

# HOME-SCHOOLED STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS: PROVOKING CURRICULUM TOGETHER THROUGH CHILD-DRIVEN LEARNING

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## Abstract

Child-centered and child-driven learning can provoke the creation of curriculum that is responsive to students' particular learning needs, is engaging and meaningful, and promotes learner agency. Homeschool settings provide opportunities for parent/educators cognizant of child-centered and child-driven curriculum to meet students' interests, readiness, growth, and educational drive with responses tailored for each unique situation. This learning space can allow for the relationship between the parent/educator and the student to continually revisit and revitalize learning, expanding on shared experience and potentially spanning the developmental years of the student. The lines between educator and student become blurred as the educator is directed by the unique interests and educational needs of each student. Research into the field of homeschooling curriculum can inspire discussion and innovation in more traditional educational settings. In this paper presentation, the authors will discuss the literature on child-centered and child-driven learning. Next, stories from real homeschools illustrating the co-creation of child-centered curriculum by both the educator/parent and student will be shared. Finally, the presenters will kindle a lively conversation with all participants about the role of students and teachers in curriculum creation, student-centered and student-driven learning in homeschools and in public schools, and imagining the possibilities of both contexts.

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**Keywords:** homeschool, curriculum, alternative, child-centered

*Melissa home schooled her two children. When you entered her neighbourhood, you couldn't help but notice all the eye-catching signs advertising the Aspen Street Arcade, which was open on Saturday afternoons at Melissa's house. I interviewed Melissa about her experiences as a home educator, after our conversation, I asked to see the arcade. Melissa took me into the garage, which had been completely transformed into a labyrinth of carnival games made by her elementary-aged children. This was a child-driven project conceived and realized by Melissa's kids. First, they had gone door-to-door collecting cardboard boxes from their neighbours. They used these and other materials to create their own version of games you would see at the county fair. Once the arcade was ready, neighbours who had donated boxes got discounts when visiting. Melissa's children ran the arcade and visitors could win prizes. The arcade had a*

*suggestion box as well. Melissa had taken her children's lead and helped them create a Facebook page to post updates for their customers. When I visited, they were in the process of making business cards. The children had already turned a profit. They were real entrepreneurs!*

## **Introduction**

The vignette above describes a real-life example of a home educator responding to a child-driven initiative or curiosity, thereby provoking curriculum together. It represents the central messages of this paper: first, that the home-school context can allow opportunities for educator/parents who wish to foster student-centered and student-driven learning to co-construct curriculum with children that builds on their natural curiosity and educational drive; and second, that policy makers and practitioners can utilize understandings gained from home educators to inform public education. We begin by briefly describing student-centered learning, including the role of the student, the role of the teacher, relevant historical educational theory, and child-centered models in contemporary institutionalized schools. Next, possibilities for student-driven and -centered learning are explored in relation to the homeschooling context.

Throughout this paper, vignettes from real homeschools help bridge the theory discussed with actual practice. These vignettes include a mix of stories and interviews from separate sources. Author Karen E. Efford shares anecdotes from personal experience; she home educated her children for 15 years and actively sought to provoke curriculum together with her children. Other vignettes have been selected from interview transcripts generated through an empirical study. Author Katherine Becker conducted a narrative inquiry into home educators' stories as told in their own words for her doctoral dissertation research (Becker, 2012). She interviewed nine home educators in-depth about their curriculum, beliefs and practices. A grounded theory approach to data analysis and interpretation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to allow the data

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to speak for itself. Data analysis involved two stages: 1) open coding, in which each line of data was searched for emerging patterns to be developed into themes; and 2) focused coding, in which data was reread multiple more times and initial themes were amalgamated, refined, or divided into sub-themes. The names of these participants are pseudonyms.

### **Student-centered learning in institutionalized education**

The following paragraphs briefly outline student-centered learning, including its roots, related educational theory, and place in contemporary institutionalized education. Child- or student-centered learning is a curricular approach in which the student is perceived as a unique learner who is afforded a degree of control over what, how, and when learning experiences will unfold. In contrast to the traditional role of the student as a passive receptacle of knowledge imparted by a didactic lecturer, child-centered learning distinguishes the child as an active participant in personally meaningful learning involving experiences such as playing, building, discovering, experimenting, and exploring. The child-centered pedagogue deemphasizes direct instruction, rote memorization, repeating and drilling, and instead assumes a role akin to a guide, facilitator, or coach.

The roots of child-centered learning trace back centuries to seminal educational theorists including Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Montessori, and Vygotsky. With the 1762 publication of *Emile*, influential French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau focused educational theory on the natural needs and predispositions of young individuals (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 2004). Rousseau perceived the child as inherently good, with inclinations complementary to the natural world. He inspired freedom-based education, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century child-centered movement that gives children the freedom to pursue their own interests. Freedom-based education is rooted in the basic premise that education should “honor the dignity and

autonomy of each individual by allowing her to freely discover her own life's meaning through the exploration of her interests, rather than being made to study some pre-arranged sets of knowledge at a standard pace" (Morrison, 2007, p. 45). Proponents maintain that this freedom helps children become better democratic citizens because they get to know and trust themselves (Morrison, 2007).

Swiss-born educator Johann Pestalozzi was inspired by Rousseau's child-centered writings and endeavored to put them into practice. In 1801 he published a systematic treatise on education entitled *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, echoing Rousseau's sentiments about the natural goodness of children and the corruptibility of modern institutions. One of his key messages was, "We must return to nature. Man is bad by institutions, not by nature" (Cooke, 1894, p. v). The report conveyed Pestalozzi's beliefs that classrooms should be child-centered and that children learn by doing rather than being told about experiences. Early education needed to emphasize experiences, not book learning. All children should be educated equally, regardless of economic standing or gender. And instruction should reflect the needs of the individual rather than the group as a whole (New & Cochran, 2007). German educator Friedrich Froebel, widely acknowledged as the father of kindergarten, drew heavily on the work of Pestalozzi and also Czech pedagogue John Comenius. Comenius had been the first philosopher to advocate the focus of education on the individual in his 17<sup>th</sup> Century work *Didactica Magna*. Froebel rejected the prevailing educational model of his day, in which male teachers enforced rote memorization through strict discipline (New et al., 2007). Froebel put child-centered theory into practice with the opening of his first class for three- to seven-year-olds, where playful games and activities and learning by doing were emphasized.

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Child-centered pedagogy continued to be popularized in the 1900s in the field of early childhood education, most notably by Maria Montessori, who is credited with the worldwide proliferation of programs that consider the interests and needs of the child. Montessori (1912/2004) asserted that teachers should reflect on the spirit of the child and create curriculum based on observations of their students. Her curricular legacy includes children's active involvement, self-pacing, self-selection, and adults as facilitators. In the United States, an influential child-centered advocate from the same period was educational reformer John Dewey. Inspired in part by the work of Froebel, *My Pedagogic Creed* (1929/2004) outlined Dewey's beliefs in a meaningful, relevant curriculum inspired by the child's capacities, interests and habits, and schools in which the teacher is not an imposer of ideas but, rather, a selector of influences.

A contemporary of Piaget and Montessori, Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist (1896-1934), believed that observation was a key to assessing a child's ability and in individual curriculum planning. He built on Piaget's theory that knowledge is constructed from experience by believing that personal and social experience can not be separated. His zone of proximal development (ZPD), the distance between development of which an individual is independently capable through problem solving and potential development through problem solving with adult guidance and peer collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978), focuses on the relationship between instruction and development (Chaiklin, 2003, p. 39). In the Montessori method a similar concept requires each directress to recognize the readiness of each child to be introduced to new activities having mastered the previous levels. To be truly successful, instruction meets a student just on the edge of prior knowledge and leads him or her into new knowledge by connections through that prior knowledge. Vygotsky's theory that through observation of a student's individual needs

and context, a teacher can help a student understand new learning, echoes Dewey's theory that teachers must use their greater knowledge of the world to help students make sense of it.

Today, multiple educational models stem from these early theorists and educators, although incorporating child-centered approaches and allowing children the freedom to discover and explore autonomously can be significant challenges for public education's contemporary classroom teachers. Constraints include mandated, sequential curricular expectations, high student-teacher ratios, and considerations related to time, space, and resources. Nonetheless, student-centered programs punctuate the contemporary educational landscape. Constructivism, cooperative, collaborative, and project-based learning, and experiential and democratic education are some notable examples of a wide array of classroom approaches and methods characterized as student-centered. In early childhood education, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf preschools comprise three child-centered models adopted worldwide.

Regardless of model, program, method or approach, proponents of student-centered learning tout its related benefits. When students are actively involved in choosing and participating in their educational experiences, they are more intrinsically motivated to learn. Choice increases student buy-in; the act alone of making a choice in learning is an act of participation. Through student-centered initiatives, cognitive responsibilities are often transferred from the teacher to the student, and these may include many higher order thinking skills such as problem-solving, communicating, gathering information, and inquiring.

## **Homeschooling**

For the purpose of this paper, we are defining homeschooling as an alternative form of educating one's children with home as the base and a parent, usually the mother, as the main teacher (Ray, 2010). The use of the word "home" is somewhat misleading as many

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homeschoolers actively use community resources, including museums, libraries, beaches and forests as their school. Often parents search out and enlist community members as mentors to cover subjects either the student is especially interested in and the parent has no experience with, or the student has exhausted the parent's knowledge and wants to go more in depth in the subject. John Holt (2004), an American educator who strongly influenced the modern homeschooling movement, advocated for *doing*, where children engage in self-directed, purposeful, meaningful life and work, over *education*, which he saw as learning cut off from life and done under pressure with bribes and threats. Holt "envisioned an unschooling approach with unstructured curriculum in which children followed their own interest and learned at their own pace" (Bailey, 2010, p. 4). This movement is a pull away from traditional institutional education, which focuses on the "one-size-fits-all," top-down, lecture-driven model. The homeschooling environment allows students the freedom to be guided by their innate desire for knowledge and parents the opportunity to initiate or respond to moments of learning and discovery. The nature of home as a safe space supports child-driven learning as the parent educator has the ability to monitor, guide, and inspire each child on their own path. The connection between a homeschool parent and their student is unique in that it builds on the natural relationship of parent and child and goes further to include a long term relationship reinforced by shared experiences and expanded over time.

Authors of literature on home education in the United States and in Canada all agree on one point: record numbers of families are choosing to homeschool their children and they are doing so at an increasing rate. In the U.S., the number of families opting to educate their children primarily at home instead of in an institution has been increasing at an accelerating rate for several years. The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) estimated that in 2012, 1.7

million children from kindergarten to Grade 12, or approximately 3% of the school-age population, were educated primarily at home. This estimate represents a jump from the 2003 estimate of 1.1 million home-schooled students and from the 1999 estimate of 850,000 home-schooled students (Bielick, 2008), indicating an accelerating growth rate presently approximated at 10% per year (Houston & Toma, 2003). In Canada, home schooled children are estimated to make up just over one percent of the school aged population (Davies & Aurini, 2003), a smaller percentage than in the United States. Nevertheless, home education in Canada is experiencing a synchronous surge in popularity. There is no indication that the homeschool growth spurt will abate any time soon. This means that between the two countries exist hundreds of thousands of home educators, ever-growing in number, who are full-time practitioners in the area of K-12 education beyond institutionalized schools. As such, this sub-population within the educational landscape represents an important demographic of pedagogues whose expertise, practices and approaches may realize vast possibilities for curriculum and instruction apart from prevailing offerings manifest in the public realm. Thus it stands that home educators may serve as a rich resource of varied and alternative perspectives to inform the dominant K-12 discourse. This paper explores home educator accounts involving just one of these perspectives: opportunities for student-centered learning.

### **Student-centered/student-driven learning in homeschools**

In comparing teaching and learning between a home and an institutionalized (public or private) environment, there are some possible advantages to be found within the home that facilitate student-centered learning. The first of these is the flexibility to allow inspiration, weather, feelings, and other personal circumstances to shape the day, rather than having to follow a predetermined schedule. During Katherine's interview with Melissa at her home,



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Melissa's daughter Ella was observing a few tadpoles swimming in a clear container filled with water on the kitchen counter. Melissa paused our conversation to answer her Ella's questions about their ability help the tadpoles survive in captivity. Melissa explained:

*My kids do get to do a lot of fun things, like we went to the creek yesterday. We took off the day just on the spur of the moment because our other homeschool friends called and wanted to know if we wanted to go. And then they got to learn all about tadpoles, natural things.*

The experience of collecting the tadpoles at the creek had piqued and sustained Ella's curiosity. Together, Melissa and Ella would be researching the answers to Ella's questions about the tadpoles that Melissa didn't know. These actions represented higher order thinking aspects of the inquiry process. The child wondered: How do we help these tadpoles survive? Should we return to the creek and release them? Where can we look for that information? Seizing Ella's natural curiosity, Melissa could then allow the child's questions to shape the learning experience, and it was made possible in part by their flexible daily schedule.

At Jaimie's home school with her two teenaged children, the teacher and learners also allowed their interests and inclinations to shape each day. As Jaimie explained, when they read together, they all enjoyed:

*Not having a goal, not having a, 'this has to be done by'... We just explore. We find a topic... and we go off on a tangent and learn all about that and sometimes it'd take us three to four hours to come back to the next page.*

Home educator Janice also named schedule flexibility as enabling her to follow the children's lead. Janice had spent her career working in elementary schools prior to homeschooling her three children, and she explained how her children's experience was different from the student experience she had witnessed in her former role:

*If your student takes a particular interest in a subject, like say they're interested in space, you can choose as a parent to... spend as much time on it as you like. That's one thing that's really nice. In elementary they don't do a lot of history and science. It's a*

*Wednesday afternoon kind of a thing. And we really enjoyed those subjects and we spent more time on them than they probably would have had in a regular classroom, doing maps and projects and all kinds of things.*

In comparing teaching and learning between a home and an institutionalized environment, a second advantage found within the home that can help facilitate student-centered learning is the ability of teachers to seize teachable moments (Romanowski, 2001) that personalized instruction affords. Sara's family of home schoolers was planning a trip overseas to Scotland. To Sara, the impending trip represented one giant meaningful learning opportunity:

*We spent a month or so before we went [on the trip] just studying Scotland and doing reports. Then to be able to do that and then go was an experience that, you know, I couldn't have had them as in depth studying this country if they were in a public school because they'd have all their public school things to do. And then being able just to take that much time off and not feel like we're behind but being able to go at the pace that we could... I make sure I follow those teachable moments. My personal opinion is that the best home school is a school that is planned but totally flexible to go off the plan and be directed by circumstances and environments.*

Grabbing teachable moments can mean letting go of predetermined ideas and following your child down a path of their interest. Much of homeschooling is trusting in our instincts and our child's interests as valid educational opportunities.

*(KEE) Nothing has attracted my son's attention as much as a computer. As a homeschool educator I have struggled with this reality, making sure he is involved in sports, music, and in regular outdoor activities. I believe in balance. I understand the common argument and concern that people who play computer games are disconnected from reality, or lack social skills. Also, that computer games perpetuate violence. In coming to terms with the magnetic online world of gaming and deciding to work with his interest, rather than fight it, I have determined through critical reflection, that there is educational value in this online world. Through observation I have had to acknowledge and support his development of skills he has acquired including problem solving, critical thinking, business skills, programming skills, and technical literacy through playing Minecraft.*

An additional advantage of homeschooling is closely linked to the flexibility and freedom of not following a pre-determined schedule. Even when home educators are not actively seizing

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meaningful learning opportunities or following a child's lead about a particular topic of interest, closer student/teacher ratios and flexible schedules can give homeschooled students the luxury of mastering concepts before moving on (Aasen, 2010). Home education can be student-centered in the sense that students may be able to work at their own pace and receive individual assessment (Jeub, 1994; Pool, 2010). Nikki, a home educator with several years of experience, described the pacing of instruction as child-centered in her home school:

*It's effective to be able to have individualized attention. That's built in with home schooling, even if you've got six kids... We can fast forward, slow down, rewind at our own speed. It's the same with math and the same with everything. You can go at your own pace, fast, slow, or a normal pace.*

Tailoring curriculum, instruction, pacing, and assessment to each individual child is, according to home educator Sara, the primary advantage of homeschooling:

*The flexibility you have, not just in curriculum, but in meeting the needs of where your kids are. Not having to follow what somebody else says your kids should be doing but being able to assess where they are and what they're capable of. And being able to tailor to their strengths and their weaknesses and go at the rate and the pace that they're able to. And to stick with the things that they're interested in. I think that's huge. There's so much curriculum out there and you can pick curriculum that really meets the needs of how your kids learn and how you teach and your philosophies and your ideas about what you think is the best way or what is going to work best with your kids.*

As home educator Janice echoed, "you're really able to teach them where they are."

Janice, a former elementary school speech pathologist, was able to compare her knowledge of K-12 public education from her professional practice with her experience as a home educator, and explained that in her home:

*If they need something explained, they've got you one-on-one, any time they need it. They don't have to wait in line behind 20 kids to get help with their math. So your kids learn at their own level at their own speed. They get up, have their breakfast, and they can choose which subjects they do first. They're very independent, they work on their own... When you say you want to homeschool your children, sometimes people in the educational world will say, "What? You think you can educate your child better than this*

*person who got their Master's degree in teaching?" And sometimes the answer to that is actually, "Yes." Because you know your child better than anybody else does. You know what's tough for them, you know what clicks for them, you know how they learn and you can cater the way you teach your child to the way that you know they operate instead of trying to teach 20 kids and maybe that'll meet the needs of 25-50%. But what about the rest? A kid who's a kinesthetic learner that may not work so well with a workbook and a classroom teacher.*

A story shared by home educator Stephanie illustrated several of these same advantages:

*When [my son] has a science or history lesson that he's really excited about... he has the freedom to just go online right then and go onto websites for museums. We have a lesson on the Vikings and it had a link to a museum that had artifacts and it was his favorite thing. He wanted to go on and look at all the artifacts. He wanted to know more, he wanted to see more and he can. He's not limited by, oh, it's recess, or it's lunchtime. He can do it whenever he wants to. And if he finishes early he doesn't have to, he can go play with his sister or read with his sister, or play cool math games or go play outside. My children have a little bit more freedom.*

A homeschool educator has the ability, knowledge, and focused attention to meet their students and support individual learning. Vygotsky's (1978) assistance assumption of the ZPD states that a child is able to learn more or expand their knowledge at a faster rate with a competent other. He believed that children learn from each other through play by trying out ideas and building on each others abilities. The individual attention of the homeschool environment, as well as the peer relations of older and younger siblings creates a vehicle for such learning. This concept can be applied to literature in a classroom setting where students are often encouraged to accept one interpretation of character development or author's intention. (Miller, 2003, p. 289)

*(KEE) My three daughters all loved reading and it was a main focus of their homeschool education. I believe that literature is important and can be a tool to teach many subjects, so I let them read. No book was off limits. Over the years the three of them developed a type of "bubble" in which they talked and discussed and argued about the stories, characters and plots. I believe that, because I was not involved in these discussions, they were not limited to preconceived ideas set out by curriculum or teacher expectation.*

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*They were able to try out ideas or concepts and create meaning from text without barriers, predetermined agendas or judgements of right or wrong. This peer relationship naturally created an assistance assumption where they were able to aid each other in forming problem solving and critical thinking abilities.*

Discussing literature helps to shape a student's knowing and thinking (Miller, 2003).

Often classroom teachers are constrained by "century-long persistence of classroom recitation as the major way of talking" (Miller, 2003, p. 291). Students are asked to accept their teacher's interpretation of a piece of literature without question and are required to 'give back' that point of view during testing.

A child's natural instinct is to learn about the world around them with the goal to survive. The design and purpose of traditional institutional education dampens this curiosity by requiring that a child only learn what is being taught in that classroom at that moment with the only measurement of success being able to reproduce the material as it was taught. The child's internal measurement of "good enough" or "success" is replaced by the requirement to the competition created between other students, the approval of the teacher, and the "A" on the test. Too often teachers who are swamped with too many students and requirements of curriculum and schools miss the opportunity to allow learning to happen. Author Karen Efford recalls:

*(KEE) I was amazed by the story of a mother whose son went to a public school. He was in a classroom of 30 students who were given the task by their teacher to build the tallest structure. The task was outlined by the teacher and the students went to work. This boy, who I will call Mark, decided to use the wall to aid his structure's stability and built the tallest tower. His teacher disqualified his efforts because of the use of the wall. He reviewed the task and pointed out that the using the wall was not disallowed by the rules. The teacher agreed she might have been unclear and proceeded to have the students try again. Mark asked for ALL the rules before they began again and even asked if there were any more that she hadn't mentioned. Mark again built the tallest tower but this time tied it to the ceiling with a string to add stability. Again he was disqualified. My amazement was that the teacher, instead of praising this student's ability to follow rules and problem solve, punished him for these very important qualities.*

This teacher might have used this as a teaching moment and praised the critical thinking. She might have challenged the other students to come up with ways to make their structure more stable while still following her task rules. Homeschooling provides an environment where this can happen on a daily basis. A student's personal interests can be used as a tool or vehicle to expand knowledge in other areas. By grabbing a teachable moment and running with it the teacher is able to engage the student and propel their learning forward, providing a learning environment that works for each child. Simply by the fact that a homeschool parent spends more than just 8 hours a day, more than just 5 days a week, more than a school term in a classroom, with their student, they are able to have an intimate connection to that person building on the knowledge and interest from prior experiences. Karen shares a story of her experience using a shared educational moment and expanding on it.

*(KEE) One of my favourite memories of homeschooling is taking them to a museum homeschooling class in California. These classes were designed with the understanding that a parent would arrive with a student, but may also arrive with several children in tow. Connie, the educator, jumped at the chance to include all the children who arrived for stories in a tent, in a field. The stories Connie told were stories from the Indian tribes of the area and she engaged all the children and parents in discussions about the meanings behind the stories. After class we would pile into the van and discuss what we each thought of that day's story. The fact that we were all a part of the learning meant that we were able to support each other's understanding and build on that knowledge another day. For example: while studying another culture I would remind the student of the story Connie had told about the creation of earth and ask them how this new culture we were studying might have answered their own questions about the same topic.*

## **Conclusion**

Provoking curriculum is like lighting a spark, we have all seen it in the eyes of our children or students. Suddenly they look up and a light shines from their eyes full of drive and inquiry, even amazement. They run into the room hardly able to contain themselves yelling,

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“You’ve got to see this!” That wonder, that connection to a subject matter, is what education should be. Every child deserves to have their curiosity, their innate quest for knowledge honoured. Educators who take their cues from their students can allow for the relationship between the parent/educator and the student to continually revisit and revitalize learning, expanding on shared experience and potentially spanning the developmental years of the student. The lines between educator and student become blurred as the educator is directed by the unique interests and educational needs of each student. We believe that research into the field of home schooling curriculum such as that shared here can inspire discussion and innovation in more traditional educational settings. How might these examples relate to the curriculum and instructional practices currently unfolding in Canadian schools? What possibilities do these vignettes present for the institutionalized educational context in terms of the role of students and teachers in curriculum creation, student-centered and student-driven learning in home schools, and in public schools?

Throughout this paper we have related examples shared by home educators that illustrate how students and child-centered teachers can provoke curriculum together through child-centered approaches to learning. These real-world stories highlighted how the homeschool context can allow opportunities for educator/parents who wish to foster student-centered and student-driven learning to co-construct curriculum with children that builds on their natural curiosity and educational drive. Some child-centered methods shared by these home educators included flexible scheduling, seizing teachable moments, and customizing the pacing, curricular materials and assessment to individual children.

Although contexts differ between and among public and homeschool educational environments, child-centered approaches boast historical theoretical underpinnings from salient

theorists, including Rousseau, Dewey, and Vygotsky. As public education evolves and the homeschool movement grows, policymakers and practitioners can utilize understandings gained from the sizable population of home educators to inform public education. We assert that informing public education with child-centered and child-driven homeschooling curriculum and instruction techniques would be an excellent starting place.

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