The Idea of an Essay

Volume 4 *Sprouts, Shades, and Sunshine* Article 32

September 2017

The Three Faces of Literacy

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"Occ..Oc-cu...Oc-cu-p...p…"
"Occupation."
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That was the fourth time in three sentences he had needed someone to say a word for him. The objective: Read a paragraph from the handbook section we were studying that week. The process: A repetitious struggle in which the eyes, brain, and mouth engaged in discordant dissonance much to the displeasure of the ear. It wasn't the first time that this problem had arisen in our weekly scout meeting, and he wasn't the only afflicted person. It seemed that each time an individual strained at the syllables of our selected reading, the act would end in amiable but much needed assistance. The process became so tedious that people began to skip words they didn't know to avoid bringing the group to another screeching halt.

As I observed the frequent foul-ups over the months, I began to notice a trend in the process. Most of those committing the errors hailed from the public schools, and those who corrected them were home schooled. I don't say this to vilify public schools but to say that I was genuinely confused by this discovery. Hailing from a private school, I had never observed such issues with pronunciation or reading. Yet here we were at the crossroads of education. Three forms of schooling had converged on page 250 of the Boy Scout Handbook, and the differences appeared to be striking.

I would be remiss, however, to believe that the reading capacities of twelve to fifteen people meeting in the upper-back room of Parkview church in Findlay, Ohio was an accurate representation of three massive bodies of schooling by itself. Merely taking an isolated event and applying it as a universal truth would be foolhardy if not criminal. The schools of the world vary in a multiplicity of ways that affect students individually in all manner

of shape and form. With that being said, it would be equally as erroneous to assume that no difference in literacy exists between these three types of schooling: public, private, and home based. It seems prudent, therefore, to examine these differences in an objective manner that will accurately reflect the reality of literacy among these institutions.

Objectively measuring the literacy of a school body is easier said than done. Numerous variables must be controlled in order to make the comparisons be fair. It would be a mistaken, fruitless endeavor to take a lad from a well-to-do family who is studying at the premier school of his area and compare him with the local Oliver Twist. Religion, ethnicity, wealth, gender, age—these are but a handful of the numerous variables that may affect the literacy of a child. As such, the evidence shown in this paper has, to the utmost of its ability, controlled for these variables so reliable results may be obtained. Controlling for external variables is one part of accurately reflecting literacy in school, but a second part of the equation must be considered—by what standard do we evaluate an individual's literacy? It must be noted here that it is practically impossible for one statistic to perfectly reflect the literacy of an individual, let alone an entire school body. However, with careful control of external variables and a quality collection of data, an accurate generalization can be reached. That generalization is realized primarily in the form of reading and writing test scores, though other data may be considered to aid the process. This allows for a standard, quantitative method of evaluation, which is an ideal setup for objective comparison. The intention of this essay is not to condone or condemn any form of schooling but to inform and provide facts. It should also be noted that this paper is not primarily concerned with causation (though some factors may be included to offer clarity) but rather the outcomes. Here I offer a statistically-oriented evaluation of national reading and writing literacy rates among private, public, and home schooled individuals among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries with a focus on the United States.

Public and Private School Literacy Rates

Before the outcomes of the public educational system can be considered, there are some statistics that should be observed as a backdrop. For the better part of the United States's history, public schools experienced an upward trend in enrollment and graduation rates. Available data spanning from 1869-1970 shows public school enrollment jumping from 7.6 million to 45.4 million students, and the same time period saw the number of graduates rise from 22,000 to 2.6 million (NCES, Table 201.10). Perhaps a better reflection, to control for the growth in total population, would be the enrollment as a percent of the total population, which increased from 19.6% to 22.6% during this same span of time (NCES, Table 201.10). To summarize these points of data, public schools experienced generally consistent growth for a period of about one hundred years. However, after 1970, the growth of public schools seems to have stalled in some respects and shrunk in others. While total enrollment has still increased since 1970, it has been at a slower rate than before (NCES, Table 201.10). Additionally, enrollment as a percent of the total population shrunk from 22.6% to 15.9% in 2012, a rate that has not yet been seen in the history of available data (NCES, Table 201.10). Any number of reasons could be the cause of this decline, but the fact remains that, comparatively, fewer students are in the public school today. However, lest these facts be misleading, it should noted that public schools are still by far the largest provider of K4-12th grade education. Even with declining numbers, public schools account for 95.1% of non-homeschool education in the United States and 81.4% among OECD countries.

Purely based on reading and writing scores, public schools tend to have the lower rates of literacy than private schools. In a study comparing private and public schools, Jaap Dronkers and Peter Robert (2003) find that American public schools tend to average scores that are 10% lower than their private school counterparts. Compared to OECD public schools across the world, American public schools are slightly below average, but the difference is a mere 1.59% lower than the OECD average (Dronkers & Robert, 2003). A more recent and tightly focused study on the United States was also conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to evaluate literacy rates. In this study, the NCES focuses on fourth and eighth grade students in both public and private schools. Much like the study conducted by Dronkers and Robert, the NCES study

finds a significant difference between the average scores of private and public school students. In the fourth grade, students hailing from public schools scored 14.7 points lower than those from the private school (Braun, Jenkins & Grigg, 2006). Similarly, eighth graders from public schools scored 18.1 points lower than their peers in the private schools (Braun, Jenkins & Grigg, 2006). Even when the average mean scores are properly weighted to account for external variables, a significant difference in the favor of private schools still exists.

In many OECD countries such as Belgium and the United Kingdom, the tendency of public schools to have lower literacy rates is similarly pronounced (Dronkers & Robert, 2003). However, this tendency is not a universal reality. In some OECD countries, the public vs. private difference is either erased or reversed. Denmark and Finland, for example, have yielded scores that lack any significant difference (Dronkers & Robert, 2003). Hungary, on the other hand, shows a fairly large difference (21.7%) in favor of public school literacy (Dronkers & Robert, 2003). Moreover, a careful look at the Dronkers & Robert study reveals an interesting find. Countries that primarily speak English are shown to have a high discrepancies between public and private school literacy, with public schools possessing the lower scores (Dronkers & Robert, 2003). By contrast, countries that primarily speak a non-English language are shown to have little to no difference in literacy results or have public schools that outscore the private schools, save for the notable exception of German-speaking countries (Dronkers & Robert, 2003).

Homeschool Literacy Rates

Researchers have found the task of measuring literary success among homeschooled students to be challenging in the past. Joseph Murphy (2014), the Frank W. Mayborn Chair at Vanderbilt University, neatly summarizes in the "The Outcomes of Homeschooling" what difficulties have been encountered: "The conclusion at present is that research on the impacts of homeschooling leaves a good deal to be desired...Much of what we do know about homeschooling is anecdotal in nature (Houston 1999)" (p. 247). While some quantitative results have been recorded, there is still a vastly larger body of data and evidence available for public and private school literacy rates than there is for homeschool literacy rates. This is

not to say that the research is inferior or sub-par in its nature, but rather that it is small in its quantity. Regardless of quantity, though, the body of work offered so far provides adequate insights into the literacy rates of home schooled students.

Overall, home schooled students generally have higher rates of literacy than public or private school students. As Murphy (2014) points out, home schooled students tend to score higher than the national norms on their literacy tests. In a 1997 study, home schooled students scored in 87th and 80th percentiles for reading and language, and a 2010 study showed that they had improved to scoring in the 89th and 84th percentiles (Murphy, 2014). Both of these scores are higher than the averages for public and private school students. Concomitantly, a similar trend is seen in SAT critical reading scores. Home schooled students have averaged a score of 568 compared to score of 501 for public school students (Murphy, 2014). Additionally, there is another aspect of literacy proficiency that is found with home schooled students. Generally, the educational development of the parent(s) tends to influence the educational development of the student. According to Murphy (2014), homeschooling tends to lessen the effect that parental education has on the child, even if the parental education is very poor. Statistically, this seems to indicate a higher level of literacy among home schooled students.

However, a question still remains pertaining to the function of home schooled individuals in society. In general, home schooled students will have a lower level of interaction with other persons than a private or public school student will have. Obviously, much of this is due to the nature of each type of schooling. As such, concerns have been raised in the past that this lack of daily, social interaction may prove to be a hindrance to the communication skills of home schooled students. A poor grasp of proper conversation and social norms can be just as damaging to a student's literacy as a lack of adequate grammar and word knowledge can be. The question becomes: Does such a deficiency exist?

What the evidence shows us is not that a deficiency exists, but that a difference exists. Using the word "deficiency" indicates a lack of sufficiency, which in this case would be an insufficient number of social peers. Homeschooled students do generally have fewer peer contacts (11 compared to 20 for public schools), but this is not an

insufficient number of contacts (Murphy, 2014). Additionally, as Murphy (2014) points out, home schooled students also tend to have a greater diversity (agewise) of contacts than public or private school students. This makes sense due to the fact that home schooled students typically spend more time interacting with their parents and other older individuals as opposed to public and private school students who primarily interact with their own age groups (Murphy, 2014). While the methods of acquiring proper social literacy are different, the results show that home schooled individuals do not suffer from a lack of it.

Conclusion

The raw, statistical data tells us that home schooled students tend to have the highest literacy rates, and public school students tend to have lowest literacy rates. Two points should be made here to offer clarification on the findings of this paper. First, this is not a condemnation or recommendation of any type of schooling. It merely observes the trends in literacy rates among the three institutions of schooling, and its sole aim is to inform the audience of the statistical facts with regard to the three institutions of schooling. Second, these facts do not guarantee a lower literacy rate in a public school student or a higher literacy rate in a home schooled student. External variables such as wealth, gender, age, community, upbringing, and etc. all affect the literacy of an individual student, and the type of school they attend is only a part of the whole picture. As seen earlier, some countries have found public schools to be the most effective institution for promoting literacy among its students. It may also be assumed that, because of the diversity within countries, state or local areas have varying degrees of effectiveness among the three institutions of schooling. While the numbers present the statistical reality of literacy on a national level, students are free to make wise, informed decisions on their choice of school based on their respective situations.

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