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Author(s): Jacque Ensign

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Defying the Stereotypes of Special Education: Home School¹ Students

Jacque Ensign

This article discusses cases from my 9-year longitudinal study of 100 home school students. The article focuses on students who have been identified as exhibiting learning disabilities and giftedness. There has been widespread concern that parents who are not trained in special education cannot adequately teach children with special needs. This article chronicles the academic development of 6 special education students and examines their parents' educational backgrounds and pedagogical approaches. I conclude that these students have not followed the expected patterns for students with their classifications and they have not been taught with the same assumptions and techniques used by special educators. These cases raise serious questions about the stereotypes that influence current practices in special education.

Historically, expectations for student performance and school outcomes in special education have been based on research in which all the participants attended some version of what Tyack (1974) called the "one best sys-

JACQUE ENSIGN is Associate Professor at Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, where she teaches special education and foundations of education.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Jacque Ensign, Davis Hall, Southern Connecticut State University, 501 Crescent Street, New Haven, CT 06515. E-mail: ensign@southernct.edu

¹Jacque Ensign prefers to use the one-word spelling, "homeschool," for philosophical reasons to denote a way of learning rather than school at home. However, for uniformity in this issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education*, the editors have chosen to use the two-word spelling, "home school," in the text of this article.

tem." As we begin to recognize more plurality in both private and public education, researchers can no longer assume that students are taught the same way. Researchers need to look closely at student outcomes in nontraditional settings to expand understandings of academic and social skills development. By teaching outside the norms of teacher preparation and pedagogy, home schoolers are offering researchers many opportunities to observe this educational alternative's effects on students (Holt, 1983).

Research in the 1970s and 1980s frequently focused on whether home-schooled children who were taught by parents who were untrained as teachers could do as well academically as public school students. Now, special education students are increasingly joining the ranks of those who are home schooled, and the initial question is being raised again, this time about teaching special education students at home. There has been widespread concern that parents who are not trained in special education cannot adequately teach children with special needs.

This article, in an effort to contribute to the research community's critique of educational outcomes, represents a contextualized outcome approach to research by a researcher who has extensive experience in both traditional and home school teaching. Researchers who have personal experience teaching in both home school and traditional school settings have what Donmeyer (1997) characterized as different life experiences from those researchers who know only mainstream school settings. Also, an ongoing debate in the American Educational Research Association has focused on whether research must be based on standardized or contextualized outcome measures. Although the most cited research on home education has been based on standardized measures, other research has been based on contextualized measures, such as that advocated for whole language research by Edelsky (1990).

After teaching in traditional schools for 10 years, I home schooled my three children for 11 years. Since 1990, I have evaluated the academic progress of more than 100 home-schooled students annually. Because many of these students have continued to home school, I have amassed a wealth of longitudinal data on these students. Now that I am teaching in a teacher education program to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms, I find that the textbook descriptions of educating special education students are often at odds with what I have observed in many home school settings.

This article questions accepted expectations for special education students that are found in current introductory textbooks for teacher education. By looking outside traditional systems, this researcher has found exceptions to many of the textbook patterns for academic and social development. My work with special education home-schooled students has included students who are in most of the categories that special education programs serve. Although I have worked with home-schooled students with autism, commu-

nication disorders, mental retardation, emotional and behavioral disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and physical disabilities, only the categories of learning disabilities (LD) and giftedness have had enough students in them for a number of years for me to feel confident that I am seeing some general trends. Therefore, in this article, I focus only on the categories of LD and giftedness. This article (a) highlights cases from a 9-year longitudinal study of 100 home-schooled students who represent regular and special education categories; (b) chronicles the academic and social development of 6 special education students who have been identified as exhibiting LD, giftedness, or both; and (c) examines their parents' educational backgrounds and pedagogical approaches.

Related Literature

One educational anthropologist who has documented how schools construct disabilities is Ray McDermott. In a recent book with Hervé Varenne, the school experiences of an elementary school boy who was labeled as learning disabled are chronicled:

Learning Disability moments were built for all to notice Adam as a problem and thus give Adam a problem he experienced keenly, as we also did. We might just as well say that *these are the moments when Learning Disability acquired Adam*. (Varenne & McDermott, 1999, p. 33)

Again and again, McDermott and Varenne documented how the culture of school orchestrated labeling and disabling Adam to confirm his differentness from his classmates.

The problems many people have in the American school system stem only incidentally from what they can or cannot do and much more radically from the way they are treated by others in relation to the designation, assignment, and distribution of more or less temporary or partial difficulties interpreted as success or failure and responded to in the terms of the Testing world. (p. 135)

They noted that in the United States, LD is considered to be a category that refers to something inherently in the child, and they contend that the culture of the United States demands that schools mark students' differences and educate them differently, thereby creating categories of disabilities and abilities that "acquire" students.

In "An Exploratory Study of Home School Instructional Environments and Their Effects on the Basic Skills of Students With Learning Disabilities,"

Duvall, Ward, Delquadri, and Greenwood (1997) documented that home-schooled students with LD were engaged in academic learning two and a half times as often as their counterparts in public schools. In addition to being more academically engaged, the home-schooled students made “relatively large gains in reading and written language while the public school students experienced losses in reading and only small gains in written language. In math, the home school and public school groups made equivalent gains” (Duvall et al., 1997, p. 167). They contended that being more academically engaged may contribute to home schoolers’ higher academic achievement, despite differences in teacher training and methodology.

Kate Donegan is Director of Services for the Matrix Research Institute in Philadelphia, where she directs a large federally funded transition program for young people who have been labeled as special education students. Donegan commented while in an online discussion of the cultural effects of special education:

The biggest challenge my staff face is building even an ounce of self-esteem in these kids—who have been through the special education/labeling ringer—once they can do that, the change, almost like blossoming, is unbelievable. ... They have scores of problems and issues to cope with; it would be nice if their “educational experience” was not one of the things we had to overcome!! (Donegan, 1998)

Donegan sounded a warning to schools as to the side-effects of special education policies.

The researchers cited previously suggest that schools may be responsible for some of the negative educational outcomes of students with LD. The following are details on a 9-year longitudinal study of 6 home-schooled gifted and/or students with LD to determine whether they are experiencing different educational experiences and outcomes than are their counterparts in schools. Although 6 students are featured in this research, they were chosen as representative of more than 50 gifted students or students with LD whom I have evaluated over the past 9 years.

LD

From a textbook on special education, the following is a typical excerpt describing studies of outcomes of students with LD:

Educational experiences are frustrating for youth who have learning disabilities. Their drop-out rate is high (38 percent versus 25 percent for

nondisabled youth). Only 28 percent attempt postsecondary education (versus 56 percent for nondisabled youth), and most do not have the study skills, reading and math skills, or academic coping skills to successfully persevere through a 4-year college career. (Peraino, 1992, as cited in Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1995, p. 22)

Only one of the four home-schooled students with LD described in this study is old enough to have graduated from high school. Projecting from the data so far on their study skills, reading and math skills, and academic coping skills, I expect all of these students to graduate and many to continue with postsecondary education. Why is there such a stark difference in expected outcomes for traditionally schooled versus these home-schooled students with LD? A look at the home schoolers' pedagogy and underlying assumptions about these special education students suggests some possible reasons.

The educational background of the parents home schooling these students ranges from 2 years of community college to a master's degree. Most do not have degrees in teaching, and none has had courses in special education. When asked how these parents learn how to teach these students, most replied that they use a combination of books, home school magazines, talking with other home schoolers, and watching their own child with LD to see what works and what does not. One parent also uses online bulletin boards. None uses traditional forms of inservice training, workshops, or courses.

When asked what specialized attention the student with LD gets from the primary home school teacher, all responded first by describing one-on-one teaching with much encouragement and love. All have read extensively to the child, even after the child mastered reading. Many of the students were taught phonics, but most never mastered phonics, being more global readers instead. Most have tried many approaches to spelling, with minimal success. All parents interviewed continually work on organizational skills with the child.

When asked what specialized attention the students with LD get from specialists, all use an educational consultant for helping plan and annually monitor the academic progress of the student. Many have used specialists for testing for LD and reading. One student is getting specialized LD tutoring twice a week, year-round. All the others get no specialized help from specialists on a regular basis throughout the academic year.

Because many schools rely on classmates and peers to provide some of the academic assistance to mainstreamed students with LD, I asked these parents what specialized attention the students get from classmates and peers. In home schools, generally the classmates are siblings who are not peers. Parents noted that siblings who are quicker in academics sometimes

assist the students with LD. They noted that siblings sometimes provide motivation, although the ease with which the siblings do academics is occasionally discouraging for the students with LD who struggle with academics. All noted that they give careful counseling to the siblings to not make fun of the child with LD and that generally this is successful. A few of the students were in traditional classrooms prior to being home schooled, and parents noted that the LD students had more behavior and motivation problems in the traditional than in the home school situations. With peers, home schoolers appear to face similar problems to those faced by traditionally schooled students. They learn ways to hide their disability in scouts, in clubs, and with friends. Often, their fear of being noticed drives them to practice at home such skills as reading prescribed texts or signing their names in cursive so that they can do these when they are with their peers.

When asked about their philosophy toward the LD of their student, parents responded noticeably differently than I have heard from teachers in traditional schools. I asked whether they considered the LD to be an excuse, an inconvenience, a bother, part of the package, a challenge, or "what." Several responded by noting that the LD is a big challenge, but that it is also a part of the strengths of the child, such as being very creative or having the ability to see through chaos. For instance, a child who is intuitively (rather than methodically) able to see through chaos in a cluttered room will approach reading in the same intuitive way. Another parent said, "It was just a timing issue. I knew he'd eventually read—and he did at age 14." This parent reflected the attitude of many of these parents that children with LD follow a different timetable in academic development but that they would develop if they were given time and support. (Note how similar this is to the stance that Louise Spear-Swerling and Robert Sternberg have taken in their 1996 book *Off Track*.) Behind these strongly held philosophies, all admitted to underlying concerns that these children might not succeed, because they knew many cases of traditionally schooled students who do not succeed. Overall, parents saw the child as normal rather than abnormal.

When asked about their pedagogical approaches for these students with LD, parents noted that they went at the speed of the child, expecting the child to blossom when ready. All noted that they were constantly having to find ways to help the child accommodate to the LD. They worked on problem areas, but also encouraged acceleration in areas of strengths, be it flying private airplanes, doing electronics, or puppetry. Parents hoped that when the child moved on to other schooling, the colleges or schools also would see beyond the LD and allow the student to shine in the areas of abilities. One parent of a gifted student with LD expected overall excellence while realizing that some accommodations had to be made for the

LD. The general approach of these parents was to work around the LD while expecting overall learning to progress continually.

Briefly, here is a synopsis of four cases of students with LD in this study.

I have followed Eileen since she was in first grade. She is now a 10th grader. For the first 6 years, she struggled to read and to do any academics. Having finally mastered reading and basic academic skills, she is now taking high school correspondence courses. Her mother said recently,

You can tell when they are ready for a change. She's finally able to blossom and the motivation is there. So much of her energy has been on learning. After so long a wait, we'll take it at her speed.

They are guardedly optimistic that she will continue her education at a technical or community college after she finishes high school.

I have followed Jamie for the last 7 years. At 13, he is still struggling to read. For the last year and a half, he has been in individual LD therapy twice a week for an hour and a half each time. Recently, noting that reading is still not progressing very easily, his family has begun to focus on how his LD is part of his personality, in that he learns by doing, not by symbols or being told. They have decided to capitalize on his interests in flying and are now allowing him to be in the cockpit with his father in their private plane, making frequent flights to other states for his father's work. Realizing how touch is involved in his learning, they have included touch in reading, with his mother giving him neck massages while he reads. They are amazed how much better he reads during these massages. Because he loves animals and tends to be reticent in social situations, he is now training a dog so that he can take it into retirement homes for "touch therapy" for the seniors and to help him develop more social skills.

I have followed Daniel since third grade. He is now in 10th grade. He was labeled LD at age 9 while in school. The family tried specialized help for LD when he was in public school, but noted that his self-confidence was rapidly eroding and behavior problems were growing. In home schooling, they tried a number of approaches to reading—including Orton-Gilligan and several phonics programs—but none worked. Because he was classified as LD, he was able to get books on audiotapes through the Library of Congress program for the blind. During the years that he devoured books on tapes, his family called him a "tape-worm." He did not read until he was 14, when he finally began reading Frog and Toad books. Three months later, he was reading Hardy Boys books and in 2 more months he was reading adult books. One year later, he read faster than his sister, who had been avidly reading chapter books for 7 years. He is presently immersed in reading J. R. R. Tolkien's books, and his family lovingly

refers to him as a “bookworm.” Because he still finds math and writing difficult, his family is focusing on those skills and trusting that, in time, they will develop, just as the reading finally did.

Tristan is the oldest of the students with LD whom I have followed. I worked with him during his 11 years of home school and have continued to follow his progress in the 6 years after home school. At age 6, he was tested for LD, and at 8 he was tested for reading because he was still not reading beyond a preprimer level. He began reading independently at 9½, and by 11 he was reading college texts, though he still could not read isolated words. Also, being gifted, he wrote reams on the computer, where he could use a spell checker to make his writing understood. He did advanced course work throughout most of his schooling, but struggled with foreign language, spelling, and memorizing math facts. At 14, he became proficient in electronics, and, several years later, did computer repair to earn money. At 16, he went to an elite high school where they noticed his LD but also noticed that somehow he read and comprehended more books than any other student in his class. After high school, he spent half a year in Ecuador learning Spanish and the culture there by immersion, rather than in a school. A year later, while a freshman in college, he conducted a month-long anthropology research project in the back country of the Dominican Republic. He did all the research, in books and in interviews, in Spanish. He was a teaching assistant for an introductory anthropology class during his sophomore year. In his junior year, he conducted 7 months of independent anthropological research in Bolivia—again, all in Spanish. He has been on the dean’s list at a tier-one liberal arts college throughout his college years, and he is graduating this year with honors. He is known for his independence, his ability to ferret out information in unusual places, and his horrible spelling. All of his anthropological research has been planned and executed by him, including securing grants, writing, and presenting final reports.

Overall, these home-schooled students with LD are expected to be and are treated as normal. They are often not as aware of their disabilities as are traditionally schooled students because they are not labeled as disabled by their families. Even those who read very late catch up quickly, and some become excellent readers. All love literature. Usually, these students have good self-esteem because they have areas of expertise and are respected for what they do, rather than known for what they do not do well.

Gifted

Increasingly, in today’s schools with tightening budgets, gifted students are not receiving the specialized education that is recommended by

authorities in gifted education. Many gifted students find themselves relegated to easy, repetitive academics in mainstreamed classes. As Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) noted, underachievement for gifted students is frequently caused by

inappropriate school programs—schoolwork that is unchallenging and boring because gifted students have already mastered most of the material or because teachers have low expectations or mark students down for their misbehavior (Kolb & Jussim, 1994). A related problem is that gifted underachievers often develop negative self-images and negative attitudes toward school (Delisle, 1982; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997, p. 472)

In the cases of home-schooled gifted students, parents are consciously trying to stimulate and encourage their gifted students to prevent boredom and underachievement. What is notable is the way in which they are teaching these gifted students; the students themselves are not aware that they are any more exceptional than other students because all the students are treated as unique. Their high level of achievement and self-confidence is evident, as is the length to which these parents go to expand these students' horizons.

The educational backgrounds of the parents home schooling the gifted students in the cases in this article range from a high school education to a master's degree. Of those who have degrees in teaching, one has a degree in teaching mentally retarded elementary school students, and one has an early childhood degree. Like the parents of students with LD, these parents use a combination of observing the child and consulting relevant literature and/or people to learn how to teach these gifted students.

When asked what specialized attention the gifted student gets from the primary home school teacher, all responded first by describing a lot of independent time for the student. Time actually spent with the teacher is mostly in long discussions with the student, with the rest of the time going to overseeing school assignments.

When asked what specialized attention the gifted student gets from specialists, all use a combination of mentors and special-interest classes or activities such as Space Camp, art classes, science museum classes, and summer programs for the gifted. Adults who share common interests with the student are often key mentors for these students. This is usually on an informal basis, with the student having long conversations with a neighbor or family friend who is knowledgeable and willing to talk or work with the student. Informality seems to be a critical aspect of these relationships, as the students do not want to be "taught" so much as to be treated as coexplorers.

Interestingly, contrary to the stereotypical concern that gifted students may have difficulty with peers, these gifted students are very social, with a wide variety of peers and classmates. Neighbors, classmates in special courses, and siblings are all part of their lives (Ensign, 1997). Typically, the gifted students are in a leadership role when they are with their peers and classmates.

When asked about their philosophy toward the giftedness of their students, parents responded by saying the giftedness is a challenge, a precious gift, a joy, and a responsibility. When asked about their pedagogical approaches for these gifted students, parents noted that they basically follow the students' interests, supplementing and expanding their horizons as much as possible. They try to provide a stimulating environment in which the student can pursue interests and find new interests. They feel that attention to academic and social skills that the student needs to develop is important in providing a well-rounded education for these students.

Following are the synopses of three cases of home-schooled gifted students in this study. Tristan's summary was the last one in the section on LD.

Philip is now 13 years old. I have followed him since he was 5. As a kindergartner, he was an avid inventor, more interested in the theory and process of his inventions than in their ultimate success. Reading has always been a love of Philip's. He rapidly learned to read in kindergarten, and, since then, has always read quantities of high-quality books each year. A natural leader, he was organizing group displays of collections in first grade and by seventh grade was foreman for a \$1,000 mapping and inventory project of a junkyard to help it comply with Environmental Protection Agency standards. Although his mother is the daily teacher, his father is instrumental in making sure that his children have as broad an experience with the world as they can get. His father is constantly finding new experiences for Philip, such as a recent course in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) programming and an online writing class.

Audin is a 10-year-old whom I have followed since he was in kindergarten. His mother, his primary home school teacher, has a high school education. His grandparents were initially very concerned that this gifted child of Color was being cheated to be taught at home. Now that Audin is 10, they are no longer concerned as they see how much he is learning at home. When he was in kindergarten, he had his own gem jewelry business and amazed customers at craft fairs when he mentally totaled sales and gave accurate change for transactions. At 9, he read Stephen Hawking's books on theoretical physics and spent a lot of time discussing those concepts with a neighbor who is an engineer. Neighborhood peers come over to his house after they get home from school so that they can play chess, math games, and talk about science. He is a child who absorbs information and who finds formal

classes frustrating. His parents are eager explorers of new territory with him and continually find new people, books, and experiences for him.

Summary

In conclusion, these students with LD and giftedness have not been taught with the same assumptions and techniques used by special educators. The hallmarks of the educational philosophies and pedagogies of the home schoolers in this study are (a) focus on the whole child rather than primarily on the child's disability or extreme ability; (b) individualized attention; and (c) care, patience, and respect for the child to lead the teacher in both the timing and the content of what the child is ready to be taught. These students with LD and giftedness have not followed the expected patterns for students with their classifications. The educational outcomes for these home-schooled special education students may be summed up as follows: They are self-confident students who have developed academic skills at very uneven rates, but who usually have achieved academic proficiency by high school.

Renzulli (1998), director of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, argued for talent development programs for all children rather than just for gifted children. He stressed the importance of allowing students to pursue their interests and talents, no matter what their academic or supposed ability level. By allowing students to forge into new territory, they develop higher self-esteem and become more excited and engaged in educational pursuits. It appears that his approach is similar to the approaches parents in this study successfully adopted in teaching their special education students, regardless of the students' ascribed abilities or disabilities.

Although some attention is being given to race as being socially constructed, little attention has been given to how special education may be socially constructed. Perhaps the reticence to question the social construction of special education has its roots in the same psychology that has kept the concept of IQ as being biologically intact and innate rather than being significantly socially constructed. In considerations of IQ, nature has been emphasized, with only a cursory nod to nurture. Both special education categories and IQ have not been seen as being very permeable. Both have been seen as being descriptions of what is in the child rather than being descriptions of the culture interacting with the child. By stepping outside the box of traditional schools as the context for educating special education students, this article has examined the role that nurture may play in special education students. This study suggests that the academic development of those special education students whose nurture occurs in home schools differs markedly from that of special education students whose nurture occurs in traditional schools.

Meier, in a recent article, emphasized why “oddball” schools that are successful should be noticed:

Rather than ignore such schools because their solutions lie in unreplicable individuals or circumstances, it’s precisely such unreplicability that should be celebrated. Maybe what these “special” schools demonstrate is that every school must have the power and the responsibility to select and design its own particulars and thus to surround all young people with powerful adults who are in a position to act on their behalf in open and publicly responsible ways. (Meier, 1998, p. 359)

The home schooling of the special education students in this study can be viewed as an “oddball” schooling that works because of caring, powerful adults and children who have not lost faith in quality education and achievement. These home school cases raise serious questions about the stereotypes that influence current practices in special education.

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