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## **Unexplored Territory: Writing Instruction in Pennsylvania Homeschool Settings, Grades 9-12, Part II<sup>1</sup>**

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HOMESCHOOLING PARENTS RECOGNIZE the challenge of teaching their teens to write. Some of these adults have been taught little about writing, feel overwhelmed by the task of choosing instructional materials, or wonder what writing skills their students may need as they enter colleges or careers. Pennsylvania parents may feel these pressures more acutely than others since they appear more likely to continue homeschooling through the high school years than do families in several other states (H. Richman, 2001).

### **Mapping Unexplored Territory**

AFTER JEFF ARCHER (1999) termed homeschooling territory “unexplored” by education researchers, one 16-year-old Pennsylvania homeschooler responded by sharing that she had for months been “cogitating experiments to assess the effects of homeschooling” (M. Richman, 2000, para. 5) since what researchers were avoiding lay “literally in [her] own back yard” (para. 5). Mapping aspects of one of homeschooling’s virgin areas—writing instruction—is the objective of this study.

### **Methodology**

ALTHOUGH INTERPRETIVE BACKGROUND for this exploratory-descriptive case study comes from numerous informant interviews and many published and private homeschool documents and artifacts, homeschool newsletters, listservs, e-mails, electronic documents, and personal observation of and participation in homeschool events, the study’s primary data originate in 1.5 to 2 hour semi-structured parent and student interviews shaped by elements of Weiss (1994) and Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) qualitative models, and Seidman’s (1991) phenomenological model.

During these interviews, parents detailed what it is like to direct the education of their own children, how writing figures into their student’s education, the history of at least one extended writing experience, and the instructive or supportive roles they or other persons played in its production. Students shared what it is like to learn at home, what writing means to them, and how they engaged writing processes to produce one extended text. The following sections document and analyze these data in accordance with the continuum of structure discussed in Part I of this report.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Part II ethnographically details what is discussed theoretically in Part I (Huber, 2003)—that homeschooling is a social movement, a family-based culture, and a system of private education populated by persons who forge family-specific living arrangements, teaching approaches, and learning relationships and that these components idiosyncratically impact writing experiences and composing processes. Participating families were selected from a county-wide, survey-generated list of volunteers who (a) live in geographical proximity to each other, (b) have homeschooled for relatively long periods of time, (c) represent a broad range of homeschooling perspectives and practices, and (d) include one or more students who, during the prior academic year of 9th- through 12th-grade studies, completed at least one extended text. Primary data collected from semi-structured interviews are analyzed to determine how the targeted components affect writing development.

<sup>2</sup> The author’s dissertation on homeschool writing instruction (<http://members.bellatlantic.net/~vze4dtms/>) details relevant theory, homeschool literature, research methodologies, data collection, analysis, and reporting protocols. Also provided are extended “thick” descriptions of each participating family’s living, learning, and writing choices.

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Therefore, in which direction both forms of schooling move their programs of writing instruction is for history to clarify. At the moment, homeschool families are foils for public ways of doing things and laboratories for researching how writers mature when families are their own teachers and assessors.

### Conclusion #3

*Homeschool living choices and teaching practices idiosyncratically determine the range of writing that students experience and the sophistication of their composing processes.*

What and how writers write is the composite of the contexts within which they learn, the ways in which they are taught, and the relationships they develop as teachers and learners. Public school students learn in public places. Schools congregate peers who primarily study together; homeschools team siblings and parents who interact in more than academic ways. Classrooms are led by professionals trained in specific subjects or teaching approaches; homeschools are generally supervised by lay educators. Academic standards and mandated assessments effectively nudge public schools into teaching a range of writing experiences and promoting certain composing processes. Homeschool writing pedagogies are free to range from the ultra-traditional to the radically alternative.

Some feel that Pennsylvania homeschool writers are unfairly exempted from language arts standards and assessments. The logic of the critique is that without governmental supervision parents may either neglect or do poorly what planners recommend. The concern is a valid one; there is that possibility. However, determining whether that possibility has become a reality or remains an unfounded projection necessitates extensive research—research that accesses homeschool families whose living choices range from structured and authoritative to open-ended and self-empowering and whose teaching approaches vary from authoritatively transmitting knowledge to independently exploiting the educational opportunities of social living. Therefore, this study calls for constructing a broad base of knowledge that confirms, extends, or challenges these preliminary conclusions.

### Conclusion #4

*Educators and governmental policymakers need to understand homeschooling as an educational*

*alternative in which writing can be learned/taught in a variety of ways.*

Self-educating families reintegrate institutions long separated by the American society: family living and formal learning. As educators, parents may dominate in ways that blur their parental roles and diminish their students' social opportunities or they may so circumscribe formal ways of learning that education becomes almost invisible and social interactions weakly impact students' educational development. Writing dangers lurk at either extreme.

The problem some educators and government officials have with parents as writing instructors is that finding balanced perspectives, pedagogies, and practices is up to persons they may be unsure are knowledgeable, experienced, or long-term educational planners. However, a related challenge faces researchers who investigate homeschool writing instruction. Public schooling has long been the privileged educational model, so these researchers must discern whether they cherish unchallenged presuppositions. It is easy to negate the need for such a self check since homeschooling is still more tolerated than encouraged. Yet for a postmodern society to ignore, denigrate, or discriminate against any of the educational alternatives it legitimizes is a contradiction and a misdeed.

Given the volatile politics of education in Pennsylvania, it is important to accumulate reliable, trustworthy data that confirm or dispel potential apprehensions surrounding how parent-educators help their writers to develop. One attempt at replacing Pennsylvania's homeschool law has failed. Before another succeeds, what can be known needs to be learned in as objective, trustworthy, and reliable a way as possible.

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## Unexplored Territory: Writing Instruction

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## **Social Skills of Home Schooled and Conventionally Schooled Children: A Comparison Study**

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DESPITE OPPOSITION FROM many local school boards, the National Education Association (NEA), and school administrators, home schooling continues to be a growing trend across the nation (Holtrop, 1996; Mayberry, 1989; Ray, 1996, Ray, 2002; Ritter, 1997). Recent estimates suggest that 1.5 to 2.0 million children may be currently home schooled in grades K through 12 nationwide (Ray, 2002). Concerns regarding the lack of religious teachings in public schools, negative influences of their children's peer culture, and questionable quality of the education received in public schools are some reasons why parents have chosen to educate their children at home (Dahm, 1996; Mayberry, 1989; Murray, 1996). However, as support for home education increases, so does the skepticism from public school administrators, who are now forced to take a critical look at the reasons *why* students are leaving their school districts.

Public educators have questioned the socialization opportunities home schooled children receive if they are denied the traditional exposure to social interaction provided in conventional schools. Moreover, educators are concerned about the level of instructional quality these children will receive, as many home schooling parents are not certified to teach (Ray, 1996; Taylor, 1986). The media have begun to present the home school debate focusing on the social and academic concerns expressed by public educators (Knowles, 1988, Ray, 1992). However, most people know little about home schoolers: their backgrounds, their activities, or their achievements (Ray, 1997). Researchers have begun to address these concerns within the small body of literature that has steadily grown with the increasing number of home schooling families over the past two decades (Knowles, 1988). The majority of these studies have focused on the academic achievement of home schooled children; the

social skills of home schooled children have received less attention (Ray, 1997).

Academically, the evidence suggests that home schooled children perform at or above the national average on standardized achievement tests when compared to conventionally schooled peers, (Frost, 1988; Murray, 1996; Ray, 1997; Wartes, 1987) and this performance resembles that of children in private schools (Lines, 1995). Moreover, home school advocates point to the increased interest from colleges and universities in actively recruiting home schooled children (Ray, 1999) and home schooled children's success in academic competitions as further evidence of their academic success. Regardless of these academic accomplishments, detractors of home education continue to doubt that home schooling has positive effects on children's overall *social skills or competence*.

### **Indirect Measurement of Social Skills: The Problem**

ONLY RECENTLY HAVE researchers examined the effects of home schooling on the social skills of home schooled children. Therefore, few data exist from which to draw conclusions about the social behavior of these children (Ray, 1997). Furthermore, many such studies have attempted to measure social skills by examining the self-concept and self-esteem of home schooled and traditionally schooled children, rather than social skills or social competence (Hedin, 1991; Kelley, 1991; Kitchen, 1991; Stough, 1992; Taylor, 1986; Tillman, 1995). These studies suggest that home-educated children have equivalent or higher self-concepts than the norm. Although such findings are of interest, self-concept and self-esteem are not equivalent to social skills or behavior (Eder, 1997).

Social skills are a difficult and complex variable to measure and can be approached in a variety of different

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ways (Gresham & Elliott, 1984). Within the home school literature, a variety of different methods and perspectives have been used to examine social skills. For example, social differences of home educated children have been investigated via self-esteem and self-concept (Hedin, 1991; Kelley, 1991; Kitchen, 1991; Stough, 1992; Taylor, 1986; Tillman, 1995), social adjustment and social maturity (Delahooke, 1986; Shyers, 1992; Smedley, 1992), and leadership skills (Montgomery, 1989). Additionally, family interaction patterns (Carson, 1990) and differences in social opportunities available to home educated children have also been examined (Chatham-Carpenter, 1994; Tillman, 1995; Wartes, 1987). Yet few of these studies have attempted to address the socialization question with the use of more *direct measures* of social skills.

Although attempts have been made to address this problem empirically by examining social adjustment (Shyers, 1992) and social maturity (Smedley, 1992), the data in this area continue to be sparse and inconclusive (Aix, 1994; Mayberry, 1989; Ray, 1997). Conducting additional studies with more appropriate and direct measures of social skills, therefore, would be an asset to the current home school research. A suggested method is to measure the social skills that are typically acquired during childhood (Gresham & Elliot, 1990).

### Social Skills

SOCIAL SKILLS ARE those skills that are “socially acceptable learned behaviors that enable a person to interact effectively with others and to avoid socially unacceptable responses” (Gresham & Elliott, 1990, p. 1). Behaviors such as sharing, helping, giving compliments, and having good manners are all examples of social skills that enable successful relationships throughout the life span (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). Consequently, each child’s mastery of these skills will enable or impair future relationships with both adults and peers (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). To date no study has approached the socialization debate specifically by measuring social skill differences of home schooled and publicly schooled children. A *direct* measure of social skills may provide some insight into social differences, if any, exhibited by home educated and traditionally educated children.

More conclusive data are needed so that the effect home education has on the socialization of children is further clarified for home and public educators alike. Such a study may contribute to resolution of the current debate between public educators and home school advocates and would meet the need for more causal-comparative studies (Ray, 1992). Past studies have examined “the social skills debate” by looking for differences between home schooled and conventionally

schooled children while primarily focusing on the constructs of self-esteem and self-concept. These constructs, however, do not adequately explain the numerous behavioral differences found in children’s social behavior (Eder, 1997). As a result, this study addressed the socialization issue through the use of a social skill measure that examined parents’ perceptions of their children’s social skills. The purpose of this research was to determine whether home-educated children’s social skills differ from those of a paired comparison group of conventionally schooled children.

## Method

### Participants

Participants included 34 pairs of children between the ages of 5 and 18 and their parents; one child from each pair was home schooled, and the other was conventionally schooled. All but one family resided in communities located in rural Western New York and the majority (98%), consisted of two parent families. Due to the nonequivalent nature of the comparison groups (i.e., home educated vs. conventionally educated) the pairing procedure was used to improve equivalency across the two groups. Briefly, home schooling parents nominated conventionally schooled friends to whom their children were compared (via a repeated measures ANOVA). The solicitation of home and conventionally school participants, along with the matching procedure used, is described in more detail in the Procedure section.

Data collection began in October 1998 and was completed by June 1999. Of the 48 home schooling families who were given the initial mailings, 39 (81%) participated. Nine families (19%) declined to participate in the study. Of the 39 who completed the survey, five families (13%) were dropped because they did not satisfy the researcher’s requirements for a home schooling family. Ninety-four percent of the conventional educating families completed the initial mailings. The two conventional educating families who did not participate were replaced.

### Procedure

*Home schooled.* Home-educating families were recruited by networking with home school organizations and individuals who subscribed to a home school newsletter within a rural area of western New York. For the purpose of this study, home schooled children were defined as those children between the ages of 5 and 18 who were currently being educated at home, and had been so educated for at least two consecutive years. Initially, the first author contacted home educating families to assess their interest for participating in the study. Parents were asked to

## Discussion

HEATED DEBATES OF concerned parents, educators, and administrators about the social implications home schooling may have on children's ability to adapt, cope, and maintain themselves within the mainstream social environment was a primary motivating factor for conducting this study. This study assisted in addressing the paucity of research within the home schooling socialization domain. With few studies measuring social skills within the literature to reference, the aforementioned debates may be based primarily on speculation and the "conventional wisdom" of the public at large. To address these concerns, this study investigated whether home educated children's social skills differed from the social skills of a matched comparison group of similar, but conventionally educated children.

The results from this study indicate that the home schooled children earned higher social skill standard scores than their conventionally educated peers. Although both groups earned social skills standard scores above the average in relation to the standardization sample, the home schooled children earned scores higher above the average in comparison to conventionally schooled children, means 113.1 and 107.1 respectively. These differences occurred despite the high degree of similarity between the groups and strongly suggest that home schooling had a statistically significant positive effect on the home schooled children's social skills. Home schooled children also earned statistically significantly higher scores on the self-control component of overall social skills.

An additional finding was that no differences occurred between the groups when measuring problem behaviors. The home schooled group did not differ from the conventionally educated group in their total problem behavior standard scores ( $M$  94.50 and 96.38, respectively) or in any of the components of problem behaviors (internalizing, externalizing, or hyperactivity). Both groups were considered to have problem behaviors typical for their age, and were slightly better than average in relation to the standardization sample of the SSRS.

The findings of this research suggest that home schooling does not appear to have any negative effects on the development of proper social skills. To the contrary, the results to this study suggest that the children benefited from an exposure to an education at home as their social skills appear to have been enhanced when compared to their conventionally educated counterparts. In addition, home schooled children show, on average, neither more nor fewer social skill problems than do conventionally schooled children.

## Limitations

A potential limitation of this study is related to the convenience sample utilized by the researchers, which may affect the level of generalizability of these results. Although this study sampled subjects across seven counties in rural Western New York, it is unclear if this sample is representative of the entire state or home schooling families across the nation. However, in comparison to a recent nationwide study by Ray (1997) some similarities in demographics were identified. In particular, similarities were noted in the areas of family size, age of home schooled children, percentage of single parents who home school, and number of years in home education.

A second limitation of this study concerns the potential of sampling bias. Specifically, all participants were volunteers. Therefore the participants may have naturally been more satisfied with home schooling than families who refused to participate. To increase generalizability and variability of this sample, home schooling subjects were recruited using a variety of tactics by the researchers, including networking via word-of-mouth, contacting independent home school support church groups, and by chapter representatives for Loving Education At Home (LEAH) support organizations. Use of a variety of methods to recruit subjects was believed to be the best way of generating the most varied group of home schooling families, and has been often practiced in previous research (e.g., Knowles, 1988; Mayberry, 1989; Ray, 1990).

Third, the use of parents as evaluators of their children's social skills allows the possibility of bias to be introduced when completing the rating forms. However, parents were thought to provide the most valid assessment of their children's social skills. This approach was the most logical as parents are likely to spend more time in a day with their children than either teachers (Conners, 1990) or independent observers; therefore, parents should have the greatest knowledge of their children's social behavior across time and varying situational contexts.

Moreover, a high degree of consistency typically has been found between observers who play similar roles when rating children's behavioral/emotional problems (i.e., parents vs. parents and teachers vs. teachers) across different situations (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987). Most importantly, it is likely that whatever bias might have been introduced by having parents rate their children's social skills should have been distributed equally to home schooled and conventionally schooled children.

Fourth, one measure was utilized when examining the socialization domain. This measure used parent's perceptions of their children's social skills while measuring social skill differences. This approach may



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seem to have some limiting qualities in relation to more “objective” measures such as direct observation. However, ratings based on observers’ impressions have been found to equal the predictive power of direct observations (Weinrott, Reid, Bauske, & Brummett, 1981; as cited in Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987), and have been used to refine direct observations of children’s behavior (Elliot, Busse, & Gresham, 1993). Moreover, although a multiple assessment method is typically suggested to take into account situational-specific conduct while measuring social behavior (Elliot, Busse, & Gresham, 1993; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) we sought to gain the most valuable information from the participating families while remaining minimally intrusive. As a result, parents were the only evaluators of their children’s social skills.

### Advantages

Advocates of home schooling have conducted much of the previous home schooling research. The researchers in this study were employees of a public school and a University and were neither home school advocates nor fundamental Christians (a common characteristic of home educators; Ray, 1997). The interpretive implications of this study were, therefore, thought to be minimized as the researchers had no incentive to endorse this non-conventional teaching method.

This study is apparently the first to explore the socialization domain of home schooled children using a more direct measure of the socialization domain (e.g. social skills). By using a measure that was specifically designed for parents to complete for the purpose of evaluating their children’s social skills, interpretation of results was assisted, and speculation minimized.

Finally, the matching procedure used having home schooling families nominate a similar conventionally schooled child succeeded in creating a demographically similar comparison group for the home schooled children studied. This similarity, in turn, bolsters confidence that the social skill differences found are in fact a result of some characteristic related to the home schooling experience. Although the home schooling sample collected is unusual in some ways (e.g., their level of religious commitment), they are representative of home schoolers, in general (Ray, 1997). Furthermore, the use of repeated measures ANOVA for analysis capitalized on the matching procedure to reduce error variance and allowed a more sensitive statistical test.

### Conclusions

THE CURRENT STUDY explored the question: Do home schooled children differ in social skills in relation to a matched group of conventionally educated students?

The results of this study indicated that differences did occur between the groups in terms of Total Social Skills Standard Scores. Home schooled children achieved higher scores on this scale than their conventionally educated counterparts. In addition, home schooled children scored higher on the four component scores of overall social skills, and statistically significantly higher on one of these (Self Control). The higher rating scores on these scales strongly suggest that home schooled children in this study were not harmed socially due to their home education. On the contrary, these data suggest home schooled children may have benefited as a result of their education at home in terms of displaying higher overall social skills and self control than the conventionally educated group.

### Implications

THE RESULTS OF this study question a conventional approach toward education and a frequently referenced secondary goal of conventional school systems. Socialization of children is often believed to be most successfully addressed through immersion into mainstream culture via the public school system (Klicka, 1993; Murray, 1996). The results from this study question this “conventional wisdom.” In fact, this study may ease concerns of educators (e.g., parents and professionals) who share anxiety over the possible social implications of home education, as the data suggests concern of social ineptness are most likely unwarranted.

This study also demonstrates the importance of using appropriate measures when exploring the socialization domain of home schooled children. Measures should be selected that are designed in a manner in which they can be appropriately applied to a home schooling population. Moreover, they should be sensitive enough to identify and evaluate the specific behavioral differences that may exist between home and conventionally educated children. Identifying the specific social and behavioral differences between home and conventional students is a crucial area for future research.

Reasons for higher social skill scores among the home educating group are unclear. This study allows for speculation as to the primary variables that resulted in the social score differences between the groups. Variables such as church attendance, and lower teacher-child ratio may have been primary factors leading to higher social skills. However, an examination of the demographic data suggests a high level of similarity between the groups. Moreover, home education allows for a consistent and high amount of parent-to-child contact. An increased opportunity for parental feedback for appropriate and inappropriate social behavior may