

# **“Nerdy Know-it-Alls” and “Paranoid Parents”: Images of Alternative Learning in Films and Television Programs**

**David Cameron HAUSEMAN**

---

## **Abstract**

This study examines how homeschooling, unschooling and alternative learners have been portrayed in five recent films and television programs. It also investigates whether the media are grounding their representations of these students and their parents in reality, or if it is disseminating harmful stereotypes that may have detrimental effects for those who choose to learn in this manner in real life.

---

In the wake of numerous (and often misguided) school reform efforts across North America and much of the developed world, many students and their parents have become disillusioned with traditional forms of formal education and find themselves turning to homeschooling, unschooling and other methods of alternative learning that have gained steam and a great deal of credibility over the past decade (Lloyd, 2009). Lloyd (2009) notes that approximately 1.5 million students in the United States of America are homeschooled, with 10-15% of that number representing unschoolers. Homeschooling is a term with which most are familiar. It refers to children who receive their education at home rather than in the confines of a

formal classroom. Unschooling, which can differ greatly from homeschooling, is a term used to classify a range of educational philosophies and practices predicated on allowing children to learn through life experience, play and social interaction without being forced to perform tasks by interfering adults (Ricci, 2009, p. 12). While these are two separate and competing educational philosophies, they have been lumped together for the purposes of this paper as the media texts used as the data sources for this study often blur the boundaries between these methods of learning. After a brief exploration of media culture and the ever increasing influence that television and films are having as socialization agents in the lives of youth and adults alike, this study will investigate how students who pursue alternative forms of learning are being represented in five films and television programs produced over the past decade. The images of their parents will also be investigated using a critical analysis approach in an effort to uncover any stereotypes or problematic assumptions embedded within each piece of media.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions were used to guide this inquiry. They are: 1) How are homeschooled and unschooled children depicted in films and television programs? 2) Are the parents of these children portrayed in a similar manner? and finally, 3) What implications do these media constructed and disseminated images of alternative learning have for those who wish to pursue non-traditional forms of education?

### **The Media's Role as a Socialization Agent**

To claim that the media can alter one's perceptions, and in the process have a significant impact on how people view the world and interact with their peers is neither new nor revolutionary. From the moment television sets became a fixture of the North American

household in the 1950s, a number of scholars (McLuhan, 1997, p. 290); Baudrillard, 1994, p. 34) have voiced their concern about the serious effects that uncritical viewership can have on an audience. In fact, the cultural studies are a whole academic discipline that emerged out of this debate.

Socialization refers to the process of inheriting and adopting societal norms, customs and ideologies. Canadian communications guru Marshall McLuhan (1960, p. 2) was one of the earliest scholars to explore the media's power to act as a socializing agent on its audience. He wrote that pieces of electronic media (like the films and television programs discussed in this study) fundamentally alter how one perceives the world. He further argued that the media has the power to brainwash people. This is particularly troubling because the more films and television programs one consumes, the more liable they are to adopt the dominant discourses and power structures that are disseminated through forms of mass media. This is especially true when people equate the depictions of reality that they see on screen as being on par with what is actually real. In *Understanding Media* (1997) McLuhan adds to that argument by stating that, "the film form is not just a puppet like dance of arrested still shots, for it manages to approximate and even surpass real life by means of illusion" (p. 290).

In his seminal *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Baudrillard argues that images, like those seen in films and broadcast on television are responsible for blurring the boundaries between what is real and simulations of reality that people perceive as being real (ie. characters in a television program) (p. 80). He elaborates on this notion by suggesting that films, television programs and other forms of mass media have become the main tools of socialization in contemporary society and states that "Everywhere socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages. Whoever is underexposed to the media is desocialized or virtually asocial" (p.

80). This seems to suggest that people are not only influenced by the various images, depictions and portrayals they see in films and television programs, but that these simulations of reality may inform society's collective perception of people they encounter in real-life (ie. the homeschooled, unschooled and alternative learners discussed throughout this paper).

More recently, Berry (2000) explains that the mass media are a major constructor of knowledge, values, history, institutions, power and what people ultimately think is important in their everyday lives. He goes on to describe a paradigm shift in the type of knowledge valued by society, stating, "where, at one time, people quoted law, classics, experts, church and academics, they now quote the Anita Hill or OJ Simpson trials, Jerry Seinfeld, ER, situation comedies, soap operas and, of course, Oprah!" (p. 72). Furthermore, Real (1996, p. 1), argues that whether intentional or unintentional, people incorporate the semiotic signifiers found in films, television programs and commercials into their reality and construct meaning and perceptions based on what they watch on television.

As digital technologies continue to play a larger role in both the personal and professional lives of people of all ages, it is not foolish to suggest that it will continue to play a part in the socialization process and persuade the perceptions of those who consume media. This means that the public's visions of children pursuing alternative, non-traditional and informal learning could be influenced by media depictions in films and television programs. Anonymous, (2007) supports this stance by pointing out that film and television programs transmit the social values and expectations of the dominant culture (p. 58). That could be quite problematic as the portrayals and depictions of alternative learning discussed below are stereotypical, inauthentic and leave much to be desired.

*Alternative Learning Methods*

As was mentioned earlier, homeschooling, unschooling and other methods of alternative learning are gathering interest and gaining steam across North America (Lloyd, 2009). This could be for a multitude of reasons. For instance, Holt, one of the most prolific and recognizable scholars who subscribes to an unschooling orientation to learning offers that “the typical classroom, with other children ready to point out, correct, and even laugh at every mistake...is the worst place for a child to begin” (1989, p. 3). It should be noted that, despite its etymology, unschooling does not refer to a lack of schooling. On the contrary, Davis (2006, p.8) stresses that “unschooling”, and similar alternative learning methods should not mean schooling without a plan. Furthermore, Ricci (2009) argues that parental and/or teacher interference takes the fun out of activities, while also removing imagination, creativity and the child’s natural desire to experiment from valuable learning experiences (p. 12). Before exploring the data, it is important to discuss the methodology used to conduct this study.

## **Methodology**

The data collection process involved finding and obtaining the five films and television programs included in the study. I used a strategy called purposeful sampling to find, obtain and include various pieces of media in this study. Gall, Gall and Borg (2005) note that purposeful sampling is “the process of selecting cases that are likely to be ‘information rich’ with respect to the purposes of a particular (qualitative) study” (p. 554). Purposeful sampling was used in an effort to uncover connections and themes between the various films and television programs included in the study. Data sources included the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)), cable television and DVD movie rental outlets.

After I was able to identify and obtain five films and television programs that featured children being schooled in a non-traditional learning environment, it was time to analyze the data. This involved conducting a critical analysis of the characters found in the five films and television programs that comprised the dataset of this study. By a critical analysis, I refer to a process in which the media representations of homeschoolers, unschoolers and other alternative learners depicted on screen are examined within a social structural context to reveal hidden messages and unstated assumptions found within the given film or television program. For instance, Beyerbach (2005, p. 267) used a critical analysis approach when analyzing over fifty school-based films set in a school environment and determined that these media were disseminating problematic stereotypes of educators that could be seen as unrealistic, classicist, sexist and racist in nature.

### **Examining Representations of Alternative Learners in Films and Television Programs**

After collecting and analyzing the data, it was determined that the media uses a single archetype to portray students enrolled in non-traditional learning environments, that being the “Nerdy Know-it-All.” As its name suggests, this archetype is neither authentic nor flattering to those practicing similar alternative learning methods in real-life. Children and adolescents of this archetype were portrayed as being far superior intellectual compared to their “normal” peers. However, the academic superiority of these “nerdy-know-it-alls” is tempered by their serious lack of social skills. Their intellectual arrogance tends to draw the ire of their academically challenged peers, which only speeds up their path towards becoming social pariahs in their particular schools. Examples of these “Nerdy Know-it All” homeschoolers and unschoolers were prevalent in all of the films and television programs studied.

*Examples of the “Nerdy-Know-it-All” Archetype*

For instance, a 2003 comedy series called the *O'Keefe's* focused on the trials and tribulations faced by two home schooled siblings who decide to attend public school for the first time during their adolescent years. In the pilot episode, viewers are introduced to Danny and Lauren O'Keefe (the two aforementioned siblings) as well as their parents and younger sister. It is clear from the beginning of the episode that the O'Keefe residence is not an average American household. The children each know six different languages, recite Shakespeare in their free time and rarely watch television or consume any form of mass media.

When they arrive at school as part of a project on "courtship rituals" devised by their controlling father, they quickly became targets for the local bullies by being too enthusiastic and eager to prove their academic superiority in the classroom. It is later revealed that many of their peers at public school thought that the O'Keefe children were in a cult because they were being homeschooled. This episode then showcases the socially inept nature of these siblings. Danny, an adolescent male, has had no prior experience talking to non-family members of the opposite sex and struggles to make friends after awkwardly making a pass at one of the popular girls. His troubles continue at the end of the show when it is revealed that his only ally at the school was feigning friendship in an effort to get back at Danny for hitting on his girlfriend.

This lack of social skills and an inability to deal with students of the opposite sex are two of the main characteristics prevalent in these film and television representations of alternative learners. For instance, an episode of a long running comedy set in a school environment called *South Park* (1999) bears a number of similarities to the aforementioned episode of the *O'Keefe's* (2003) described above. However, it is worth noting that *South Park* is a satirical comedy. There is a strong likelihood that the commentary on homeschooling offered by this program is firmly "tongue-in-cheek" and should be taken as such, especially when compared to the other programs

## Images of Alternative Learning in Films and Television Programs/ Hauseman

mentioned in this paper. In this episode, the viewer is introduced to two homeschooled students Rebecca and Mark Cotzwalz at the county spelling bee. These siblings took home a joint victory, even though the words they were asked to spell were much more challenging than those encountered by their public school peers. After the spelling bee, the Cotzwalz children wanted to attend school and, as in the O'Keefe's, their controlling father reluctantly agreed to let them try it out. When they arrive at school both students are depicted as being socially inept and lacking personality. Mark Cotzwalz does not understand male bonding and becomes a frequent target of bullying and harassment from the boys in his class. While his sister, Rebecca, is also portrayed as lacking socialization, her troubles arise from having had little contact with boys her age prior to attending South Park Public School. She does not understand the concept of love and turned into an out of control kissing fiend after locking lips with one of the boys at school. At this point, Mark punched the boy in the face for kissing his sister and instantly became popular. Mark then offers this bit of advice on the benefits and importance of formal schooling to both his father and anyone watching the show when he recites this monologue:

“Calm down, Papa. Everything is all right. You see, I learned something today. Public schools may be a bit lacking in education, but it is the place where children learn all of their social skills. You can't teach a child social skills, they have to learn them themselves, and the only place to do that is the playground, the cafeteria and so on” (Parker & Stone, 1999).

Besides perpetuating the myth that children cannot develop the social skills necessary to thrive in society without attending formal schooling, a number of other potentially problematic stereotypes about homeschooling and other forms of alternative learning are disseminated to viewers throughout this episode. For example, another student at the school named Eric Cartman declares that homeschooled kids may be smart, but that they have personalities like dishcloths. Furthermore, Cartman decides that he also wants to be homeschooled because he does not want



to do his schoolwork. While many students decide to pursue alternative learning because they are bored with and uninterested in the schoolwork found in a formal classroom, one gets the impression that Cartman is a lazy opportunist who wants to be homeschooled so that he can avoid doing any learning whatsoever. While it was mentioned earlier that *South Park* is a television series chock-full of comic satire (with this representation of homeschooling is a prime example of such), the program is marketed toward adolescent boys who may not (or may) have the critical viewership skills who could see through the sardonic wit manifest in this episode.

Katy Heron, the main character in the film *Mean Girls* (2004), also faced a tough transition from an alternative learning environment to attending a public high school. Katy, an exceptionally bright student finally became “cool” when she shed her intellectual weight and began to act like a stereotypical “bimbo.” Later in the film Katy shed more than her intellect when she became a popularity-driven, lying cheat with little regard for the feelings of those around her. This nerdy know-it-all was rejected from the in crowd when she was forced to join the school’s “Mathlete” team, something one of her cool cohorts called “social suicide.”

All of the representations of homeschooled, unschooled and alternative learners are negative and inauthentic in nature. Instead of simply being a media propagated archetype of alternative learners, the image of the “Nerdy Know-it-All” is very much a stereotype used to characterize non-traditional schooling in a negative manner. This stereotype could persuade those who are considering alternative learning methods like homeschooling and unschooling to reconsider making that decision while also perpetuating a harmful myth that could lead to harassment and abuse for those who are currently learning in such a manner. With that in mind, the images of parents who subscribe to homeschooling, unschooling and alternative learning methods are equally inaccurate and grounded in stereotype.

## **Examining Representations of the Parents of Alternative Learners in Films and on Television**

The archetype used to represent the parents observed in these films and television programs is that of the “Paranoid Parent.” Similar to how it treats their children, the media presents only one image of the parents of students who pursue their learning in an alternative fashion. These “Paranoid Parents” are agoraphobic control-freaks who are scared of the outside world. They tend to subscribe to homeschooling, unschooling and alternative methods of learning because it acts as a tool they use to shield their children from the many dangers that are a part of growing up in modern society.

### *The “Paranoid Parent” Archetype*

The father in the aforementioned television program called *The O’Keefe’s* (2003) is a prime example of the “Paranoid Parent” archetype discussed above. He admits to homeschooling his children because he was a nerd and treated cruelly by his fellow students. Even before his son departs for his first day of school, Mr. O’Keefe cannot resist teaching him a number of different positions he can use to shield his head and vital organs from the unrelenting fists of the school’s bullies. Mr. O’Keefe is obsessed with making sure that his children do not become “slaves to mindless popular culture” (DeGregorio, Murphy, & Ruehl, 2003). While acknowledging that Mr. O’Keefe has given his children the skills necessary to excel when it comes to academics and “book smarts”, the teachers and students at the local school point out that he has failed in cultivating within his children the necessary social skills needed to succeed in modern society.

A more extreme example of the “Paranoid Parent” is found in a 2004 episode of the hit drama *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* titled “Home.” This episode tells the story of Marilyn Nesbit and her two homeschooled sons. While Mr. O’Keefe seems to be protecting his children out of a genuine desire to look out for their best interests, one gets the impression that Marilyn Nesbit homeschools her children because she became an agoraphobic germophobe after her husband was killed by a street tough. A teacher interviewed by the police in this episode referred to Nesbit as a “fruitcake”, while any character representing the academic establishment (teacher, principal, etc.) frowned upon the New York Homeschool League and painted them as a bunch of paranoid, out of touch “crack-pots.” Nesbit brainwashed her children to be suspicious of school because of school shootings, bullies, gangs, etc. In a tragic turn, she is found guilty of first degree murder at the end of the episode for convincing her older son to kill his younger brother after she became worried that he would get hurt in foster care. It almost goes without saying that portrayals of parents of students who homeschool, unschool or learn in another alternative fashion as paranoid, psychotic killers is both inauthentic and potentially damaging to the public perception of those who are learning in a similar fashion.

Four of the five media portrayals of homeschooling and unschooling included in this study are fictional in nature. The only media text that featured “real” people was an episode of the seminal *The Dr. Phil Show* that aired on November, 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006. It should also be noted that this is the only film or television program included in the study that places a specific focus on unschoolers and the unschooling movement. This episode provides a number of exemplars of the “Paranoid Parent” archetype. The first guests on this episode, titled “The Great School Debate” were a couple named Dayna and Joe. Dayna and Joe described themselves as radical homeschoolers who think that children deserve more freedom and respect than what is found in

traditional public schools, which are more akin to prisons than institutions dedicated to learning. Early on in this episode, I came to the conclusion that the show's host, Dr. Phil McGraw is against alternative learning because he pounced when this couple admitted that they did not have pleasant school experience. These two "Paranoid Parents" were then chastised by McGraw who proclaimed that their children would be at a disadvantage when entering the work force because they are unschooled and lack not only social skills, but also the ability to work under pressure and meet deadlines, all of which are inherent in the school experience.

McGraw then painted the second guest, a mother named Raeann as an overprotective, paranoid, fearful mother akin to Marilyn Nesbit from *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (2004). He did this because the Raeann wanted to pursue unschooling because she thought schools were unsafe and becoming more dangerous by the second. McGraw immediately dismissed this argument and repeated that if Raeann did choose to unschool her children, they would lack the social skills needed to grow up to be well adjusted adults with the ability to contribute something to society. He then inferred that children who are homeschooled, unschooled or learn in an alternative setting may come to rely on their parents for everything rather than developing their own set of problem solving skills.

McGraw reveals his personal stance on this schooling issue when he introduced his final guest, a 26 year old woman who said she feels like unschooling robbed her of "normal" school experiences like the high school prom and that she lacks the social skills needed to survive and thrive in modern society. While Dr. Phil McGraw did make an effort to point out that parents have the ultimate choice when deciding the educational fate of their children, his questions and segments throughout this episode clearly promote a schooling orientation towards learning. Furthermore, his demonizing of unschooling parents as fearful, overprotective parents who

pursue alternative learning methods and their children as social pariahs who will struggle to adapt to life in the “real world” also reflect a dominant discourse on schooling. The representations of the “Paranoid Parents” in this episode are consistent with that found in the other pieces of media included in this study.

### **What Implications do these Portrayals Have for Those who Homeschool, Unschool or Practice Alternative Learning**

Because the representations of homeschoolers, unschoolers and their parents were so negative and inauthentic, they could have tremendous repercussions for the various alternative learning movements popping up across North America and the developed world. While the internet has made it much easier for people interested in these learning methods to contact like minded peers, many members of the general public rarely encounter anyone who subscribes to an alternative method of schooling and may come to rely on these negative, inauthentic and potentially harmful media propagated stereotypes to characterize their images of homeschooling, unschooling and those who subscribe to both movements. Needless to say, the mass media machine is so pervasive that the continued dissemination of these inauthentic images of alternative learning may lead many who are interested in alternative learning to abandon their plans to unschool because they do not want their students to turn out like the “Nerdy Know-it-Alls” they see depicted on screen.

### **Conclusions**

After obtaining and viewing the five films and television programs that acted as the data sources for this study, it became clear that the media is using a single respective archetype to

## Images of Alternative Learning in Films and Television Programs/ Hauseman

portray both students who pursue alternative learning methods as well as their parents. Children who are homeschooled, unschooled or engage in non traditional and/or informal forms of learning are portrayed as “Nerdy Know-it-Alls.” While these “Nerdy Know-it-Alls” heavily outperform their public school peers in the classroom, they are also seen as lacking socialization and the social skills necessary to thrive in the real world. Characters who occupy this archetype appeared in viewings of all five of the films and television programs that comprised this study.

Similarly, the parents of the “Nerdy Know-it-Alls” were also depicted in a negative light. These “Paranoid Parents” were portrayed as agoraphobic control freaks that are scared of the outside world and have an insatiable need to protect their child from all the dangers inherent in growing up. This was the only archetype used to portray the parents of alternative learners and was prevalent in all five of the films and television programs viewed and analyzed for this study. One implication of these negative and inauthentic depictions of alternative learners and their parents could be the fear that they (and their children) will be tarred with the same brush as the fictional characters presented in these films and television programs. The severity of this implication is furthered when one realizes that few people come into contact with homeschoolers, unschoolers and alternative learners on a daily basis and that members of the general public may come to rely on these inauthentic and mostly negative depictions to guide their perceptions of those who subscribe to non-traditional views on schooling.

While some homeschoolers, unschoolers and other alternative learners might be content with the ways in which they have been portrayed in these particular pieces of media, those who take issue with these representations can work to counteract the mostly negative depictions of their respective educational philosophies found in the films and television programs included in this study. Perhaps it would be advantageous for homeschoolers, unschoolers, other alternative

learners and their parents to become familiar with the “Nerdy Know-it-All” and “Paranoid Parent” archetypes used to portray them in films and television programs. Trumpeting the successes of adults who were homeschooled or unschooled (ie. Heisman trophy winning and highly decorated football quarterback Tim Tebow) might be another beneficial strategy that alternative learners and their parents could use to root the public’s perceptions of their educational philosophy in reality. They could then work towards saving their reputation with the general public by constructing and disseminating an authentic image of their respective alternative learning method throughout the community rather than letting members of the general public rely on an inauthentic, media propagated stereotype to influence their perceptions of homeschooling, unschooling and other forms of alternative learning.

**David Cameron Hauseman** recently completed a Master of Education degree at Nipissing University, studying primarily at its satellite campus in Brantford, Ontario. A former professional actor, his teaching and research interests revolve around how educators (particularly school principals) and the school system as a whole are portrayed in the media, and the effects that these media representations have on current practitioners. Cameron is currently employed at Cathexis Consulting Inc., where he is using his research skills to aid in program evaluation and applied social research projects.

## References

- Anonymous. (2007). War Against the Imagination: Technology, Kids, and Autonomy. *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*, 1(1), 56-62.
- Anonymous (Writer & Director). (2006). The Great School Debate [Television series episode]. In M. Armstrong, C. Graham, J. Johnson, G. Paymani, A. Pepper, J. Ross, E. Santos, & J. Skinner (Executive Producers), *The Dr. Phil Show*. Chicago, IL: Harpo.
- Beyerbach, B. (2005). Themes in sixty years of teachers in film: Fast times, dangerous minds, stand by me. *Official Journal of the Educational Studies Association*, 37(5), 267-285.
- Davis, M. (2006). Unschooling stresses curiosity more than traditional academics. *Education Week*, 26(16), 8.
- De Fleur, M. (1964). Occupational roles as portrayed on television. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 28(1), 57-74.
- DiGregorio, C., Murphy, K., & Ruehl, P (Writers) & Ackerman, A., Cohen, G., & Kerns, J. (Directors). (2003). Pilot [Television series episode]. In B. Hartman Edwards & M. O'Keefe (Executive Producers), *The O'Keefe's*. Los Angeles, CA: Warner Brothers.
- Gall, J.P., Gall, M.D., & Borg, W.R. (2005). *Applying Educational Research: A Practical Guide*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Green, A. (Writer), & Wallace, R. (Director). (2004). Home [Television series episode]. In N. Baer, P. Jankowski, T. Kotcheff & D. Wolf (Executive Producers), *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. New York, NY: NBC.
- Holt, J. (1989). *Learning All the Time: How Small Children Begin to Read, Write, Count and Investigate the World Without Being Taught*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Lloyd, J. (2009, January 4). Home Schooling Grows. *USA Today*. Retrieved from: [http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-01-04-homeschooling\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-01-04-homeschooling_N.htm)
- McLuhan, M. (1960). *Report on Understanding New Media* [Monograph]. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/>
- McLuhan, M. (1997). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Messick, J. L. (Producer), & Waters, M. (Director). (2004). *Mean Girls*. Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures.



Parker, T., Stone, M. (Writers), & Stough, E. (Director). (1999). Hooked on Monkey Phonics [Television series episode]. In T. Parker & M. Stone (Executive Producers), *South Park*. New York, NY: Braniff.

Real, M. (1996). *Exploring Media Culture: A Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ricci, C. (2009). How my now six-year-old daughter learned how to write her name, recognize numbers, read some words and draw: A narrative. *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*, 4(7), 1-14.