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Unexplored Territory: Writing Instruction in Pennsylvania Homeschool Settings, Grades 9-12 Part I

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FOR MORE THAN a century, the culturally mandated task of teaching American high school students to write well has been a primary responsibility of professional educators in public school systems. Now, as postmodern cultural shifts facilitate the expansion of such social movements as homeschooling, increasing numbers of teenage students are developing as writers in family-oriented and parent-supervised ways.

Although scholarly educational research addresses such global issues as why or how effectively families self-educate, little of that research details the ways in which homeschoolers implement specific curricula. Therefore, this descriptive study explores the educational perspectives, teaching approaches, family roles, and relationships—as well as the writing experiences and composing processes—that energize a selected range of homeschool approaches to high school level writing.

Homeschool Writing Instruction As Research

HOMESCHOOLING IS NOT an unresearched topic. A virtual “cottage industry” (Cizek & Ray, 1995, p. 1) generates and distributes many advocacy and how-to materials. Journals publish special issues full of factual and anecdotal articles. More importantly, a “small, but growing group of researchers” is generating a respectable number of “books and journals ... scholarly articles ... conference papers, theses and dissertations, and independent reports” (Cizek & Ray, 1995, p. 1) that analyze and theorize homeschooling. Still, as Cizek and Ray demonstrate, in 15 years of homeschool studies recognized by the *Home School Researcher*, few curricular studies have been completed. For example, only two studies (one briefly) address math (Richman, Girten, & Snyder, 1992; Sande, 1995). Just two explore science (Hornick, 1993; Ray, 1989). A single study considers writing (Galloway & Sutton, 1995) by determining differences in the performance of 180 students who

graduated from public schools, private Christian schools, and homeschools. The study found no significant difference in the mean scores these students received on a required freshman library research paper or on tests that indicated their composition knowledge. However, since the study’s focus was on how well homeschoolers had performed on the college level, there was no examination of their pre-college writing instruction.

Neither this researcher nor Dr. Ray, whom I consulted on the matter, is aware of more than three other studies that even tangentially consider homeschool writing. June Hetzel (1997) discovered that in a typical day, students in 272 California homeschool families spent 19.5 to 34.5 minutes on writing instruction and 21 to 36 minutes engaged in the writing process. Parents provided opportunities for print-rich experiences. Hetzel’s report, however, specifies neither ages nor grades and offers only a few tantalizing statistics.

Elizabeth Treat’s (1990) ethnographic case study of two parents and one student interacting as readers and writers documents and analyzes variables involved in learning to write at home. In a case study format, it provides “a natural, in-depth, holistic ... view [of] the sociolinguistic context of [one] home school family” (p. 11). Participant observations, interviews, recorded teaching sessions, dialogic journals, and personal interactions “capture the complexity and spontaneity of ... ongoing, everyday language behavior during reading and writing events” (p. 11), and illustrate how one set of parents designed a literacy curriculum and “envision[ed] ... themselves to be teachers of reading and writing” (p. 13). However, since Treat’s study focuses on only one family with one third-grade child, its contribution to this study—which targets teenage writers—is somewhat limited.

Gary Hafer’s (1990) descriptive study of homeschool writing instruction (a) profiles major homeschool composition textbooks; (b) analyzes how

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they exclude, include, or alter four crucial writing variables—planning, types of writing, grammar, and responses; and (c) illustrates with a case study of a single family who patronizes such texts. The study is Hafer’s response to “previous calls for home school research in the area of curricula and pedagogical descriptions and evaluations” (p. 16). His rationale for focusing on writing parallels the motivation for this study: “Writing has never been a subject for analysis because its complexity escapes the easy categorization of standardized testing. Even when verbal ability has been tested, writing ability has not been measured” (Hafer, 1990, p. 16).

Hafer’s profile of specific composition texts and his analysis of how the enabling perspectives and pedagogies compare or contrast with composition theories up to the end of the 1980s do provide interpretive background to this study. Their application, however, is limited since only two of the study’s six participating families used the traditional resources modeled in Hafer’s study. Also, although Hafer targets writing instruction, the participating student is a single third grader rather than high schoolers, the focus of this study.

Writing From Home

THOUGH THE RANGE of writing pedagogies in educational institutions is known (Tate, Rupiper, &

Schick, 2001); home-based writing pedagogies remain unexplored. This study addresses that lack by extrapolating from Mary Hood’s (1990) categorization of homeschool philosophies and Diana Baseman’s (1989) model of homeschool educational choices. According to Hood, parent-educators are motivated by essentialist, perennialist, progressive, or existential philosophies of learning. Essentialism or perennialism generally fosters such instruction-based approaches as fact transmission, while progressivism or existentialism encourages learning-based choices that target skills or insights useful for integrated social living. Conversely, Baseman discounts basic motivational differences and models the graduated blending of educational choices.

Baseman’s continuum (see Figure 1) begins with observing and being-available parents who respect their students as interest-driven learners and encourage them to structure their own learning environments and tasks. At the polar end are directing and school-at-home parents who turn their homes into classrooms and authoritatively direct children who obey and learn. Scattered at many intermediate points are shaping-the-environment parents who may regulate or monitor behaviors, roles, and relationships at one stage but relax into emergent and flexible patterns at another.

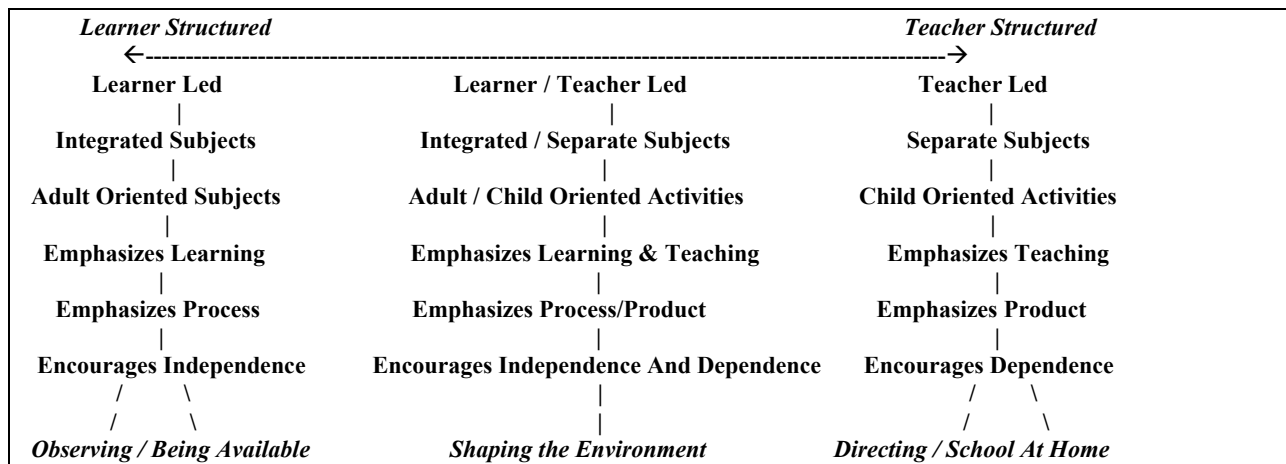


Figure 1. Model of homeschool educational styles. Reprinted by permission.

Unexplored Territory: Writing Instruction

primarily learn at home. The options allow writers to move in and out of classes on fiction, creative writing, poetry, drama, basic composition, and grammar.

Alternative schools that offer such homeschool incentives frequently also offer to keep student records, act as curriculum advisors, or serve as representative or mediators in dealing with state officials in matters of compulsory attendance. In some states, however, homeschool laws forbid or complicate such dual enrollments.

College Writing Courses

Community colleges, undergraduate colleges, and universities sometimes open their composition classes to high school juniors or seniors—whether they are studying in public school or homeschools. Either to increase enrollment or as a public service, some smaller colleges offer a limited number of free courses to those who qualify on placement exams or essays. Because of their flexible schedules, homeschool students sometimes find that they can accrue both homeschool and college credit at the same time. The option entices junior or senior homeschool writers who wish to improve or assess their writing skills before they graduate and transfer to larger or more distant colleges or universities.

Conclusion

THOSE WHO ENCOURAGED Pennsylvania parents to educate their own children could not have known that their activism would foster a quantum leap from alienation and prosecution to learning in undisturbed parent, parent/learner, and learner-structured ways. For more than a decade, Act 169 (1988) has empowered parent-educators to forge idiosyncratic ways of teaching and learning to write. However, that privilege has carried with it the obligation to submit certain documentation—more than some wish to comply with.

Still, parent-educators who teach writing do have freedoms no law can affect. They may discount or implement composition theory and praxis as they flex with research. Local districts are obligated to loan homeschool parents course outlines, textbooks, and materials if they request them. Instructional services and writing curricula once available only to professional educators are accessible through libraries, bookstores, publishers, community colleges, correspondence courses, distance education, online search engines, or other sources that spring up like Jack's beanstalk.

What no publisher, program, or service can ever duplicate, however, are the relationships homeschool parents and children forge as educators and writers in training. Because homeschooling is a social movement, a family-based culture, and a system of private education, these interactions both shape and constrain the writing experiences parents assign or facilitate and the composing processes homeschool writers develop. The second section of this study documents, characterizes, and analyzes those components within the unique contexts of six Pennsylvania homeschool families where high school level students learn to write.

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Social Development in Traditionally Schooled and Home Educated Children: A Case for Increased Parental Monitoring and Decreased Peer Dominance

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IN RECENT YEARS there have been significant increases in youth antisocial behavior (Kaufman et al., 1999) and problematic interpersonal relationships (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Since individuals learn how to interact with others through the extended interpersonal training that comes with peer and familial interaction, this would seem to indicate a need to better and more fully understand the influences associated with both parent-dominant and peer dominant environments

This article examines the factors that may contribute to the social development of children especially in regards to peer influence and parental involvement and monitoring. These effects are examined by looking at their influence across traditionally schooled and home schooled populations. Additionally, contributing factors are examined across their varied dimensions including: (a) schema development, as influenced by the availability heuristic and the false consensus effect; (b) negative peer influences from three domains: outward, inward, and through deviance training; and (c) parental monitoring. Studies suggest that as parental monitoring increases and is integrated within the peer culture, socialization and personality development are enhanced.

Availability Heuristic and the False Consensus Effect

Schema Development

WHEN CHILDREN ARE immersed in a peer-dominant culture without an appropriate outlet for accountability, they can very quickly assume the attitudes and behaviors of the other members of their group. As individuals increase their exposure to activities or behaviors that people are engaged in, their perception of prevalence rates for that behavior will likely increase. This is because the most available information regarding prevalence ratings is drawn from the most immediate experiences. This mechanism is referred to

as the availability heuristic. This is one tool we use to construct our perceptions of reality and truth regarding the world around us and how it works. We shape our schemas of the world through heuristics. By operating under the mechanisms of the availability heuristic children begin to view behaviors that their peer group members engage in as being more prevalent than they really are. As they reflect on the prevalence of a particular behavior, they use the actions of their immediate groups as a reference tool. This would apply to a variety of behaviors that lead to significant social problems such as bullying behavior, substance abuse, and promiscuousness.

As individuals' perceptions of prevalence for a specific behavior increases, they may also begin to believe that other people share the same beliefs (Ross et al., 1977). They develop a false consensus effect. The false consensus effect leads an individual to believe that more people think and act like as he/she does than actually do. For example, if a child begins to believe that more young people are using alcohol, they also assume that more people believe that children are using alcohol than actually do. To demonstrate the false consensus effect, Brown and Shuman (1994) examined the effects of individuals' perceptions of others' membership across two political dimensions: political affiliation and abortion. They demonstrated that an individual's own beliefs had in impact on their perception regarding the number of people who support a specific political candidate and their perception of support for pro-life and pro-choice positions. For example, the individuals that supported George Bush in the 1994 elections believed that more people supported George Bush that actually did. Likewise, the individuals that supported Bill Clinton believed that more people supported Bill Clinton that actually did. They found similar results when examining the issue of abortion. Individuals that were pro-choice believed that more people were pro-choice than actually were.

Because the institutionalized education system

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deviant behavior and talk, peers had a significant increase in their deviant behavior at 3 months, 1 year, and 3 years following the termination of the study. Once these deviant behaviors develop it seems that they are very difficult to extinguish, even through adulthood. Patterson, Dishion, and Yoerger (1999) found that deviant behavior that developed in childhood, such as sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, relationship problems, and criminal convictions tend to increase across adolescence and adulthood. The effects of deviance training are long lasting and socially impairing. As previously demonstrated, the lack of parental monitoring can be a major contributor for this phenomenon of deviant behavior teaching. If a caregiver were actively involved in the children's relationships the children would not be reinforced for the deviant behavior, rather they would be punished or reprimanded.

There seems to be an overwhelming amount of evidence that children socialized in a peer-dominant environment are at higher risk for developing social maladjustment issues than those that are socialized in a parent monitored environment. This becomes a significant issue when we look at the rates of aggression, violence, drug use, and sexual promiscuity in our children. In 1996, 5% of all 12th graders reported that they had been injured with a weapon in the last 12 months while at school or at a school function (Kaufman, Chen, Choy, Chandler et al., 1999). Another 12% reported having been injured without the use of a weapon. In 1993, 76 students were murdered or committed suicide while at school and another 7,357 while away from school (Kachur et al., 1996). The high rates of violence and aggression instill a sense of fear in children. They often do not feel safe in their learning environment. They may engage in deviance training within their peer groups as a means of dealing with the fear and anticipation of aggressive oppression. Between 1989 and 1995, the number of children that avoided a specific place in their school for fear of violence increased to 2.1 million. In 1996, 8% of 12th graders used alcohol in school and there was a significant increase in the use of marijuana and stimulants since 1992 (Kaufman, Chen, Choy, Chandler et al., 1999). There has also been an increasing rate of school dropouts. In 1998 the dropout rates among 10-12th graders in the United States were 11.8%. Nearly one and a half million children were so disillusioned with the school environment that they were not able, or willing, to complete their education. There may be a relationship between the increases in deviant behavior, aggression, violence, and substance abuse, and the school dropout rates. This appears to be related to the same issues discussed earlier regarding the effects of unregulated peer group socialization. As discussed

briefly earlier, one possible solution for this peer victimization and subsequent social maladjustment is a higher degree of parental involvement in education. It has been demonstrated that deviance, deviance training, and delinquency decreases and prosocial activity increases as parental monitoring increases (Flannery et al., 1999; Pettit et al., 1999; Sim, 2000).

Increased Parental Monitoring

TO CIRCUMVENT THE problems resulting from deviant peer culture an environment can be constructed in which the dynamics and membership of the prospective peer groups are closely monitored and controlled by adults or parental figures. This would decrease the involvement of deviance-oriented youths with children that could potentially excel in academic and social development. A decrease in involvement within delinquent peer culture could result in a decreased in deviance talk, peer rejection, and demoralization.

One format that could accomplish increased monitoring is the home education model. This may be effective by allowing for a higher level of parental monitoring and increased peer supervision. Home educated children, by the nature of their education, are raised in a parent-dominant environment compared to the peer dominance found in traditionally schooled environments. This gives them a significantly smaller opportunity to engage in and be influenced by deviance talk. Because of the regulated peer culture, children can be kept further away from problematic children, thus removing from their schemas of social behavior those that are antisocial and maladjusted; they can then be placed in peer groups that are prosocial and achievement oriented. If this takes place we will observe an availability heuristic that evokes images of prosocial behavior rather than antisocial behavior. They will not experience a significant increase in their false consensus effect and thus be less likely to engage in undesirable behaviors.

In a study examining this concept, Delahooke (as cited in Ray & Wartes, 1991) found that children that were home educated had a greater focus on family issues and family functioning than did children from a traditional educational format. Consistent with research discussed earlier, the researcher also found that the children educated in the traditional format were more influenced by their peers and more concerned with peers than were their home-educated counterparts.

In one of the largest studies to date examining the socialization of home educated children compared to traditionally educated children, the researchers found that home educated children may be more socially well adjusted. In this study, Shyers (1992) compared and contrasted the beliefs and behaviors of 70 home

educated children and 70 traditionally educated children on self-concept, assertiveness, and quality of social play and interactions. When the children were tested regarding self-concept and assertiveness there were no significant differences. Both groups of children seemed to possess equivalent characteristics. However, when the quality of their social interactions was observed, the traditionally schooled children consistently displayed aggressive, loud, and competitive behavior. The mean score for their problem behavior scores was actually eight times higher than the mean problem behavior score for the home-educated children.

There have also been several studies that demonstrate the increased sociability of home-educated children in respect to their self-perceptions and self-concept (Medlin, 2000). Taylor (1986) and Kelly (1991) both found significant increases in self-concept in home-educated children compared to children from conventional schools. In another study, Hedin (1991) found no significant difference between the two populations suggesting the home-educated children were at least as strong as traditionally schooled children in regards to the development of their self-concept.

Conclusions

WHILE PEER INTERACTION may be important for successful personality development, the quality of these interactions is equally important. Children that live in a peer-dominant culture tend to be at greater risk for negative peer influences, such as rejection and deviance training. These social interactions find their strength by using the availability heuristic to alter the false consensus effect. Research has demonstrated that increased parental monitoring can increase successful socialization and personality development. The positive increase in social behavior may be due in part to the supervision and regulation of peer group membership and peer activities.

Future research that directly examines the effects of parental monitoring across a variety of social constructs would be beneficial. The potential for socially inhibited behavior resulting from parental monitoring could be explored as well. It would also be interesting to examine the effects of increased parental monitoring within various contexts and/or activities.

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