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From McGuffey Readers to Taking Notes on the Sermon: Literacy Experiences in a Catholic Home Schooling Group

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the literacy practices of a Catholic home schooling group located in the Pacific North West. Semi-structured interviews conducted with each parent in the home schooling group comprised the primary data source. Researchers have called for more research looking at specific teaching practices of such individuals (Cizek & Ray, 1995; Knafle & Wescott, 1994) involved with home schooling. Findings of this study revealed that reading aloud was important to all parents. Benefits cited by parents included immediate feedback for children, ability to pace themselves as necessary, and the opportunity to tailor lessons to individual child. Parents used a variety of materials in the literacy lessons and television usage was restricted in each family. While the home schooling movement is growing quickly, the amount of research conducted with families involved in home schooling is still extremely limited (Cizek, G. J., & Ray, B.D., 1995).

Theoretical Framework

The idea of analyzing the home schooling movement is relatively recent. In fact the first major study on home schooling was completed in the early 1980s (Gustavsen 1981). Since that time a great deal of this research focuses on a few aspects of home schooling. Studies often look at who is home schooling (Wynn, 1989) why people

are home schooling (Mayberry & Knowles, 1989), the socialization of home schoolers (Johnson, 1991) and a comparison of the academic achievement of home schoolers with children attending public schools (Wartes, 1990; Williams, 1990).

Mayberry, Knowles, and Marlow's work (1995) informs us that the majority of people who home school are White. Also home schoolers often claim to have a fairly strong tie to their faith. While only 30% of the nation attends church weekly, 91% of home school families state a strong commitment to their religion. Approximately 33% of the parent educators belong to Evangelical, Pentacostal and other nondenominational religious organizations. Furthermore, it has also been shown that in home schooling situations the mother is often the primary instructor (Ray, & Cizek, 1995; Wartes, 1988).

Research has revealed a variety of reasons why people choose to home school. Three decades ago most people who home schooled were living in isolated areas, traveling or stationed abroad, or did it because of religion (Lines, 1991). While religion often still plays an important factor in the decision to home school, it is usually not the only deciding factor. The reason (Mayberry, 1988; Mayberry & Knowles, 1989) commonly given (in order of importance) is religious beliefs, academic achievement, to provide learning environment conducive to the children's social development, and a New Age orientation.

Knowles (1988) believes that many parents decide to home school based on their past experiences with schooling. Therefore the teaching methods they decide to use are related to their past educational experiences. It is interesting to note that Knowles finds that parents often teach with the same teaching methods or instructional practices they condemn. Unlike beginning teachers, home schooling parents often have no formal training on how to teach and their early experiences are the major component of their teacher role identity. These parents rarely have the opportunity to see others teach and cannot fall back on a variety of teaching methods. Usually they rely on suggestions from friends, books and how they were taught.

Many studies have supported the belief that home schoolers are not academically disadvantaged. Ray's research (1988) reveals that home schoolers perform equal or better than school peers on measures of cognitive achievement. Ballmann (1987) shows that the students average 30 percentile points higher on standardized academic achievement tests than classroom students. While many studies look at standardized test scores and intelligence tests to compare groups, Quine and Marek (1988) look at levels of thought processes and find that home schoolers move into formal thought earlier than people who are schooled in the traditional sense.

People often express concern about the socialization of children who are not surrounded by peers and learning to deal with different types of people. Some people feel that kids actually walk away with a better self-concept (Sheffer, 1995). Home schoolers are also not totally isolated from peers. Research suggests that while home schoolers may not be in a formal school setting, they are often involved quite heavily with other home school kids in organized activities (Wartes, 1988). Studies of home schoolers also show that instead of being primarily limited to working with age group peers as in traditional schooling, the opportunity to interact with a wide range of people is beneficial (Knowles & Muchmore, 1995).

While some studies look at home schooling, it is evident that there is limited research. Research in home schooling magazines warns home schoolers about participating in research. Kaseman & Kaseman (1991) give a list of reasons why home schoolers should not participate in studies, and Knowles (1991) gives advice if home schoolers should decide to participate in research. As the number of home schooled children has grown, it is not uncommon to see the topic debated in newspapers and magazines. However it is almost impossible to find research-based articles in educational journals.

Given the limited amount of home schooling research, it is even more difficult to find research on literacy practices in home schooling situations. Such research has often focused on only one family (ie: Hafer, 1990, Hall, 1996; Treat, 1990). Treat (1990) looked at one

family's teaching while Hafer (1990) looked at one family's writing instruction.

Knafle and Wescott (1994) found that very few studies even look at specific teaching practices. Their research reveals that oral reading is an extremely important aspect of literacy instruction. Also while phonics is often emphasized in the early grades in traditional schools, phonics remains an important focus throughout the home schoolers' education. Furthermore, parents try to individualize, using various programs for different children. Parents will continue to work at the most basic levels until success is achieved instead of being concerned with covering a set amount of curriculum (Knafle & Wescott, 1996). Reading instruction in a home schooling situation often involves a heavy emphasis on decoding.

Even though a great deal of the home schooling literacy research hasn't been conducted, it is evident that quite a bit of time is being spent in developing literacy knowledge in home schooling situations. Knafle's and Wescott's surveys (1994) show that parents report that 41% of their total teaching time during home schooling is spent on reading and language arts activities. Thus more research needs to be conducted to find out what is being done during this time. Ray (1988) finds many studies look at generalities but stresses the need for studies looking at various dimensions of individuals home schooling. Cizek and Ray (1995) state that research is needed on the actual teaching strategies used by home educators.

The purpose of this present study is to expand on prior research. It will look at one Catholic home schooling group located in the Pacific Northwest. This research will take a close look at the literacy experiences of the children involved in the group.

Method

Participants

The city where the study took place has approximately 125,000 people and is the largest town in the state. The majority of people in the

town work in a professional capacity. A local university is a major employer in the town.

The respondents in this study are the parents involved in one Catholic home schooling group located in the Pacific North West. These parents were located through my employment at a local university. One of my students knew a parent in the home schooling group. After talking to that parent, the parent recommended I meet with the entire home schooling group so I could talk to more parents and meet the children involved in the group. Each of the respondents (N=5) are female, Caucasian, and Catholic. None of the participants had been home schooled as children. All participants and their husbands attended college. They each have two to four children who are involved in the group. The parents have been home schooling their children for a minimum of two years. The children range in age from preschool to middle school age. See Table 1 for specific information on each respondent.

Data Source

One primary data source provided semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1988) conducted with each parent in the home schooling group. These interviews took place over the course of a few months in the spring during weekly group gatherings at a local library. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes. While I interviewed parents, students and parents not being interviewed often worked on individual student research projects. Students also made group presentations about information they learned, stories they wrote, etc.

I took notes during the interviews and later transcribed them. Member checks were held with many of the respondents in order to clarify questions the researcher had pertaining to responses (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). Questions during the interviews began with a grand tour question (Spradley, 1979). Then questions of a general nature were asked regarding reasons behind their decision to home school, a look at a typical day, etc. After that, specific literacy questions were asked that focused on each parent's use of reading, writing, speaking and listening in the home schooling experience. This included questions related to

what materials were used, the selection of materials, perceptions of how their literacy instruction differed from traditional schooling, difficulties children experienced with learning to read, outside experiences related to reading, etc.

Table 1

Members of Catholic Home Schooling Group

Name	Years Involved in Home Schooling	Education of Parents	Number of H.S. Children	Grade Level of H.S. Children
Alexa	3	Two art degrees Husband-pursuing Ph.D. in Science	2	1 st & 3 rd Grade
Jo	3	Degree in Library Science Husband-Univ. Scientist	2	3 rd & 7 th Grade
Laurel	2 ½	Degree in Religious Ed. Husband-Degree in Industrial Tech.	3	2 ½ yr. old K, & 5 th Grade
Lisa	2	Two Science Degrees Husband-Some Junior College	2	1 st & 4 th Grade
MaryAlice	4	College Educated Husband-college degree	4	K, 3 rd , & 6 th Grade

Other data included written correspondence received from participants and notes taken as a participant observer in the weekly home schooling meetings. All data were broken down on cards into individual thought units. Cards were then sorted multiple times and put into data-driven categories using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results and Discussion

While the parents mentioned the importance of integrating their Catholic faith across the lessons, they stressed that faith was not the determining factor in choosing to home school. Many cited the benefits of immediate feedback for the children, the ability to not “push academics”, the freedom to linger over material for a longer period of time, and the opportunity to tailor lessons to individual children’s strengths and weaknesses. The participants felt that in traditional schooling, certain skills were demanded at specific ages (ie: reading). They did not feel that all children could be expected to develop skills at the same age. Laurel stated, “We can go at our own pace. We don’t just teach and hope they get it. We go until they catch on. It is more like a mentor relationship.”

Parents used a variety of literacy materials within each family. These included Accelerated Reader, SRA/Distar, McGuffey Readers, Spalding, Junior Great Books, magazines, and the newspaper. CD Rom and internet were also commonly used with the children. The materials were selected based on the individual child’s perceived strengths and weaknesses. Several families used different materials with different children depending on the assessed needs of the children in decoding or spelling. While Laurel chose to make reading the newspaper a daily event since kindergarten, Jo subscribed to ten different magazines in order to make reading relevant.

A number of common literacy practices were evident with these families. The adults modeled reading at home from a wide range of texts and frequently stressed the importance of reading aloud to children. The need for a wide variety of reading materials was discussed. The desire to

tie in literacy to all areas and not make it a separate section of time during the day was common. Often parents planned trips around academic content, developed thematic units, and used literature to teach history. Some participants felt that isolated grammar instruction was not necessary. Daily or weekly spelling lessons were not usually used unless a child appeared to encounter difficulty with spelling.

Participants stressed the importance of allowing children to see writing as meaningful. Common practices were taking notes on the sermon at mass, keeping dialogue journals, and writing letters on a regular basis. One parent also had her child write to a local store to complain about the price of an aquarium. The child had seen it advertised in the paper, and yet it was priced differently in the store. In the end, the child was able to purchase the aquarium at the price that was originally stated in the advertisement. The mother said that she felt the child learned something valuable. According to Laurel, "He learned that writing and reading are worthwhile, especially when he is paying for an item with his own money."

As in previous research (Williamson, 1989), each of these parents monitored the quantity and quality of television viewing. This ranged from 30 minutes to 60 minutes a day. Often the television viewing consisted of preapproved videos or shows. The parents stressed that their children don't look to television to entertain them, and thus their kids choose to pick up books during free time.

Children had the opportunity at weekly library meetings to share favorite books, accomplishments, or projects. Alexa organized a monthly park day and field trips to local establishments. It was evident that these meetings provided parents with an opportunity to network, exchange catalogues and materials for children, and have discussions on educational issues. Similar to adults involved in other educational contexts, these parents continuously participated in professional development. They read a great deal of educational material, talked to local principals, and attended home schooling conferences.

It was evident from conducting the research that these parents valued authentic, real-life experiences. These home schooled children

did not sit and copy identical paragraphs off the board or write letters to fictitious people. These activities are often viewed as contrived and limited in meaning by literacy professionals. Instead the children took trips, wrote letters to real people about their concerns, took notes on the sermon so that the notes could be used later, etc. Parents also tried to attend to individual children's needs and varied materials and methods when it seemed that appropriate progress was not being made. All of the traits mentioned are widely accepted as having value in quality literacy instruction. It may be easier for parents home schooling children to complete these activities and have the flexibility to change plans. They obviously have fewer restraints placed on them than teachers in a formal schooling situation. However, one thing is clear, these parents took their role as teachers and mentors very seriously and provided rich literacy experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

Like all research, this study has limitations. First of all, only one group of home schoolers was analyzed. Future research might look at larger groups. While there are a number of large scale surveys that have been completed by parents involved with home schooling, research looking indepth at large groups was virtually nonexistent. Also research is needed which looks at the children's experience with home schooling. Often the primary caregiver is the one involved in any study. Finally, more work needs to be published in peer-reviewed journals by people who are not involved in the home school movement.

Educational Importance of the Study

In 1993-1994, estimations of home schooling families were that as many as 450,000-800,000 children were educated at home (Mayberry, Knowles, Ray, & Marlow, 1995). Yet a minimal amount of research has been done on the home schooling movement (Cizek & Ray, 1995). With the home schooling movement continuing to grow (Lines 1991), more research needs to be completed. Hall stresses (1996) that the understanding the home schooling movement is important because the children often enter school at some point. Therefore it is especially

important that persons involved in an educational context develop an understanding of it home schooling practices and reasons.

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