for a group of disadvantaged girls in a YWCA program. They’ve volunteered at a resource room for abused foster children, at the Reading is Fundamental

program that promotes literacy and gives away children's books, and at the local public school's annual reading advocacy day.

We've gotten to know our neighbors better. Zoe often visits the 84-year-old retired woman across the street. She also belongs to a mother-daughter book club, furthering her contact not only with girls her own age but also with adult women. "The good thing about homeschooling is that you can have older or younger kids and even grownups for friends," notes Zoe. "In school, you just have to be in a room with everybody your age, but with homeschooling I have friends of all ages." As a much-sought-after-babysitter, Jess has had the opportunity to see how other people structure (or not!) their lives and how they work with their children.

All of this broad experience and interaction with a range of youngsters, teens, and engaged adults has led us to laugh when various people share their concern(s) about our children's presumed lack of social skills because they've been "kept out" of school. With homeschooling, our kids have acquired more positive socialization than most children ever get in a school setting with its de facto peer rule occasionally tempered by the one adult currently responsible for twenty to thirty children. And the results show not only in our kids but in most homeschooled children. Accustomed to being treated with respect by multi-aged peers and the large numbers of adults in homeschoolers' lives, they generally emulate the mature role models and negotiate relational problems just as many studies report.<sup>xxii</sup> Bottom line: we've found it's generally much easier to have a conversation with a homeschooled kid than a schooled kid, simply because the homeschooler is used to making more conversation with more people.

Another commonly expressed concern is whether homeschooled children are learning “as much” as they could in a school setting. In the quantitative terms that define “education” in our culture, studies show that overall, homeschooled children typically perform well on standardized tests.<sup>xxiii</sup> Our test results show that our daughters are doing well. Jesse scored “beyond high school” in all but one category in her most recent Stanford Achievement Test; while Zoe hasn’t yet taken a similar standardized test, other indicators predict a quite positive outcome. Even more important to us and most other homeschoolers is that their enthusiasm about learning and their ability to integrate knowledge from wide-ranging sources has soared. Their learning is broad and deep with a surprising—at least to us—amount of nuance and sophistication.

One factor facilitating both a love of learning and a desire to follow particular passions is the increased “free” time that homeschooling affords. Because of the one-on-one learning, as well as not having to spend time repeating information and engaging in other time-consuming practices mandated by an institutional setting, homeschoolers need much less time to “do school.”<sup>xxiv</sup> For our daughters, the extra time means they can follow interests such as Jess’ current fascination with acting, the Middle Ages, strong and powerful women (Queen Elizabeth and Cleopatra have been recent favorites), and yes, fashion design. She’s able to apprentice at directing at the university, sit in on a lecture on women in medieval times, and pore over fashion history and costuming books. Both children have ample time for reading and writing, with Zoe spontaneously churning out plays, stories, and even commercials, while Jess recently published an article on sexism in children’s books for New Moon, a national girl’s magazine.<sup>xxv</sup>

And there's also more family time with homeschooling. When Jess was in school, she had the worst schedule in the house. Up and out early, she spent long hours sitting and listening, followed by hours of relatively mindless homework day after day after day. Our increased family time has resulted in increased communication and bonding among our little community of four as well as relieved our concerns that school, with its mandated hours and requisite homework rising along with grade level, would absorb most of our daughters' waking hours and squeeze out family time. Our children are learning and doing incredible things and seem to revel in a world which they are making. So we wonder at times: what it is exactly that they are missing? Have we deprived them of anything significant? Our gut feeling is affirmed by our extended family and friends who often note, "this homeschooling thing seems to be working out."

Of course, homeschooling isn't perfect. Particularly for Helen, it takes time away from writing and researching, although it has also given her a good reason for taking on only the most engaging assignments and foregoing those done primarily to generate income. As Jesse's learning material becomes more complex, Helen spends more time working with her. However, we can avail ourselves of the many resources available to homeschoolers, including occasional tutoring, community college "dual credit" classes intended for high-school-aged students, and a multiplicity of interactive online classes that are part of an enormous universe of online resources. Eric also feels torn between "professional" responsibilities and wanting to be more involved with the girls' day-to-day education. And, once in a while, our children aren't receptive to the learning we've proposed—Zoe would rather play with roly-polys than memorize multiplication tables

(who could blame her) and Jesse, while generally self-motivated, has been less than eager to devote time to physical science.

While most homeschooling families we've met have been delightful, homeschooling does attract some strange bedfellows whose approaches we wouldn't necessarily recommend. We have great respect, however, for homeschoolers who are skilled at accepting differences and focusing on commonalities. For instance, students of differing abilities and interests are not marginalized or ridiculed, as a rule, are appreciated and recognized for what they bring to the mix—soccer skills, math capabilities, singing voice, obsession with Shakespeare (or Magic cards), fascination with the Internet, and so on. Instead of a melting pot designed to reduce difference (and creativity) to a common stew, we found a delightful tossed salad, full of different ingredients constantly being mixed and remixed into new combinations.

Sure, we haven't escaped the shallow consumer culture endemic to schools and our society in general, but that's not entirely bad. We realize that such information is not unimportant, especially as children begin to develop their own views of the world distinct from their parents? But we can't help thinking that it seems a lot healthier when these messages are coming from a diverse and varied crowd. We also are happy to see that gender issues, including acceptance of non-heterosexual affiliations, are downplayed in a homeschooling community. Few girls are shrinking violets and boys and girls interact more easily without the schoolyard taunt of “ooooh, that's your boyfriend” branding children from preschool on up.

In fact, the worst thing about homeschooling is that it's such a shame that more kids aren't doing it. Take community—most kids are afforded few if any opportunities to

create and sustain communities of their own choosing or ones that are fulfilling for them. Adults devote a lot of energy trying to surround themselves with people and situations that reinforce a sense of their own value and efficacy. Kids who spend eight hours in school, followed by a regimen of homework and formal enrichment activities, not only have little opportunity for such community-building, but also are likely to be stressed-out and emotionally drained. Studies tell us that kids spend more time interacting with TVs, VCRs, computers, and other electronic devices than with the parents who have a pivotal role in their education and love of learning whether it be in school or at home.<sup>xxvi</sup> Schooled kids have little free time and opportunity to follow, or even discover, their passions.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In sum, we've come to believe that homeschooling could, in fact should, be a profoundly feminist act-ion/ivity/ualization. If feminism is, in large measure, a multifarious, multifaceted array of approaches to the problems confronted in a world inimical to women's interests, desires, hopes, and dreams, what better place than education—a field long dominated by men and their constructions designed to (re)enforce the hierarchy/patriarchy such as the Church, the military, and the state—to work with what is at hand by whatever means necessary.<sup>xxviii</sup> This may seem to ignore that “school” is mostly read and written as the province of women,<sup>xxix</sup> but here we want to distinguish between this stereotype and the overwhelmingly male direction and domination of educational processes and procedures in this (and most) other societies.<sup>xxx</sup>

Schools as currently constructed and construed embody and engender systems of oppression and domination. Why not resist and rework “school” and education into child-friendly, perhaps more importantly, girl-friendly conceptualizations? A profoundly

feminist homeschooling will necessarily generate a progressive social movement rooted in notions of resistance, rebellion, and perhaps even revolution all embedded in and reconstitutive of human community.

Every state and every society seeks to socialize citizens. The community building, how-ever dysfunctional, that occurs in the (roughly/vaguely) common experience of the standard educational system is critical to the maintenance and extension of what is commonly referred to as “civil society.” But this term can also be seen less positively, as redolent of latent notions of “civilization” and “the white man’s burden.” For most people most of the time, the “civilizing mission” of education—in the hands of Church or state—rarely seeks to inculcate messages of freedom, of justice, of equality, of diversity in all its glories; rather the raison d’etre is regulation, homogenization, and obedience to priests, politicians, and advertisers. Why not instead empower children and parents to wrestle with state and society on their own terms? How better to realize the immense revolutionary potential of the bourgeois family.<sup>xxxix</sup>

There are indications that educational institutions are looking to integrate some of homeschooling’s advantages. Opposition is increasing to the growing reliance on standardized tests as the sole assessment of a child’s learning, particularly in Texas and other states where teachers are protesting being forced to “teach to the test” to the exclusion of other topics. Colleges are reducing their reliance on SATs, ACTs, and other standardized entrance requirements, and relying more on portfolios that illustrate a prospective student’s learning and aptitude to learn more. One reflection of this trend is that homeschoolers are being courted by even elite colleges and universities. Multi-age classrooms are proliferating as more educators realize the importance of children learning

from and interacting with peers in addition to those of their same chronological age. One Austin, Texas, high school has a program that sounds like group homeschooling. Designed to cut “repetition and fluff” from the curriculum, the school offers an individualized study course, a living-room like classroom atmosphere, and half-day attendance which leaves time for other pursuits.

To paraphrase the compelling question about democracy posed by Mexico’s Zapatista National Liberation Army, one of the twentieth century’s most intriguing social movements, “is this the educational system you wanted?”<sup>xxxii</sup> If we are to reimagine “theoretical concepts which. . . have great normative importance to feminist theoreticians and activists,”<sup>xxxiii</sup> what better place to begin than with one of the most basic—education. We must “act and not merely be acted upon”<sup>xxxiv</sup>—the stakes are too high for our children and ourselves. Such dramatic change does not simply come. It is made by real people living in the real world. “It is not necessary to conquer the world,” contend the Zapatistas, “It is sufficient with making it new. Us. Today.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>i1</sup> The title is a paraphrase of the famous question posed by the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee General Command (CCRI-CG) of the Zapatista National Army of Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico in a communique sent out January 31, 1994 (30 days after their uprising began) in which they asked, “Why is everyone so quiet? Is this the ‘democracy’ you wanted?.” Often dated Feb 4, 1994 in the U.S.

<[http://www.ezln.org/ezln\\_1\\_31\\_2.html](http://www.ezln.org/ezln_1_31_2.html)>

<sup>ii2</sup> While primarily written by Helen Cordes and Eric Selbin, whose names are listed here alphabetically, Jesse Cordes Selbin and Zoe Cordes Selbin both wrote brief parts as well

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as read and commented on the entire manuscript; some of their comments are included.

Helen and Eric are, obviously, responsible for any errors.

iii<sup>3</sup> Helen Cordes, “Battling for the Heart and Soul of Home\_schoolers.” Salon (October 2, 2000).

<[http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2000/10/02/homeschooling\\_battle/index.html](http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2000/10/02/homeschooling_battle/index.html)>

iv<sup>4</sup> Patricia Lines, “Homeschooling Comes of Age.” The Public Interest 140 (Summer 2000), pp. 74-85.

v<sup>5</sup> John Taylor Gatto, The Underground History of American Education (New York: The Oxford Village Press, 2000).

vi<sup>6</sup> Alex Molnar, Giving Kids the Business (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

vii<sup>7</sup> It is striking the number of times Eric has had people allow that “as a professor” he has the “knowledge to homeschool.” As if. . . .

viii<sup>8</sup> With the caveat that while “change” most often—especially in our relevant communities— denotes some sort of Enlightenment, male, linear progression, it need not necessarily do so.

ix<sup>9</sup> Mary Ann Tétreault and Robin Teske, “Introduction: Framing the Issues,” in Robin Teske and Mary Ann Tétreault, ed., Conscious Acts and the Politics of Social Change: Feminist Approaches to Social Movements, Community, and Power, Vol. I (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 1.

x<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

xi<sup>11</sup> Helen Cordes, Girl Power in the Classroom: A Book About Girls, Their Fears, and Their Future (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 2000); Helen Cordes, Girl Power in the

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Mirror: A Book About Girls, Their Bodies, and Themselves (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 2000)

<sup>xii</sup><sup>12</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>xiii</sup><sup>13</sup> Myra and David Sadker, Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls (New York: Touchstone, 1994).

<sup>xiv</sup><sup>14</sup> <<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/resources/ssced/teks/teksqa.htm>>

<sup>xv</sup><sup>15</sup> Though in fairness to Jesse, she was the most charming-and-sweet sad-and-irritable person you could imagine—which only made it worse, somehow, for all of us.

<sup>xvi</sup><sup>16</sup> The-then seven-year-old Zoe, our house liberal, wrote Presidential candidate Al Gore a letter of support during the contested 2000 election which included the following: “I am the only Demo in a house full of socialists.”

<sup>xvii</sup><sup>17</sup> And we remain indebted to Laurie Stone for doing so and egging us on to join her.

<sup>xviii</sup><sup>18</sup> During Jess's first stint, in kindergarten, we dutifully filled our prescribed and highly gendered roles, with Helen as a “home room mom” and Eric working the athletically based “field day.” On Jess's second tour of duty, Eric served as a Parent Representative on the Williams Elementary School Site-Based Decision Committee for two years and as a Parent Representative on the Georgetown Independent School District Site-Based Decision Committee for one year. Helen served for one year on the Georgetown Independent School District Gifted and Talented Committee.

<sup>xix</sup><sup>19</sup> See, for example, Gary Orfield and John Yun, “Resegregation in American Schools,” The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, 1999.

<[www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights/publications/resegregation99.html](http://www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights/publications/resegregation99.html)>

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<sup>xx20</sup> Susannah Sheffer, A Sense of Self : Listening to Homeschooled Adolescent Girls  
(Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1995)

<sup>xxi21</sup> While the local schools are at least nominally integrated, most schools in our town and region reflect the increasing national practice of creating schools within schools where different classes and ethnicities rarely mix. (Honors programs, for example)  
Personal Conversation with Dr. LaVonne Neal, Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas, 28 February 2001.

<sup>xxii22</sup> Roland Meighan, "Home-based education effectiveness research and some of its implications." Educational Review 47(3) November 1995: 275-287.

<sup>xxiii23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxiv24</sup> Some homeschoolers advocate "unschooling," a learning philosophy totally guided by a child's interest; we do a blend of child-led learning and education that conforms to structural requirements such as future college entrance exams.

<sup>xxv25</sup> Jesse Cordes Selbin, "Reading Between the Lines: Why Are So Many Books Still Sexist." New Moon: The Magazine For Girls and Their Dreams 8(4) March/April 2001: 40-42.

<sup>xxvi26</sup> Helen Cordes, "Kids Who Do Too Much." Child 15(7) September 2000: 71-74.

Also, Helen Cordes, "Overdoing Extracurriculars: How and When to Say "When." "

Britannica Online, September 7, 2000.

<<http://www.britannica.com/bcom/original/article/0,5744,10020,00.html>>

<sup>xxvii27</sup> Helen Cordes, "Sour Grapes, Anyone?" Salon (June 6, 2000).

<<http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/tues/2000/06/06/homeschool/index.html>>

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<sup>xxviii</sup><sup>28</sup> Most commonly associated with Malcolm X, the phrase “by whatever means necessary” is apparently a paraphrase from Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” (Roger Protz, “Millions of Britons See Malcolm X In TV Broadcast of Debate at Oxford.” The Militant 14 December 1964: 2) and has been widely adopted by progressives around the world. It reflects the strategy(ies) adopted by millions of people for thousands of years when faced with oppression, repression, and the lack of social justice.

<sup>xxix</sup><sup>29</sup> This was brought home on one occasion when our children were enrolled at our fine local Montessori school. Eric volunteered to help with lunch one day and was greeted with, “Oh, there’s a man in the house.” Decidedly weird and all too telling.

<sup>xxx</sup><sup>30</sup> Worldwide, boys have much more access to education, leaving one-third of the world’s females illiterate. The US followed European tradition by barring girls from full participation in schools for nearly two centuries. (Sadker, 15-41). In our nation’s early years, only a small minority of white and wealthy girls attended private elementary schools or public schools—which they were allowed to attend only after the all-boys school day, and for a fee. During the 1800s, girls gradually gained access to public elementary schools, but it took decades for high schools to begin offering equal curricula to girls (as opposed to a home arts-oriented education), amid emotional debate over whether education diverted to the brain blood needed for menstruation, and widespread fears that coed schools would shatter the family by erasing the differences between male and female (Sadker, 230-32).

<sup>xxxi</sup><sup>31</sup> On this “significant revolutionary potential,” see Mary Ann Tétreault, “Women and Revolution: A Framework for Analysis,” in Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the

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New World, ed. Mary Ann Tétreault (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994),

11-17; “Women and Revolution: What Have We Learned?” Ibid., 438-40.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See note 1.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Tétreault and Teske, 13.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, “First Declaration of La Realidad For Humanity and Against Neoliberalism” Mexico, January 1996.

<<http://www.ezln.org/fzln/LaRealidad1.html>>