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**Schooling Dangerously**

*A review of Homeschooling in America and The Year of Learning Dangerously*

*Mary McConnell*

*Homeschooling in America: Capturing and Assessing the Movement*   
by Joseph Murphy   
*Corwin, 200 pages, $34.95*

*The Year of Learning Dangerously: Adventures in Homeschooling*   
by Quinn Cummings   
*Perigee, 240 pages, $23.95*

I’m tempted to compare homeschooling to a YouTube video gone viral. Defying regulation, thwarting would-be competitors, and multiplying without official sanction, homeschooling just keeps popping up in more homes. Over the past three decades, the number of homeschooled children has grown by at least 7 percent a year—the number may now exceed the number attending charter schools—and between 6 and 12 percent of all students are educated at home at some point between kindergarten and twelfth grade. See it; like it; forward it to a friend.

My husband and I began homeschooling in 1994 for multiple reasons. Our three children were neither enjoying nor learning much in school, our professional lives were crowding out family time, and our children’s school treated religious faith as a curiosity, if not an active barrier to reason. We would be spending a year away from home while my husband was a visiting professor in Utah, and we craved more flexibility to explore this new corner of the world. Besides, how much harm could we do in a year?

Six years later, our children returned to brick-and-mortar school. No longer math-phobes, now steeped in history, geology, logic, sentence diagramming, and even (thanks to my husband) a little Plato, they thrived. I went back to school, too, first as a public and then as a Catholic high school teacher.

I remain an enthusiastic advocate of homeschooling, but recent years have found me occupied with reforming “real” school. Two much-heralded but very different books, Joseph Murphy’s new survey of the professional literature on homeschooling, *Homeschooling in America*, and Quinn Cummings’ story of homeschooling her daughter Alice*,* *The Year of Learning Dangerously*, rekindled my interest in the movement that once so engaged my family.

A professor of education at Vanderbilt, Murphy is a social scientist, not an advocate, which makes his generally positive evaluation of homeschooling all the more significant. His survey of the social science literature on the topic usefully, if sometimes turgidly, compiles the growing evidence that homeschooled children learn more than their counterparts, at least to the extent that standardized tests measure learning, and are emotionally healthier as well, at least to the extent that psychologists’ “self-esteem and self-concept” scales truly capture emotional health. They volunteer many more hours in their communities and even spend more time participating in extracurricular activities.

While these findings have been widely reported, some of the other studies he describes deserve more attention. For example, low-income children who are homeschooled often reach or exceed national academic averages, whereas the average low-income children in public schools score “considerably below” the national norm.

Likewise, homeschooling seems to mitigate the negative effects of low levels of parents’ education on student achievement—a finding that’s especially intriguing since these parents are the educators—as well as the negative effects of family socioeconomic variables and race displayed in public schools. It’s easy to postulate that homeschooling parents are unusually committed, but these results still challenge the prevailing orthodoxy that societal problems inevitably hold education hostage.

T*he Year of Learning Dangerously* offers an account of homeschooling driven by personal experience rather than data. Quinn Cummings, a former child actress turned blogger, intersperses her tale of her first year of homeschooling with anthropological forays among those she repeatedly dubs the homeschooling “tribes.”

She seems, alas, to envision herself following in Margaret Mead’s footsteps. We learn a lot more about her worldview than we do about the world of homeschooling. Here, for example, she describes preparing for a visit to a Christian homeschooling convention:

From the back of my closet I unearthed a below-the-knee skirt I’d bought three years before . . . [that] made me look twenty pounds heavier and depressed. . . . Fingers were another matter. I wondered if godly women wore fingernail polish. . . . I then had another flash: a cross! My ensemble absolutely required a cross.

I’ve attended more than a few of these conventions, and I suspect Cummings depicts this “tribe” about as accurately as Margaret Mead portrayed adolescent Samoans. To be fair, she wields the same ridicule when attending a convention of radical “unschoolers.” Of all her anthropological forays, only one resonated with my own encounters with a wide variety of homeschooling families: her surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of a homeschool Shakespeare production.

But she has little to say about how she actually conducted her daughter’s education. She recounts her repeated decisions to throw in the towel and outsource subjects she found troublesome. She dismisses the classical education movement with sarcasm: “Should I win the lottery tomorrow I’ll hire a full-time classical education tutor for myself. I’ll pretend I’m five years old and memorize all fifty states, the pantheon of Greek gods and a bunch of long, fancy poems. Then I’ll invade Gaul.”

Yet for all her condescension and self-preoccupation, Cummings captures some of homeschooling’s delights in ways that reams of data cannot. Her daughter “continued to consume books like an industrial shredder.” She and Alice meander through “canyons. . . warmed by the sun and smelling vaguely of sage” while talking “of nothing and everything.”

She also raises some issues that homeschooling advocates need to confront more forthrightly. While allowing children to pursue their own interests encourages a love of learning, how should parents respond when “Alice was less interested in doing math than creating art”? What happens when parents begin to feel oppressed by what Cummings calls “aroundness”—because “when children homeschool they’re always around”?

Above all, Cummings asks the question that troubled me most when I watched my children make the transition back to “real school,” and when I taught previously homeschooled children in the classroom. Yes, she concedes, “maybe school is stupid, soul-crushing and irrelevant. But . . . how many of us are continually delighted by our work? . . . Maybe school is designed to acclimate humans to enduring long stretches of tedium.”

Buried in this snarky speculation is an important insight. “Socialization” encompasses more than developing high self-esteem or meaningful relationships. To quote one researcher, socialization includes “acquiring the [needed] rules of behavior.”

It is fashionable in pedagogy circles to deride efforts to instill workforce skills as neo-Taylorite, harking back to days when factory workers’ every move was scripted and designed to produce automatons, not thinkers. But not all of school’s more irksome lessons are useless. My Catholic high school requires students to wear uniforms, leave their cell phones in their lockers, and complete homework assignments even if they’re deemed stupid or unnecessary.

Soul-crushing? Sometimes, probably. But these rules do not only enhance learning by removing distractions; I’m convinced that my students benefit from learning to conform to expectations and, yes, even bow to authority.

One of the few negative studies that Murphy cites examined homeschool graduates’ record as enlistees (not officers) in the military. As the authors of the study acknowledge, their sample is small and almost certainly unrepresentative. Still, they found that homeschoolers drop out of the military before their enlistment period is over at a rate almost double that of public school graduates (41.5 percent versus 26 percent in the first three years of service), and often with unfavorable discharges.

I can’t help wondering if many homeschool recruits rebelled at what appeared to be petty, unreasonable rules. One of my own children, upon return to “real” school, actively resisted tackling assignments that he did not enjoy. Previously homeschooled children in my Advanced Placement classes embraced self-directed learning and read voraciously, yet struggled with the strict timetable and subject-matter regimentation that success on an AP exam demands.

In the end, both books, in very different ways, debunk the notion that homeschooling families or strategies are easy to pigeonhole, or that they are flawless. Current pedagogical fashion harps endlessly on “differentiating” instruction to meet the needs of diverse individual students; for homeschooling parents, whose “individual students” are their own kids, this comes naturally.

*The Year of Learning Dangerously* is all about creative, obstreperous Alice and her neurotic mother, which is precisely why I liked it, even as I winced at Cummings’ pseudo-anthropology. And it is also easier to understand why public schools are not as able to devote intense, individual attention to every student.

The Cummings family story ends (or continues) with the family taking a direction that may bring the worlds of homeschool and real school together: an online charter school where some classes would be “self-directed” and others would “meet in a virtual classroom on a regular schedule.” Cummings suggests that homeschooling may evolve into “roam schooling”; my own experience suggests that “real” school is, hesitantly, embarking on the same journey.

My online economics students are enrolled at the Catholic school where I taught, but didn’t have time to fit this class into their schedules. So they still take quizzes, but now these quizzes are interactive and students receive instant feedback about where they went wrong.

My students and I don’t interact in a classroom, but they watch podcasted lectures where I walk them through problem sets—and they can rewind without having to raise their hand and admit that they’re confused. They work at their own pace and in their own space. And, to my surprise, my online students seem more willing to enter into heated discussion than the students who sat in my classroom.

Homeschoolers—ever the braver and more innovative of the two sets—have traveled farther down this road, but I’m guessing that fiscal constraint and frustration with disappointing educational results may lead brick-and-mortar school leaders to start living dangerously, too, and realize that each group has something to learn from the other.

*Mary McConnell, who has homeschooled her own children and taught at a Catholic high school, works as an online instructor.*