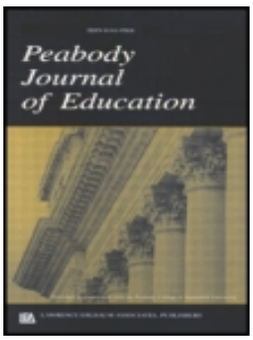

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Hostility or Indifference? The Marginalization of Homeschooling in the Education Profession

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Reasons for neglect of homeschooling in educational research literature are explored. The ideological hostility that occasionally surfaces in policy debates is unlikely to have a major influence on mainstream researchers. An alternative explanation based on Kuhn's concept of normal science is proposed. The dominant paradigm of educational research emphasizes quantitative analyses, standardized settings, and large randomized samples. Unlike homeschooling, public schools, with their state-mandated curricula, age-graded classrooms, and tight regulation of facilities and personnel, provide an ideal setting for this paradigm. The congruence between setting and method is reinforced by universities. The training of licensed public school teachers generates most of the revenue that supports faculty positions in colleges of education. Consequently there is little incentive to study homeschooling. The article concludes that a scientific revolution in educational research is not in prospect. Moving beyond the current neglect will require a change in approach in investigating homeschooling. Rather than focusing on holistic comparisons, aimed at demonstrating the superiority of one educational mode over another, homeschool researchers can gain mainstream attention by investigating factors that affect motivation and learning across educational contexts, thereby generating results that would be useful to both public school teachers and home educators.

In his symposium paper summarizing the state of research on homeschooling, Brian Ray (2011) expressed dismay and puzzlement at the hostility of professional educators toward this mode of education. Ray noted that despite extensive empirical evidence describing the benefits of homeschooling and little to no evidence of detrimental effects, those in the education profession do not promote homeschooling, actively oppose it, or call for more stringent state regulation. Because of the dearth of evidence supporting their position, Ray (2011) attributed the marginalization of homeschooling to ideological motives on the part of professional educators:

> It appears likely that opponents of home-based education do not promote it because they want the state to be in primary and ultimate control over the education and upbringing of all children (i.e., future adult citizens) or they are upset that homeschooling is affecting children and youth to become adults who hold worldviews, think, believe, and act (e.g., vote, engage in social relationships, promote particular polities) different than they, the opponents, and different from what home-education opponents want to promote to children and society via state-controlled education. (p. 24)

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Ray's frustration is understandable. Of the tens of thousands of faculty members in education-related fields, no more than a handful have expertise in the area of home education or have conducted research on that subject. Major research studies like those conducted by Ray are rarely published in mainstream journals. Of the few published studies, many have been published by the National Home Education Research Institute, of which Ray is president, and its journal, *Home School Researcher*, a peer-reviewed journal with small circulation and modest impact. The major funding agencies almost exclusively support research and improvement focused on public schools.

Although I understand and sympathize with Ray's frustration at the marginalization of homeschooling, I do not find credible his attribution of this marginalization to ideological hostility. This is not to say ideological antipathy to homeschooling doesn't exist. As a faculty member with a longstanding interest in homeschooling, I have experienced it—twice in 10 years. On neither occasion did it have any effect on my career. My daily work as faculty member, department chair, and dean in colleges of education has primarily involved the training of teachers and administrators to work in public schools. Of the people with whom I have worked closely, most have known my children were homeschooled; their reactions have ranged from polite indifference to mild curiosity.

In short, ideological hostility does not account for the marginalization of homeschooling, at least in my experience. In this article, I present an alternative explanation based on Kuhn's (1970) concept of normal science. Kuhn contended that scientists select their research interests in light of the paradigmatic concepts, problems, and methods currently dominant within their discipline and tend to resist or dismiss competing concepts and methods. This account, I argue, is sufficient to explain the indifference of the educational research community both to the phenomenon of homeschooling and to the claims of homeschooling researchers.

I then go on to consider whether a "scientific revolution," in which the dominant paradigm is overthrown and replaced by new concepts and methods, is likely in the field of educational research for the foreseeable future. I conclude that neither the well-known deficiencies of public schools nor reductions in their levels of public funding are likely to lead to such a crisis. Homeschooling research is not going to supplant the current educational research paradigm, and is more likely to gain influence through an accommodation with the mainstream research establishment. After sketching the lineaments of such an accommodation, I conclude by warning homeschooling researchers and advocates to be cautious in their quest for more influence, either on public policy or in research institutions. It is not clear that increased scrutiny by policymakers, researchers, and academics will be warmly received or regarded as helpful by homeschooling families.

ARE EDUCATIONAL SCHOLARS IDEOLOGICALLY COMMITTED TO OPPOSE HOMESCHOOLING?

It is true that there is a strong philosophical tradition supporting public schools as the educational norm for a just democratic society, which could be taken to imply that homeschooling potentially undercuts justice and political legitimacy for such a society. Dewey (1897), Gutmann (1987), and others characterize public schools as the preeminent institution cultivating democratic dispositions. Gutmann, too, commented on this belief when she asked rhetorically whether the training of future citizens should be controlled democratically. The answer is meant to be obvious: If private entities control the formation of citizens (e.g., through private schools or homeschooling), then

in essence they control its future political life, and democratic rule cannot be sustained beyond one generation.

There is also a robust strain of scholarship critical of "privatization," which encompasses not just private schools but also public school choice and homeschooling. Apple (2000) characterized privatization as part of a larger conservative assault on equality and participatory democracy. Lubienski (2000) suggested that it undermines broad educational opportunity by encouraging a withdrawal of middle- and upper-class families, with their political influence, from the public system. If they don't send their children to common schools, then they have no incentive to maintain or improve them and their political influence and social capital is no longer available to support the schools that children of less advantaged families attend.

Finally, there is an egalitarian argument based on the premise that education is a "positional good"—that is, its value is inherently relational. People benefit from having more education only insofar as others have less of it (Brighouse & Swift, 2006). Consequently, any arrangement such as school choice or homeschooling that allows children to benefit from advantages already possessed by their families necessarily disadvantages those who are less fortunate and is thus, from the point of view of social policy, undesirable.

Arguments from democratic control, privatization, and positional goods clearly do constitute an ideological nexus that is hostile to homeschooling. Not surprisingly, they have attracted considerable criticism from those who defend homeschooling (Howell, 2003, 2005; Ray, 2004, 2006). However, those skeptical of homeschooling have only questionable influence on educational policy. Most states now provide legal protection for homeschooling. Although common schools are still the norm in the developed world, many countries have experimented with some form of school choice. The influence of social policy critics like Apple, Labaree, and Swift is not in the ascendant. Is it reasonable to blame them for policymakers' neglect of homeschooling?

Evidence of homeschooling critics' influence on research is also lacking. Very little research has sought to show social harm as a result of children not attending common schools. On the contrary, a great deal of research has focused on the inadequacy of common schools; the conspicuously unequal results they produce; their ineffectiveness in teaching mathematics, reading, and science; and the psychological harm inflicted on students through bullying. If, as seems evident from the data presented by Ray, researchers have shown less interest in homeschooling than its advantages merit, reasons for their neglect must be sought somewhere other than in a pervasive ideological commitment to the defense of the common school ideal. The next section suggests where such an explanation can be found.

AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION: KUHN, NORMAL SCIENCE, AND THE CONCEPT OF PARADIGM

Thomas Kuhn (1970), an early leader in the social studies of science, proposed that what we call science is a series of conceptual revolutions interspersed with periods of in-depth research, refinement, and articulation of shared concepts, which he refers to as "normal science" (p. 10).

Normal science is a period of routine research on a defined set of problems using established methodologies and relying on established concepts, which are traceable to foundational achievements. Problems, methodologies, and concepts define what Kuhn has referred to as a paradigm for research. Newtonian physics and Copernican astronomy are canonical examples. A paradigm

shapes the training, induction, and professional life of generations of scientists working within it. It dictates what problems are worthy of investigation, what investigative methods are feasible, and what evidence is required to reach a conclusion. According to this account, during periods of normal science, scientists working within the current paradigm are highly productive, earning recognition from their peers by solving new problems and extending basic concepts that are widely accepted. Those who try to work against the dominant paradigm are effectively marginalized, ignored, and denied access to resources needed to advance and promote their work.

Kuhn's view contradicts what might be thought of as the conventional view of science, which views science as a purely rational activity from which conclusions are drawn solely on the merits of the available evidence and are not influenced by preconceptions about what the scientist expects to find. This conventional view is of interest for present purposes because echoes of it are detectable in Dr. Ray's critique of contemporary educational research. If the aim is to find educational methods that lead to better outcomes—improved learning, enhanced socialization, prosocial values, self-actualization, or whatever other outcomes are available to be studied—then evidence of the efficacy of homeschooling should lead researchers to investigate homeschooling practices. Too often education researchers spend millions of dollars on large-scale studies of how children learn science in schools, when there is strong evidence that students learn a great deal more science when their parents educate them directly.

According to Kuhn, the argument that educational research should be rationalized in this way implies an unrealistic view about the nature of science. Scientists, a term that can plausibly be extended to include educational researchers, are socialized within a paradigm, which dictates certain evidentiary standards, methods of inquiry, and judgments about what problems are worthy of investigation. Within educational research, paradigmatic concepts that provide a focus for research include the learning environment, school effectiveness, equity in the distribution of learning opportunities and resources, and developmentally appropriate practices. Paradigmatic methods are those that link inputs (teaching strategies, school structures, and teacher characteristics) with outcomes for large sample sizes, a model that is difficult to replicate in studies of the heterogeneous, irregularly documented, and decentralized homeschooling population. For a variety of reasons that are explored in the next section, the paradigmatic concepts and methods that currently dominate educational research are not easily extended to home education.

THE CONTEMPORARY PARADIGM OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND WHY IT IGNORES HOMESCHOOLING

The tradition of educational research, as we know it today, grew out of the administrative wing of the progressive movement and assumed a context that they brought into being: a system of state-funded schools controlled by a centralized bureaucracy, age-graded, and socially homogeneous (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Certain features of this system have changed over the past century, including how many years children attend school, who goes to school with whom, how the stakeholders measure the efficacy of the system, and how tightly governing bodies exercise centralized control. The basic structure, however, remains intact, and this structure is reflected in the concepts that guide educational research, the methods of research that are employed, and the problems that are considered worthy of researchers' attention.

One key concept in which these assumptions are evident is that of the learning environment. Myriad studies have investigated environmental factors that influence students' learning or lack of learning, from physical factors, such as light, sound, furniture, and the arrangement of the room; to social factors such as the degree of interaction among students, the demeanor of the teacher, and the quality of interaction between teachers and students; to structural factors such as classroom rules and expectations, the length of class periods, circulation within the school, whether lunch is provided, and countless other conditions that shape students' experience.

Given the societal context described by Tyack and Hansot (1982), it is not surprising that the features of the learning environment that have been the subject of educational research are all characteristics of classrooms and schools. However, one important characteristic of classrooms and schools is not considered part of the educational environment, and that is which students are actually in them. Abundant research has established that the family background of students enrolled in a school or present in a classroom profoundly affects student learning and educational quality, but students' family background is *not* considered an aspect of the educational environment, because it lies outside the purview of teachers and administrators and is therefore not something for which they can be held accountable. Indeed, researchers routinely disaggregate data by race, language background, and income level precisely in order to screen out these factors, the more reliably to identify aspects of the environment that affect learning and motivation no matter what the students' families are like. Thus, in Kuhn's terms, the paradigm of the educational environment effectively prescribes features of the classroom and school as the topic worth investigating and effectively *excludes* the influence of family as an object of study.

Another paradigmatic concept of contemporary educational research is developmentally appropriate practices. Based on the developmental characteristics of children at specific ages, researchers have identified activities and practices targeted at those characteristics, and a great deal of energy has been invested to try to show that employing these activities and practices produces results better than those associated with less "appropriate" alternatives. For example, free play and activities that involve motor coordination are believed to be important in the education of 4- and 5-year-olds, whereas group projects and the opportunity of learning from peers are claimed to enhance the educational experience for middle schoolers.

The concept of developmentally appropriate practices is particularly helpful in age-graded classrooms, where continuous large-group formal instruction requires preplanning and the size of the group reduces the impact of the natural variability of children's development. The utility of this research is obviously much diminished in family settings, where formal instruction is not continuous and activities can more easily be adapted to individual children's interests and needs.

These and other paradigmatic concepts have the effect of directing researchers' attention toward research sites where they are relevant (schools) and away from sites where they are less useful (homes and families). As Kuhn pointed out, a discipline is constituted by the topics and problems considered to be important, useful, and interesting, and this feature alone goes a considerable distance toward explaining the neglect of homeschooling in the educational research community.

There are, however, additional factors in play in normal science that reinforce researchers' orientation to schools. Kuhn's research focused on conceptual and cognitive factors that tended to reinforce the paradigm. Building on Kuhn's work, researchers such as Shapin (1994) have highlighted the influence of social structures and institutions on the development and consolidation of disciplinary paradigms. A brief review of these structural factors in the field of education will

shed further light on why the phenomenon of homeschooling has elicited so little interest from educational researchers.

The most important institution is schools, which provide extraordinary advantages for researchers interested in large-scale studies of factors that affect student achievement. This is due in no small part to the fact that schools house such a large array of children of the same age from a wide assortment of backgrounds. Large numbers of these children, moreover, are under the control of a single entity—typically the building principal or the district superintendent. The concentration of children in one location under central control drastically reduces the time that a researcher must spend in traveling and meeting with individual parents to obtain permission to study their children. In addition, schools, unlike homeschooling families, have elaborate interactive data systems from which the researcher can extract information about the child's family as well as the child's entire educational history, and this information can be linked to achievement, survey results, and a variety of other sources of data in which the researcher may be interested.

School structure is not just a convenience. It also has implications for the cost, scale, and statistical power of research. If, for an investment of a few thousand dollars, one can study the effects of a specific pedagogical innovation on a thousand students, or the benefits of preschool for several hundred thousand children from poor families, the incentives are increased not only for researchers but also for funding agencies. For a modest investment, one can obtain results generalizable to huge populations and therefore of interest to policymakers.

The political control of public schools also provides an advantage for the conventional research paradigm. Centralized control of schools facilitates their use as policy instrument. Pass a new law or issue a new regulation, and the effects are felt throughout the whole system, with results available at the next round of standardized testing. This responsiveness greatly enhances the value of educational research about schooling and thus creates a market for researchers' services. Thus, for example, under the auspices of the Race to the Top program, the states were mandated to ensure teachers were evaluated based on current research on effective teaching. Policymakers rushed headlong to write laws giving effect to these mandates, with the result that thousands of districts are currently in the process of rewriting their teacher evaluation instruments and retraining the principals who must use them. A similar nexus of policy, research, and funding would be inconceivable in the case of homeschooling.

Even the widely publicized dysfunctional aspects of formal schooling ironically strengthen the appeal of the conventional approach to educational research. The worst features of school—wasted time, chaotic classrooms, bullying, and ineffective teaching—have generated some of the most robust research programs, as investigators look for solutions. Discovery of the Pygmalion effect, for example, led to countless studies of the effects of teachers' expectations on students' performance. Evidence of the victimization of gay youth has led to myriad initiatives to reduce bullying and address homosexuality in the curriculum. Public exposure of these conditions attracts the attention of state legislatures and funding agencies, which jointly ensure that a steady stream of resources is directed toward researchers who address them.

Support for researchers working within the dominant paradigm does not come only from funding agencies and policy-making bodies. Accepted theories and methods are also encoded in the institutions that shape researchers' careers. Position notices for faculty searches routinely focus on the research agendas of applicants, whether they have the potential to attract external funding, and whether they have participated in presentations at leading conferences, such as the American Educational Research Association, or published research-based articles in leading peer-reviewed

journals. Large-scale studies employing quantitative methods, although not the only acceptable empirical method, enjoy privileged status in these venues. Similar factors figure prominently in criteria for tenure and promotion. The effects are magnified by research centers where faculty pool their talents and efforts, attracting external funding and "buying out" time that they would normally devote to less prestigious teaching responsibilities. In light of this focus, it is not surprising that in recent years some of the major book-length studies of homeschooling (Stevens, 2001; Wyatt, 2008) have come out of departments of sociology, not colleges of education.

Funding opportunities and policy relevance are not the only factors that incline universities to recruit, tenure, and promote faculty members who focus their efforts on schools. The primary activity of Colleges of Education in all but the most prestigious universities is the preparation of licensed teachers, administrators, and other professionals who will one day serve in formal schools. Programs leading to licensure account for nearly all undergraduate majors and for a large proportion of graduate majors in schools of education (Eduventures, 2008). Without the income streams generated by these students, Colleges of Education would be much smaller, employ fewer faculty, and play a less prominent role within the universities in which they are housed. In recruiting faculty to advance their core mission, universities are invariably looking for candidates who not only have well-developed research agendas but also have experience in public schools. Just as hardly anyone can make a career as a homeschooling researcher, no one can procure a university position instructing homeschooling majors, and it is highly unlikely anyone will obtain such a position in the foreseeable future.

POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR HOMESCHOOLING RESEARCH

According to Kuhn, the period leading up to a conceptual revolution in science is marked by an accumulation of evidence that cannot be accounted for by dominant theories. Initially, scientists working within the paradigm dismiss this evidence, but as reports of apparent anomalies multiply, scientists begin to take notice of these unexpected anomalies and begin to explore alternative theories. Once a new theory is found that both covers the evidence that supported the old theory and accounts for new evidence, it gains acceptance, and if it is confirmed through further investigations, it becomes the new dominant paradigm.

Unfortunately, such a revolution does not appear imminent in the domain of educational research. Granted, evidence of schools' ineffectiveness proliferates, but this has hardly proven detrimental to researchers. All of the familiar scandals of public schools—bullying, low math scores, obesity, the achievement gap—are accompanied by new funding sources. Evidence of the superiority of homeschooling, however persuasive, is unlikely to be construed as a reason not to improve schools.

Fiscal constraints and competing economic priorities in the public sector appear much more likely to threaten public schools. Pension reforms, state budget shortfalls, rising medical costs, and the oversupply of teachers are making the profession of teaching less attractive than it has been in the past. Colleges of Education, faced with declining enrollments, are hesitant to maintain or add to their tenure-track faculties.

Whether this news is beneficial for proponents of homeschooling remains to be seen, as it is too soon to predict where these trends will lead. The resilience and creativity of the education profession should not be underestimated. If the trends did lead to an erosion of the power of

public schools and their allies and to a more pluralistic conception of schooling, participation in homeschooling might well increase, but it is not clear that this would lead to an influx of research funding. Given the enormous costs of funding medical care, public employee retirement plans, and public schools, colleges, and universities, even at reduced levels, there is no obvious source of public funding for homeschooling researchers to lay claim to.

Given the unlikelihood of a Kuhnian scientific revolution in educational research, accommodation with rather than resistance to the dominant paradigm appears more promising as a road forward for homeschooling research. To date, homeschooling research has assumed a binary opposition between homeschooling and conventional schooling. Researchers like Ray (2004, 2006) and Rudner (1999) contrast performance between homeschooled and conventionally schooled students, implying that differences in outcomes between the two groups are attributable to educational mode and not to different characteristics *within* each educational mode. Efforts to disaggregate outcomes for homeschooled students based on family income, race, parental education, and whether one of the parents is a licensed teacher have failed to demonstrate a link between these factors and differential outcomes for homeschooled students (Ray, 2004, 2006; Rudner, 1999). Hence one is left with the claim of superiority of one mode to the other, without any credible account of *how* gains from the more successful mode are achieved and what participants in either mode could do to improve results. This strategy focuses attention on a question (namely, how many students would be better off if they left school?) that motivates neither conventional researchers nor homeschooling families, as researchers have no incentive to seek the answer and homeschooling families believe they have already found it. The binary relationship is thus a research paradigm that guarantees marginalization.

An alternative strategy, which may have better prospects for overcoming marginalization, would be for homeschooling researchers to emulate their conventional school counterparts by attempting to identify factors that affect outcomes *within* their preferred educational mode. Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse's (2011) study of literacy development among homeschooled families aptly illustrates this strategy: They found that for young children, structured homeschooling led to gains over conventional schooling, whereas an unstructured approach led to a deficit. Despite the limitations of this study (small sample size, limited age range, and reliance on standardized tests as the sole outcome measure), it illustrates an approach that has promise for overcoming marginalization, because it invites conversation about which features of homeschooling and conventional schooling make a difference in children's academic achievement and long-term well-being, a subject of interest to both constituencies.

A second limitation of the binary approach is that it disregards the impact of persistence in homeschooling. As Wyatt (2008) has noted, families who persist in homeschooling may differ from families that do not. Wyatt also contended that families change over time through their participation in homeschooling, thus suggesting a mechanism that may explain improved outcomes. Focusing on persistence could enable researchers to map out patterns of family interaction and structural change that could also be useful to the broader community of educational researchers, including those who focus on schools.

In short, the current educational research paradigm appears robust. Incentives for research on schools are unlikely to be significantly reduced or eliminated in the near future, and research designed to show the relative effectiveness of homeschooling as an educational mode is unlikely to gain interest or acceptance among researchers who focus on schools. A more nuanced research program focusing on differences among homeschooling families that affect student outcomes

would invite parallel investigation of how these differences affect outcomes in conventional schools. The results of such studies could prove illuminating and useful for homeschooling families and would be more likely to influence broader conversations about educational policy.

A FINAL CAVEAT: THE PRICE TO BE PAID FOR RELEVANCE AND RECOGNITION

As homeschooling researchers explore strategies to gain acceptance and institutional credibility, they would be well advised to reflect on the features that *make* the dominant paradigm dominant: generous grant funding, proliferating research activity, ever more specialized studies, legislators eager for ideas for social improvement, and a cadre of academics, teachers, and social workers promoting the most recent findings, even those apparently far removed from common sense. Researchers and policymakers embrace these phenomena. Those who actually work in schools are more skeptical. Considering this disconnect between research and practitioner opinion, researchers must question whether an increase in homeschooling research would elicit similar or more enthusiastic reactions from homeschooling families.

All this is remote from Dr. Ray's modest goals: recognition of the strengths of homeschooling, respect for research results, and equal participation in the public discussion about how children should be educated. He would like to replace the current dominant paradigm with something fairer, more inclusive, more rational. When homeschooling research enters the purview of normal science, though, the political and economic consequences may be difficult to avoid. The findings of science might well provide clues about how to improve home education. But it is not clear that prolonged and enthusiastic attention from legislatures, state boards of education, and education professionals would be welcomed by homeschooling families.

AUTHOR BIO

Charles Howell, Ph.D., is a philosopher of education whose interests lie in the areas of ethics, education policy, and how educational practices affect children's development into autonomous adults. His work has dealt with school structure, discipline practices in families and schools, and intergenerational transmission of values. His professional experience as an educator spans four decades. He currently serves as Dean of the Beeghly College of Education at Youngstown State University.

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