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ABSTRACT

Homeschooling is a practice in which children are not sent to school but instead learn at home under their parents' supervision. The present research examined how children who were home-schooled, compared with children attending school, perceived learning. It included interviews of 50 elementary-school-age children (25 who were homeschooled and 25 who attended school) regarding their perceptions of learning. The findings indicated that in both groups, the children held mainly traditional views of learning, in which the subjects are academic and physical, and less associated with life skills. Possible explanations of the findings are suggested and ideas for further research that would shed light on learning in homeschooling are discussed.

Introduction

In the framework of homeschooling, children do not attend school, but instead study at home, under their parents' supervision (Neuman and Aviram 2003, 2008). Throughout most of human history homeschooling was a common educational practice. Parents, not the state, bore the responsibility for the education of children. Accordingly, most children did not enjoy general education; if they studied at all, it was in the form of vocational training. Only a very small percentage of children benefited from general education and learned to read and write (Evangelisti 2013; Wilhelm and Firmin 2009).

During the industrial revolution, along with the processes of urbanisation and the employment of large portions of the population to factory work, the public education system developed and laws were enacted to guarantee that children would attend the public schools and enjoy an education. With the transition to state-sponsored mandatory education, the responsibility and authority of parents over their children's education was diminished and homeschooling became a rare occurrence (Gaither 2008; Hiatt 1994).

In the last third of the twentieth century, homeschooling emerged once again. The practice began growing in different countries in the Western world, particularly the United States and England. Parents chose not to charge the state with responsibility for their children's education, and instead to educate them themselves, including determining of the curriculum: what they would learn, how they would learn, and when they would learn.

In recent decades, homeschooling has become more popular and, correspondingly, in some countries, mandatory education laws have been adapted so that under certain conditions, homeschoolers are able to fulfil the mandatory education requirement (Blok and Karsten 2011; Levy 2004; Lines 2000). This has also been expressed in an increased number of children being educated at home. In the 1970s, there were about 13,000 children being homeschooled in the US; recent estimates put the number at over two million. In England, the number of children studying at home is approximately 80,000. In Israel, the first instances of homeschooling were seen about twenty years ago. At the time, about 60 families taught their children. There are now over 400 children studying in this framework in Israel (Davis 2006; Neuman and Guterman 2017; Ray 2011).

The decision to opt for homeschooling, at least for young children of elementary and junior-high-school age is made by their parents; thus, it could be argued that homeschooling can be understood primarily as a "story" of parents and not of children. Accordingly, the parents should be considered the main source of information for research on homeschooling, in general, and on the reasons for choosing homeschooling, in particular.

Indeed, many studies have examined the reasons underlying parents' decisions to take their children out of school and educate them at home. Some of the most common reasons include dissatisfaction with the existing education system, problems associated with the personal security of children, ideological reasons, negative relationships of the students with their peers, negative experiences of parents when they were students, pro-family reasons, and others (see, e.g., Green and Hoover-Dempsey 2007; Ice and Hoover-Dempsey 2011; Isenberg 2007; Kunzman and Gaither 2013; National Center for Education Statistics 2008).

In the United States, an extensive survey is conducted once every few years that includes, among other things, aspects of education (the National Household Education Survey). Analyses of this survey over time have shown that, the main factors in the decision of parents to homeschool have been related to pedagogy and school environment (Bielick 2008; Noel, Stark, and Redford 2013; Princiotta and Bielick 2006). Ninety-one percent of the homeschooling parents said that concern about the school environment and climate was the most important reason for choosing to homeschool (Noel, Stark, and Redford 2013). Kunzman (2009) also reported that according to the 2007 survey of the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES), 88% of the parents who homeschooled identified "concern about the environment" at conventional schools as a significant factor in their choice of homeschooling. Parents who homeschooled believed they could provide a better educational experience for the children than the schools could, and were willing to sacrifice their time, money, and professional development for this purpose.

In addition to these research findings, a previous study conducted with a population of homeschoolers in Israel revealed that the choice of homeschooling could be seen in a broader perspective. The parents who homeschooled ascribed not only pedagogical significance to their choice; in fact, they considered homeschooling a holistic practice that influenced all aspects of life, including lifestyle and sense of family (Neuman and Guterman 2017). If homeschooling is a holistic practice, it inevitably influences educational process, as well. Examination of the educational process as an aspect of life and not a separate process

is consistent with the constructivist view of instruction and learning. Indeed, another study conducted on this subject (Neuman and Guterman 2016c) suggested that in some cases, parents who taught their children at home embraced constructivist educational approaches. According to the constructivist paradigm, learning is a part of daily life, and authentic, relevant learning results from inner drive. Such learning is based on subject matter that interests the learners; it takes place in a way that interests them, at a time that is suitable for them, and it requires concentration of skills of self-direction. Such learning also differs essentially from the learning that takes place in the conventional education system, and it inevitably dictates the study of different subject matter in different ways (Neuman and Guterman 2016c). This is expressed not only in the learning processes, but in the processes of assessing the learning products, as well (Neuman and Guterman 2016a).

While the research described earlier examined parent's perception of education, it might be interesting to also examine the objects of the learning process – the children. The purpose of the present study was to examine how children perceive education. Are the more holistic educational views and the constructivist approach found amongst parents also expressed amongst children.

A holistic view of education and learning views the goals of these activities as more than imparting knowledge in mathematics, science, history, and the like. The question arises whether children who are homeschooled share this broader view of learning. For instance, when asked to give examples of learning, will they focus more on factors such as developing self-awareness, personal happiness, life skills, creativity, and the like or will they focus on more conventional aspects such as subject matter?

In previous research, differences were found between children who were home-schooled and those who attended school in several respects, such as emotional and behavioural characteristics (Guterman and Neuman 2017). In light of these findings the present study compares attitude towards learning amongst home schooled children and school attending children.

The hypothesis of the present research was that the children who were home-schooled would differ from those attending school in the way they perceived learning; specifically, it was expected that the homeschooled children would demonstrate a more holistic and broader perspective on learning, in the spirit of the constructivist approach, compared with the children who attended school.

Method

The purpose of the research was to examine the perception of learning, in terms of content, among children who were homeschooled, and to compare this with the perception of learning among children who attended school.

Instruments

For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were held with children. In the interviews, the children were asked three questions about the subject matter they learned: What do you think is important to study?; What do you like studying?; and Please give an example of something you learned recently. The assumption was that by means of

these three questions, it would be possible to collect a variety of subjects of study, as perceived by the interviewees.

Research population

The research included 50 children of elementary-school age. Twenty-five of them were homeschooled (Interviewees 1–25), and 25 studied at schools (Interviewees 26–50). The age range of the children was 6.08 years to 12.7 years, with an average of 8.90 years and a standard deviation of 1.67 years. In order to examine whether there was a difference between the two groups in the children's ages, an independent samples t test was conducted. The results showed no difference between the groups in the ages of the children, $t(48) = 1.34$, $p > .05$.

The average number of children per family was 3.06, with a standard deviation of 1.10. In order to examine whether there was a difference between the two groups in terms of number of children per family, an independent samples t test was conducted. The results of the analysis showed no difference between the groups in this respect, $t(48) = 1.16$, $p < .05$.

Procedure

The interviews were held in the children's homes. The interviewers arranged a convenient time for the visit with the parents. During the visit, the interviewers presented each parent with the purpose of the research, the procedure, and the means of data analysis, and the parent signed an informed consent document. Then the interview with the child took place. It included several "ice-breaking" questions and games, intended to create a good atmosphere. Then the child was asked the three main interview questions. After that, the interviewer and the child conversed freely. The interviews were recorded with two recording devices and transcribed afterwards.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted using Atlas ti software. The written interviews were entered into the program and divided into two groups of data – children who were homeschooled and children who attended schools. After this division, the thematic analysis was conducted in three stages (in accordance with Giorgi 1975), for each of the two research groups separately.

In the first stage, the children's answers to the three main questions were identified. In the second stage, each answer was given a title that described the theme mentioned. In the third stage, the themes were divided into super-categories. At the end of the second stage, each of the themes that arose in the interviews was classified as belonging to one of the super-categories.

In order to test the reliability of the analysis, the peer debriefing method, as described in Lincoln and Guba (1986) discussion of trustworthiness, was employed. The researcher conducted the first and second stage. When that was completed, the results were sent to a colleague for critical observation. In any case of disagreement between the researcher and the colleague, they discussed it until they reached a consensus.

After that, the researcher performed the third stage. When that was completed, the results of this stage were also sent to the colleague for critical observation. In any case of disagreement between the researchers, a discussion was held until they reached consensus.

Results

In the following, the results for the children who attended school are presented first, followed by those for the children who were homeschooled. For each group, the results are presented according to the super-categories.

Results: children who attended school

Six categories of subject areas emerged from the interviews with the children who attended school: academic subjects, physical activity, life skills, social aspects, values, and "what you want to learn." The following are details of these super-categories, each accompanied by a few examples.

Academic subjects

The interviewees mentioned seven academic subject areas: arithmetic, language, computers, nature and science, history, Bible, and art. In total, they mentioned these areas 53 times.

I learned about animals, that the snake sheds its skin (I already knew that beforehand) and that there are types of snakes that I didn't even know existed. I learned about ... mice whose tails are for their equilibrium, I thought they was just for something else. (31)

Interviewer: *Okay, what do you like to study?*

Child: *Arithmetic.* (37)

Interviewer: *I understand, okay. And tell me, what is most important to learn about, in your view.*

Child: *I don't know how to answer that.*

Interviewer: *What's the first thing that comes to mind?*

Child: *I thought English, because when I go to another country, or a place of city or kibbutz, I need to know how to talk, either Hebrew or English – in the meantime those are the only languages I know how to speak.* (49)

Interviewee: *What do you like learning the most?*

Child: *Art.* (28)

Physical activity

The interviewees noted four areas of physical activity: general sports, martial arts, folk dancing, and gymnastics. In total, physical activity was mentioned 9 times.

Interviewee: *What do you like to study?*

Child: *What I like to study is … sports*. (42)

Interviewee: *Tell me, give me an example of something you've learned lately.*

Child: *Something I learned lately … I learned karate*. (33)

Life skills

The interviewees mentioned 3 areas of life skills: baking and cooking, road safety, and guided imagery. In total, life skills were mentioned 3 times.

Interviewer: *What do you like to study?*

Child: *I like study [name of an enrichment programme].*

Interviewer: *And what do you learn in the enrichment program?*

Child: *I chose Young Chefs.*

Interviewer: *Chefs? What fun.*

Child: *About food from all over the world. We prepare dishes from the world, we actually travel around the world*. (34)

Interviewer: *What do you like to study most?*

Child: *Guided imagery, because … should I tell you why?*

Interviewer: *Guided imagery, do you learn guided imagery in school?*

Child: *Yes, every Wednesday*. (29)

Social aspects

Only one interviewee mentioned the subject of social aspects.

Interviewer: *Give me an example of something you learned lately, something really new. It could be anything.*

Child: *That you can't rely on your best friend.*

Interviewer: *What does that mean?*

Child: *When I watched a TV series called [name of series], if you don't know it, there's a kid there called [name of child], actually a teenager, and his friend lied to him that his father was in prison*. (36)

Values

Only one child mentioned the subject of values.

Interviewer: *What do you think is most important to learn?*

Child: *Education and values.*

Interviewer: *Education and values?*

Child: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *Which values, for instance?*

Child: *At our school, they teach us the value of respect, responsibility, … we learned about every value that exists.* (27)

"Whatever you want." Only one interviewee mentioned that it was important to study what one wants to learn about.

Interviewer: *What is most important to learn, in your view?*

Child: *I think that there isn't something that's most important to learn, I think that if you study all the things you think you want to study and that you can know well, I think that will help you the most.* (26)

Results: children who were homeschooled

Analysis of the interviews of the children who were homeschooled yielded the same six super-categories of subject areas: academic subjects, physical activity, life skills, social aspects, values, and "what you want to learn." The following are details of these super-categories, each accompanied by a few examples.

Academic subjects

The interviewees mentioned five academic subjects: arithmetic, language, computers, nature and science, and art. In total, they mentioned these areas 29 times.

Interviewer: *What do you think is most important to learn?*

Child: *Arithmetic.* (8)

Interviewer: *What do you think is most important to learn?*

Child: *To read and write.* (5)

Interviewer: *What do you like to study?*

Child: *I like theatre club, I really liked being in theatre club.* (10)

Interviewer: *Okay, give me an example of something you learned recently.*

Child: *Recently I learned a lot of English, but …*

Interviewer: *Give me an example of a word or something you learned in English*

Child: *I don't know many words.*

Interviewer: *Then tell me something that you didn't know before and discovered now, that you learned.*

Child: *I don't know, there isn't much, but there are many words, say, "pipe", which is [Hebrew for "pipe"], I didn't know this beforehand, so I ask and learn or … all sorts of things I don't really remember now. I have a lot of words.* (2)

Physical activity

The interviewees mentioned five areas of physical activity: capoeira, dancing, swimming, bike riding, and developing flexibility. In total, physical activity was mentioned 7 times.

Interviewer: *Okay, what things did you learn, say, recently, [tell me] one thing that you learned recently*

Child: *I learned to swim.*

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Child: *Until a few months ago, I didn't know how to swim at all.*

Interviewer: *Okay, how did you learn this?*

Child: *With a teacher in the pool*. (11)

Interviewer: *What do like learning?*

Child: *Capoeira, capoeira also includes to play an instrument for capoeira, not only the movements*. (14).

Life skills

The interviewees mentioned 3 areas of life skills: getting to know oneself, building, and travelling by bus. In total, life skills were mentioned 3 times.

Interviewer: *Give me an example of something you learned recently.*

Child: *I don't know, I learned to travel with Hadas [name of a sister]alone on a bus.*

Interviewer: *Really?*

Child: *We travelled, just the two of us, from Tuvalim Junction to Jerusalem.*

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Child: *And back*. (13)

Interviewer: *What's most important to learn?*

Child: *About myself.*

Interviewer: *It's most important to learn about yourself? Like what, tell me what about yourself?*

Child: *What happens to me, what will happen to me, what's going to be*. (10)

Social aspects

Only one child mentioned social aspects.

Interviewee: *And is there something else you learned recently?*

Child: *Yes, not to let [name of child] throw your marbles from the stairs onto Mom's head.*

Interviewer: *And anything else?*

Child: *Not to annoy [name of child].* (22)

Values

Only one child mentioned values.

Child: *I learned from the book … it's actually a book about the future of humans.*

Interviewer: *And what did you learn from it?*

Child: *That there are no equal relations in the world. That those who have more power can actually do what they want … that those who have power do what they feel like, regardless, and sometimes without consideration. That's what I learned – that there is no justice.* (25)

   "What you want to learn." The area of "what you want to learn" was mentioned three times as an area of learning.

Interviewer: *Tell me, what's most important to study, in your view?*

Child: *If you are someone with a mind like that, then you should study that, if you have a mind like that, learn it.*

Interviewer: *You mean according to what interests you?*

Child: *Say, someone has a mind that suits one thing, so he should study that thing. And if someone else has a mind that is suitable for something else, but he studies the first thing, then it won't help him much.*

Interviewer: *I understand, so according to what suits his mind, that's what's most important for him to study?*

Child: *Yes.* (15)

   Table 1 summarises the findings regarding the areas of learning. The findings are presented according to the super-categories and the areas included in those categories. For each category, the number of times it was mentioned is noted.

Discussion

The research hypothesis of the present study was that differences would be found between children who were homeschooled and children who attended school, in their perceptions of learning. It was expected that children who were homeschooled would demonstrate a broader, more holistic attitude, in the spirit of the constructivist approach, compared with children who attended school.

   Although parents who homeschool In Israel tend to teach in a constructivist manner (Neuman and Guterman 2016a), in the present research, no difference was found between the children who were homeschooled and those who attended school in the tendency towards a constructivist view of learning. Contrary to the hypothesis, the findings suggest that both the children who were homeschooled and those who attended school considered learning mainly in terms of academic and physical subjects

Table 1. Themes and categories, by group.

Children who attended school		Children who were homeschooled	
Super-categories and areas	Times mentioned	Super-categories and area	Times mentioned
Academic subject areas: arithmetic, language, computers, nature and science, history, Bible, and art	53	Academic subject areas: arithmetic, language, computers, nature and science, and art	29
Physical activity: martial arts, folk dancing, and gymnastics	9	Physical activity: capoeira, dancing, swimming, bike riding, and developing flexibility	7
Life skills: baking and cooking, road safety, guided imagery	3	Life skills: self-acquaintance, building, and bus travel	3
Social aspects	1	Social aspects	1
Values	1	Values	1
"What you want to learn"	1	"What you want to learn"	3

of study, and less in terms of learning in the spirit of the constructivist approach (life skills, social aspects, and values).

A possible explanation for these findings might be the focus of the questions asked. In this study, the views of the interviewees regarding the subjects they learned were examined, and the three structured interview questions elicited information on what the children though should be learned, what they liked to learn, what they had learned recently. The ways of learning were not examined in this research. It is possible that the difference among the children in perceptions of learning was not associated with what they learned, but in fact, with how they learned. In that case, a question examining the ways the children learned might have revealed more constructivist views among those who were homeschooled (on this, see also, Neuman and Guterman). It would be interesting in further research to examine the way in which learning takes place, that is, the "how" in addition to the "what" in homeschooling and in conventional schools.

Another possible explanation of the findings might be associated with the possibility that the interviewees responded to the interview on the basis of social desirability. Their actual perception of learning might indeed be broad, with a constructivist character, but perhaps they assumed, based on experience in previous conversations with adults, that the interviewers perceived learning as something more traditional. In that case, the children might have presumed that the questions refereed to academic subjects, and therefore responded on the basis of what they thought to be the interviewer's perspective.

The findings might also be understood based on the possibility that despite the message that the children received at home, which might be of constructivist nature, social influences affected the children's view of learning no less, and perhaps even more, than their parents did. The views might be conveyed to children in difference ways: in social encounters with children who attended school, via the television, the internet, or by means of a clear message regarding mobility in society, which requires formal study of the different disciplines in academic institutions.

A few limitations of the research warrant mention. First, in this study, two groups of children – children being homeschooled and children attended school – were compared. In further research, examination of children who are homeschooled as well as their parents could provide deeper insights regarding the findings. Such research would

provide information on the relationship between the attitudes of the parents and those of their children.

Second, it is important to remember that the research focused on a specific sample. It is important to examine the same aspects in other countries and other populations. Further research of this type is likely to shed light on the social-cultural context of the research questions.

Third, the present research looked at a group of children who were homeschooled as a single bloc, and children who attended school as a single block, but there may be differences among the children educated under different educational approaches. Accordingly, it would be interesting to conduct additional research, that will take into consideration the different educational approaches to learning in schools (for example democratic schools, community schools, and the like), and in homeschooling (such as, unschooling or structured homeschooling). In addition, it would be interesting in future research to ask homeschooled children whether they experienced learning at schools and do they know from their own experience how children learn at school.

These limitations notwithstanding, the present research offers a contribution to research in this field. In terms of methodology, the present study expanded the examination of the perceptions of children who are homeschooled, by using matched groups of children studying at schools. Such use of comparable groups is essential to research of this issue, as it enables identification of disparities between the groups.

Furthermore, from the theoretical perspective, the present research helps broaden the lens of previous studies that have been conducted regarding the holistic character of the practice of homeschooling, as seen by the parents, and on the constructivist learning perceptions of parents who homeschool. The present study examined the perceptions not of the parents, as many studies have done, but of the objects of the learning process – the children. In this respect, the examination of the views of the children and the surprising findings of the present research highlight the need for further studies on the subject, to clarify children's perceptions of learning and the relationship between these and those of their parents.

Finally, from the practical perspective, the results of this research may be useful to homeschooling parents, informing the examination of their success in achieving educational goals, such as imparting perceptions of learning. The research findings may also assist professionals who supervise homeschooling families in distinguishing between the perceptions and interests of parents and those of their children.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Ari Neuman is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education at the Western Galilee College in Israel where he chairs the Education Systems Management Division.

He is interested in home schooling as the ultimate form of parental involvement in their child's

education, and also as a parental response to the crisis in education.

Dr. Neuman's research explores the process of choosing to home school, the reasons for this choice, the significance of the choice itself, and the ramifications for home schooling families. He also explores the overall significance of the home schooling phenomena and its role in better understanding education today and in the future.

Dr. Neuman is also interested in program evaluation, an activity in which he has been engaged for more than 15 years, and co-chairs a private consultancy firm called the "Muvanim – Evaluation Team."

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