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Homeschooling, Abuse and Qualifications

By Stephen Downes

March 22, 2008

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Dana Hanley's post combines a mixture of misinterpretation and criticism in response to my recent [video](#) outlining my position on home schooling. In this post I respond to the first part her post, that dealing with abuse and qualifications. This post does not deal with the remaining four sections (content, accountability, resources, and equity).

On the 'Abuse' Remark - What I Actually Say

Before getting into detail, let me address what is probably the most persistent of the criticisms: that I "essentially equated homeschooling with abuse." This is a persistent misreading of what I in fact stated in my original post.

I said: "it is a form of child abuse to subject children to an education at the hands of a person who is manifestly unable to provide it." Hanley and others are misreading the word 'it' to mean "homeschooling". This is an error.

I am using the word 'it' in the sense "It is wrong to steal." Or "It is a crime to steal." This should be clear to any reader. Substituting 'home schooling' for 'it' in my sentence is grammatically absurd.

I hope we will have no more accusations that I am equating 'home schooling' with abuse. This is a transparently incorrect reading of my assertion.

I stand by the assertion that "it is a form of child abuse to subject children to an education at the hands of a person who is manifestly unable to provide it." If some people wish to dispute this assertion, I will debate with them in another post.

On the Abuse Remark - What The Court Said

Hanley writes, "I dedicated an entry to the false assumption that [credentials have anything to do with quality education](#)." Let me address this argument first.

Hanley states that my statement regarding abuse is "not in line" with what the court ruled. She then cites the appellate court ruling to support this position.

The petition granted by the court is not found in the appellate ruling, but rather, in the original judgement. It is a bit difficult to locate because of the discussion of all the other forms of abuse taking place in the family in question, but it is clearly enough stated, with my emphasis added:

A first amended petition was filed on March 1, 2006, the day of the scheduled pretrial resolution conference. It is the operative petition. It addresses all three subject minors and alleges father's physical abuse of Rachel, mother's failure to protect Rachel, the sexual abuse of Rachel by Leonard C. and the parent's failure to protect her from him in that they allowed him to frequent the family home, Rachel's refusal to live in the family home, the older siblings' having been dependents of the court due to father's physical and emotional abuse, the parents' failure to provide the children with regular medical and dental care and provide Rachel with therapy when they discovered she was practicing self mutilation by cutting herself, the threat to the minors' physical and emotional health that these matters pose, **and the parents' failure to keep the children in regular attendance at school.** ([In re Rachel L.](#) et al., Persons Coming Under the Juvenile Court Law, JONATHAN L. and MARY GRACE L., Petitioners, Versus SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA FOR THE COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES, Respondent. It can be found in its entirety at the state of California's government link to the [judicial branch](#). [[Also found here.](#)])

To support her position, Hanley also cites from the appellate court ruling an extract to the effect that home schooling does not qualify as schooling "whatever the quality of that education." She perhaps should have read the entire paragraph, including the footnote:

The parents in this case assert that when the mother gives the children educational instruction at home, the parents are acting within the law because mother operates through Sunland Christian School where the children are "enrolled." [Footnote 4: In support of the parents' home schooling, Terry Neven, Sunland Christian School's administrator, submitted a letter in which he stated the school is a private school and the two younger children are enrolled there. The letter fails to mention that the children do not actually receive education instruction at the school.] However, the parents have not demonstrated that mother has a teaching credential such that the children can be said to be receiving an education from a credentialed tutor. It is clear that the education of the children at their home, whatever the quality of that education, does not qualify for the private full-time day school or credentialed tutor exemptions from compulsory education in a public full-time day school.

The court is very clear on this point. You can't sign up for a private school, keep your children at home, and then pretend that this constitute enrollment in private full-time day school.

There is another remark in the ruling, that "'[h]ome education, regardless of its worth, is not the legal equivalent of attendance in school in the absence of instruction by qualified private tutors.'" However, this is not a part of the ruling itself, but rather, a citation from a previous ruling

(specifically, Turner, supra, 121 Cal.App.2d Supp. at p. 868-869; accord Shinn, supra, 195 Cal.App.2d, at p. 694.)

It is clear that both courts made the same ruling, specifically, that the instruction was not provided by qualified instructors, that "enrolling" (but never attending) in a private school didn't make it so, and that this constitute a part of the more general child abuse taking place in that family.

Why home schoolers would want to leap to the defense of the family in this case is beyond me, as it appears to be in every way an appalling mistreatment of the children involved.

Qualifications

Hanley begins reasonably, stating "no one is arguing that it is better to not be certified." But then she asserts that "certification itself is an ineffective predictor of teacher ability and that research shows that there is no statistically significant difference between classroom teachers who are certified via the traditional route, via alternative certification programs and who enter the classroom uncertified."

On the whole, this assertion is implausible. While we agree that certified plumbers may be incompetent, and that uncertified plumbers may be competent, on the whole, in general, we take certification to be a reliable indicator of competence. And this belief is reflected in our behaviour: on the whole, we opt for certified plumbers, certified dentists, and certified doctors.

As evidence, Hanley cites a [study](#) of certified, uncertified, and alternatively certified teachers in New York City schools. One would have thought that a more general study would have been relevant, rather than a very focused look at a small number of teachers in one particular environment. A study, perhaps, such as Kate Waqsh's "Teacher Certification Reconsidered: Stumbling for Quality," published through the Abell Foundation. But this, I guess, would mean acknowledging the many studies that *do* assert that certification makes a difference. And it would mean responding to Linda Darling-Hammond's [extended critique](#) of the report.

We would expect some studies to show that certification is an unreliable indicator. But the study Hanley cites is not one of them. The authors state "On average, the certification status of a teacher has at most small impacts on student test performance." And they admit that the subjects of the study are people who have been selected; they are highly motivated and educated. They are therefore not representative of the much wider population that is not certified.

My own view regarding certification accords with Darling-Hammond's:

certification is but a proxy for the subject matter knowledge and knowledge of teaching and learning embodied in various kinds of coursework and in the evidence of ability to practice contained in supervised student teaching. It is true that certification is a relatively crude measure of teachers' knowledge and skills, since the standards for subject matter and teaching knowledge embedded in certification have varied across states and over time, are differently measured, and are differently enforced from place to place... Given

the crudeness of the measure, it is perhaps remarkable that so many studies have found significant effects of teacher certification.

I am rather more interested in the *qualifications*, rather than the certification, of the person educating the learner. As Darling-Hammond states, certification is but a proxy. And as I have written elsewhere, I expect the larger community to contribute to the education of a child. This will necessarily involve people who are not certified as teachers - but on no account should it involve people who are *unqualified*.

I know of no research that suggests that a person untrained in carpentry would be as able to teach carpentry as someone who has been trained as a carpenter. Nor am I aware of any studies showing that a person who is illiterate is better able to teach literacy than someone who is literate. Teacher certification allows us to get some handle on those - and other - qualifications. It is by no means perfect, and 'alternative certification' even less so. But it is demonstrably better than nothing.

If parents are not even going to subject themselves to a literacy test - something that would be important, given the levels of [functional illiteracy](#) in the United States - then how can we know they are even able to teach their children to read.

Perhaps the best evidence comes from the [international studies](#) (some of which I have been reporting in my newsletter). Nations that score well in international tests do not employ 'alternative' and uncertified instructors; quite the contrary. As [Lisa Moore reports](#) in U.S. News & World Report, "Perhaps the most potent secret weapon in Finland's success is well-trained teachers. In 1970, as the country began to overhaul its system, it mandated that teachers for all grades must obtain at least a master's degree. Today, teacher-education programs at universities are highly competitive, in part because teachers enjoy high prestige in Finnish society."

Parental Involvement

Hanley follows up her discussion of certification with an alternative theory: "I think it is important to note here that the only factor proven to have a significant effect on student performance beyond all socioeconomic factors is parental involvement."

I have commented on the impact of socio-economic factors on numerous occasions, and need not belabor that topic here.

Hanley continues, "Parents are vital to the educational success of their children, and any system or solution we propose needs to take this into account."

I wish Hanley were more precise with what she means by "vital" - because we know that orphans are able to succeed educationally, as are children raised by guardians or even educated in (some) residential schools (such as [Eton](#)).

My own understanding - based on research such as is summarized by the [Harvard Family Research Project](#) - is that parents are important not so much as teachers but as role models, "

such as reading and communicating with one's child, and the more subtle aspects of parental involvement, such as parental style and expectations."

In fact, even Hanley seems to agree that the *teaching* that takes place in homeschooling is almost incidental to its success:

This is also the real reason why homeschoolers have traditionally been quite successful academically and socially after graduation. There is no magic formula; it is just that homeschooling selects for the most involved parents.

This may well be. But at the same time, this - and the research cited - suggests that some parents may play a significantly *negative* role in their children's education: parents who are not involved in their education, who do not (or cannot) read to their children, who have limited, or negative, expectations of their children.

Hanley writes, "it is just that homeschooling selects for the most involved parents." Perhaps. But it may also select for any number of other types of parents - including, for example, the abusive parents at the center of the court case that spawned this discussion.

We cannot depend on some mysterious 'self-selection' mechanism to defend children against parents who would use the cover of homeschooling to perpetuate the sort of abuse cited in the court case. We need some sort of evaluation, some sort of assessment. Something that would indicate to us, incidentally, that the 'involved' parent can also fill some of the functions of the teachers they are replacing.

Certification seems like a very small requirement, for such high stakes.

What Does This Have To Do With Homeschooling

There is an old adage: the law is made for other people. This applies in this case.

Hanley agrees with me that "many parents are simply not qualified to teach their own children. They lack a proper knowledge base, capacity for reason and any grounding in pedagogy or communication theory."

But then she asks:

what has that to do with homeschooling? I know many competent adults who have graduated from college who say they could never teach their own children. While I think many of them could if they let go of some of their schoolish notions of what education means, it still points to a fundamental aspect of homeschooling rarely considered in these discussions: Homeschooling is self-regulating. Most people do not and will never try it...most will not even ever seriously consider it. And many of those who do begin homeschooling find it too difficult and seek out other options for their children.

Quite so. Many people do not try homeschooling.

But it simply *does not follow* that the only people who try homeschooling are those who are qualified for it.

Some people are manifestly not qualified to offer homeschooling. The subjects of this court case offer an example of this.

Hanley is using a logic that only applies to people like her:

So long as the parent-child relationship is healthy, no one wants to see that child succeed more than the parent. Thus the parent who is failing at educating their own child will seek alternatives.

The problem is, there is a certain number of parent-child relationships that are [not healthy](#). "During FFY 2005, an estimated 1,460 children died due to child abuse or neglect." A certain number of parents who will *not* seek alternatives, even if they are failing. A certain number of parents who will not even be able to recognize *that* they are failing.

The law must be made, not just for you, but for those other people. We need to know that you are *not* one of those people. 1,460 children died due to child abuse or neglect. Is it too much to ask for *some* guarantee that your children will not be among those statistics?