



Academic achievements and homeschooling—It all depends on the goals



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ABSTRACT

This article discusses assessment of academic achievement in the context of home schooling or elective home education (EHE). It presents the argument that although academic achievement is used to compare between homeschooling and school learning, in many cases this comparison is misguided.

The achievements of homeschooled children have been examined extensively, but the questions to be considered is whether or not the evaluation methods used were suited to the teaching and education taking place in the homeschooling context, and in particular whether these evaluation methods are compatible with the educational objectives of this framework. This question is fundamental to understanding the homeschooling phenomenon and also to the attempt to compare the achievements of students studying in schools with those of students learning in a homeschooling environment.

The article opens with a brief description of the homeschooling phenomenon, introduces a short review of studies comparing academic achievement in this context, presents a number of basic concepts in the field of evaluation as well as an evaluation model relevant to the questions that form the basis of this study, and examines whether, and under what conditions, a comparison can be made between children attending school and those studying in the homeschooling framework.

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1. Academic achievements and homeschooling—it all depends on the goals

This article discusses a question commonly asked in the field of homeschooling (or elective home education—EHE) studies, that compares the achievements of children studying in schools and those of children learning in a homeschool environment. This comparison is usually made in order to examine the effectiveness of these methods of study.

The achievements of homeschooled children have been examined extensively, but the questions to be considered is whether or not the evaluation methods used were suited to the teaching and education taking place in the homeschooling context, and in particular, whether these methods are compatible with the educational objectives of this framework? These questions are fundamental to understanding the homeschooling phenomenon and also to the attempt to compare the achievements of students

studying in schools with those of students learning in a homeschooling environment.

The article opens with a brief description of the homeschooling phenomenon introduces a short review of studies comparing academic achievement, explains a number of basic concepts in the field of evaluation, presents an evaluation model relevant to the questions that form the basis of this study, and examines whether, and under what conditions, a comparison can be made between children attending school and those studying in the homeschooling framework.

Thus this current article attempts to create a bridge between the study that examines homeschooling and the study dealing with academic achievement.

1.1. School learning, structured homeschooling and unstructured homeschooling

Homeschooling is a general term in the literature describing a phenomenon in which children (of all ages) do not attend school, usually because of their parents' beliefs. Thus for these children education is conducted mainly at home, according to curricular directives determined first and foremost by the parents (Neuman and Aviram, 2003, 2008; Harding & Farrell, 2003; Lyman, 1998). In

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recent decades, homeschooling has been gaining momentum in various Western countries, among them the United States, where an estimated two million children are educated in a home-schooling setting (Blok & Karsten, 2011; Davis, 2006; Ray, 2011).

As a result, the last few decades have seen numerous studies that examine homeschooling from a variety of viewpoints, among them reasons for choosing to educate children at home and the processes that occur while practicing homeschooling (Neuman & Aviram, 2003; Bates, 1991; Marchant & MacDonald, 1994; Rothermel, 2005) But one of the most researched aspects of homeschooling is the results of the process.

The results of homeschooling may pertain to family, livelihood, social relations, etc., but because homeschooling is usually perceived as an alternative to school education, the results of homeschooling are most often examined in light of the outcomes of school education. The results of school education are usually measured in terms of academic achievements, and consequently, this same yardstick is used to measure homeschooling results.

Many studies compare the academic achievements of home-schooled children to those of their school-learning peers. These studies are usually based on standardized achievement tests that examine the various content areas that are taught in schools and in particular the core curriculum subjects (i.e. reading and writing, mathematics, the sciences, etc.). Because the approaches to education of homeschooling and traditional schooling are often contradictory, and because homeschooling is often perceived as a substitute for traditional schooling, the test results provide researchers with a tool for comparing the effectiveness of the two approaches, and can thus allegedly help to answer the questions: Which educational strategy is better and in which subjects?

There are different types of homeschooling in different countries and different laws regarding homeschooling, but many questions regarding homeschooling can be examined on an international level. Hundreds of studies and meta-analyses have been conducted in recent decades (for example: Bagwell, 2010; Blok, 2004; Galloway, 1995; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Meighan, 1997; Ray & Wartes, 1991; Ray, 2010; Ray, 2013; Rothermel, 2002; Rothermel, 2004; Rudner, 1999). Internet sites also provide references or links to hundreds of such studies (for example: http://www.indiana.edu/~homeeduc/topic_academic.html; <http://www.hslda.org/docs/nche/000010/200410250.asp>).

The majority of studies clearly indicate that the academic achievements of children who are homeschooled exceed those of peers attending schools.

This plethora of findings is seemingly indicative of an answer to the simplistic question “Which educational strategy is better?” However, much of the research has suffered methodological flaws (such as nonrandom volunteer samples), which limit the ability to generalize them (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). In addition, this examination of educational achievements alone raises a number of fundamental problems, as presented later in this article.

To understand the difficulties involved due to the methods of evaluation customarily used in these studies, it is important to consider the following division often used in studies examining homeschooling: structured homeschooling on one hand, and unstructured homeschooling (also referred to as unschooling or autonomous learning) on the other.

In structured homeschooling, teaching and learning processes take place within a home framework according to a defined curriculum, while in the unschooling approach teaching and learning processes are not orderly or defined, and structured learning, if it exists, is carried out during random windows of opportunity as part of the daily schedule that is not devoted to learning or teaching (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Neuman & Guterman, 2016; Ray, 2010; Rothermel, 2011).

When examining the results of homeschooling in terms of academic achievements as defined by traditional schooling, this division is significant because the structured homeschooling approach is actually closer in concept to traditional school learning – in terms of learning framework – than it is to the unschooling approach. Both structured homeschooling and school learning maintain that the purpose of learning is to acquire knowledge based on a curriculum, using structured tools, in defined units of time devoted to this process. However, structured homeschooling does not necessarily follow the same curriculum and objectives as institutional schooling systems do, and furthermore, some families, of course, practice a combination of approaches.

In contrast to these two groups, the unschooling group, with its unstructured approach, forgoes a set curriculum and does not allocate separate units of time to the process. In the unschooling group view, learning should be spontaneous and occur mainly as a part of daily life.

The consequence of these differences is that in subjects included in standardized achievement tests, children in the unstructured, unschooling approach will have difficulty producing a level of academic achievement similar to that of peers in school for the simple reason that they do not learn according to a systematic curriculum and therefore have not been exposed to some of the specific knowledge acquired by their peers in school—i.e., the material being tested in standardized assessments.

It is important to note that the opposite situation is also possible—that some of the knowledge acquired by children from the unschooling approach has not been accessed by children in the structured approaches, whether at school or at home, but usually this is material not tested by standardized assessments.

Many studies examining homeschooling achievements in comparison to the achievements of school learned children do not consider the division between structured homeschooling and unstructured homeschooling or unschooling (see for example, Blok, 2004; Ray, 2010; Rothermel, 2002; Rothermel, 2004; Rudner, 1999).

In contrast to the abovementioned papers, a recent study by Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) does refer to the two types of homeschooling (structured and unstructured). This study compares three groups (school learning, structured homeschooling, and unschooling) and shows that while the achievements of the structured homeschooling group were higher than those of the school learning group, the achievements of the unschooling group were lower than those of both the other groups.

In other words, based on the above-mentioned research, and keeping in mind that this was a small-scale research, it appears that the strategy used in structured homeschooling is more successful in terms of academic achievement than the educational strategy used in schools. In other words, when homeschooled children are taught in a structured way, their academic achievements are higher than those of children who attend schools. However, the educational strategy used in schools is better, in terms of academic achievement, than unschooling (that is, when homeschooled children are taught in an unstructured way, their academic achievements are lower than those of children who attend school). However, this conclusion also has, in fact, a number of key shortcomings.

It is important to understand that there is a fundamental problem in this type of study—the assessment of academic achievement is actually an examination of the degree to which the goals of the teaching and learning process have been achieved. However, it is not possible to assess achievement in this manner without examining the goals of the educational process. Consequently, studies that examine the academic achievements without first examining the goals of the process are actually overlooking a critical aspect of the process. The assessment must examine the

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