

THE CHALLENGES HOMESCHOOLING PRESENTS TO SOCIAL SCIENCE

RESEARCH

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I want to thank the National University of Colombia, the social science department and the education department for inviting me to address the International Education in Social Sciences Conference. I particularly want to thank Erwin Fabian Garcia Lopez for his help with translating and navigating me from Boston to Bogota.

I will limit my presentation about education and the social sciences to how the growth of alternatives to compulsory school attendance in the past fifty years, especially homeschooling, require the social sciences to rethink their conception of how they quantify education and, in particular, educational attainment.

Social scientists use educational attainment to refer to the highest degree of education an individual has completed. This statistic is often presented for comparisons of a country's gross intelligence and investments in education. This statistic is quite deceptive, because wrapped into it are assumptions that are demonstrably incorrect, such as:

- 1) **The more education one attains the smarter one is.** One need only look at the mistakes and misdeeds of our financial analysts, economists, and government regulators to see that their educated manipulations of money not only caused our global recession, but also exacerbated it. Though it is

possible, it is hardly guaranteed that one's educational attainment is the same as one's intelligence.

- 2) **The more education the general population attains the better it is for society.** Right now, the people of the world have attained more diplomas and degrees than at any time in world history, and yet hunger, disease, poverty, injustice, civil unrest and other huge problems continue to plague countries, including "the rich countries where a third of their children complete university."¹ In the US, "Not only has the number of diplomas and degrees increased, but their percentage in the population has also increased, indicating a growth in attainment greater than the relative growth in national population."² Nonetheless, the US suffers from growing unemployment, even among college graduates, significant and growing debt from students who attend college, and a host of social ills that no amount of school degrees seems capable of addressing.

- 3) **The more education people attain results in better, more productive employees.** Despite record levels of college graduates and higher levels of school attendance, employers bemoan the low quality of their employees, including their college graduates. Daniel Goleman writes,

In a national survey of what employers are looking for in entry-level workers, specific technical skills are now less important than the underlying ability to do the job. After that, employers listed:

- Listening and oral communication
- Adaptability and creative responses to setbacks and obstacles
- Personal management, confidence, motivation to work towards goals, a sense of wanting to develop one's career and take pride in accomplishments

- Group and interpersonal effectiveness, cooperativeness and teamwork, skills at negotiating disagreements
 - Effectiveness in the organization, wanting to make a contribution, leadership potential
- Of seven desired traits, just one was academic: competence in reading, writing, and math.³

Must one attend college to establish competence in reading, writing, and math?

Increasingly it seems so, despite the evidence before everyone's eyes that so much of what we require people to learn in school has little bearing on their lives and the world when they are not in school. Educational attainment should be called "years of schooling," because that is all that is being measured. The knowledge inside each graduate's head, and their ability to use that knowledge even if they remember it, is not well represented simply by the number of years of school they completed.

Compulsory school laws create the grade levels that education attainment is measured by. However, Periclean Greece, Elizabethan England, and America after the revolution are examples of civilizations with great cultural achievements, and they never had compulsory school laws such as ours. There are clearly other ways to attain education besides being compelled to sit in a classroom, but modern institutions ignore this inconvenient truth.

As the cost of attending school continues to increase financially, spiritually and physically for families, more are seeking alternatives. In the United States, over one and half million children are now being taught at home by their parents, representing more than 2% of the total school-age population.⁴ Though my wife and I both graduated college, we did not want to give our girls the same schooling we had. We were both bored and confused in school as people, though we did well academically as students. We

wanted something better than school for both the girls and so we homeschooled our three girls without using any school-based curricula. Our girls have moved easily in and out of school as they needed to, including graduating from college, without special difficulty.

Homeschoolers use a variety of methods to help their children attain education and no homeschooler is required to be a certified teacher in the United States.⁵ Nonetheless, despite the lack of certification and standard curricula, homeschooled children are accepted at work and in the university without special difficulty.⁶ Though lacking conventional degrees and diplomas, homeschoolers successfully use their life experience, C.V.s, letters of recommendation, networking skills, and other assessments to describe their self-directed learning to those who need to know about their abilities and background.

The concept of grade level acts as a closed container for many children, instead of a growing medium. Explorations and interests that diverge from grade level expectations are often discouraged in school, whereas in home school these divergences can become major routes of study, spiraling back to the original study in a much longer arc of time than school uses. How do we rank the educational attainment of students who don't use grade level to determine what subject matter they should learn?

The last point I wish to make about educational attainment is this: Shouldn't the scope of educational attainment be from birth until death, not from elementary to college years? The world is demanding that people of all ages learn new skills and jobs at ever-faster rates, so who can say that the formal education attained from schooling when one is 21-years-old is anywhere near as valuable or meaningful to themselves or to their nation as the informal education attained when one is 51?

Before continuing, I must note that though I criticize education it does not mean that I do not honor and want people and places for teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are vital human activities that are intimately connected to one another and I seek more ways to create, in the words of Ivan Illich, “institutions which can increase the opportunity and desirability for human interaction.”⁷ I think we need other places besides school for children and adults to learn, share, play, and work together, and that by having such places we increase both educational attainment and social capital for people and their neighborhoods.

The most important element about teaching and learning gets lost when we reduce schooling to a series of grades, test scores, and requirements, namely the human element. Instead of educating a particular person to help them find a life worth living and work worth doing we educate a generic student to fit into a national economy.

It is not schools that nurture academic success: most poor students stay poor students in school. It is not schools that nurture social success, nor do schools protect students from bad behaviors. Studies show that the major predictor of academic success is a child’s family background,⁸ that the major predictor of social success as an adult is a warm and caring parent⁹, and that having a “strong emotional connection to a parent is the best guarantee of a teenager’s health and the strongest barrier to high risk behaviors.”¹⁰ Knowing this, shouldn’t we be studying and creating ways that encourage families to stay together, that nurture warmth and responsiveness towards children from adults, that honor time for families to bond?

Since school and society take these aspects of community and family life for granted, even though they have great benefits for schools and society, it is up to

parents and other concerned adults to ensure they happen for our families. School and society are preoccupied with educational attainment, seeking to graduate more and more children into more and more school, thereby confusing education with schooling.

Psychiatrists and social scientists have noted how modern schooling and our consumer culture are infantilizing youth and extending adolescence. The classic benchmarks of adulthood are leaving home, finishing school, getting married, having a child, and being financially independent. *Psychology Today* reports:

Using the classic benchmarks of adulthood, 65 percent of males had reached adulthood by the age of 30 in 1960. By contrast, in 2000, only 31 percent had. Among women, 77 percent met the benchmarks of adulthood by age 30 in 1960. By 2000, the number had fallen to 46 percent.¹¹

Though there are other social factors at play, this can be seen as more evidence that school prepares youth for more schooling, not for adulthood.¹²

Another effect of all this schooling is to create undue anxiety among parents and students, who worry that poor performance in any grade of school will hurt their employment opportunities. The irony is there is scant evidence that the skills one learns in school are transferable to the world of adult work. As Dr. Lauren Resnick, former president of the American Education Research Association, notes, "Growing evidence... points to the possibility that very little can be transported directly from school to out-of school use."¹³

The global trend to reduce everyone's learning to a report card to be submitted to the government for review is growing. Conventional schooling standardizes and regulates learning to bureaucratic standards rather than to the needs of individual

learners. Indeed, Ivan Illich noted in 1971 how our pursuit of standardized schooling would create a universal schoolhouse that transcends national boundaries.

Today, for instance, the school systems of Colombia, Britain, the USSR and the US resemble each other more closely than US schools of the late 1890s resembled either today's or their contemporaries in Russia. Today all schools are obligatory, open-ended and competitive. The same convergence in institutional style affects health care, merchandising, personnel administration and political life. All these institutional processes tend to pile up at the manipulative end of the spectrum.

A merger of world bureaucracies results from this convergence of institutions. The style, the ranking systems and the paraphernalia (from textbook to computer) are standardized on the planning boards of Costa Rica or Afghanistan after the model of Western Europe.¹⁴

Copying the education system of Western Europe may not be the best strategy for countries that wish to preserve their unique characters and cultures. Creating more local, adaptable, and less centralized schools is one way to cope with the trend of teaching everyone the same thing, at the same time, in the same way. A more radical, though quite ancient, method for transmitting knowledge, skills, and information from adults to youth would be to let children, in addition to or instead of attending school, attend work places that are structured to let youth participate, ask questions, and become part of adult activities in whatever ways they can. We can also establish places and events for elders, crafts and trade people, and other adults to share their knowledge, skills, interests and hobbies with others, particularly young people, without exploiting children.

To summarize:

- Social science research in education supports the trend of schools to confuse a process, schooling, with substance, education, by using terms like “educational attainment.”

- The conventional courses and grades of study of government schools are not used or closely followed in many homeschools, distance learning programs, alternative schools, religious schools, and private schools. As more people choose to use alternative education to fit curriculum to the child rather than fit the child to the curriculum, school concepts like age-based grades and detailed studies for each grade are becoming meaningless.

- A variety of educational strategies are being employed by homeschoolers in a number of countries with success. Homeschooling exists in all English speaking countries, as well as in many other countries. Homeschooling is banned outright in some countries, such as Brazil and Germany.

- Social science research can explore how children and adults continue to learn when they no longer go to school and study how these insights can improve school practice and social programs. This would include studying how people learn without being taught.

- Governments and schools should consider education as part of the context of every person’s life, not just children. This context should include people’s health and welfare, not just their test scores and school attendance.

- Governments and schools should support programs that encourage adults and children to have meaningful, warm relationships in their homes and communities, rather than just more tutoring or test-preparation for school. As noted earlier,

numerous studies show that healthy, secure children with a warm and caring adult who shepherds them through their youth are more successful academically. This person does not need to be a parent, of course. Sometimes the family isn't warm and nurturing, which is why I mention allowing children to have opportunities to be with other adults who might provide them with emotional and technical support, though these other adults should not only be professional teachers.

However, it is important for teachers to be warm and nurturing too. A recent study notes that adolescents in school report their own well-being to be better when teachers "attempt to connect with students on an emotional level, use diverse and best-practice teaching strategies, acknowledge and boost students' academic success, demonstrate fairness during interactions with students, and foster a classroom environment in which questions are encouraged."¹⁵

Even in school, it is human relationships, the human element, that makes the biggest difference in a child's academic achievement, not class size, teacher qualifications, time on task, size of the school budget, the latest school facility or the best computers. It is my hope that social science can rise to these challenges and develop new ways of thinking about and quantifying education that are better suited for understanding how children and adults learn in our changing world.

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