

Homeschooling and Literacy

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Homeschooling is a phenomenon that is here to stay. One current report estimates that there are up to 1,200,000 students now being homeschooled in the United States, and that this educational movement is growing steadily (Rudner, 1999). Utah alone has an estimated 7,200 homeschooling families (Lee, 1999). How literate are homeschooled children? How do homeschooling parents teach their children to read? What differences are there, if any, between learning to read in a school and learning to read when homeschooled? These are the questions that this report will try to answer.

What is homeschooling? According to Pam Sorooshian, board member of the National Home Education Network, the answer to that question may be as varied as the people who practice it. Simply, homeschoolers are those who choose to teach their children at home rather than have others teach them at private or public schools. But even that statement is misleading, as many children who consider themselves homeschoolers are nominally enrolled at a private, or even public school to avoid problems with state and local governments (P. J. Sorooshian, personal communication, October 12, 2001). For our purposes, however, we can stick to that simple definition.

Homeschoolers generally teach their children to read in very similar ways that schools teach their students. Some use phonics methods, some use sight methods and others use whole language instruction. "Instruction in phonics consists of teaching letter-sound relationships to provide an approximate pronunciation, whereby the sound elicits a meaningful association of the word meaning in the sentence...The objective in using letter-sound relationships is to identify unknown words to read for meaning, not to identify words simply because they are there" (Heilman, Blair & Rupley, 1990, p. 129, 142). The Whole Language method is described as a philosophy as much as it is a teaching approach. Programs will vary but incorporate the basic principle that reading is learned best through actual use and application. Applications of this method include reading whole stories, articles and real world-materials through cooperative learning with other learners at times. Because of the variety of materials, learners can use their use own "...sense language and three cueing systems of semantics, syntax, and letter-sound relationships to grow in reading". A few advantages to this approach is "...that it stresses real reading and real writing for real purposes and a functional, contextual approach to skills instruction..." However, a "...disadvantage of whole language is a lack of systematic instruction" (Gunning 1996, p. 408, 411). The Sight method incorporates memorization and or the instant recognition certain high frequency words. The can be useful because learners can be taught to compare known words to similar unfamiliar words and use known words to focus on reading for meaning (Gunning 1996; Heilman, Blair, & Rupley 1990).

Many parents use combinations of these three methods just as teachers do in the classroom. The main difference seems to be that homeschooling parents are focused one-on-one with their children, while teachers generally have groups of children to teach. Parents may more easily see which teaching method is working and which method is not working. With the more individualized instruction that can take place in a home rather than in a school, homeschooling parents can move lessons along as quickly or slowly as their child needs (P. J. Sorooshian, personal communication, October 12, 2001).

The only really radical difference found in teaching methods between homeschooling parents and teachers in schools are found in the subgroup of homeschoolers who call themselves "unschoolers". Unschoolers have a very different view of teaching reading than either one of the aforementioned groups. Unschooling has also been called natural learning, deschooling, or delight directed learning, and can compare somewhat to the Open Classroom method of teaching in the 1970's (P. J. Sorooshian, personal communication, October 12, 2001).

John Holt (Rice, 2001), who is sometimes considered the father of unschooling, gives a definition of unschooling,

Birds fly, fish swim, man thinks and learns. Therefore, we do not need to motivate children into learning by wheedling, bribing, or bullying. We do not need to keep picking away at their minds to make sure they are learning. What we need to do, and all we need to do, is bring as much of the world as we can into the school and classroom; give children as much help and guidance as they ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking; and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest.

Unschooling has been described as an attempt to provide learning based on the needs of the student, not the needs of the teacher, the school, or the economy. The student decides what he/she needs to learn, and when they need to learn it. Unschooling parents generally do not plan curriculum unless asked to by their child. Students set their own goals and follow their own passions (Austin, 2001).

How well does this method work when children are learning to read? Because most unschoolers do not test their children it is difficult to say. However, anecdotal evidence seems to bear out that this method actually works very well. In fact, some unschoolers claim that the reason we have so much adult illiteracy in the United States is because children are forced to try to learn to read before they are developmentally ready to. This causes failure and a reluctance to read on the part of the child, and can easily turn reading into a lifelong problem, rather than a lifelong pleasure. It is known that just as muscles and the nervous system must grow and develop before a child can walk, the brain too must grow and develop before a child can learn to read. Linguistic skills come at different times to different children, and they should not be rushed (Reed, 2001).

Margaret Phinney (2001), a certified independent reading consultant, tells parents to, "use natural common sense. Remember, your children learned to speak successfully without formal instruction. All you did was model, encourage, and remain sensitive. Keep it up!" She also cautions parents not to try to teach phonics principles or rules. She claims that children can become easily frustrated trying to learn to read with these formal methods.

Unschooling parents let their children learn to read when each individual child is ready, even if it takes years! Many personal accounts in home schooling magazines and web sites offer this kind of anecdotal evidence:

I was holding my breath the whole time. I was battling tremendous self-doubt. I must be an awful mother. Some folks advised me to take Chris to specialists, test his hearing, eyesight, cognitive abilities, look into reading labs for him. Deep in my soul, those didn't feel right and I never took Chris to any of those things. And then the miracle happened. Right about his ninth birthday, reading clicked in his mind and he just began reading. Within a month he was reading easily at his grade level. Within a year he had read every book on airplanes at the public library (Rice, 2001).

It often seems that boys in particular need more time than girls to begin reading. Another unschooling parent talks about letting their child decide when to learn:

All Derek really needed was time. When he was eight, "it" finally happened. After he made the first breakthrough on his own he was an insatiable reader, and within six months was reading way beyond his grade level (Reed, 2001).

This method of natural learning is finding its way into adult literacy classes as well. In many classes adult learners are encouraged to set their own goals, and learn at their own pace. In some family literacy programs, whole families attend sessions together, children and parents. It has been found that separating children and adults into different programs does not work as well (NIFL, 2000).

How do homeschoolers compare with school-educated children on reading and academics? There are few scientific studies done that compare homeschoolers and school-educated children particularly with regard to literacy. Of the few that have been done, they show that home-educated children compare very well indeed.

One particular study directly deals with the issue of literacy in the homeschool setting. This study examines the survey results of 272 homeschool families in the Southern California area taken in 1996. There were three focuses to this study: (1) what factors influenced parents to homeschool (2) how much time was spent engaged in literacy activities and (3) what literacy methodologies were being used. For the purposes of this paper, the results regarding first factor in this study are not relevant or consequential. The results in this study regarding the third factor, methodologies used, reconfirms that whole language, phonics, sight or combination of these three methods are being utilized by the homeschooling families (Hetzel, 1997).

The interesting part of this study is that it attempts to give us an idea of how much time is spent on literacy activities by homeschoolers. Survey participants responded that they spent a total between 135-225 minutes a day on various literacy related activities. Broken down, into a specific literacy activities, children spent between 22.5-37.5 minutes receiving phonics instruction, 19.5-34.5 minutes of writing instruction, 21-36 minutes engaged in writing, and 72-117 minutes of reading either by or to a parent or independently. Information on this aspect of homeschooling is rare and the author of this study, June Hetzel (1997), even notes that more intense studies and observations of the homeschooling setting would be beneficial.

According to an article by Roy Lehtreck (1994), homeschooled children in Los Angeles scored higher on standardized tests than similar public school students. He also cited other studies that show that homeschooled students in Oregon, Alaska, Washington, and Tennessee, outscored their peers in public schools on achievement tests.

A recent study by Lawrence M. Rudner (1999), showed that homeschooled students scored well above public and private school students on achievement tests. Homeschooled students typically scored in the 70th to 80th percentile on those achievement tests. Also, students who had been homeschooled all their lives generally achieved higher scores than students who had also been enrolled in other educational programs.

Homeschooled students are also getting accepted into colleges and doing well. Brigham Young University (BYU) is admitting more and more homeschooled students. According to Dr. Benson, professor of ancient scripture at BYU, homeschooled students appear to do better academically than students from public schools. BYU is now offering undergraduate and graduate credit for alternative education, which includes homeschooling (Lee, 1999). In 1998, homeschooled students had an average ACT composite score of 22.8, which means that the average homeschooler lands in the 65th percentile of all ACT test takers (Rudner, 1999).

While it seems that homeschooled children are doing very well academically, there may actually be some reasons other than better teaching methods as to why this is so. Homeschooling families have been found, as a norm, to be two-parent families. They have also been found to have parents that have some college, and a higher family income than the national norm. This is a select group of families that obviously place a high premium on education for their children. These are reasons as to why it is so difficult to compare homeschooled children to public school students. Although their learning methods may be similar, the groups are not similar in demographics (Rudner, 1999).

In order to gain further insight into these teaching methods and philosophies, we contacted Pam Sorooshian, co-founder and board member of the National Home Education Network (www.nhen.org). Pam lives in Orange County, California where she unschools her three daughters (aged 16, 14, and 10.) She was kind enough to take some time out of her busy schedule to answer a few questions and discuss her own experiences with homeschooling, the answers of which can be found below.

Briefly, how did you get interested in homeschooling?

My oldest two daughters were excelling in public school, in 1st and 4th grades, but they were not getting as "enriched" an education as I thought they could get outside of school. I felt like school was limiting their experience - that more learning happened in our regular family life and that school actually interfered with

their learning. The children were, for example, being exposed to and choosing to read outstanding literature at home, while at school they were reading excessive amounts of things like *The Babysitter's Club* and *Goosebumps*. I'm not opposed to them choosing to read these, but it wasn't their choice. For example, the first grade teacher read aloud every day after lunch and he chose to read *Goosebumps* very frequently. I spoke with him about the fact that my daughter really didn't like these books and suggested some more variety would be in order, but his rationale was that MY daughter already read voraciously outside of school and these books were especially attractive to the children who didn't read yet. The kids were allowed to make requests, apparently my daughter's request was *Ivanhoe* - I was sympathetic to the problem that he couldn't very well read the whole book to his first grade class, but I thought it was a good choice for telling the story or reading an abridged version and then reading some "scenes" out of it to the class. The teacher was completely and totally unsympathetic to the fact that my child was unhappily enduring the read-aloud time which, given her LOVE of books, should have been the highlight of the day for her. The teacher wasn't much of a reader, either, his reading style was monotonous and he mispronounced a lot of words and read somewhat haltingly.

So, it was a disappointing year, in many other ways, too. I've just used the read-aloud time as one example. In the meantime, my older daughter was reading every book in the classroom - unfortunately, she read every fiction book in the classroom and was left to read the extensive collection of *Babysitters Club* books - she was only allowed ONE book per week from the media center and not allowed to bring ANY books from home. She was allowed to read anytime her other work was finished and that gave her a lot of reading time - she read pretty much every *Babysitters Club* book. Seemed silly to send her to school to do that when I could keep her home and take her to the library to check out as many wonderful books as she wanted to read. Again, it felt like school was limiting in so many ways. As a fourth-grader, they were studying California's history and geography. My daughter's "team" was assigned the desert areas and my daughter was assigned to do a presentation on one animal in their area. So she spent a month or so creating a presentation on the kangaroo rat - something she had absolutely no interest in at all. In the meantime, she was in love with ocean life. We tried to squeeze in trips to the aquarium and the tide-pools, but it was difficult. When we decided to homeschool, we spent the first day at Sea World, going on one of their educational tours that take you behind the scenes to their labs, etc., and then we spent the next three weeks immersed in every aspect of "the ocean." We went to the beach almost every day - taking our homemade plankton nets and underwater viewers and field guides. We did a LOT of close-up observation and took ocean water and sand home for further experiments. We also read *The Cay* and watched a movie of *Moby Dick*, went to the aquarium a number of times, took a short trip out to an offshore island where we went snorkeling, got a tape of sea chanteys from the library and listened to them and wrote some of our own, and looked at paintings of the sea and painted some ourselves. We went whale-watching and we took a tour of a "tall ship" which is re-creation of an early 1800's trading brig.

Don't get me wrong; there were some really good things happening at school, too, and some wonderful teachers. Overall the kids were happy and learning and, if we couldn't homeschool, I would have put them back into the same schools again. We have remained friendly with some of the teachers and the media center teacher and they applauded our choice to homeschool.

How would you personally define "literacy"?

Comfort, joyfulness, and facility with print material. Reading for pleasure and information. Ease in use of a variety of types of material - magazines, reference materials, novels, poetry, drama, online search capability and so on.

Describe your approach/philosophy toward helping your children achieve their own educational goals?

I observe them carefully and support their personal learning styles and their individual interests. We make life exciting and interesting and we "dig in" and really enjoy learning. I do not give "assignments" ever. We do

not "test" and we do not "grade." The kids LOVE to learn and make connections from one interesting thing to another. They have a lot of interests and, slowly, they are developing some serious passions. My oldest daughter is now almost 17 and is passionate about art and poetry. We support these passions in many ways - we've purchased a high-quality pottery wheel and she has taken ceramics at a local community college for the past 3 1/2 years. She recently got a job/internship with a company that manufactures and sells clays and glazes and we support that primarily by providing transportation. She has won a number of poetry contests - we support her writing by providing a computer where she interacts with a number of poetry-writers email lists. Again, we provide materials, opportunities and transportation and, most important, we allow her the TIME. I have found some creative writing courses for her and found her some books about writing and publishing poetry. We take her passions seriously.

Is literacy an objective? How do you help your children achieve literacy?

Surround them with a print-rich environment. Let them see their parents and other adults enjoying and utilizing literature of all kinds. Give them beautiful wonderful books as special gifts. Visit the library often. Take advantage of library activities. Go to author talks or signings at local bookstores. Read the same books the kids are reading and talk about them. Watch book-based movies and compare them to the books. Watched a lot of Reading Rainbow and Wishbone and other book-based shows when the kids were younger. Listened to books on tapes in the car. Went to a LOT of theater. Made up plays and acted them out for friends and family.

What, if any, specific teaching methods or materials, books etc. were used to help your children learn to read?

All three children learned through their own efforts - we surrounded them with books and reading materials and answered questions about letters, sounds, words, etc. We played some word games. We read aloud a lot. We provided simple reading books that were attractive. We sometimes provided workbooks, too, when they asked for them and we let them use them just like a coloring book - playing with them in their own ways. We didn't correct them, we only answered questions. My oldest daughter learned to read comfortably by the time she was five, before she started kindergarten. My second daughter read extremely early, she wasn't even four years old yet and could read at what would probably be considered high school level or beyond - she has continued to be highly gifted in this area. My third daughter didn't read until she was seven years old. She went from barely able to sound out, painstakingly and not consistently, a three-letter word, to reading Shakespeare in about six months (we were involved with a Shakespeare theater group and she played the part of the Indian Boy in A Midsummer Night's Dream - she carried the script around and finally learned to read it). That was it, from that point forward she was a voracious reader just like her sisters.

How has this philosophy evolved over time? Still evolving? Always evolving?

I watched and learned from early childhood educators and developed my own belief in the efficacy of surrounding the children with a super enriched environment and letting them go at it in their own way. This has always worked well for us and I haven't changed my mind.

What have been the greatest challenges or obstacles in this pursuit?

Financial challenges are there, of course, since we'd all like to travel around the world, buy a horse, have an even more extensive personal library, go more often to the theater, etc.

Balancing the interests and passions of three children and two adults is also challenging and exhausting, at times. But well worth it.

The greatest rewards?

Wonderful, happy, intelligent, kind, good, passionate loving family. Kids have goals and expect to be able to

achieve their goals with hard work and perseverance. Seeing them moving into adulthood with self-confidence and energy and the desire to live life to its fullest - that is the greatest reward.

How do you personally measure your successes in homeschooling?

I consider it a success when I see developing competencies in the kids along with growing confidence that they can achieve their goals - academic and otherwise.

Being that part of the general philosophy behind unschooling is to allow the child to work at their own speed and follow their own curiosity and interests, thus in a sense creating their own curriculum defined by them as individuals, how would you approach a child who didn't show much personal interest in reading and writing, or was extremely apathetic toward the process?

I'd support whatever they WERE interested in. If it was skateboarding, for example, I'd support that and find ways to expand their horizons such as working together to build skate ramps, reading skate magazines, maybe even going to another country to a world skating championship. I'd entice and attract them to other things, too, of course, but I wouldn't shove anything down their throats. Kids who are respected - whose passions are respected - will have enough respect for their parents that they'll listen to them and give suggestions a try. I would NOT make a kid read or write if they were apathetic about it - I'd figure my job is to help them find what DOES excite them.

What kind of community support have you found out there for homeschoolers? Have you found your local library to be of much support or use?

We utilize the library extensively. They are nice people. But, no, they have not been particularly supportive in terms of some of the ways we've mentioned that they could specifically help out homeschoolers. One thing we'd really like is the library to set up some book discussion clubs for young and older teens. Their comment was that that was the "school librarian's" job. Another library, on the other hand, is letting us use a room there once a week for our "Destination Imagination" team meetings. That is VERY helpful - space is a major problem for homeschoolers and libraries are the perfect place for us.

As we can see from the increasing popularity and successes of homeschooling, there certainly are other options available to the parent who is unhappy or dissatisfied with the methods and results of the standard public system. Homeschooling can be a positive, child/student centered learning experience, and it is quickly proving itself to be a seriously viable and beneficial alternative to traditional teaching methods. At this point, what we as future library professionals need to pursue, is the application of what we can learn from homeschooling's successes to other teaching scenarios and library programs such as literacy programs, ESL programs, and continuing education.

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