PEER-REVIEWED

Encouraging Educational Diversity

Depictions of Homeschoolers in Middle-Grade Fiction

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In this article, depictions of homeschooling in middle-grade fiction—defined here as fiction for children in grades three to six—will be examined. Factors considered while completing this literature review include: the homeschooling motivation, homeschooling as the problem or solution, and the homeschooling style. Titles were chosen based on quality, availability, and age appropriateness.

I have a personal investment in this topic because I was homeschooled until my first year of college. My homeschooling experience was positive, and it unquestionably shaped the person I am today.

My mother used an "unschooling" approach, which I feel not only prepared me to excel academically as an undergraduate and graduate student, but also as a professional. From an early age, I was aware of the stereotypes associated with homeschoolers, and it would have been reassuring to find more reflections of my world in children's literature. Unfortunately, the one book with homeschooled characters I remember reading (*Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfeild) was set in a world far removed from my small-town Oregon upbringing. It is my hope that a greater diversity of educational experiences will soon be reflected in children's literature to provide windows and mirrors for children of all educational backgrounds.

Homeschooling in the United States

Homeschooling, sometimes called home education or home-based learning, can be defined as parent- or caregiver-led, personally funded education of a child outside of a traditional on-campus school. Children can be taught in a variety of environments (such as at home or online) and by an assortment of instructors, including a parent/caregiver, tutor, or online teacher.

Research shows that the number of homeschooled children in the United States has been rising steadily.[1] In the 2011–2012 school year, 1,770,000 homeschoolers were identified in the United States.[2] According to the National Center for Education Statistics, most homeschoolers are white and "non-poor," and they can be found in all types of communities from rural areas to cities.[3] Homeschooling is legal throughout the United States,, but requirements and laws vary by state.[4]

Homeschooling "remains a topic of significant debate among academics, legal scholars, professional educators, and the general public."[5] Kenneth V. Anthony writes, "As home schooling continues to grow as a viable educational option for families, our society will continue to debate its merits as well as its legality and the proper extent of regulation."[6] Regardless of the societal implications, the rising numbers indicate that homeschooling will continue to be part of our society.

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The reasons people choose to homeschool their children are often ideological or pedagogical. Those in the ideological category homeschool for religious reasons. On the other hand, pedagogical homeschoolers are typically dissatisfied with the environment, class size, or curriculum of traditional schools.[7]

According to recent research, 91 percent of homeschoolers fall in the pedagogical category.[8] However, the way that each parent/caregiver approaches home-based learning varies greatly. Homeschooling approaches are as unique and varied as homeschoolers themselves.

The Titles

This literature review focuses on middle-grade fiction titles that have a homeschooler as the protagonist or a major supporting character. To ensure that titles are widely considered of high quality, only titles that have positive reviews from at least two professional children's literature review journals (*School Library Journal*, *Horn Book*, *Booklist*, or *Kirkus*) are included for consideration. At the time this article was written, all the titles in the annotated bibliography were in print and available for purchase. It should be noted that nearly all titles that fit these criteria have been included in this literature review; there were not a large number of titles from which to choose.

The Factors

Factor One: Homeschooling Motivation

The reasons characters in children's literature are homeschooled can be considered ideological, pedagogical, or unintentional. This last reason is not generally seen in the real world, but can be found frequently in children's literature. Ideological and pedagogical homeschoolers make a conscious choice to homeschool, but unintentional homeschoolers are forced to homeschool due to elements outside of their control. In the titles considered, the unintentional reasons include protection for physical or psychological reasons, isolation, lack of finances, and magical abilities.

There are few instances of ideological motivation in the literature reviewed, however an example is seen in the motivation of Ratchet's father (*This Journal Belongs to Ratchet*) to homeschool her because of his religious beliefs. Most characters fall into the pedagogical category.

Skellig and *Surviving the Applewhites* are excellent examples of pedagogical homeschooling. In *Skellig*, Mina explains her mother's homeschooling philosophy to Michael, "We believe that schools inhibit the natural curiosity, creativity, and intelligence of children. The mind needs to be opened out into the world, not shuttered down inside a gloomy classroom."[9] The Applewhite family in *Surviving the Applewhites* goes one step further by creating their own school so that all of their children can be educated at home.

Protection is the most frequent unintentional reason. Auggie (*Wonder*) and Lila (*A Cool Moonlight*) are homeschooled for medical reasons. Auggie was born with severe facial deformities

Table 1. Educator and Educational Styles by Title

Title	Taught by One Family Member	Taught by More than One Friend/Family Member	More Structured	Less Structured
Ballet Shoes by Noel Streatfeild		X	X	
A Cool Moonlight by Angela Johnson	X		Unknown	
Ida B . . . by Katherine Hannigan	X			X
Liar and Spy by Rebecca Stead		X	Unknown	
The Mysterious Howling by Maryrose Wood		X	X	
Nim's Island by Wendy Orr	X			X
Prairie Evers by Ellen Airgood	X			X
Savvy by Ingrid Law	X		Unknown	
Schooled by Gordon Korman	X			X
Skellig by David Almond	X			X
Surviving the Applewhites by Stephanie S. Tolan		X		X
This Journal Belongs to Ratchet by Nancy Cavanaugh	X		X	
Wonder by R. J. Palacio	X		Unknown	

that caused him to be in and out of hospitals for many surgeries. This made going to traditional school impractical for much of his life. Lila is homeschooled because she was born with xeroderma pigmentosum, a genetic disorder that makes it difficult for her body to handle sunlight.

Another facet is psychological protection, as we see in *Schooled*. Capricorn's grandmother chooses to homeschool him on her commune. This shelters Cap from the evils of capitalism, but also leaves him unprepared for the outside world.

Isolation is an unintentional reason, exemplified by Nim (*Nim's Island*) who is homeschooled because she lives alone on a remote island with her scientist father. A more fanciful example can be seen in *The Mysterious Howling*; the three Incorrigibles are homeschooled by their governess partly because they were raised by wolves, but also due to their living at the luxurious and rural Ashton Place.

The Fossil sisters (*Ballet Shoes*) are homeschooled because their guardian cannot afford traditional schooling. Instead, the sisters are enrolled in a performing arts school. Although highly unlikely even in the 1930s, this is a delightful plot device.

Finally, in fiction, characters are homeschooled as a result of their magical abilities. Magical abilities are categorized as unintentional because characters are homeschooled to keep their supernatural powers a secret, rather than to educate them with a religious ideology or particular educational philosophy.

One of the best examples is the Beaumont family (*Savvy*). The children go to traditional school until they reach the age of thirteen and their magical talent, or savvy, is revealed. It can take years to master a savvy, so the Beaumonts avoid magical disasters by homeschooling.

Factor Two: Homeschooling Style

Theresa Willingham points out that homeschooling can be "carried out quite formally, with rooms set aside as fully furnished classrooms with children's desks and whiteboards, and lessons conducted via prepared commercial curricula or via rigorous correspondence programs…" or they can be much more informal "as in 'unschooling' families who follow a casual, free-spirited child-led approach to learning."[10]

However, most homeschooling styles are on the spectrum between the two, "with families choosing a variety of methodologies and approaches, adapting to the changing needs of each child and providing a varied mix of structure and spontaneity."[11] Additionally, many homeschoolers change curriculum or styles several times within the first few years of homeschooling.[12]

As with real homeschoolers, there is a wide spectrum of educational styles in the titles considered (see table 1). Some children are taught by a single family member, while others are taught by a variety of friends and family members or a governess.

Some characters have a more traditional education. Their daily routine is generally more structured with lesson plans or a set schedule. The Incorrigible children in *The Mysterious Howling* follow lesson plans and schedules meticulously set by their governess. Other characters have a primarily hands-on education focusing on practical skills, as well as academic goals.

Two great examples in this category are Mina in *Skellig* and Nim in *Nim's Island*. Mina is homeschooled in an "unschooled" fashion by her mother with her studies taking place outside, as well as inside her house. Nim's education takes place all over the island as she helps her father observe and record the natural world.

Table 2. Depictions and Motivations by Title

Title	Depiction	Motivation
Ballet Shoes by Noel Streatfeild	Positive	Unintentional—Lack of Finances
A Cool Moonlight by Angela Johnson	Positive	Unintentional—Protection
Ida B . . . by Katherine Hannigan	Mixed	Pedagogical
Liar and Spy by Rebecca Stead	Negative	Pedagogical
The Mysterious Howling by Maryrose Wood	Positive	Unintentional—Protection
Nim's Island by Wendy Orr	Positive	Unintentional—Isolation
Prairie Evers by Ellen Airgood	Mixed	Unintentional—Isolation
Savvy by Ingrid Law	Mixed	Unintentional—Magical Abilities
Schooled by Gordon Korman	Negative	Unintentional—Protection
Skellig by David Almond	Positive	Pedagogical
Surviving the Applewhites by Stephanie S. Tolan	Positive	Pedagogical
This Journal Belongs to Ratchet by Nancy Cavanaugh	Mixed	Ideological
Wonder by R. J. Palacio	Mixed	Unintentional—Protection

It should be noted that these homeschooling styles are not mutually exclusive in real life or in the literature reviewed. Table 1 notes the dominant style seen in each title. Additionally, four titles (*Wonder*, *A Cool Moonlight*, *Liar and Spy*, and *Savvy*) have homeschooled characters, but the details of homeschooling are never described. These stories, while excellently written, provide few windows into the daily life of a homeschooled child.

Factor Three: Homeschooling as an Obstacle

Although the homeschooling motivation and styles are diverse, many of the stories use homeschooling as an obstacle and regular schooling as the solution. In several titles, the major conflict is solved through acceptance or celebration of traditional schooling. For instance, Safer (*Liar and Spy*) decides to step out of his comfort zone and attend regular school, and Auggie (*Wonder*) becomes a stronger person by attending regular school.

In many stories, homeschooled kids feel isolated due to a lack of friends. A need for social interaction is the most oft-cited reason homeschooled characters want to go to traditional school. Making a friend is often a goal set by homeschooled characters, such as Ratchet (*This Journal Belongs to Ratchet*), and going to traditional school is often seen as the path to achieving that goal.

In the titles considered, none of the characters wanted to go to traditional school for educational reasons. Characters that transitioned to traditional school met the academic standards easily. This aligns with the findings that, "Homeschooling has consistently proven to be an academically valid educational option."[13] However, some characters had a difficult time learning how to operate in a new culture. Capricorn (*Schooled*) faces many challenges when he enters the social whirl of middle school and Prairie (*Prairie Evers*) hates having to learn a specific lesson at a specific time.

Two titles provide exploration into the benefits and challenges of different types of education. In *Ida B . . .* , Ida and her family discuss homeschooling, as well as public school, with the positive sides of each rising to the top. *Surviving the Applewhites* focuses more on the benefits of homeschooling, including artistic freedom, independence, and creativity.

Factor Four: Definitions of Positive, Negative, and Mixed

The final factor looks at the representation of homeschooling in these titles (see table 2). Is the overall depiction of homeschooling seen as positive, negative, or mixed? Two things were considered when looking at each title:

1. Do/Did the character(s) like being homeschooled?

2. Are the character(s) personally, as well as educationally, fulfilled while homeschooled? Are they happy? Are they part of a community and do they have friends? Are they growing emotionally, as well as academically? Or is homeschooling used as a way for them to avoid the outside world, keeping them from being fulfilled?

Based on these questions, the following categories were created:

- **Positive.** In stories with positive depictions, the homeschooled characters prefer to be homeschooled, and they feel personally and educationally fulfilled. This usually means they are an active participant in their community and have at least one friend.

- **Negative.** Conversely, books with negative depictions have characters that dislike their homeschooling experience and do not feel personally and/or educationally fulfilled. Often these characters are not active in any community. These are the books that most often end with the character finding fulfillment through traditional schooling.

- **Mixed.** Stories with mixed depictions fall somewhere on the spectrum between positive and negative. In some, the kids like being homeschooled, but ultimately learn that they must interact with their community to be fulfilled. In others, the characters are reluctantly forced to attend traditional schooling, but come to learn that both types of education are valuable.

Literature Review Findings

There is a small collection of quality middle-grade fiction that depicts homeschooling in a positive or mixed light; however, in many cases, going to traditional school is the solution to the protagonist's problem. While this is the case for some homeschooled children, there are many other homeschooled children who are equally happy with nontraditional schooling. Hopefully, the diversity of educational experiences will soon be reflected more widely in middle-grade fiction.

The Importance of Educational Diversity in Children's Literature

The need for educational diversity in children's literature is great for two reasons. First, as the number of homeschooled children increases, so does the importance of having those experiences reflected in books.[14] Studies show that nearly 80 percent of homeschoolers use public libraries as an educational resource, so it is important that our collections reflect their stories.[15] Judi Moreillon writes, "All children deserve literature that reflects the cultural diversity of our society and world. . . . They deserve books that are authentic and accurate."[16]

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As Rudine Sims Bishop writes, stories are mirrors that reflect back the human experience so that reading becomes a means of self-affirmation of our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience.[17] It is important for homeschooled children to see their daily educational experiences reflected in stories so they can be confident and proud of themselves. If homeschooled children only find stories that show traditionally schooled or "distorted, negative, or laughable" homeschooled experiences, "they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part."[18]

Just as librarians should seek to collect materials that reflect racial and cultural diversity, they should also seek to collect materials with educational diversity. Homeschooling culture is as richly diverse and vibrant as any other in the United States, and we should strive to reflect that in our collections.

In addition, librarians should be proactive in promoting these materials through programming use (such as book clubs), online and print booklists, book talks, and other readers' advisory activities. The toolkit created by the ALSC Committee for Library Service to Special Population Children and Their Caregivers provides excellent resources for serving homeschooled families.[19]

Secondly, it is also important for traditionally schooled readers to gain insight into the other educational perspectives. Michael Tunnell and James Jacobs point out that multicultural books "provide a connection between each of those communities and the world."[20] They also write that well-written multicultural books can prompt "a global outlook as well as an understanding that members of the human family have more similarities than differences."[21] Additionally, stories can also help readers understand what is happening in the house next door.[22]

Although the practice of homeschooling is becoming more mainstream, there are still many negative connotations associated with being homeschooled. For example, Michael Romanowski lists the following generalizations: homeschooling produces social misfits, homeschooling fails to prepare good citizens, students who are homeschooled have a hard time getting into college, and most people only homeschool for religious reasons.[23] He urges parents, educators, and others to strive for education in any form that "maximizes the potential of all children."[24]

Historically, education was the responsibility of the family, but now it has become the responsibility of society. Kenneth V. Anthony writes, "Today most Americans have been educated in a school setting and accept by default that the school is primarily responsible for education."[25] However, Theresa Willingham predicts "Homeschoolers will always be a large, anomalous group."[26] With this in mind, it is important that we encourage the creation, publication, collection, and promotion of quality stories that feature positive depictions of homeschoolers. &

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