

# The Evolution of Homeschooling in North America

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the development and current state of homeschooling in North America, which has seen consistent growth since the 1970s, particularly in the United States. The growth in popularity, as well as an increase in advocacy groups in both Canada and the United States, has seen a corresponding increase in research. While much of the research suffers from issues in sampling and bias, general findings seem to indicate neutral or positive educational outcomes. This paper also looks into the development of a unique ‘schooling at home’ program in the province of British Columbia in Canada called distributed learning. In general, research and trends suggest ‘schooling at home’ presents possibilities for meeting diverse student and community needs.

Key words: *homeschooling, distributed learning*

## Introduction

While homeschooling was the norm in most civilizations throughout history, it all but disappeared in modern nations at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In North America homeschooling was prevalent until the 1870s, when compulsory education and the training of professional teachers combined to create the physical schools with which cultures around the world are familiar today. However, in the 1970s homeschooling underwent a form of rejuvenation in Canada and the United States. A steady, albeit slow increase over the last 50 years has resulted in a homeschooling population of about 3% of the student population in the United States (Redford, Battle, & Bielick, 2017). In Canada the numbers are smaller, less than 0.5% of the student population, although the numbers may be underestimated (Van Pelt, 2015). Homeschooling in Canada and the United States has not remained a static entity and, has instead, evolved in response to technological developments, the formation of grassroots organizations, and government policy. Along with these developments have come changes in the terms used by proponents; from the earlier terms ‘deschooling’ or ‘unschooling’ to ‘homeschooling’ as well as ‘distributed learning’ or ‘blended learning’ today. This paper will outline some of the developments in homeschooling, with a general focus on North America, but concluding with a closer look at the development of a distributed learning program in the Canadian province of British Columbia, and its implications for the future of homeschooling.

## Regulation of homeschooling in Canada and the United States

There is no national ministry of education in Canada as each province and territory is tasked with establishing their own educational policies. While in early Canadian history most children were educated at home, the growth of public education at the outset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Canada (and around the world in most advanced countries) resulted in a situation where the vast majority of children were educated in public, and some private, school systems. Still homeschooling, also referred to as unschooling, deschooling, and elective learning (Bosetti & Van Pelt, 2017) has always been an option for Canadian families, unlike the United States where it was still illegal in 30 states as recently as 1980. The defining feature of homeschooling is “that parents take the final responsibility for the selection, management, provision, and supervision of their child’s education program that education occurs largely outside of an institutional setting” (Ven Pelt, 2015, p.3). While legal in Canada, homeschooling was extremely rare outside of remote areas with few options until the 1960s and 1970s. The resurgence in both the United States and Canada was led by two very different ideological groups, a conservative Christian community concerned with the increased secularization of public education, and a counterculture movement of the liberal left (Murphy, 2012). Homeschooling has continued to grow in Canada, albeit very slowly, since then. The current population still constitutes a very small share of total student enrollment in Canada, from a miniscule 0.1 percent in the province of Quebec to a highest percentage of 1.5 % in

Manitoba (Fraser Institute, 2018). Along with the growth in the numbers of children being homeschooled has come increasing societal acceptance of homeschooling as a valid educational choice. A poll taken in 1985 in the United States showed that only 16% of families surveyed considered homeschooling a good thing. This number had risen to 41% by 2001 (Rose & Gallup, 2001). While legal in all 10 Canadian provinces, regulations vary by province. In most provinces, parents opting to homeschool still need to register their child with the local school board and require that parents comply with each province's respective Education or School Act. What this means in practice is not clear. Basham, Merrifield, & Hepburn (2007) note that this simply means that "the provincial government insists only upon the homeschooled child receiving 'satisfactory' instruction in the home environment" (p.6). They also note that the provinces of Alberta, Newfoundland, and Saskatchewan require parents submit an application before children are allowed to homeschool. Alberta, Manitoba and the Northwest Territories require the approval of the homeschool curricula. Alberta, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Saskatchewan require an annual report of student progress. Only Alberta requires provincial testing and no province in Canada requires that parents possess teaching qualifications. Clearly, homeschooling in Canada is very loosely regulated, led by parents that need not have any teaching qualifications, often devoid of any supervision of the curriculum nor any accountability in terms of testing. In the United States homeschooling has been legal in all 50 states since 1993. As with Canadian provinces, states vary in the amount of regulation of homeschooling. Highly regulated states include supervision over curriculum and testing as well as regular visits to homes. Moderately regulated states require parents to send notification and test scores and/or professional evaluation of students' progress. The most loosely regulated states do not require that the parents initiate any contact with the state educational authorities at all. In general, homeschooling is loosely supervised, with 41 states having no minimum academic standards for families that homeschool (Basham et al., 2007).

### **The Motivation for Homeschooling**

As the number of families opting for homeschooling has increased, the reasons for doing so have also increased from the original ideologically driven movements in the 1960s and 70s. While in the early homeschooling movement liberal counterculture parents were more numerous than their religious counterparts, today homeschooling families are more likely than other families to be religious, particularly in the United States where one news report estimated that 75% of American home schoolers were practicing Christians (Livni, 2000). Still, it would be a misrepresentation to collectively paint all homeschooling parents with the religious fundamentalist brush. Basham (2001) found that some parents opted for homeschooling due to dissatisfaction with public schooling in terms of academic performance, discipline, or concerns regarding the physical and emotional safety of the learning environment. This dissatisfaction with public schooling seems to be quite widespread. Basham et al. (2007) note that polls consistently show more than 50% of Canadians expressing some level of dissatisfaction with public education. They cite the following summary of reasons for homeschooling (p. 10).

- The opportunity to impart a particular set of values and beliefs.
- Higher academic performance through one-on-one instruction.
- The opportunity to develop closer and stronger parent-child relationships.
- The opportunity for the child to experience high-quality interaction with peers and adults.
- The lack of discipline in public schools.
- The opportunity to escape negative peer pressure.
- The expense of private schools.
- A physically safer environment in which to learn.

Van Pelt (2003) notes the motivation for pursuing homeschooling was less about avoiding perceived shortcomings in the public-school system than a desire to achieve specific goals such as teaching from a framework of beliefs and values, promoting family interaction, or individualizing education. Davies and Aurini (2003) note that homeschoolers increasingly share a culture of 'pedagogical individualism' that emphasizes tailoring education to meet the needs of individual students. Some parents may have opted for homeschooling due to having a child with a physical or mental disability (Bosetti & Van Pelt, 2017). Another impetus behind the growth in homeschooling is technological advances, particularly the growth of the Internet, that have made learning more accessible at home and helped to connect groups of homeschooling parents into communities offering validation and support. Discussions by the author with a homeschooling administrator, teacher, and mother found similar 'push' and 'pull' motivations behind the option to homeschool. The push comes from dissatisfaction with the regular school education system

(both public and private), and concerns regarding school environments. The 'pull' comes from the belief that homeschooling can result in better educational outcomes, both academic and personal.

### **The Research on Homeschooling**

There are a number of pervasive issues in drawing unequivocal conclusions regarding the research done to date on homeschooling. One is that, as Kunzman and Gaither (2013) note, the research is primarily qualitative in nature.

While many of these studies are ambitious and imaginative, taken as a whole, homeschooling research has an anecdotal quality it has yet to transcend. (p.50)

Relatively small sample sizes and the sparsity of comprehensive data are hurdles to overcome when dealing with an educational system that is, by its very nature, isolated to individual homes and outside the realms of the public education sphere and therefore the systematic collection of data. The homeschooling student population is also not a representative sample of the student population of Canada or the United States, and this makes comparisons to the general student population problematic. A second issue is that much of the literature cited here is politically motivated. A primary source of research is from organizations whose purpose can be skewed towards promoting and supporting homeschooling such as that produced by think tanks such as the Cato Institute in the United States and The Fraser Institute in Canada. A final issue with regards to this paper is the research tends to be concentrated in the United States, with much less in Canada. Still, some of the findings have been consistent and some tentative conclusions can be drawn.

### ***Demographics***

A survey of homeschooling families by Planty, Hussar, Snyder, Kena, KewalRamani, Kemp, Bianco, & Dinkes (2009) showed that American homeschooling families are primarily two-parent families (89%) with a slight majority of families with one working parent (54%). Those numbers deviate significantly from the national average (73% and 21% respectively). They also report slightly higher education levels and household income. One consistent finding that holds true across research is that mothers primarily take responsibility for home instruction (McDowell, 2000; Morton, 2010; Stevens, 2001). That finding appears to be true in Canada although Van Pelt (2003) found that one third of homeschooling mothers in Canada do generate income. In both Canada and the United States, family sizes of homeschooling families do tend to be larger than the average (Van Pelt, 2003). Homeschooling children also tend to be younger. Isenberg (2007) found that homeschooling grows less common as children age, with only 48% of children from religious homes and 15% from secular homes continuing to homeschool for more than 6 years.

### ***Curricula and practice***

The inevitable variety of practices where curriculum decisions are dispersed across homes, and the difficulty in getting access to these homes, have made research into curriculum and teaching practices very difficult. What is taught and how it is taught is inextricably intertwined with the motivation to homeschool and one consistently discussed and researched issue in the United States has been the dichotomy between 'ideologues' and 'pedagogues' first noted by Van Galen (1988). These dichotomies can result in strikingly different teaching practices.

The ideologues are the conservative Christians who typically prosecuted their home schools much like the traditional schools they had left behind, complete with formal curriculum, tight schedules, authority-figure teacher, and so on, but suffused with religious content. Pedagogues, in contrast, reacted not to the secularism of public education but to its formalism, choosing to use the home as a haven from the regimentation and drill of institutional schooling. (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013, p. 13)

Of course, not all homeschooling parents fall neatly into one category or another. Hanna (2012) found that 47% of respondents self-identified as 'ideologues', 25% as pedagogues, and 26% as both (Hanna, 2012). No matter where they fall in the spectrum, research has indicated that parents tend to move from trying to reproduce traditional schooling at home towards a more eclectic and less structured approach as they gain experience homeschooling (Colman, 2010; Gaither, 2009). This shift seems to be motivated as much by time management as ideology, because attempting to replicate the school curriculum at home can be very demanding for parents.

All homeschooling families have a number of curriculum options including various commercial options that were originally a 'curriculum in a box' purchases but have moved increasingly online. A study of homeschooling families found that they traditionally relied heavily on libraries (Furness, 2008) and, increasingly the Internet (Hanna, 2012) as sources of information. Safran (2009, 2010) found that many homeschooling families also rely on informal networks for support and ideas. The least formal of these support groups could be homeschooling mothers that meet in homes or playgrounds for encouragement and to exchange ideas. 'Timetabled' groups would be more formal and involve pooled resources and a common open space. The most formal of these networks would be 'mom schools' where one homeschooling mother would offer teaching expertise to the other homeschooling families and 'co-op groups' that offer an educational experience more resembling traditional schooling. In co-ops families provide classes taught by parents and even hire experts in rented facilities. Hana (2012) found that as children get older families are more likely to rely on networks outside the home, including co-ops and internet resources. Anthony (2015) has stressed the importance of these educational supports in helping bridge the gap between the advantages of institutional schools and homeschooling.

### *Academic Achievement*

Research on academic achievement suffers from the same design flaws of other research, mostly critically in unrepresentative samples. While much has been written about research showing higher levels of academic achievement for homeschooling children, many of the studies that received significant press coverage were done under the sponsorship of Homeschooling Legal Defense Association, a nonprofit advocacy association for homeschooling (Ray, 1994; Ray, 2010). They relied on self-report from volunteers under the explicit promise the data would be used to advocate for homeschooling. When compared to the national average in the United States homeschooling children consistently performed in the top 80<sup>th</sup> percentile in the United States. However, few conclusions can be drawn from this data when, as Kuzman & Gaither (2013) note about the 2010 study by Ray:

...the sample of 11,739 homeschooled children came from families that were 95% Christian, 91.7% white, 97.7% married, 80% with stay-at-home moms, and 45.9% with incomes over \$80,000 per year (p.16).

Belfield (2005), in a study that controlled for family background found results much less dramatic: SAT scores for homeschooled seniors were slightly better than predicted in verbal scores and slightly worse on math scores. A 2011 study by Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse (2011) in Canada compared homeschooling children to demographically-paired students of regular schools, and found that structured homeschoolers performed moderately better than the regularly schooled pairs, but that unstructured homeschoolers performed worse. Other research has indicated that homeschooling may dampen the typically negative effects of low family socioeconomic background (Murphy, 2012), race (Ray, 2015), as well as the existence of special needs students (Duvall, 2004). Parental background and motivation for homeschooling also play an important role in homeschooler achievement. Belfield (2005) found greater variance in SAT scores by family background among homeschooling children than children in regular schools. Kunzman (2009) also found significant differences in instructional quality among homeschooling families with parents of higher educational background. Research in Canada by Van Pelt (2003) found statistically higher scores on the Canadian Achievement Test for homeschooling elementary age children whose parents reported academic motivations for pursuing homeschooling. An interesting study in 2004 by Barwegen, Falciani, Putnam, Reamer, & Star compared ACT results between homeschoolers and public high school seniors found that the critical variable was parental involvement, where public school students with high parental involvement scoring as high as homeschoolers. This study makes intuitive sense as the choice to homeschool would seem to eliminate parents with low levels of involvement in their children's education. It would be interesting to see more studies on achievement control for this variable.

The most one could conclude from the research on academic achievement is there may be some small academic gains resulting from homeschooling, but those gains are mediated by other, more significant factors such as the socio-economic status and educational background of the parents as well as the type and quality of the instruction received. Conversely, there is little to no evidence that homeschooling, despite the lack of systematic oversight, has a negative impact on academic achievement.

### *Socialization*

For many people a common, if not primary, concern regarding homeschooling would be the impact of removing children from

the highly social school environment. Many studies focusing on social skills and finding results favorable to homeschooling have the same methodological problem of sampling already described in this paper and also tend to rely on self-reports of students and/or their parents. Some studies have tried to control for these problems including Shyers (1992), who used a double-blind protocol of behavioral observations of 70 homeschoolers and 70 students from public schools and found significantly fewer problem behaviors among homeschoolers between the age of eight and ten. Knowles and Muchmore (1995) conducted life interviews on adults that had been homeschooled (10 homeschooled adults from a total pool of 46) and found no indication that being homeschooled had disadvantaged them socially and may have contributed to a sense of independence and self-determination. Later research on the social integration of homeschoolers in a college setting (Galloway & Sutton, 1995; Sutton & Galloway, 2000) found that homeschoolers were doing at least as well as their institutionally educated peers in social behavior and leadership. Some research has supported the intuitive expectation that home schoolers would be more likely to experience social isolation and be less peer-oriented than students at regular schools (Delahooke, 1986; Shirkey, 1987). Other research has suggested that lower dependence on peer relationships may actually have had a positive effect on homeschooled students, with those students showing less concern about fluctuating social status (Medline, 2000; Reavis & Zakriski, 2005).

### **Values**

Related research has focused on the formation of values through education. Some have argued that homeschooling can prevent the full development of the autonomy to critically reflect on values and commitments and may restrict exposure to a wider variety of ideas and perspectives (Reich, 2008; Blokhuis, 2010; West, 2009; Buss, 2000). Many religious homeschooling families in an increasingly secularized public school system might have a different perspective than society at large as to what would constitute a positive values outcome. In fact, for many families the choice to home school is a counterculture endeavor that could include an ethos of resisting authority and questioning professional expertise (Meighan, 1984). Skepticism among wide segments of the American population, including the religious right, regarding issues on which there is broad scientific consensus such as vaccination, climate change, and the dangers of COVID 19 (McDuffie, 2020), could be a cause for concern. Public schooling is an important part of a democratic society's efforts to prepare its citizens for respectful and positive engagement in the public sphere. Some see the rise in homeschooling as a part of a greater shift in the United States towards privatization of the education and a skepticism of the state and its public schools (Nemer, 2004). Others have argued that homeschooling is part of a shift that could weaken a sense of mutual civic obligation and tolerance (Balmer, 2007; Lubienski, 2000; Ross, 2010). Moss (1995) argued that home schoolers view their efforts as a means to re-establish critical local communities that have weakened in modern society. In conclusion, it might seem intuitive to connect the development of homeschooling in the United States, with its demographic skewing towards the religious right, to the broader deterioration of political discourse also tending to break down at least partially on religious lines (Dias, 2020). Still, there is no research that provides evidence that homeschooling has contributed to this disconnect.

### **Educational options in British Columbia: homeschooling and distributed learning**

The right to homeschool is explicitly stated in Section 12 of the Education Act in British Columbia (Government of British Columbia, 2020). Still, the number of students actually registered as homeschoolers is very low: 2258 out of a total student population of more than 500,000 (British Columbia Home Educator's Association, 2020). One reason for those very low numbers is a shift from homeschooling to distributed learning. The main distinction between distributed learning (DL) and homeschooling is

...while homeschooling is the responsibility of the parent, the distributed learning program, although it takes place in the home, enrolls the student in a public or independent distributed-learning school, is directed and supervised by a teacher certified by British Columbia's Teacher Regulation Branch, and meets the provincial standards for education (Van Pelt, 2015, p. 17).

This is a significant development because of its popularity, particularly among families sending children to private schools (British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2019), but also because it is indicative of a trend towards the blurring of lines between homeschooling and regular institutional schooling.

The DL program in British Columbia (BC) can be seen as an evolution from a long-standing K-12 correspondence education program in the province. BC began incorporating distance learning in 1919 (Stack, 1990), primarily to deal with a relatively

small population spread out over a large geographical area. Winkelmans (2010) identifies three stages in the evolution of what was eventually called Distributed Learning.' The first stage was the 'centralised correspondence education' from 1919 to 1984 that had started with just 86 students from remote areas in 1919, 13 of whom were living in lighthouses. The whole program was run from central office in the capital of B.C., Victoria. The second stage was the 'decentralised distance education administration' from 1984 to 1996, in which responsibility for overseeing correspondence education was delegated to nine regions, although the Ministry of Education retained responsibility for curriculum decisions. Distance learning was renamed as 'Distributed Learning' (DL) in 2006 and, by 2008 included about 3 percent of the entire student population; having grown by more than 2000 percent between 2001 and 2008 (Winkelmans, 2010). Students participating in DL were no longer referred to as 'homeschoolers' but were considered students who were 'schooled at home.' With this change in wording, and administration, came a critical bump in public funding. While a homeschooled student was only eligible for CAD\$250, a schooled at home student was eligible to receive CAD\$5500 (Horsburgh, 2005). Unsurprisingly, some of the growth in DL came at the expense of homeschooling numbers as families shifted to DL from traditional homeschooling.

Up until April of 2020, funding for DL was received through provincially recognized programs, either 'virtual' DL schools, or accredited brick-and-mortar schools. Virtual schools have been in existence in Canada since the mid 1990s and Barker, Wendel, and Richmond (1999) defined a virtual school as "one that offers the mandated provincial instructional program to students through web-based means (i.e., computer-mediated and online via the Internet)" (p. 2). Further, they described a virtual school as being "characterized by a structured learning environment under the direct supervision of a teacher, web-based delivery to home or in a setting other than that of the teacher" (p. 2). There are two categories of accredited DL schools in BC, with Group 1 (fully verified for more than one year) receiving 63% of public-school funding and Group 2 schools (schools that have passed the preliminary external evaluation but are still in the first year of operation) receiving 44.1 percent of public-school funding. These rates were reduced in May of 2020 to 50% and 35% percent respectively, a decision not without controversy (Luymes, 2020). A DL school principal noted that this coincided with a spike in enrollment that was primarily a result of the COVID 19 epidemic and, coming with little warning, resulted in a complete budget overhaul for the school, including an increase in the fees parents were expected to pay. Despite the cutbacks in funding, the principal stated that demand for DL is at an all-time high, and that there was significant growth in the virtual school over the past 6 months.

The DL program in BC is born out of the political, geographic, and demographical characteristics of the province. It is a response to changing technologies and pedagogies, with a focus on student choice and local school autonomy. It has also proven to be a popular option for homeschooling families that should have significant implications for the future of homeschooling and education as a whole. While allowing for quality control and curriculum oversight it provides an option to traditional classroom-based models of school organization and governance.

## Conclusions

A critical part of the growth of modern countries included the development of mass education in government administered brick-and-mortar schools. Yet homeschooling has remained an option for a minority of families and children in many countries and has undergone a bit of a comeback in North America. While inconclusive, the research does seem to indicate that homeschooling, despite being mostly devoid of rigorous educational oversight and governance, has little to no negative effects on children's educational and social development, and may indeed have a positive effect. The development of distributed learning in British Columbia has also blurred the lines between 'homeschooling' and 'schooling at home' while reintroducing government oversight and control. The current COVID crisis, with a huge increase in the number of children receiving education in their own homes around the world, will no doubt raise awareness of non-traditional schooling options. For modern societies and their education systems, homeschooling, or 'schooling at home', may present a flexible option to better meet the needs of some families and communities than traditional schools. For example, in Japan, homeschooling could be an option to meet the needs of a growing number of students who have dropped out of traditional schools. Additionally, if the current demographic trends continue, thousands of rural towns and communities across Japan could lose schools over the coming decades. A flexible response to this demographic trend could include homeschooling options. Certainly, nontraditional schooling options should be part of the dialogue as education systems respond to evolving technology and the needs of students in a rapidly changing world.

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