

Safety and Structure First: The Debate about Homeschooling

Charles St. Martin

Excelsior College

The Debate about Homeschooling

Over twenty thousand Oregonian students attend school at home (Horvde, 2013), and according to Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011), the national number of homeschoolers was close to 1.5 million children in 2008. Hovde (2013) estimated that the numbers account for about 2.9% of the total school-age population in the United States, a significant statistical



proportion. She noted that while homeschooling has become a “fashionable choice” for young urban professionals who want the best education for their children, including many in the Pacific Northwest, the subject is still fraught with controversies about cognitive and social development, governmental involvement, standards, and safety. Opponents of homeschooling believe too much is often left up to parents, who can teach their kids anything they desire and limit contact with other perspectives and environments. Homeschooling is often associated with extremism, and potentially abusive situations are harder to identify when the victims are isolated. Additionally, opponents fear that some parents choose homeschooling reactively out of fear or displeasure, rather than making a thoughtful choice based on their child’s needs. Proponents of homeschooling believe homeschooled children are healthy and advanced learners because they receive one-on-one attention and often have some degree of control over their own learning. They believe parents can make the best choices for their children. Research and anecdotal evidence demonstrate that these positive claims are true in safe situations but are lost in extreme cases. Ensuring safety and educational support for all homeschooling students should be a top priority as the state works to ensure parents who want to still have an opportunity to homeschool their children.



Plenty of information exists to validate the concerns of the opposition of homeschooling. In many cases, parents do have total control over the homeschooling environment. Oregon, for

example, monitors homeschoolers by requiring children to take standardized tests in “grades three, five, eight, and 10” (Hovde, 2013). This requirement is the only major assessment.

According to Joyce (2013), many states require even less from families who choose to homeschool: twenty-six states do not require any testing, and eleven states do not ask for any kind of notification from homeschooling parents. In these locations, parental discretion becomes the law in place of any formal guidelines. Perhaps in most cases such parental freedom benefits the children, but in others, as opponents note, the children lose out. 

In her article “The Homeschool Apostates,” Joyce (2013) tells the stories of several former homeschoolers whose educational experiences were dangerous and harmful because of their parents’ fundamentalist stance. One woman explained, “I was basically raised by someone with a mental disorder and told you have to obey her or God’s going to send you to hell Her anxiety disorder meant that she had to control every little thing, and homeschooling and her religious beliefs gave her the justification for it” (as cited in Joyce, 2013). In this same example, the parents also failed to take an active interest in teaching their children, choosing instead to simply hand out schoolbooks and require their pre-teens to self-teach. Joyce argued that this type of situation is not anomalous and cited websites such as *Homeschoolers Anonymous* and *No Longer Quivering* where hundreds of others have shared similar accounts of their homeschooling experiences. These students are in situations that are detrimental to their emotional, intellectual, social, and sometimes physical health, but little is done to protect them.

Questionable outcomes are not just limited to abusive situations. Sometimes, homeschoolers struggle to achieve on the same level as their peers despite their parents’ best intentions. According to Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011), children whose parents chose “unstructured” homeschooling do not achieve academically on the same level as their peers,

falling behind students who participated in structured homeschooling and traditional schooling (p. 200). In the unstructured form of homeschooling, the learning process is entirely determined by the child, whereas in “structured” forms, “the parents [view] themselves as important contributors to their children’s education (p. 197-198). Structured homeschooling may still focus on a child’s individual interests, but the parents create lesson plans or otherwise guide the child’s learning (Concordia University, 2012). In an interview for Concordia University, Martin-Chang acknowledged that the results of the study might have been different if student achievement had been measured using a different tool—the results here were garnered from a standardized test with no connection to either the public school curriculum or homeschool groups—or if the children had been older than ten years old at the time of the test. Despite these qualifiers, Martin-Chang felt the study’s initial findings were in keeping with other research that suggests parental engagement with the child’s learning is a good indicator of academic success. In some forms of homeschooling, it appears that there is a lack of this essential involvement. 

On the other hand, homeschooled students whose parents instituted some structure scored higher on the independently implemented test than both the traditional students and the unstructured learners (Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse, 2011, p. 199). This result supports earlier, although potentially flawed, research indicating the high achievements of homeschoolers (p. 195-196). Additionally, such findings underscore the claims of those who believe that homeschooling can have big benefits for children. Many believe that the big reason for homeschool success is parental investment. Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) hypothesized, “This advantage may be explained by several factors including smaller class sizes, more individualized instruction, or more academic time spent on core subjects such as reading

and writing” (p. 200). The flexibility of the homeschool environment allows parents to tailor the material and the schedule to the needs of their child, who, ideally, they know well and love tremendously. Public school teachers cannot currently devote the same time to each child because they have full classrooms and additional demands on their attention from administrators and political figures. 

 Clearly, both opponents and proponents of homeschooling have well-supported arguments for their positions. Homeschooling is an option that often leads to high achievement and personal satisfaction for students. However, some situations are unhealthy and potentially harmful to a child’s development. The solution to the homeschool controversy is a balanced approach that upholds the benefits of homeschooling while accounting for dangers. While, as Hovde noted, abuse can occur in any educational setting, Joyce thoroughly demonstrated that abused homeschoolers have a harder time finding access to help, emphasizing that, in the past “homeschooling families had to look for help through an informal grapevine of survivors” (para. 44). Now, those survivors are pushing for legal reforms that assess state policies for protecting homeschoolers. In order for homeschooling to remain a safe and rewarding option for parents and students, these extreme cases need to be taken seriously. Resources need to be readily available, and anyone found to have abused a child should be held accountable. Those who support homeschooling should also support reforms that make homeschooling safer for everyone.

In addition, more research needs to be done on unstructured homeschooling, perhaps using a more holistic measuring tool since standardized tests are known to be problematic. Parents who are deciding how to educate their children should have access to accurate information about child development and learning. If total freedom is not the best option for

children, parents should be encouraged to seek alternative methods of homeschooling. The bottom line is that parents have a great deal of influence on their children's learning, whether that learning is done in a traditional school or at home. Hovde (2013) said, "[B]etter scores should be expected when parents are so involved in a child's education. I'd argue that parent involvement is the primary factor for student success in any educational venue" (para. 15). In her interview with Concordia University, Martin-Chang went even further, suggesting that public-school teachers and parents can create the same benefits as homeschooling in traditional classrooms by investing time in individual students and creating choice in the classroom. True changes to public school classrooms will likely require other educational reforms, but the point is that the learning environment is more important than the actual venue. Still, as public schools work and sometimes struggle to meet the needs of individual children, ensuring quality homeschooling experiences should be a priority in the state of Oregon and elsewhere.



References

Concordia University. (2012, Nov. 6). Are home-schooled children smarter? [video file].

Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGp4KFLuQNc>

Hovde, Elizabeth. (2013, Jan. 5). Sorting out the truth and myth in home schooling. *The*

Oregonian. Retrieved from

http://www.oregonlive.com/hovde/index.ssf/2013/01/elizabeth_hovde_sorting_out_th.html

Joyce, K. (2013). The homeschool apostates. *The American Prospect Longform*. Retrieved from

<http://prospect.org/article/homeschool-apostates>

Martin-Chang, S., Gould, O.N., and Meuse, R.E. (2011). The impact of schooling on academic achievement: Evidence from homeschooled and traditionally schooled students.

Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science, 43(3), 195-202. doi: 10.1037/a0022697