

Culture Studies Activity



Socialization

Reading 6

"We Were Weirdos"

From 1972–1976, Margaret Heidenry and her three siblings (Mary, James, and John), all under the age of 7 when they left New York City, traveled the world for four years with their parents. During that time, their mother home-schooled the children. While they loved their adventures, the Heidenry children suffered from severe culture shock when they entered American public school. This article reinforces the concepts of socialization, peers, and the hidden curriculum discussed in Chapter 4.

... There were a few interludes of standardized education, but for the most part, as my mother would later write, ... "during all this time, the children traveled with us and received nothing that remotely resembled formal schooling." ...

[... My] mother laid out the basic tenets of her approach to educating us. "They work at their own pace," she wrote. "They have no assignments to complete. ... I am not teaching the children. I am permitting them to learn." ...

... It is not surprising ... that art—and travel—is what stands out most in our minds when we think back on those years. John, who was especially fond of the time the family spent in Mexico, recalls "third-class bus trips to see the mummies of Guanajuato" and "taking tinware classes at the Bellas Artes." James remembers the tea breaks and exploring medieval English ruins in thick, warm sweaters. "You know what it's like to be a kid and go into a ruined castle?" James says. "England was the best field trip ever." My sister's most vivid memories are also of England. "I remember a moment that has always stayed with me because it was so beautiful—sitting in a field where sheep were grazing and sketching an old gray stone church. Parishioners were inside singing, while outside the bells were ringing."

But these far-flung field trips had downsides. Mary vividly remembers the 10-day drive to Mexico—seven people crammed into a used station wagon with no air-conditioning. "We mostly ate Heinz beans warmed up on a hot plate in motel rooms," she recalled. "And moving around so often could be lonely. We had only one another for company." ...

The night before our first day of school [in St. Louis in 1976], instead of staying up worrying about what it would be like, we looked forward to it as "the latest adventure," John recalls, "like moving to Mexico or England." ...

Looking like Goodwill poster children was [the hardest part]. "I thought I looked great in my huaraches and striped, fiesta-themed peasant pants," Mary says. "But everyone else in the sixth grade was wearing a Led Zeppelin T-shirt and jeans. I was not too naïve to realize I needed to get some jeans. Quick."

Everything about the single-file, cliquey public-school system was counter to our counter-lifestyle. "I was in math class," John recalls, "sitting at a desk wondering, Am I going to have to sit in this same spot every single day from now on? The teacher was grilling kids on decimals, which I did not understand. To me it just looked like a dot! Then the teacher asked me to recite the nine multiplication table. I answered, totally nonchalantly, 'I don't know it.' The teacher paused, eyes zeroing in on me, and said, 'Boy, I'm gonna have fun with you.'" Slowly the meaning of being unable to recite lines from "Star Wars" (we'd never seen Hollywood movies) and not having feathered hair began to sink in. We were weirdos.

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In 1978, NPR interviewed my mother about her home-schooling experiment when a multistate teachers strike left thousands of parents wondering what to do with their homebound children. After asking, "I'm curious about how you basically stood it all day," Cokie Roberts repeatedly pressed my mother about our socialization. To gain independence and prepare children for the realities of adulthood, didn't they need to be with their peers and suffer all the harsh experiences that entails?

"I don't know if children should be put through bad school situations just so they can be socialized," my mom replied. It was a noble sentiment, but unfortunately bad situations were exactly what was in store for us, especially for John and James. "I was very green, and a few days into school this kid pushed me so hard I fell over a desk," John remembers. "I just couldn't understand. Why would a kid want to fight me? At home, James and I were like two peas in a pod."

At my schoolyard, James, in third grade, was instantly picked on. Within the first week, he recalls, "an older kid kicked me in the butt really hard. The other boys were laughing. A girl finally told me someone put a 'kick me' sign on my back. I never heard of that, teasing and pranks." James was also taken to the back of the bus and "punched incessantly" for the better part of grade school. "Oh, . . . it was awful." James never told my parents. He just "took it." Was Cokie Roberts right? James thinks so. "I wasn't around kids," he says. "The four of us were never threatened, so I didn't learn how to stick up for myself."

My mother worried that when we went to school, she would lose her identity. But she flourished in her new job as an editor at St. Louis magazine. We were the ones who lost ours. Mary never told anyone she'd been home-schooled. "By sixth grade I knew that kids weren't, especially back then. When you're a kid, you don't want to be different, you want to fit in." Mary conformed quickly and even liked the rules, like having to "write your name at the top of paper." John was picked on until he fought back, pushing his tormentor over a desk. James learned how to fit in by observing the other kids and copying what they did. "It was a chameleon act. I was never the most popular, but I eventually made friends."

Academically, my siblings were all over the map. Mary, the avid reader, did well without much effort. "And if I didn't understand something, I wasn't afraid to raise my hand and ask." John was taken under the wing of Mr. I'm Gonna Have Fun With You, who drilled him on math one on one until John caught up. James excelled in subjects like science and history but had a hard time with reading. "It was very stressful," he remembers. "I couldn't get it." . . .

James now wishes our parents had made reading a priority for him. "It would have made my life a lot easier," he recalls. "Struggling wasn't fun. I was frustrated that I couldn't do better in school."

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Directions: Using information from the reading, answer the following questions.

1. **Summarizing** What was "school" like for the Heidenry children before they began attending public school in St. Louis?

2. **Identifying** What different actions did each of the author's three siblings take to adapt to their new school situation in St. Louis?

3. **Analyzing** What were the main drawbacks for the Heidenry children of their unusual home-schooling experience?

4. **Evaluating** When interviewed by NPR, the Heidenrys' mother indicated she did not expend any extra effort to socialize her children. After the fact, do the siblings seem to be satisfied with her decision?

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Thinking Like a Sociologist

5. **Hypothesizing** Suppose you are a parent and have decided you need to home-school your children (perhaps to ensure they get more personal academic attention). You are concerned you will be hurting their socialization by doing this. What actions can you take to ensure your children are still adequately socialized despite being home-schooled?

Topic for Research

6. **Researching** In the 1970s, home-schooling was illegal and practiced by very few families. It did not become legal in all 50 states until 1993. Research the history of the home-schooling movement. Why was it legalized? Why was it illegal in the first place? How has home schooling changed between the 1970s and today?

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