Reimagining home-based learning through comparisons of alternative schooling methods

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Abstract

Moving forward into a post-pandemic world, we can reimagine institutional education systems by reflecting on the lived experiences of emergency home-based learning and exploring the alternative narratives of traditional homeschooling. Having worked in the educational sector of Ontario during the pandemic, I observed families transitioning their homes into blended learning spaces for emergency home-based learning and the challenges that came with this change. Parents found themselves trying to explain teaching materials with no previous training while teachers tried to enforce traditional classroom expectations in households where many children had no remote learning structures in place (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020; Orelien-Hernandez et al., 2021). In contrast, the growing homeschooling alternative, a blend of home and educational space, had established relational systems to support this kind of community-based pedagogy. This alleviated many of the challenges of multimodal learning and had shown promise in increasing student academic scores, creating alternatives to socioeconomic barriers found in institutional education, and fostering racial protectionism (Mazama & Lundy, 2012; Statistics Canada, 2021a; Van Pelt, 2015). My paper introduces the preliminary questions and discussion of my proposed study for my master's thesis using place-based pedagogy (Corbett, 2009; Ellsworth, 2005; Gruenewald, 2003; Illich, 1971) to open a conversation around homeschooling as a resource for post-pandemic pedagogical design and development.

Keywords: *Homeschooling, Covid-19, home-based learning, place-based pedagogy*

Melody Minhorst is a Master of Education student at York University and became interested in using what had been learned from the pandemic and from alternative schooling to explore and inform education system design and practise. She has a background in interdisciplinary approaches and multicultural education that is the base of her interests in place-based pedagogies and exploring inclusion in early childhood education.

Introduction

During the school lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen schools suddenly shift to delivering educational programming through, almost exclusively, online learning methods. This sudden shift to learning at home and online came with a multitude of challenges; teachers were suddenly trying to take what had previously occurred in-person in a classroom into an online world, parents quickly had to accommodate their children's learning from home, and students saw their home and school spaces blend together. In this paper, I will examine how comparing home-based learning to traditional homeschooling during the pandemic provides an opportunity to see how challenges were overcome and how homeschooling can inform future home-based learning practices.

Critical Place-based Pedagogy

Education can be a complex multimodal learning experience that encompasses place as both an experience and a location. Places are never neutral; they are a direct reflection of the history of the place, the social constructs of the community, and the experiences of the learners. The seemingly static and built institutional schooling space is more than just a place of work and teaching. It is a dynamic learning space that extends past its physical walls and is founded in collective history and individual learners' experiences. Critical place-based pedagogy theory acknowledges the bias of learning spaces because it "recognizes how relationships of power and domination are inscribed in material spaces. That is, places are social constructions filled with ideologies, and the experience of places" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 5).

Major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting school closures, which directly influenced the spaces in which children learned, are part of children's and families' lived experiences, making them an important component of this research. Children consistently show

that learning is found in the everyday, more than just within institutional, educational spaces (Ellsworth, 2005; Gruenewald, 2003; Illich, 1971). Social connections made through peers, participation in media and current events, and experimentation during planned learning opportunities are just a few of the ways that children demonstrate learning (Ellsworth, 2005; Gruenewald, 2003; Illich, 1971). For this reason, when we discuss educational experiences, it is useful to employ a "framework that interrogates the intersection between urbanization, racism, classism, sexism, environmentalism, global economics, and other political themes" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 6).

Disability Studies and Social Constructionist Theory

In institutional schooling, guidelines and policies provide a measure of accommodation; however, public schooling in Ontario needs to utilize a more proactive approach in creating accommodations and reducing barriers for people with disabilities. Currently, before any additional accommodations or assessment modifications can be provided to students with disabilities, there are many bureaucratic hoops to pass through, often detrimentally affecting feelings of inclusion (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). In contrast, Van Pelt (2015) claims that students with disabilities in homeschooling or home-based learning may be better accommodated as there are less institutional or social barriers in place. The proposed study uses both social constructionist theory and disability studies in tandem to explore how families experience accessibility and how socially constructed ideas around schooling, inclusion and childhood have been altered during the pandemic.

Social constructionist theory can be understood as a framework to explore social phenomena in which the concepts remain "fluid, dynamic, and changing according to historical and geographical context" (Kang et al., 2017, p. 37). Specifically, using social constructionist

theory to focus on the constructs of social space rather than just physical place allows for a more balanced analysis of families' lived experiences. In public spaces such as institutional buildings, the general public is concerned with maintaining socially constructed and accepted realities; any behaviour that is different from the expected norms is viewed with distrust and negativity (Ryan, 2005). In the shift to home-based learning, many seemingly immovable and slow-to-change social structures were suddenly disturbed and drastically altered. The physical and psychological transition to home-based learning also created an opportunity to see how institutional schools provide much more than just a location for learning. Instead, they provide a multitude of social programs and physical accommodations to the community (Dwyer, 2022; Kirsch et al., 2021).

Disability studies provide a framework to explore concepts of disability and accessibility which are woven through the social constructionist theory of maintaining social norms through exclusion. Disability studies are positioned in this work as a methodology that explores disability identity as a cultural, political, and social phenomenon (Hall, 2019). By using both disability studies and social constructionist theory in tandem we can explore how changes in learning experiences and environments affect social concepts of childhood, accessibility, and inclusion. As Titchkosky (2011) notes, "unless the relation between environment and its participants is theorized and thereby disturbed, disability will continue to be included as an excludable type [of intellectual concepts or minority groups] even as the physical environment changes" (p. 78).

Childhood and accessibility are both social concerns that were affected by changes made to the education system during the pandemic. Using social constructionist and disability studies lenses when exploring the narratives of families in home-based learning creates an opportunity to reflect on which pandemic changes will inform more inclusive education systems.

Schooling Types

Homeschooling

In Canada, homeschooling is defined as "an alternative method of learning that takes place outside the public or private/independent school environment" (Statistics Canada, 2021b, para. 9). In this definition of homeschooling, parents are responsible for delivering, managing, and monitoring all forms of school learning independently of any institution. Canada's definition of homeschooling, however, also includes homeschooling that is associated in some way with public or private school institutions, therefore allowing for almost all forms of alternative learning to fall under the umbrella term of homeschooling (Statistics Canada, 2021b).

Learning, as the experience of transition found between knowing and not knowing, is found in a variety of places, not just in institutional schooling (Ellsworth, 2005). Illich (1971) argued that children are capable beings who can introduce and explain complex learning concepts to their peers when given the opportunity. The conceptualization of children as capable and curious is the basis of the deschooling theory of taking learning outside of institutions and "changing laws and policies to make schools non-compulsory" (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020, p. 80). Deschooling (Illich, 1971) was proposed as a radical theory that contrasted with traditional, institutionalized schooling as the only place of learning (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020; Ellsworth, 2005). Illich believed that most "learning happens casually, and even the most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction" (Illich, 1971, p. 12). Illich's radical ideals of abolishing mass compulsory schooling to allow for independent learning often takes the more practical form of unschooling (Holt, 1982) in homeschooling practices (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020). Specifically, unschooling emphasizes the same ideals of learning completely independently of the institutional schooling system without changing compulsory schooling laws (Bartlett &

Schugurensky, 2020; Holt, 1982). Unschooling promotes independent education by focusing on child-led learning with no formal curriculum in which "students choose what, when, how and why they want to learn" (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020, p. 79). Homeschooling comes in a wide variety of styles with unschooling being just one type of homeschooling practice. There are other types of homeschooling methods including both microschooling, which was popularized as the 'pandemic-pod' system in which small groups of students all work on school activities together with one teacher-parent, and curriculum-based homeschooling, in which the parent delivers all forms of educational content (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020).

Homeschooling as a generalized term to encompass a wide variety of alternative schooling models has some well documented challenges in pre-pandemic literature. Some of these challenges include: limited opportunities for socialization with peers, a sense of isolation, feelings of outside criticism and judgement on the types of schooling methods used, and a lack of social-emotional learning opportunities through group work (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020; Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021; Riley 2018). However, many families already practicing homeschooling have established relational systems to support this kind of community-based pedagogy, alleviating many of the challenges of multimodal learning and the isolation of homeschooling (Anthony, 2015; Van Pelt, 2015). Homeschooling has also shown promise in increasing student academic scores, creating alternatives to socioeconomic barriers found in institutional education, and protecting students of colour from racism, while also creating opportunities to explore pedagogy in a wider sense (Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021; Mazama & Lundy, 2012; Riley, 2018; Van Pelt, 2015). Homeschooling is an alternative schooling system that lends itself to fostering self-direction, independence, and flexibility in how the teaching curriculum is presented (Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021; Riley, 2018; Van Pelt, 2015).

Home-based Learning

The Statistics Canada definition of homeschooling is quite broad and does not differentiate between different types of homeschooling. This paper distinguishes between pandemic home-based learning and homeschooling as during the COVID-19 pandemic the shift to home-as-school learning was completely involuntary and strongly affiliated with the public schooling system (Statistics Canada, 2021b). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected students' learning to at least some degree since March 2020, and what this looked like depended on where the students were located in Canada as policies regarding learning content, educational environment, and school closures varied widely (Statistics Canada, 2021c). When looking at home-based learning caused by the pandemic, there are similar challenges as found in homeschooling *before* the pandemic. Home-based learning during the pandemic was found to possibly lead "to social isolation, compromised nutrition, and the unavailability or curtailment of childcare services affecting children's psychological and emotional wellbeing" (Kirsch et al., 2021, p. 1). Parents found themselves trying to create an environment for home-based learning, often creating transitional and multi-use spaces in the family home. Meanwhile, teachers needed to quickly convert their curriculum materials into online and home-learning friendly forms, while trying to enforce traditional classroom expectations in households where many children had no remote learning structures in place (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020; Orelien-Hernandez, et al., 2021). Schooling resources were difficult to access and there was an overall lack of communication between the institutional school systems, teachers, and the families (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020; Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). It was also found that many children could not focus or did not know how to structure their studies in a way that was helpful for learning (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020; Kirsch et al., 2021). In contrast, there were also multiple cases

where children excelled in the home environment and some children enjoyed "that they could organize their work autonomously and work independently" (Kirsch et al., 2021, p. 8). In the literature, whenever children or caregivers were asked about what they needed or what they appreciated about home-based learning, the answer to both questions was flexibility (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020; Kirsch et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Orelien-Hernandez et al., 2021).

Many of the similarities between homeschooling and home-based learning were brought to the forefront by the sudden educational shift caused by COVID-19. Families had to take on different responsibilities as school and home roles overlapped and they faced similar hardships as documented in pre-pandemic homeschooling. The similarities and possible connections between homeschooling and home-based learning challenges lay the groundwork for the preliminary questions of my proposed study, which aims to understand how these shifts in responsibility extend beyond our usual structures that mandate schooling such as policy, curriculum, and school guidelines.

Discussion

Over the last decade, homeschooling as a blend of home and educational spaces has become a steadily growing alternative form of education (Statistics Canada, 2021a; Van Pelt, 2015). Studies show a trend that contrary to popular beliefs, homeschooling is often chosen for ideological and pedagogical reasons, such as increased flexibility or concerns about class sizes, rather than for religious reasons (Bruce Arai, 2000; McDonald, 2019). Public opinion has slowly been changing in seeing homeschooling as "one educational option among many, rather than as a radical alternative to contemporary public schooling" (Bruce Arai, 2000, p. 214). As such, some forms of homeschooling "thrived under pandemic conditions, with online groups organizing what are now being called pandemic pods or learning pods in many localities" (Bartlett &

Schugurensky, 2020, p. 78). Knowing that Canada has made a shift towards increased online and multimodal learning, and that public opinion has become more accepting of schooling alternatives, it can easily be projected that exploring homeschooling models can help to inform our future educational practices.

How programs, spaces, or even educational systems are designed around daily use and personal experiences to create more flexibility and inclusivity is a key component of the basis for my research. During my undergraduate studies, I completed concurrent degrees in Landscape Architecture and Psychology during which I completed a capstone project that explored physical transitional spaces designed to accommodate a wide variety of abilities and uses. This project allowed me to dive into my personal interests about inclusivity by exploring the ways that a space can become more accessible and multifunctional. The reason I was so interested in understanding these ideas of multi-use and transitional spaces was because I grew up hearing stories from my father who joked about being a 'school failure' as he put it, since he never completed elementary school. My father is, however, much more than a failure; he is an intelligent man who told captivating stories about forging his own way through the world, relying on his own sense of independence and self-worth without any formalized schooling. My father's stories of making his own accommodations and successes outside of any type of school system showed me that learning and education could happen in more than just institutional spaces. As both a student and educator in the Canadian education system, and inspired by my father's stories, I have a unique perspective to explore how families used their spaces to learn when the pandemic lockdowns in Ontario began. My personal experiences allowed me to critically examine how families tried to transition their homes into blended learning spaces that accommodated the challenges caused by the shift to home-based learning.

Study Proposal and Methods

This paper serves as a literature review and theoretical exploration of the literature to inform a proposed qualitative study as part of my master's thesis. The paper explores the ideas of using homeschooling as a guide for overcoming challenges in home-based learning and builds on current research conversations about the pedagogical lessons of the pandemic, creating the basis for my master's thesis study. My study will use qualitative interviews to document detailed lived-experience narratives of participating families to provide a snapshot into their lives during the pandemic and an opportunity to analyze and reflect on the complexities of pandemic education (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The interviews will be individual semi-structured interviews of parents with children who experienced homeschooling or home-based learning during the pandemic. The interviews will utilize open-ended questions to introduce topics about pandemic learning, specifically reflecting on how the home space was used, and how pandemic learning impacted the family's relationships with students' learning. The use of open-ended questions during the interview encourages interviewees to answer in depth and at length while also allowing them to introduce and discuss topics that are significant to them (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Ryan, 2005). Interview data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, focused on how the pandemic has changed and affected learning in the home, what types of challenges or changes the participants faced, and how these challenges were overcome. In focusing on the lived experiences of both homeschooling families and home-based learning families, this study will fill a gap in scholarship about the strengths of home-based learning.

Conclusion

This paper introduces my master's thesis research topics using place-based pedagogy and literature that examines homeschooling methods. My thesis will use the proposed research plan to explore how home-based learning and homeschooling narratives can be used as a resource for post-pandemic pedagogical design and development. In using lived-experience narratives to discuss the paradigm shift in home-based learning, we create an opportunity to initiate dialogue and theorize solutions in how educational institutions will integrate home, digital, and school learning spaces when looking to the future. This paper aims to facilitate conversations around the experiences and changes in learning in the home as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. By discussing these preliminary questions of spaces of transition, parental roles in teaching, and disability accommodations, this paper demonstrates the need for further research into the narratives of families participating in home-based learning and homeschooling during the pandemic. This paper has shown a connection between pre-pandemic homeschooling challenges and the challenges that arose due to the pandemic response of home-based learning. Comparing the ways in which families navigate and overcome these challenges will provide a foundation for future educators and educational design.

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