

Customization Through Homeschooling

The home offers a natural environment for customizing a child's education.

Brian D. Ray

I used to call Philip my renaissance boy because he could play Mozart's sonatas on the piano, then go outside and kill and dress chickens for our supper."

Deborah Butler told me about her 19-year-old son, second oldest of seven. Philip was labeled gifted in a southern California public school and then moved on to 11 years of home-based education.

"Differentiation is what homeschooling is all about," Sherry Bushnell told me. She and her husband founded the National Challenged Homeschoolers Associated Network, an international organization that supports parents who educate special-needs children at home. They homeschool their son Jordan, a 13-year-old boy with Down's syndrome, along with his nine siblings.

A variety of people are involved with homeschooling: high- and low-income families; parents with doctorates and parents with general equivalency diplomas; two- and single-parent families; people from different ethnic groups and various religious and secular persuasions.

Multiple studies confirm that homeschooled students score, on average, 15–30 percentile points above their peers in public schools on standardized academic achievement tests (Ray, 2000b; Rudner, 1999). Research has not conclusively controlled for all background variables to determine whether homeschooling actually increases academic success, and, considering the nature of the population and social science research, it may never be able to do so.

Do homeschooled students miss out on socialization? Studies have revealed that in terms of social, emotional, and psychological well-being, homeschooled students are doing well (Medlin, 2000). Of course, not all homeschooled students do extraordinarily well academically or thrive in terms of psychosocial development. In spite of some problems, however, the evidence suggests that the failure rate is lower than that of students in public schools (Medlin, 2000).

Why Homeschool?

All parents, including homeschoolers, want their children to be competent in reading, writing, and mathematics and to comprehend the fundamental principles of science, history, art, and geography. Homeschoolers also want to retain the responsibility of raising their children and not have their children raised by strangers. Homeschoolers want to have a deeper understanding of their children's education progress than

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Homeschooling has come of age (Lines, 1996), but many educators continue to ask questions and doubt its appropriateness for most students. Should, can, and do homeschooling parents customize the education of their children?

The State of Homeschooling

Home-based, parent-led education has undergone a remarkable resurgence during the past two decades. Sites of growth include Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, Poland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Up to 2 million students in grades K–12 are homeschooled in the United States alone (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001; Ray, 1999).



school reports provide and to give their children the liberty to explore their own family's culture, free from the constraints of government-controlled systems and institutions (Ray, 2000a). They want to see their children enjoy a broader socialization than a typical classroom allows and to give their children "a more active learning environment, with provision of real opportunities to structure their own days" (Taylor, 1997, p. 111). Homeschoolers want to protect their children from violence, drugs and alcohol, psychological abuse, and ill-timed sexuality; help their children accomplish more academically than they can accomplish in school; and individualize each child's curriculum, instruction, and learning environment (Carper, 2000; Ray, 1999).

A Natural Environment for Customization

Customization—or differentiated instruction—influences a student's academic performance and social development and is the reason that some parents want to homeschool. Bielick and colleagues (2001) found that the parents' desire to customize their children's education was consistently among the most important reasons that parents cited for homeschooling.

Holly's¹ story is an example. In 1987, when Holly was 6, she wanted to know what school was like, so her parents arranged for her to spend a day as a student in a local public school's 1st grade classroom. It was a cheery room, not too crowded with students. Holly had her own desk, and the amiable and talented teacher was an acquaintance of her family. That evening, when her parents asked Holly what she thought of school, she replied that she liked recess. When asked whether she would like to go to school, Holly replied, "No, they're always sitting around doing nothing." She noticed the waiting—waiting in lines, waiting for the teacher's help with a math problem, and waiting for a classmate standing at the front of the room

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struggling through saying the names of the week in Spanish while others giggled and lost attention. Holly noticed that she could not move on to another engaging learning task or adventure when she was ready for it. There was a group for whom to wait. There was a structure to follow. At home, Holly knew that she could move on to new challenges when she was ready.

But is it possible for parents who are neither professionally trained nor credentialed teachers to differentiate the elements of content, process, products, and learning environment on the basis of their children's readiness, interests, and learning profiles? Customization does not always happen by itself. Taylor (1997) explains that many homeschooling parents emulate the institutional classroom practices that they experienced as schoolchildren. They stick strictly to a planned curriculum, and they follow 40-minute subject periods. They use a lot of tests and do not give much thought to integrating disciplines. In some families, the "pedagogy tends to be seatwork, emphasizing coverage and control" (p. 112).

Nonetheless, the informal environment of homeschooling affords natural opportunities for teaching and learning to become more personal, thoughtful, and individualized. When children are at home and not in large groups, time management is more flexible, and parents, who know their children intimately, can respond to their children's individual talents and needs.

After studying home-based education in the United Kingdom, Thomas (1998) concluded that homeschooling is "an interactive process rather than a series of tasks to be tackled" (p. 127), noting that parents can respond in a timely manner to students' readiness for new challenges and take the time to make sure that their children understand concepts. The discussions that take place during informal learning deepen parent-child interactions and increase the children's confidence as learners.



Many publications are available to help homeschooling parents develop effective lesson plans, teaching strategies, and learning projects.

Homeschooling advocates urge parents to respond to the differences among learners in their families. Harris (1988) describes homeschooling as intensely personal, closely supervised, intentional, delight-directed, and not based on a one-size-fits-all model. Homeschoolers regularly promote various teaching strategies that incorporate customization ("Educational Approaches and Methods," 2002), and the National Challenged Homeschoolers Associated Network (www.nathhan.com) encourages parents of special-needs children to develop personalized opportunities for their children to learn. Having observed the individual growth of each of their children since birth, parents naturally watch, evaluate, teach, provide feedback, and customize for their children.

Customizing for Special Needs and Talents

Duvall, Ward, Delquadri, and Greenwood (1997) found that homeschooling parents of learning disabled children "can create powerful instructional environments for their children" (p. 150)

and that their children achieve more academically than do their peers in public schools. Ensign (2000) found that homeschooling parents of a child with learning disabilities are more likely to go at the child's speed, provide one-on-one tutoring, and expect their child to blossom, with the result that the child does well academically.

The same learning environment is also a boon for gifted children. They can "develop in multifaceted ways and pursue interests without time and curriculum constraints" (Ensign, 1997). They can receive one-on-one teaching, guidance, and encouragement from their parents; they are free to go at their own pace in every subject; and they can regularly take advantage of resources outside the confines of a school's walls.

Following Students' Interests

In an environment that respects their individual traits, homeschooled students can take advantage of their flexible schedules and academic requirements to jump into internships, apprenticeships, field trips, volunteer service, jobs, trade schools, and college.

For example, 15-year-old Michael was intrigued with mechanical objects. His homeschooling parents kept him involved with the standard college preparatory subjects in case he wanted to go the university route. At the same time, they gave him large doses of outdoor work and arranged an apprenticeship with a local auto mechanic two days each week.

Keely, 13, decided to serve as a volunteer legislative intern for an Oregon state legislator throughout a four-month session. She did general clerical work, prepared files on specific pieces of legislation, and ran errands for the lawmaker. Intellectually above average, Keely has a penchant for creative writing and social activities. Now, at age 16 and still studying at

speech and debate classes and participated in competitive debates. He started college courses at home at age 16, and two years later went to Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, Virginia, for a degree in government. He has done well academically, and with a partner will represent their college at a national forensics competition.

Sharing the Benefits of Customization

Differentiating instruction to meet the individual needs of student, family, and community is the ideal kind of education. With individualized curriculum and instruction, "the teacher can provide the student with sustained personalized attention" (Good & Brophy, 1987, p. 352).

researchers should also study home-based education and talk with homeschoolers. Professional educators can rediscover simple practices that optimize customization and students' learning success. Research on homeschooling (Thomas, 1998) shows that uncomplicated but regular and detailed observation by the teacher, a focus on the individual student rather than on grade level, a social and physical environment more like home, strong doses of personal attention, and unsophisticated pedagogical techniques lead to student success. ■

'Some students' names have been changed.

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home, she is completing a detective novel and would like to be a writer and a mother.

Daniel is the oldest of six children. He was always homeschooled and was never tested for IQ, learning disabilities, or giftedness. His mother says that if he had been, professionals probably would have labeled him with an attention deficit disorder. His mother reports,

We didn't even make him sit down; even until high school, he would pace the floor while reciting spelling words, math facts, scripture, or anything that didn't require sitting at a desk. When working at a desk was necessary, we made him sit down, but we put the activities in time frames that worked.

Starting at age 12, Daniel scored in high percentiles on annual standardized academic achievement tests. When he was 13 years old and developed a special interest in politics, he took

Homeschoolers may not always customize as much as is possible, but home-based education is by nature friendly to customization. Flexible schedules, small class size, high parental involvement, and much feedback from adults are natural elements of home-based education (Ray, 2000b). These endemic elements should make it no surprise to observers that homeschool students, as a group, are doing well. Perhaps there is potential for even better results.

Homeschooling parents should focus on the benefits of customizing the education of their children. They should not follow unfruitful instructional approaches simply because they experienced them when they were students. Parents can look to sources from literature on homeschooling (Hood, 1994; Taylor, 1997) and on differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2000, 2001).

Schoolteachers, administrators, and

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Making the Homeschool Connection

Homeschooled students in Arizona's Kyrene School District spend one day a week in a public school setting.

Mark G. Eley

Homeschooled students can come to the CASA Vida Homeschool Enrichment Center to supplement their home curriculum and interact with other students.



Photos by Trudy Adams

It's Friday morning, and Sharon Morgan is getting her two younger children ready for school. Joshua, 7, is last, as usual. Rebecca, 11, was ready 30 minutes before everyone else, eager to get to school and chat with her friends. The two siblings pile into the family van with their mother and brother Derek, 13, and

head off to school. Joshua and Rebecca's day will include instruction by certified teachers in such subjects as science, technology, Spanish, oral communication, art, music, and physical education. What is different for these students is that their instruction Monday through Thursday takes place at home. The Morgans are one of many families customizing their children's education by combining homeschooling and public school instruction.

The Arizona legislature's commitment to choice in education has encouraged a proliferation of private and charter schools and other education alternatives. In response to this competitive education market, the Kyrene School District, a K-8 district with an enrollment of approximately 19,000, has developed creative programs and made them available to its 350 homeschooled students.

One such program is the CASA (Community-Assisted Schooling Alternatives) Vida Homeschool Enrichment