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# Cynicism, Trust, and Internal-External Locus of Control Among Home Educated Students

**Article**

Home education, also known colloquially as home schooling, has been on the rise for the past two decades. Estimates of the number home educated students range from 1.7% to 3% of the student population (Blok, 2003). It has gained legitimacy as noted by its evolution from being prohibited in 30 states in 1980 to now being legal in all fifty states (Blok, 2003). Probably the greatest sign of this new legitimacy is its general acceptance and positive coverage in the media where home education is presented as a viable alternative to traditional schooling. Often stories present some exceptional and phenomenal successes, which are portrayed against a backdrop of public school failings (Medlin, 2000).

Home education has not achieved its present level of ascendancy without some scrutiny. The first issue to be researched had to do with academic performance. The general findings related to academics reported that home educated students performed equal or better than traditionally educated students. In the largest home education student study ever conducted (n = 20,760, collected throughout the U.S.) Rudner (1999) summarized some of his findings as follows:

> • *Almost 25% of home school students are enrolled one or more grades above their age-level peers in public and private schools.*
> • *Home school student achievement test scores are exceptionally high. The median scores for every subtest at every grade (typically in the 70th to 80th percentile) are well above those of public and Catholic/Private school students.*
> • *On average, home school students in grades 1 to 4 perform one grade level above their age-level public/private school peers on achievement tests.*

The second issue to be addressed had to do with socialization. The question raised was "were students removed from the mainstream and taught at home properly socialized"? This was answered in Medlin's (2000) article, "Home schooling and the question of socialization". In his summary, he notes the work of Chatham-Carpenter (1994) who found that rather than being socially isolated, home educated students had an extensive and diverse social network. He also applauds a well-designed study by Shyers (1992) that directly compared home educated students with a matched group of traditionally schooled students and found no differences between self-concept and assertiveness. He also discusses a study by Ray (1997) that found that home

educated students are very comparable to traditional students in terms of post-secondary education and employment.

Despite these seemingly positive findings, there have been critics of the home education phenomenon. Reich (2002) leveled the criticism that the homogeneous nature of home schooling is not conducive to the functioning of a pluralistic democratic society (Link to April 2002 Educational Leadership article abstract: http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/menuitem.a4dbd0f2c4f9b94cdeb3ffdb62108a0c/). This raises a deeper question about socialization. What is the attitude of home educated students regarding our larger political structures; are they separatists and cynics or are they participants and engaged? Rosin's (June 27, 2005) article in the New Yorker magazine regarding Patrick Henry College, a college exclusively for students who were home educated and who are seeking political or policy making careers, seems to answer the question in the direction of participation (Link to full text New Yorker article: http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/050627fa_fact).

The issue of cynicism remains to be addressed. Purdy (1999) opined in his popular work, For Common Things, that our society in general is becoming more cynical. Are home educated students any different on this dimension? This is an important issue in the academic leadership community as evidenced a significant body of research aimed at cynicism among college students. For example, cynicism has been investigated among medical students (Kopelman, 1983; Roche, Scheetz, Dane & O'Shea, 2003) and among military academy students (Brockway, Carlson, Jones & Bryant, 2002). In a Washington Post article, de Vise (March 19, 2005) discussed how the Defense Department is concerned about cynicism among military academy students and its impact on honor violations, particularly sexual assaults at the academies (Link to the full text Washington Post article: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A48335-2005Mar18.html).

In summary, home educated students tend to do as well or better academically than traditionally schooled students and do not appear to differ in terms of socialization. Some psychological variables have been assessed in the home educated population, however most the focus has been on self-esteem. Yet to be addressed are social psychological attitudes and beliefs that may have a bearing on home educated students relationship to the world in general. Moore (2000) developed a measure of cynicism which used college students as a normative sample. A logical question to ask is whether a comparable group of home educated students would be more or less cynical than a group of traditionally schooled students.

This present study compares the level of cynicism, trust and externality between a group of home educated students with a group of traditionally schooled students. The groups were purposely similar in terms of age and religiosity, two variables that literature suggested would need to be controlled in order to properly interpret any significant findings that might result. In other words, differences among the groups on trust and cynicism might be confounded if the groups were of dissimilar age or religious commitment.

Methods

Ninety-one students between the ages of 15 and 21 were administered three scales: a Cynicism scale (Moore, 1999), the Trust in People scale (Survey Research Center, 1969), and the Adult Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Control Scale (Nowicki & Duke, 1974). The Cynicism scale consisted of a full scale measure and three sub-scales: cynical behavior justification, cynicism toward human nature, and cynicism toward love. Forty-five students were home-educated. Forty-six students were traditionally schooled either in public or private schooling. Participants in the home-educated groups were solicited at a large home-educators convention, at a "co-op school" and from the entering class of freshman at Palm Beach Atlantic University. All participants in this group were self-identified as "home-schooled". The traditionally schooled were a random sample of entering freshmen at Palm Beach Atlantic University. As home-educated students are often home-educated for religious reasons, all students were assessed regarding their strength of religious commitment. It was expected that both of the groups would be fairly matched in being high in strength of religious commitment.

Results

The median age of both groups was 18 years old. (home-educated group, Mean = 17.49, SD = 1.12; traditional group, Mean = 18.65, SD = 1.02). The strength of religious commitment was almost identical for both groups with a median score of 4 out of 5, with a score of 5 representing the highest level of religious commitment (home-educated group, Mean = 3.56, SD = .91; traditional group, Mean = 3.44, SD = 1.02).
There were no significant differences between groups on the total scale and subscales of cynicism. There was no significant difference on external control. There was a significant difference between groups on trust scale (home-educated group, mean = .65, SD = .29; traditional group, mean = .42, SD = .37; t-test = 3.17**, df = 87, significance = .002), with the home-educated students being more trusting than traditionally schooled students.

Table 1. Correlations with years of home education

| | | YRS-HS | CAVG | TRUAVG | EXTAVG | STRENGTH |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yrs home school | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.237* | .071 | -.168 | -.027 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | . | .024 | .507 | .112 | .804 |
| | N | 91 | 91 | 89 | 91 | 86 |
| Cynicism | Pearson | - | 1 | -.532** | .369** | -.124 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Correlation | .237* | | | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .024 | . | .000 | .000 | .255 |
| | N | 91 | 91 | 89 | 91 | 86 |
| Trust in people | Pearson Correlation | .071 | -.532** | 1 | -.317** | .001 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .507 | .000 | . | .002 | .989 |
| | N | 89 | 89 | 89 | 89 | 84 |
| Externality | Pearson Correlation | -.168 | .369** | -.317** | 1 | -.211 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .112 | .000 | .002 | . | .051 |
| | N | 91 | 91 | 89 | 91 | 86 |
| Religious commit | Pearson Correlation | -.027 | -.124 | .001 | -.211 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .804 | .255 | .989 | .051 | . |
| | N | 86 | 86 | 84 | 86 | 86 |

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

When the each of the primary scales above and strength of religious commitment were correlated with years of home-schooling, there were some significant findings (Table 1). Years of home-schooling showed a significant negative correlation with cynicism (r = -.24*, significance = .02). There was also a significant negative correlation between cynicism and trust (r = -.53**, significance = .00) and a significant positive correlation between cynicism and external control (r = .37**, significance = .00). There was one additional significant negative correlation between trust

and external control (r = -.32, significance = .00).

Discussion

The primary hypothesis of this paper was not supported. It was hypothesized that there would be a difference in groups on the measure of cynicism. Neither the total score nor the three subscales of this measure produced significant between group differences. In fact, the averages for the total scale of cynicism were essentially identical (home-educated group, mean = 2.58; traditional group, mean = 2.57). The groups were also very similar on strength of religious commitment, this makes the significant finding that home educated students have more trust in people all the more interesting. Religion and cynicism cannot be used to explain this difference. Something about the home-education experience may engender greater trust in people when compared to an equally religious traditionally schooled group.

That home-education may be related in general to less cynicism is supported by this study. There is a great deal of difference in the number of absolute years that individuals are home-educated. Some students are home-educated in the primary school years and then placed in traditional schools when the curriculum demand increases (or requires more specialized knowledge). Other students are removed from traditional settings in order to have them school at home in the later developmental years. Still other students rotate the years they school at home verses attending traditional settings. This means that not all home-educated students are equal in the amount of years exposed to home education. There was great variability in our home-educated sample relating to the number of years of actual home education they had received in their median 18 year lifespan (ranging from 2 to all school years at home). There was a significant negative correlation between years of home education and cynicism. This is supportive of a general hypothesis that more a person is educated at home, the less cynicism will be endorsed on this scale. Years of home-education did not correlate with any other scale including the trust scale.

The other two significant correlations related to cynicism were in directions that would be expected, as students were more cynical they were less trusting, and as students were more cynical they tended to externalize control more. These findings tended to support the validity of the cynicism scale used in this study which was created by Moore (1999). Conversely, the finding related to trust was also as expected; as trust increased there was less externalizing of control.

In conclusion, another study is now needed to further pursue the relationship between home-education and cynicism. The major drawback of this study has to do with sample size. A another study could change the design from comparing groups and provide a larger sample of home-educated students with varying years of home-education to see if this finding will be strengthened. Additionally, another study could be done that would compare home educated students with a more heterogeneous group than the comparison group used in this study. Particularly, a comparative sample could be collected from entering freshman with a more diverse religious commitment level.

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