

The Feminist Art Homeschooler

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Abstract

The discourse of feminism, modern homeschooling, and an arts-based education are fused in this paper to align each one of those topics separated and seeing how they come together. I question if they can since much literature does not have these topics linked together. Through a journey of the history of homeschooling, the history of feminism, and what a feminist art pedagogy is, this paper provokes common stereotypes of the “mom” precisely and if she can be a feminist and a homeschooler. The unity of those words together guides this paper in asking, can a feminist be a homeschooler?

Keywords: homeschooling, home education, feminism, art education, pedagogy.

THIS PAPER DRAWS on the fusion of three themes, feminism¹, modern homeschooling², and an arts education situated within a homeschool environment. Analyzing through a feminist lens, I will explore how feminism, modern homeschooling, and art education might merge. The amalgamation of arts education in homeschooling plays a significant part in this paper as well as the notion of craft education as a domestic role for art. This notion comes from centuries of systematic exclusion of from art history due to established factors of art such as that “textiles and what we call the decorative arts were often dismissed as a craft and not fine art” (Gajewski, 2015, p. 1). Amid discussing craft practices and domesticity as the role women are assigned throughout society, I will briefly relate that role to the canon of art history. Finally, I will offer additional insight into a prodigious unity of feminism, modern homeschooling, and art education by diffusing and abandoning stereotypes and myths in my research.

Deeply rooted within feminism are negative clichés. For example, an article entitled, *Myths about Feminism*, from Berry College (2020) states that feminists often face stereotypes which include but are not limited to: “feminists hate men, feminists are lesbians, feminists can only be women, and lastly, all feminists are career women and do not support stay-at-home moms” (BerryCollege, 2020, p. 1). Careers are not always the central focus to feminists, for instance, as feminist author Wendy McElroy (2002) writes, “many educated women are turning their backs on careers and returning to the traditional domestic value of putting children and family first” (McElroy, 2002, p. 1). There is nothing wrong with a woman or man placing their children and family first before careers. This doesn’t make them a non-feminist, or feminist, but rather is simply their decision; yet still, “feminists are frequently positioned in the U.S. media as anti-family and anti-motherhood” (Dillaway et al., 2008, p. 1). This paper is concerned with these various false representations and asserts particular focus on those representations of stay-at-home moms relating to the site-specific environment of homeschooling.

In order to complicate and dispel these myths surrounding feminism and art as they are connected to homeschooling education, I first turn to the archives of the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) for homeschooling data and research. The data shows that “there are about 2.5 million homeschool students in grades K-12 in the United States. It appears that the homeschool population is continuing to grow, 2%-8% an increase as of 2019” (Ray, 2020, p.1). According to Dr. Sarah Pannone (2015), professor of education at Liberty University, “while homeschooling is an educational practice that has been employed since ancient times, the modern homeschool³ movement has experienced tremendous growth over the past several decades” (Pannone, 2015, p. 1). Further, given our COVID-19 pandemic realities—which are turning countless families into homeschooling families overnight—advancement of technology, and public receptiveness to online learning resources, the future of in-person education is now being contested and taken up like never before.

This data is relevant to dispatching false and harmful representations as it demonstrates significant—and growing—numbers of homeschooling families in the U.S. are overlooked and ignored. Despite this growth, stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions perpetuate regarding homeschooling. These fallacies often construe an alternative narrative, that many parents do not homeschool

¹ “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2015, p. 240).

² “The modern homeschool movement began in the 1970s when John Holt, an educational theorist and supporter of school reform, began arguing that formal schools’ focus on rote learning created an oppressive classroom environment” (Knowles et al. 2018, p. 1).

and that homeschooling is unfavorable or even detrimental. One particularly salient representation is that “homeschooling equals fundamentalist Christians, or else bunkered survivalists at their most threatening or hippy-dippy ‘back-to-the-earth types’ at best” (Corbes & Selbin, 2002, p. 1). These misleading labels generate language and discourses of exclusion and deficit which socially results in division amongst homeschooled families and so-called “mainstream” families.

This paper is motivated by these harmful stereotypes. One significant consequence of these misconceptions, perhaps, is the overwhelming lack of literature that examines and explores feminist art education in homeschooling contexts. What we have in depth, in other words, is work that focuses on teaching style (Cai et al., 2002), motivation to homeschool (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007), and academic outcomes (Cogan et al., 2010). Informing this paper is the conviction that feminist homeschooling is possible, that feminist can and do homeschool their children. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold: First, as aforementioned, I work to untangle and dispel such harmful representations of feminism, domesticity, and homeschooling art education because these falsities prevent meaningful research and development in our literature concerning feminist homeschooling contexts. Second, I move beyond patriarchal myths of homeschooling, craft practices, and domesticity to bring visibility to and advance a framework for fusing these areas into feminist homeschooling pedagogy.

History and Biased Perceptions

IN THIS SECTION, I provide a historical sketch of the modern homeschooling movement and its corresponding socially circulated misconceptions and biases towards homeschooling. Then, I work through the ways in which feminism, domesticity, and craft practice are linked to homeschooling through popular misconceptions and how those misconceptions further damage and hinder the transformative learning environment and research potential for art homeschooling.

Modern Homeschooling Movement (1977-Present)

According to the Coalition for Responsible Home Education, “the modern homeschooling movement can trace its roots to John Holt’s writing on Unschooling⁴ back in the 1970s” (Knowles et al., 2018, p. 1). As an educational theorist and advocate of school reform, John Holt (1923-1985) was a pioneer in his work to shape the modern homeschooling environment. His philosophy held that “what is most important and valuable about the home as a base for children’s growth into the world is not that it is a better school than the schools, but that it isn’t a school at all” (Holt, 2003, p. 24). In this way, Holt’s work was derived from practices of unschooling that assumed children would gain knowledge organically but made an important shift in considering the home as a place of learning in ways that are like the structure of school but can deviate according to students’ interests and motivations to achieve similar learning outcomes. That is, homeschooling, for Holt, wasn’t a free-for-all but rather a nurturing base for children’s growth that is less dominating and conformist in nature than formal schools. In fact, Holt’s friend and fellow educational theorist Raymond Moore contributed that, “early schooling was detrimental to children, and [they] be schooled at home until age eight or nine in order to offer a firm educational, psychological, and moral foundation” (Knowles et al., 2018, p. 1).

Although interested homeschool families wholly welcomed Holt and Moore’s philosophy in the late 1970s, “the early homeschooling movement faced a major legal hurdle: compulsory education laws, which required children to attend a public or state-accredited private school for a certain period of time” (Carter, 2017, p. 1). As a result of this provision, families were unable to afford the expensive tuition of a private school and resumed homeschooling their children illegally. In the 1980s, homeschooling families faced hurdles in winning legal challenges. The first significant win came with the New Jersey case of the State v. Massa (1967), “though it took nearly 20 years for other states to change their laws” (Carter, 2017, p. 1). What this illustrates is how “the story of the legalization of homeschooling is really fifty different stories” (Knowles et al., 2018, p. 1). Even after homeschooling became legal nation-wide in 1987, homeschooled families were being “misunderstood and even held in suspicion by neighbors and family members, distrusted and occasionally persecuted by authorities, confused about what was legal and how to do what they were trying to do” (Gaither, 2009, p. 339).

Dominant Categorizations and Biased Perceptions of Homeschooling

Once the entirety of the United States legalized homeschooling, it grew as the “fervent conversation” for literature in scrutinizing the culture and what homeschooling encompassed. In her 1991 essay “*Ideologues and Pedagogues: Parents Who Teach Their Children at Home*,” Jane Van Galen, a sociologist, claimed that homeschooling families were split into a pair of distinct groupings, which she termed “*ideologues*” and “*pedagogues*.” As specified by Van Galen (1991), the *ideologues*, which covered the larger group, “were Christian fundamentalists who objected to what they believed the public schools were teaching and wanted to instill their conservative political and religious beliefs in their children” (Knowles et al., 2018, p. 1). *Pedagogues*, in contrast, homeschooled because of a shared conception that “children learned more naturally apart from formal schooling, which they believed stifled children’s innate curiosity and creativity” (Knowles et al., 2018, p. 1).

⁴ “Unschooling is a style of home education that allows the student’s interests and curiosities to drive the path of learning. Rather than using a defined curriculum, unschoolers trust children to gain knowledge organically” (Unschooling: Laws&HowtoStart.com, 2020, p. 1).

Another popular and sensationalist way to categorize homeschooling families was by demographics. As mentioned above, the narratives surrounding homeschooling dominantly considered these families to be brainwashed, Caucasian religious outcasts. However, as Ray (2020) asserts, there is

A demographically wide variety of people homeschooling [...] these are atheists, Christians, and Mormons; conservatives, libertarians, and liberals; low-, middle-, and high-income families; black, Hispanic, and white; parents with Ph.D.'s, GEDs, and no high-school diplomas. One study shows that 32 percent of homeschool students are Black, Asian, Hispanic, and others (i.e., not White/non-Hispanic) (p. 1).

Homeschooling, in short, is not one size fits all as within the homeschool community as there are diverse demographic populations with their own reasons to homeschool. The impulse and practice of splitting the homeschooling community up into categories is harmful and misleading; such categorizations then perpetuate marginalizing narratives of religious extremism, brainwashing, and racial disparity.

Feminism and Domesticity

The homeschooling movement cannot be understood apart from the dramatic rise in female education and political participation that the feminist movement has secured (Ray 2020). Yet, the role of the educated-mother is affected, according to Dr. Isabel Lyman (2000), author of *The Homeschooling Revolution*, who states that “homeschooling constitutes a revolution in education, the most significant trends to affect women and families in decades, especially since it is led by mother-educators” (p. 38). Contrary to the dominant patriarchal myths and misinterpretations of the homeschool community, feminism is no stranger. Since the feminist movement emerged in the 1960s, rooted in a belief system of “political, economic and cultural equality of women” (Onion et al. 2020, p. 1), multitudinous stereotypes perpetuate even today. For instance, the Cowichan Women Against Violence CWAV (2020) found that an overarching stereotype considers “feminism was necessary in the past but is not necessary now” (CWAV.org, 2020, p.1). Such a misconception elides the lived realities of mothers who led and bolstered the homeschooling movement and sought to educate their children according to the same equitable values of feminism.

Many feminists demand that feminism be taught to our youth so that stereotypes and inequality can be dismantled during our lifetime. Feminist author, bell hooks (2000), affirms that “public education for children has to be a place where feminist activists continue to do the work of creating an unbiased curriculum. Teaching feminist theory to everyone means that we have to reach beyond the academic and even the written word” (hooks, 2000, p. 23). Connecting hook's theory to homeschool, feminist mothers can place their feminist pedagogical⁵ expertise and experiences to an inclusive practice within an unbiased learning environment as hooks affirms the necessity to fuse feminism to education. I argue that implementation of feminist theory within a homeschool context would enable hooks' and others' visions for a more equitable and just future and expose homeschooled children to feminism.

Homeschooling has evolved as a means for women who ultimately decide to take ownership of their choice to homeschool their children. The fundamental element of feminism is *choice*. As the steadily increasing numbers of already significant populations of homeschooling families suggests, more women are willingly choosing to homeschool which transforms the home into a site of feminist work. Further, through the shared role of an educator figure in homeschooling, mother and child do not entertain patriarchal hierarchy. For example, in *The Evolution of Feminist Approaches to Leadership*, professors at the Australian National University, Marian Sawyer and Merrindahl Andrew (2020) write that “hierarchy was seen as inextricably linked with the patriarchal domination of women. To liberate themselves from patriarchy, women were trying to organize without hierarchy” (Sawyer & Andrew, 2020, p. 1). Whether this approach is within organizing, teaching, or life roles, hierarchy does not exist within a feminist's ideology, which is taken up through the sharing the roles of educators in a homeschooled setting.

In terms of *choice*, the migration of American families from farms to cities—and eventually suburbs—demonstrates another way in which domesticity and feminism interacted with the realm of homeschooling. Dr. Milton Gaither (2009), professor at Messiah College, describes this migration as:

...a mass movement toward suburban life, which impacted American women in many ways. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan argued that suburban life served as a sort of comfortable concentration camp for women, segregating them inside the walls of domestic bliss from adult conversation, meaningful work, and political involvement” (p. 341).

However, domesticity does not need to be perceived as Friedan declares it to be, which can be ultimately understood as a misconception and misuse of the word. The word domesticity is often associated in a negative regard; however, I want to bring a positive understanding and new view through homeschooling. For example, when domesticity is included within a homeschool environment, “homeschool boys learn to cook, clean and take care of younger siblings. Children in general are raised with less gender specificity (Gaither 2009) because of shared duty within a household. This domesticity becomes a life-skill for children to cultivate as they mature. Encompassing this philosophy of domesticity, instead, allows us to raise more feminists and work toward equality for all.

⁵ “Feminist pedagogy is a way of thinking about teaching and learning, rather than a prescriptive method. There are three key tenets: resisting hierarchy, using experience as a resource, and applying transformative learning” (Henderson, 2020, p.1).

Devaluation and Erasure of Craft Practice

Another stereotype established throughout history is that craft is a devalued medium. In her thesis, *The Evolution of Craft in Contemporary Feminist Art*, Carolyn E. Parker (2010) writes, “while fine arts are ‘a public, professional activity,’ craft is traditionally practiced in the home and can be defined as ‘domestic art’” (p. 11). As Parker explains, craft practice is often considered a lesser skill in the art world. Women have long been linked with craft in art history, given the associations between craft practice and the domestic and women-only subjugated to the domestic sphere. This begs the question, have women who craft throughout art history been devalued, or is craft art being guided by the patriarchy that establishes the art historical canon⁶? In the canon, many women were excluded from the records because of the media in which they worked with. For example, Gajewski (2015) explains this exclusion:

Due to a number of factors art forms like textiles and what we call the “decorative arts” were often dismissed as craft and not “fine art”; many women were kept from pursuing a general education, let alone arts training; and finally the men who dominated the discipline both in practice and history often believed women to be inferior artists (p.1).

Subsequently, because of that denied title of “fine” art, the specific history of women and their artwork are erased when art historical discourse characterizes this media of art practice as decorative, dexterous, industrious, geometric and the expression of the feminine spirit in art. (Parker 2010).

Nevertheless, the feminist movement brought about a place for women not just politically but also in the art world by empowering them in rejecting preconceived notions and untrue stereotypes. Feminism made them visible. The feminist movement in the arts fostered a large body of theory and diverse artistic practice, redefining what was possible in the studio and beyond which paved the way for many women artists practicing today (Gajewski 2015). Credited to the feminist movement, craft emerged as a common form of feminist art⁷ that used traditional craft techniques for social and political activism. It is vital to recognize the historical associations linking activism and crafts because it held a central power for women who did not have a public voice throughout the feminist movement.

Conclusion: Moving Toward Feminist Art Education Homeschooling

WHAT MOTIVATED THIS work was the detrimental lack of research and literature devoted to art education in homeschooling. I was disappointed that the best I could find in my research were online homeschooling sources that offered access to art lesson plans and activities—some even included craft art. Figure 1 is one such example from TheHomeSchoolMom. Significant here is that while some homeschool resources are available freely online, the interest in craft-based art and art education in homeschooling ends with the mothers and feminists actually implementing the learning. In other words, the absence of critical and scholarly uptake and interest in art education and feminist theory in a homeschool setting coupled with the very real and detrimental myths and stereotypes about homeschooling that still linger on the public’s imagination is debilitating to meaningful integration and development of homeschooling pedagogy. This paper is a call for researchers to fill this knowledge gap.

Figure 1. TheHomeSchoolMom.com, Art Curriculum Reference

⁶ “The conventional timeline of artists who are sometimes considered as ‘Old Masters’ or ‘Great Artists’. Today’s art history attempts to question these rules of ‘greatness’, considering issues of gender, race, class, and geography among others” (NationalGallery.com, 2020, p. 1).

⁷ “Art that seeks to challenge the dominance of men in both art and society, to gain recognition and equality for women artists, and to question assumptions about womanhood” (MoMA, 2020, p. 1).

As I have shown through this discussion, the one-size-fits-all approach to homeschooling does not reflect the realities of the homeschooling community. Homeschooled families represent a diverse population who have transformed the look of homeschooling to become nearly as diverse as its practitioners (Gaither 2009). Part of this diverse community are the feminist mothers and feminist artists who have tried to gain respect for their positions and work which is hard—and for some, nearly impossible—to overcome in the male-dominated art world. The sphere of the domestic and its attachments to women’s art and craft practice has been elevated by feminists, but can benefit from being further supported and meaningfully valued in homeschooling.

By understanding where harmful myths and false representations come from, how they developed alongside the rise of homeschooling and feminism, and what persistent and pernicious effects they have today is key for recognizing opportunities for growth of homeschooling art pedagogy. Feminism, art education, and homeschooling share organic connections and interrelationships; I propose that they can and should be integrated into a cohesive, blended pedagogy of feminist art homeschooling. In taking up the loose ends of research I identify here, feminist art homeschooling can be shaped and implemented in ways that recognize and assert the work of a feminist mother in education with her children, that recognize and assert the value of the domestic home as a site of nurturing and development, and that recognize and assert the value of all art mediums for the diverse range of learning opportunities they cultivate.

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Endnotes

1. "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks, 2015, p. 240).
2. "The modern homeschool movement began in the 1970s when John Holt, an educational theorist and supporter of school reform, began arguing that formal schools' focus on rote learning created an oppressive classroom environment" (Knowles et al. 2018, p. 1).
4. "Unschooling is a style of home education that allows the student's interests and curiosities to drive the path of learning. Rather than using a defined curriculum, unschoolers trust children to gain knowledge organically" (Unschooling: Laws&HowtoStart.com, 2020, p. 1).
5. "Feminist pedagogy is a way of thinking about teaching and learning, rather than a prescriptive method. There are three key tenets: resisting hierarchy, using experience as a resource, and applying transformative learning" (Henderson, 2020, p.1).
6. "The conventional timeline of artists who are sometimes considered as 'Old Masters' or 'Great Artists'. Today's art history attempts to question these rules of 'greatness', considering issues of gender, race, class, and geography among others" (NationalGallery.com, 2020, p. 1).
7. "Art that seeks to challenge the dominance of men in both art and society, to gain recognition and equality for women artists, and to question assumptions about womanhood" (MoMA, 2020, p. 1).