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Peterson, Brooke M. *The Advantages and Disadvantages of Unschooling with Regards to Academic Success and Social Development*

### **Abstract**

Unschooling is a form of homeschooling that allows students to guide their own learning while providing minimal structure. Unschooling is believed, by those who practice it, to provide numerous opportunities of growth for students. Students are able to freely learn what they choose while eliminating the stress of constant evaluation that mainstream students so often encounter. While there are clear advantages to unschooling, some have found there to be disadvantages as well. This paper will discuss the observed academic and social development ramifications that unschooling may have as a form of less structured homeschooling.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Sarah spent her entire first grade year learning about presidents. She is seven and has not yet learned to read or do mathematics, but instead has learned the United States president's middle names and where they were born. Sarah's parents claim they are not at all worried and are confident that Sarah will learn what most other students her age are learning such as spelling, reading, mathematics, etc. Sarah's family is part of a movement called "Unschooling." Unschooling is a form of homeschooling that usually involves a less structured learning environment in which the student guides his or her own learning. The student's learning choice is then complimented with real world experiences such as field trips in the community. There are both advantages and disadvantages to a student learning through the unschooling method (Shinn, 2009).

Homeschooling overall has increasingly gained in popularity. Over 2 million children were reported learning at home in 2011, which increased 75% since 1999 (Slatter, 2011). According to the Department of Education's National Center for Education, homeschooling has risen by 36% in the years between 2004 and 2009 (Schilling, 2009). Reports have shown the positive influences of homeschooling. The President of National Home Education Research Institute stated that homeschool children rate higher than public and private schools with regards to social, emotional, and psychological development (Ray, 2000). Very little research was found on unschooling, but it is usually considered a type of homeschooling and is also growing in popularity.

Very little research has been done on homeschooling's close relative, unschooling. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude many exact advantages and disadvantages to this practice just yet, but there certainly are some substantial inferences about what unschooling may provide

for its students. Unschooling allows a student to direct his or her own learning, guided by an adult. It operates under the philosophy that, “there is no separation between life and learning” (Paulson, 2000, p. 20).

Those who practice unschooling treat learning as a lifelong, enjoyable process. They identify play as a crucial factor necessary to have in the learning process. O’Rourke (2012) identified play as “not only a pleasure but a necessity for growth, learning and mental health” (p. 30). O’Rourke (2012) argued that play creates a safe place for students to test their own knowledge and competence without the impending fears of rejection or failure. Unschooling parents want their students to participate in natural growth and learning. The issue is that many parents do not know exactly what “natural” learning actually looks like (O’Rourke, 2012). The main reason caregivers choose to homeschool or unschool their children is dissatisfaction with the public school system which tends to provide a greater amount of structure than unschooling and homeschooling (Martin et al., 2011).

The lack of structure involved with unschooling may prove disadvantageous for student’s learning. Unschooling is a form of learning that usually involves little structure, no classrooms, no strict schedules, and no age-segregation (Morrison, 2007). Most school-aged children are at a developmental stage where they need structure and a lot of guidance (Thomas & Wray, 2012). The idea of unschooling allows students to guide their own learning. Some unschooling parents set more structure in place than others, such as by limiting television and video game consumption. Critics argue that without such boundaries in place, students can and likely will sit and watch television or play video games all day (Martin et al., 2011). While this may be a possibility, the authors provided no such evidence of this behavior. The idea of unschooling assumes that children are “naturally curious” and have a desire to thrive and learn that is innate.

Without hindering and limiting such desire, children will learn on their own and grow in ways that make sense to them and help them become highly functioning members of society (Morrison, 2007, p. 43).

### **Statement of the Problem**

There are some resources available regarding the effectiveness and level of student's success regarding unschooling. Some argue that unschooling, as a form of homeschooling, may inhibit a student's social development. At the same time, unschooling may also provide opportunities of learning not otherwise experienced in a structured school setting. Students who are unschooled (much like students who are homeschooled) may also display higher levels of academic success as measured by standardized test scores. Unschooling students have access to similar social relationships as public school students that are beneficial for the development of student's social skills. Unschooling may be a viable alternative to the public school setting, depending on the individual student. Some students thrive with less structure, while others need a bit more direction. While there are serious considerations to take note of and address, unschooling assumes that students are naturally curious and want to learn on their own. By placing strict guidelines on what public school students should learn, educators may be stifling the student's innate desire to learn (Lebeda, 2007; Schilling, 2009).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this thesis was to critically analyze the advantages and disadvantages of unschooling students in Wisconsin in relation to academic achievement and social development, with the hope of providing more information for families contemplating the potential of unschooling their children. A comprehensive review of the literature available during the fall and spring of the 2012 and 2013 school year was completed at the University of Wisconsin- Stout. It

is important for parents and schools to be aware of the implications for students who are unschooled so that effective decisions can be made regarding whether or not students should be unschooled or homeschooled.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions have been developed to discuss and explore the topic of unschooling in relation to relevant scholarly literature:

1. What is unschooling?
2. Are unschooling practices beneficial for students with regards to their academic success?
3. What laws exist to regulate homeschoolers' and unschoolers' academics?
4. Is unschooling related to social deficits in students due to their lack of sufficient interaction with peers?
5. What perceived advantages and disadvantages exist for students who are unschooled?

### **Definition of Terms**

This section describes words that are relevant in order for the reader to comprehend what they mean in this particular context.

**Academic success.** Defined by Ray (2000) as “the demonstration of learning (including knowledge, understanding, and thinking skills) attained by a student as measured by standardized academic achievement tests. For example, knowledge and ability in the areas of reading, language, and mathematics are included” (p. 78)

**Homeschooling.** A form of learning/schooling that takes place at home and usually involves structure and curriculum. It is also clearly parent-controlled or parent-directed.



**Social Development.** Refers to students who are considered “well adjusted” and able to function appropriately in social situations.

**Unschooling.** A form of homeschooling that allows self-directed learning usually with less structure than public or private school and has no set curriculum. The main difference between unschooling and homeschooling is that unschooling is clearly child or student-directed learning whereas homeschooling is parent or guardian-directed.

### **Assumption and Limitations of the Study**

An assumption of this research is that resources pertaining to unschooling are readily available for review using the University of Wisconsin- Stout’s library and online database. Because of restrictions such as thesis selection of other universities, limited access to all applicable resources may inhibit extensive research of this topic. Lastly, unschooling is most times assumed to be a form of homeschooling; therefore, data pertaining to homeschooling is sometimes inferred to unschooling as well. A limitation to this study is that most research pertaining to unschooling mainly addresses homeschooling and not directly unschooling. A final limitation is that some literature may not have been accessible and some literature may have been overlooked due to limited time and resources.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

This chapter will include a discussion of research studies pertaining to the advantages and disadvantages of unschooling students. It will also discuss unschooling with regards to academic success. In addition, it will explore the relationship between unschooling and social development. Lastly, this section will include information regarding legal requirements for unschoolers.

### **Academic Success**

Limited articles were found strictly addressing unschooling student's academic success. However, unschooling is considered a form of less structured homeschooling and therefore some research regarding homeschooling can be applied to unschooling practices as well considering the two practice's similarities.

Some people may question the ability of parents to school their own children. Policymakers, educators, administrators, and other parents sometimes wonder about the capacity for parents to effectively teach their children. Based on the majority of research found, it is not entirely necessary for a parent or home educator to have a substantial amount of certification in order for them to be effective teachers. At the same time, students with certified caregivers did succeed at a higher level than students whose caregiver's were not certified (Ray, 2010). Lack of certification, however, did not suggest that a student would be unsuccessful because he or she still tended to show slightly higher test scores than their peers in public schools. On the other hand, students who had two parents who both did not receive a college degree performed slightly better than students whose parents did obtain a college degree. These results were small, but still significant (Ray, 2000; 2010).

Most studies involving determination of test scores between homeschool students and mainstream students showed positive results for homeschool students (Ray, 2010; 2000; Martin et al., 2011). Homeschool students tend to score significantly higher on standardized tests compared to their peers at public schools (Ray, 2010; 2000). This does sound promising, but it is important to note that many of these tests were administered by the students' parents, which may have made the results quite biased. Also, unschooling students are not specifically targeted in such studies and therefore little consensus can be made about their achievement on standardized tests; what is discussed here is inferred from homeschooling test results (Rudner, 1999). Regardless, homeschooled students across the board are scoring in the 65<sup>th</sup> to 80<sup>th</sup> percentile, while the national average, consisting mainly of public school students, remains at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile (Ray, 2010).

Results on standardized tests, taken by homeschooled students, are puzzling. While homeschooling and unschooling students ultimately focus on similar subject areas as public school students, it is usually at an extremely different rate (especially for unschooling students). At the same time, the focus of many families who teach at home is on religious and moral values so it is interesting that these students succeed so well with standardized tests. Homeschooled and unschooled students seem to have enough time, according to data, to learn about religion and morals while still outperforming their peers on standardized tests (Ray, 2010).

A number of factors play a part in a homeschooler's and unschooler's academic success. Ray (2000) looked at five factors including: father's education level, mother's education level, years taught at home, student's gender, and the number of frequent visits to the public library. He found that each school subject correlated with different variables that allocated academic success in that specific area. For example, the father's education level, number of years the student was

taught at home, and number of public library visits were positively correlated with reading scores. Father's and mother's education level, gender of the student (females scored higher), and number of years the student was homeschooled was positively correlated with language scores. Lastly, father's and mother's education level and the student's gender (boys scored higher) were positively related to math scores (Ray, 2000).

The last idea that Ray (2000) presented was the finding that students tended to have higher success in smaller groups. The majority of unschooled students tended to learn in groups of two to four children for the majority of their schooling. At the same time, they are privileged with more one to one interactions with the educator, who is usually a parent or guardian. Even if a family has more children, there is still usually the opportunity to learn in smaller groups in comparison to public schools. Similarly, since homeschooled and unschooled students are generally taught with their siblings, they usually have plenty of interaction with different age levels. Age mixing has been found to be positively linked to higher academic success (Ray, 2000).

### **Laws Regarding Academics**

There are many different laws and regulations with regards to homeschooling. Research reviewed for the purpose of this paper has shown very little to no relation between the degree of regulation by the state and the student's academic achievement.

Wisconsin law defines homeschooling as "A home-based private educational program provided to a child by the child's parent or guardian or by a person designated by the parent or guardian" (Woodruff, 2012, p. 1) The educator is required to cover six subject areas when teaching students: reading, language arts, math, social studies, science, and health. That being said, there is not a specific curriculum or set lesson plans that homeschoolers are required to

follow. There is a form, however, that is filled out by a school administrator reporting whether the program meets the state's criteria (covering the six basic subject areas). Other criteria include: making the main purpose to provide private or religious-based education, the instruction is controlled privately, at least 875 hours of instruction are provided, and the program is not created to avoid the compulsory attendance law. This statute resulted from Wisconsin's Supreme Court decision in *Wisconsin v. Popanz* (Woodruff, 2012).

Homeschooling and unschooling students can add as many other subjects as they would like, including: art, music, religion, woodworking, home economics, etc. There is no specific amount of time required to be spent on each subject. The last requirement to take note of is that an educational plan for learning basic subjects must be provided. There are three ways that families can meet this requirement and they must choose at least two of the three choices. First, a curriculum can be purchased that directly outlines what the children study including when and how. The next two ways fit more comfortably under unschooling philosophies. The second choice is for the guardian to develop his or her own curriculum based on the six subjects. The third choice is to plan for students to learn from life experiences, such as by pursuing personal interests and projects in the home, as well as the community (Wisconsin Parenting Association, 2012).

Wisconsin has few requirements for parents of homeschooled or unschooled children well that are important to know when attempting to unschool students. First, a curriculum chosen by the state is absolutely not required, since guardians have the freedom to choose their own curriculum or education plan. Second, homeschoolers and unschoolers are not required to take the state-mandated tests that public school students have to take. Similarly, homeschool educators do not report grades and do not need to use a grading system. They can evaluate their

children's learning by observation and responding to their children's questions. Third, school officials do not need to review or approve of curriculums. Lastly, guardians who choose to homeschool do not need to be certified teachers or have any particular educational degrees (Wisconsin Parenting Association, 2012). Interestingly, Ray (2000) found no significant relationship between a student's academic achievement and the degree of state regulation. Therefore, the amount of regulation required does not appear to influence a student's academic success (Ray, 2000).

### **Social Development**

Some studies determined that social development is greatly fostered within the school system and that the school environment actually plays a large part in, "socializing future citizens and fostering peer relations between children" (Martin, et al., 2011, p. 201). Meanwhile, Beauchamp and Anderson (2010) have determined that social development is more dependent on the social brain network that becomes vulnerable to environmental influences throughout the lifespan. Therefore, social development is dependent on both biological and environmental influences.

The development of proper social skills is crucial in all students' development. Lack of social skills may lead to a number of issues such as problem behaviors, psychological distress, developmental issues, neurological conditions and cognitive impairments. Students with poor social skills tend to display higher rates for exhibiting delinquent or criminal behaviors in adolescence and adulthood. Hindered social skills also tend to be associated with heightened levels of aggression, violence, neuropsychological and psychiatric conditions (Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010).

Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010 found that social issues may develop as a result of restrictions in social participation and opportunities. Therefore, in either a school or home setting, social restrictions can hinder a student's social development. A student can develop adequate social skills if given sufficient opportunities and experiences to bolster social growth (Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010).

What unschooling students are not receiving in the school system may be made up for in the home. For example, unschoolers tend to experience many more field trips than public school students in which they can gain an immensity of social interaction. Homeschooling and unschooling students also commonly have social or support groups with other unschooling peers. Three types of relationships are identified in studies as necessary for student's social development. Each relationship may help a student meet different developmental needs and each relationship is more than possible for unschooling and homeschooling students to have. Even the teacher relationship can be provided by the caregiver who is educating the student (Vandell, 2000).

The first crucial relationship for students' social development is with their peers. Something that unschooling students are more likely to lack is negative relationships with their peers. Peer pressure can be perceived both negatively and positively, but can often distract and greatly harm a student's self-esteem. Many unschooling parents also perceive public schools as a place of harm and danger, which their child can usually avoid by receiving an education at home. One study suggested that any student, with a parent who is as involved in his or her life as much as an unschooling parent is, would also likely succeed in the public school system, since high parental involvement is strongly related to student success. Public school students who struggle with being a victim of bullying or suffer from peer rejection may find relief in unschooling or

studying at home while meeting with other unschooling students whom he or she chooses to interact with (Ray, 2000; Martin et al., 2011).

In Brian Ray's (2010) nationwide study, homeschool students were not found to be any less engaged than non-homeschool kids in predictive leadership activities. At the same time, unschooling students experienced an unlimited range of different opportunities and experiences from one another. Some students have regular interaction with other peers of all ages and adults. Vandell (2000) found strong correlations between peer group status and the following concepts: academic performance, internalizing issues such as depression and loneliness, and externalizing issues such as aggression and delinquency. Students who perceived higher peer acceptance appeared to be better adjusted at the end of the school year because they reported being less lonely, more satisfied with school, and they performed better on an academic readiness test. On the other hand, students who felt victimized by peers early on in the academic year tended to avoid school more often, felt lonelier, and were less academically proficient as the school year progressed (Vandell, 2000).

Peer rejection is a large determinant of student's social functioning within and outside of the school. For example, peer rejection among fifth grade students was found to be a prominent predictor of adjustment 12 years later. Fifth grade students, who were rejected by their peers, displayed poorer job and school performance, lower aspirations, and less of a social life. Lastly, the students 12 years later displayed lower adjustment ratings overall. Unschooling students tended to face less peer rejection due to the fact that they have less unsupervised time with their peers. We can infer that peer interaction plays a crucial role in adult adjustment. Peer rejection is one of the main factors that may predict adjustment and academic success. Luckily, the majority



of unschooling students are more often separated from such rejection as compared with their peers in public schools (Vandell, 2000).

The second part of peer relationships is friendships, which are identified as having different influences on a student's social development. Friendships involve reciprocity and mutuality, while peer groups are considered assessments of social standing and reputation. Individuals who have friends appear more cooperative, self-confident, socially competent, and sociable compared to students who do not have friends. Students with friends also tend to be more involved at school and are more academically inclined to perform well. Student in hostile or negative friendships consequently experience higher incidences of depressive symptoms and delinquent behavior. Positive friendships have also been shown to be beneficial across time. For example, kindergarteners who had a friend at the beginning of the year were more socially well-adjusted than kindergarteners who did not identify with friends. Similarly, students going through transitions between grade levels tended to adjust better when in the presence of friends. It is clear that friendships play an important part in all students' lives and it is crucial that students have access to these types of relationships no matter what type of schooling he or she receives (Vandell, 2000).

The second relationship, considered crucial for student's development, is one with parents or teachers. Hopefully, parents can provide love, affection, protection, security, advice, and limits. Children who have a stronger and more positive relationship with their teacher tended to be more successful and more well-adjusted in school. They also tended to be more motivated, and more likely to put forth an effort, to learn when a caring teacher was available compared to students who did not have a positive relationship with a supportive educator (Vandell, 2000). There is question whether or not unschooled student's receive enough adult interaction. This is

dependent upon the guardian and the number of experiences in the community and amount of adult exposure the student is allowed.

The third type of relationship that can be conducive to a student's social development is the relationship between siblings. According to Vandell (2000), "siblings may offer opportunities related to social understanding, conflict management, and differential status" (Vandell, 2000, p. 706). Siblings may help one another model effective conflict resolution skills (Vandell, 2000). Unschooling students likely have more interaction with their own siblings than public school students because they are usually educated together by a guardian. This information does not take into consideration unschool students who do not have any siblings. These students' community exposure likely would need to be greater in order to reach the same level of social exposure as his or her peers. Such students may experience such social interaction through comingling with other students of different age groups

As described above, unschooling students appear to have enough, if not more, opportunities for relationships that are conducive to their social development. No research has been found suggesting that any of these relationships are hindered or lacking among unschooling or homeschooling students. The amount of social development seems to be dependent upon how many outside experiences are provided by an unschooling parent's caregiver.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages**

No research was found providing evidence that being educated at home, using homeschooling and unschooling methods, was related to negative behaviors or being inept in adulthood. This lack of information in research is either promising or else has not yet been observed. Research has also shown that homeschooled students tend to succeed in ACT/SAT tests as well as college acceptance at a rate that is higher or equal to public school students (Ray,

2010). This information may also apply to unschooled students as a form of homeschooling, but research has not demonstrated this specifically.

Ray (2010) also found significant results related to the amount of money spent per homeschool student. Students whose caregivers spent \$600 a year or more per student outperformed students who had caregivers who spent less than \$600 a year on educational materials. Such educational materials included: textbooks, lesson materials, tutoring, enrichment services, testing, counseling, and evaluation. Similarly, students in a household with higher family income reported higher test scores than students from lower family income households (Ray, 2000; 2010). With that being said, Griffith (1998) described unschooling as one of the least expensive public school alternatives. Many unschooling families reported that they do not acquire many more resources than they would have already provided for their family. At the same time, it is clear that financial means are a necessity for unschoolers. The majority of unschoolers get most of their life experiences from field trips (Griffith, 1998). Many community functions such as certain museums and libraries can be free, but some are not and it is important to realize the costliness of unschooling in order to ensure that an effective education for students can be provided (Griffith, 1998).

In order to help determine which resources may be effective, support groups are available specifically for unschooling as well as homeschooling families (Griffith, 1998). Some support groups operate using rotating host activities. For example, each week a different “host family” decides which activity they will provide for the other unschooling families such as crafts, hiking in the woods, a trip to Science World, and the list is endless. This is one of the many ways unschooling students can make positive relationships with other individuals outside of their own family (Griffith, 1998).

In an era of accountability and testing, many individuals may question how an unschooling guardian knows that his or her child is learning. Griffith (1998) suggested that many guardians know simply by speaking with their students. Unschooling students are commonly very excited and willing to share what they learned each day. The guardian is able to observe this, since he or she spends each day with the student. Some unschooling parents use a narrative journal to keep track of what their student learns and does each day. Other unschooling educators log activities in a subject or schedule grid listing the academic subject in one column, with the activity and dates alongside it. This helps ensure that students are learning a bit of information from each required subject area (Griffith, 1998).

The most popular documentation option for unschoolers is the creation of a portfolio, which can be thought of as a glorified scrapbook (Griffith, 1998). Many unschoolers include a collection of artifacts accumulated over their education including drawings, letters to pen pals, journals, stories, artwork, computer programs, 4-H project records, science projects, etc. Many choose to use a portfolio in the place of a transcript, while others still opt to create a transcript for the simplicity of not having to explain anything to an institution (such as a university, armed forces, or an employer) that is not prepared to deal with an unconventional portfolio (Griffith, 1998).

This idea brings up an interesting concept; apparently some employers and universities still accept unschooling students using their portfolio or created transcript, despite the lack of conventionalism (Griffith, 1998). The ultimate lack of structure in many unschoolers' lives may be a pitfall to these students' education. The idea of unschooling in itself usually holds very little structure. Some parents put structure into place by placing boundaries, such as a limit to television consumption, but it may not be enough structure to yield beneficial educational results.

Martin et al. (2011) found that unstructured homeschoolers achieved lower standardized scores across three groups (the other two groups were structured homeschoolers and children attending public school). Students who were homeschooled showed higher scores overall than the standardized norms. Therefore, we might infer that unschooling students are likely to score higher on standardized tests than public school students due to its unstructured format (Martin et al., 2011).

One of the main criticisms of unschooling, with regards to structure, is the amount of television students are allowed to watch (Griffith, 1998). The range of restrictions on number of hours allowed watching television and playing video games is expansive among unschoolers. Many families that allow limitless hours of television viewing find their children regulating their own television consumption anyways. Sometimes viewing television series prompts students to be interested in the coinciding books as well. Some unschooling parents use television as means for discussion and further learning. In a world that is constantly and technologically advancing, it may be necessary to use such technological advances for educational purposes. Direct research was not found observing students who have no limits on their television consumption and how it actually affects their learning (Griffith, 1998).

Unschooling education has numerous forms. The options are limitless. This can be seen as an advantage and a disadvantage. It is difficult to collect data from these students since they are not required to take standardized tests (according to Wisconsin laws); therefore, it is complicated attempting to determine how successful the unschooling program truly is.

### **Chapter III: Critical Analysis**

Chapter III includes highlights from some of the key findings in the literature review pertaining to unschooling as a form of homeschooling. A discussion follows offering suggestions for school counselors and parents to think about while considering the option of unschooling. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research on the topic. The main issue found in this thesis is that there is a minimal number of research studies available directly related to the topic of unschooling in relation to academic success as well as social development. More testimonials and case studies were found boasting benefits as opposed to reporting disadvantages.

#### **Summary**

Unschooling is a unique form of homeschooling education. Unschooled students have the option to direct their own learning. Students can choose to learn about any subject they choose to or are interested in. This learning is then guided by a parent or guardian for when the students have questions or want further experience in a particular area. Many unschooled students' learning takes place in real life experiences such as field trips.

Academically, homeschoolers tend to outperform their peers; it is possible that unschooling students may also outperform their peers. Unschooling allows a more individualized approach. The student works directly with the instructor (usually a parent) and receives a learning program that works directly for him or her. This may be why forms of homeschooling tend to be effective for student's academic achievement. However, no positive nor negative evidence was found to document academic achievement of unschooled students separate from homeschooled students.

Unschooling students are not required to take state mandated tests nor do they submit grades to anyone. Their curriculum is entirely individualized while teaching the six basic subject areas. Unschoolers may and often do add as many other subject areas as they would like. Unschooling practices must satisfy the criteria involving students learning from life experiences as well as having some sort of curriculum. In the case of unschoolers, the “curriculum” is student-guided learning.

With little evidence regarding unschoolers’ social development, it is difficult to infer whether or not unschoolers’ experience social deficits in comparison to their public schooled peers. Unschooling students’ social exposure is extremely important as well as dependent upon the amount of interaction in the community that the parents encourage.

There are a number of advantages and disadvantages involved with unschooling that a guardian should consider before making the decision to unschool his or her child. First, a student’s success has been found dependent upon the amount of money the guardian spends on the student’s education. It is not free to have a student unschooled since more social exposure happens when a student is brought to events in the community which are not always free of charge. Unschoolers must also create a portfolio in the place of a transcript. This includes artifacts to show what a student has learned. This does not prove to be an issue when getting into college. Many universities will accept a portfolio in the place of a transcript when making acceptance decisions. A homeschooled or unschooled students level of structure should also be taken into consideration by the guardian since less structure has been associated with lower standardized scores on tests.

## Critical Analysis

The whole idea of unschooling challenges mainstream schooling. It is about teaching students how to be lifelong learners and to learn what they are passionate about. Our society's educational system values structure and test scores. Unschooling asks the question, "Are structure and test scores necessary in order to predict if a student will be a high functioning member of society?" Their philosophy hints that tests scores and structure displayed in public school settings are not necessary for this type of prediction.

One of the disadvantages identified included Martin et al.'s (2011) study that found unstructured homeschoolers to show the lowest standardized scores among two other groups, structured homeschoolers and public school students. It is difficult to prove what level of structure poses the best results or proves the most beneficial to students. Some unschooling parents do provide structure, so it is difficult to determine whether or not unschooling would prove disadvantageous to a student's standardized test scores.

Similarly, studies that showed homeschoolers had higher standardized test scores had substantial flaws. Often times, the caregivers administered the standardized test to their own child/children. This could introduce serious bias, as well as make the test unstandardized by lack of uniformity in its presentation. Second, one study only included results from families who used the services of a privatized educational testing company. Third, homeschooling students included in the study came from families that reported a higher mean income than the national norm (Martin et.al, 2011). Studies such as Ray (2010) use standardized test scores as a way to measure students' academic success. Scoring well on a test is not the only predictor of a student success. The study could have looked at other measures of success as well. For example, graduating from



high school, getting a job, or getting a job after high school may all be adequate indicators of a student's success.

Ray (2010) found a higher level of success for students when working in small groups of 2-4 students as opposed to a larger group. This idea does not reference environmental attributes. It does not look at the types of environment that are more conducive to learning in small groups (classroom setting versus home). It also does not look at the demographic traits of the students in the small groups. For example, is it more beneficial for students of mixed ages to learn in the small group or students that are all the same age? This information would be important to know for unschooling students who tend to experience learning in small groups with their siblings of different ages.

Critics argue that unschooling students lack the social interactions necessary for social development. Numerous research shows that this has yet to be proven. Unschooling students may have plenty of opportunities to have relationships that are conducive to their social development as their public school student counterparts depending on the caregiver's involvement (Vandell, 2000). Vandell (2000) did not offer any suggestions specifically for unschooling students. However, he does refer to benefits of socialization for students overall. Unschooling students likely have to seek out social experiences due to the fact that they are not in a classroom with a number of their peers on a daily basis.

Martin et al. (2011) found peer relationships to be necessary for a student's social development. Both negative and positive attributes were examined regarding peer relationships including peer pressure. Unschooling parents may choose to unschool because they are worried about peer pressure from other students. More research on the benefits of peer pressure may help parents make more informed decisions. Similarly, one study found a multitude of issues

concerning peer rejection. Unschooling students likely experience less peer rejection due to potentially less unsupervised face time with their peers.

Overall, there are numerous advantages and disadvantages to take into consideration when determining whether or not unschooling is a viable option for a student. Every student is different and should therefore be considered differently from one another. What works for one student may not work for another. Also, standardized tests may not necessarily and appropriately measure students' complete success, since success can be displayed in many forms. For example, no standardized tests have measured homeschoolers' success in the adult world with their careers or university majors.

One disadvantage of unschooling is that parents report spending very little on instructional resources. Ray (2010) found students are more successful when parents spend more money on education materials as opposed to homeschooling parents who spend little money. This idea does not address the amount of money spent on experiences in relation to student's success. Unschooling students reportedly spend more time on outside activities in the community than reading books.

Griffith (1998) discusses how some unschoolers spend more time watching television than others, but research does not address the effectiveness of how time is spent while unschooling. Unschoolers do not have a "regular" eight hour school day. Their learning is constant and never ends, but it would be important to know how effective unschooling is when time is spent addressing particular areas or subjects.

Interestingly, lack of parental certification did not predict an unschooled student's heightened academic success. In fact, homeschooled students who had both parents who did not receive a college degree fared slightly better than students who had two parents with college

degrees. There is little explanation for this finding. Logically, one would assume that more educated parents would have more knowledge to share with their unschooled students. On the other hand, unschooled students direct their own learning and research information they do not know with the help of their parents. Therefore, there is less teaching left up to the guardians. There is very little research conducted concerning unschooling separate from homeschooling. Likewise, there are many unknown issues with the level of structure that yields the most positive results for unschooling students, which makes it difficult to know the level of success different forms of unschooling may foster.

### **Recommendations**

The amount of research completed specifically on the ramifications of unschooling students could be greatly enhanced. Very little research is available that provides specific social and academic outcomes for students who choose unschooling. Future research should look more closely at specific consequences of such an educational choice.

A student's success could be examined with relation to his/her parental involvement. For example, the number of field trips or opportunities in the community should be measured. Future research might also examine a number of social interactions and experiences in order to adequately determine level of unschooling students' social success. Similarly, future research should look at using test results that have been administered by the researchers. This idea is in opposition to Martin et al.'s (2011) student that consisted of parent's administration of achievement tests which likely yielded biased results. Future research might also look at age differences within small groups and how beneficial they are to learning to determine if unschoolers have an advantage learning with their siblings.

Unschoolers in the state of Wisconsin submit a portfolio in the place of a high school transcript. This portfolio may be a much better representation of student's work as well as show the student as a well-rounded individual. Future research should certainly look at success in the adult world to determine if unschoolers fair better in society. Such research might look at the number of unschoolers versus mainstream students who graduate, get into college, and get jobs after high school.

There are many different forms of unschooling. Martin et al. (2011) found that more structured homeschoolers achieved higher standardized test scores. Future research should look at the levels of structure in unschooling in relation to success in the students' adult lives. The level of structure greatly determines how an unschoolers time is spent. Future research should look at how a student's time is spent and how effective this appears to be with a student's level of success.

Another topic that would be beneficial to future research is student's stress, with pressures on testing more prevalent among a multitude of other issues students experience. Students may experience a lot of stress from school-related issues. Unschoolers don't normally have to take tests and therefore may experience less stress as a result. On the other hand, if the student has issues with his or her family, the unschooled student may experience more stress due to hardly being apart from the family. They have little to no time away from siblings and parents which may pose an issue for some students.

With regards to social development, future research might look at the amount of social interaction that is necessary in order for proper social growth to occur. Similarly, it would be interesting to study student's resiliency concerning peer rejection. Sometimes strife can foster resiliency. Since the majority of research is on homeschooling with little specification to

unschooling, comparative studies might yield interesting results determining whether unschooling is equally as effective as regular, guardian-directed homeschooling.

A major issue regarding unschooling students may likely be when an unschooled student attempts to return to the public school system. Educators and parents should be aware of how such an extreme change in structure may greatly influence the student. Unschooled students are likely used to learning with very little structure whereas public schools generally provide a lot of structure. This type of structure may be extremely difficult for an unschooled student to get used to. Unschooled students are also used to learning on their own terms. They get to learn what they want, when they want. Public schools tend to have curriculums and set subjects for learning. An unschooled student would experience a lot of extreme changes if they return to public schools after being unschooled. One could assume a great deal of stress surfacing for student's going through such extreme changes. It would be important for both parents and educators to be aware of such changes to help better accommodate these students.

The options of research needed regarding unschooling is limitless. Very little research is done on a form of schooling that is becoming increasingly popular. In times when violence in schools seems to be increasing, parents may be looking for other options to school their children. Providing more research on unschooling may help parents make a more informed decision about how to most effectively teach their children.

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