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Instructional Motivations: What Can We Learn from Homeschooling Families?

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Abstract

Some educational theorists have believed that the beneficial aspects of home education will eventually find their way into mainstream educational contexts. The purpose of this paper was to extract the motivations behind homeschooling instructional decisions. This study was built on surveys and interviews from over 1000 homeschooling parents across the United States. Participants were asked about the reason for their instructional routines. Instructional motivations reported included a child's particular learning style, a parent's personal preference, a child's interests, community resources, experience, faith, family reasons, special goals, and special needs. These motivations may also represent those of public school parents, thus providing a voice for all parents. The results provide an informational narrative that can be used by public school representatives to meet the changing needs and values of parents across the U.S.

Keywords

Homeschool, Instruction, Parents, Ethnographic Research, Naturalistic Inquiry

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Instructional Motivations: What Can We Learn from Homeschooling Families?

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Some educational theorists have believed that the beneficial aspects of home education will eventually find their way into mainstream educational contexts. The purpose of this paper was to extract the motivations behind homeschooling instructional decisions. This study was built on surveys and interviews from over 1000 homeschooling parents across the United States. Participants were asked about the reason for their instructional routines. Instructional motivations reported included a child's particular learning style, a parent's personal preference, a child's interests, community resources, experience, faith, family reasons, special goals, and special needs. These motivations may also represent those of public school parents, thus providing a voice for all parents. The results provide an informational narrative that can be used by public school representatives to meet the changing needs and values of parents across the U.S. Keywords: Homeschool, Instruction, Parents, Ethnographic Research, Naturalistic Inquiry

Public school teachers are often provided an array of ideas and methods through pre-service training, in-service training, professional conferences, and personal study. However, they often feel restricted by what they are actually able to implement in the classroom (Gatto, 2009; Olivant, 2015; Rose, 2015). For example, a district may adopt a certain curriculum program that teachers must abide by, restricting their own educational motivations (Olivant, 2015). Given the opportunity, teachers might have different classroom arrangements, choose different methodologies, and follow a different curriculum guide. One of the benefits of homeschooling is that parents have the freedom to choose the curriculum and the instructional design for their academic programs. This reality may mean that homeschooling practices more closely align with new instructional ideas and methods. For example, pedagogical elements such as situated practice (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), critical framing (New London Group, 1996), community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and transformed practice (Lohrey, 1995) are embraced by homeschoolers (Murphy, 2012; Ray, 2009; Sheehan, 2002).

Unlike public school teachers who are often limited by certain factors such as end of course examinations, homeschooling parents can educate their children with their own personal motivations. For example, a public school teacher may be asked to follow a certain curriculum program because it corresponds to the concepts that will be expected to appear on the state's standardized test. In contrast, homeschooling parents may cover a similar unit as their public school counterparts, but choose the educational design based on a number of different possible motivations—their own preferences for how the unit should proceed, a suggestion from a curriculum package, an educational theorist, empirical research, a child's unique learning style, or a child's interests, among other factors (Hannah, 2012; Lips & Feinberg, 2008; Ray, 2005).

Whereas a public school teacher's educational motivation may be overshadowed by a mandatory educational regimen (Rose, 2015), a parent has the freedom to draw from a number of resources (Hill, 2000). In addition, the practices of a public school teacher may remain constant since they are derived from a standardized curriculum guide, but a parent's motivation can change from unit to unit, thus providing a natural rhythm to the educational experience which is based on a student's understanding and progress. Because of this flexibility and

freedom in teaching (Cai, Reeve, & Robinson, 2002), parents have the choice to utilize the latest teaching strategies that are being endorsed by educational theorists.

What is unfortunate is that public schools often do not have the flexibility to implement these new types of methodologies. In a paper titled *Life as Education and the Irony of School Reform*, Kunzman (2012) expressed that our efforts to reform education are not working. Kunzman (2012) stated,

The irony is that the most vocal school reformers today, the ones who rail so passionately against the status quo, are ultimately seeking to replace it with another singularly prescriptive vision of schooling, one driven by a testing regimen that narrows the learning experience even further. (p. 128)

Although there are a number of great ideas about educational strategies coming from educational researchers and theorists, the ideas and strategies are inserted into an educational framework that may not be compatible with their utilization. In other words, these effective methodologies are not getting a fair evaluation due to factors such as the district's adoption of a particular learning model, or an emphasis on preparing for standardized testing (Grinell & Rabin, 2013).

Can something be learned from homeschooling practices, especially in terms of curriculum and instruction motivation? Learning from others who have an alternative perspective has often proved to be successful in moving forward and making progress (Jennings, 2011). Additionally, by listening to the voices of homeschoolers, our current educational system in the United States may be improved. Homeschoolers have chosen to opt-out of mainstream education with all of its advantages—expert teachers, advanced technology, a wide variety of classes, and extracurricular activities along with many other conveniences—and stay in the home, on their own time, finding their own resources at their own expense financially, and possibly delaying a parent's personal career goals and opportunities. Understanding the homeschool environment and listening to the voices of homeschoolers can likely unveil valuable and important contributions to the educational discourse.

Purpose

The research questions in this study were designed to uncover homeschooler motivations related to curriculum and instruction decisions. Qualitative methods allow for exploring and describing the thoughts and motivations of why the participants choose certain methods or routines. The following questions were explored: What are the pedagogical reasons for how homeschoolers structure their time? What practices or methods are they using that suggest how the academic day should be arranged? To what extent does the child affect educational decisions, and thus customize the academic schedule? These questions help capture the themes about the overall formation and implementation of homeschooling curriculum and instruction resources. These questions also address the educational routines utilized in homeschooling education, and may provide support for applying similar structures in other educational settings.

Background

There are a few things to keep in mind when thinking about curriculum and instruction motivations for homeschooling families. The following information will provide a general context out of which homeschooling families make educational decisions.

Once homeschooling became legal in all fifty states, the new battle has been about regulation (Murphy, 2012). To understand current homeschooling practices, it is important to understand the regulations under which homeschools operate. The battle continues to be played out between those who desire a high amount of regulation and those who desire a small amount or no regulation.

Regulation laws consist of issues such as attendance, curriculum, student assessment, time requirements, qualification of the educators, and compliance reporting (Dahlquist, York-Barr, & Hendel, 2006). As each state possesses the authority for educational regulation, it has made for an interesting patchwork of rules under which home educators must comply (Basham, Merrifield, & Hepburn, 2007). Basham, Merrifield, and Hepburn (2007) organized state regulations into the following categories:

1. High regulation – states may require parents to inform authorities of their decision to homeschool, maintain compulsory attendance laws, require a certain curriculum, conduct periodic visits to the home, administer standardized tests, and require that homeschooling parents be certified teachers.
2. Moderate regulation – states may require parents to send notification and provide test scores and/or professional evaluation of the student’s progress.
3. Low regulation – states do not require parents to initiate any contact with the state. (p. 5)

The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA, 2015) created a map to visually represent the level of regulation across the United States. To illustrate the great variability between states, Alaska, which was categorized as a “state requiring no notice” can be compared to Pennsylvania, a “state with high regulation” (Home School Legal Defense Association [HSLDA], 2015). Homeschoolers living in Alaska were not required to “notify, seek approval, test, file forms, or have any teacher qualifications” (HSLDA, 2015). This was in stark contrast to the high level of requirements in Pennsylvania, where homeschoolers must maintain certain documentation, such as a portfolio of records and materials, an annual written evaluation of the student’s progress by a professional, certification of the student’s evaluator, on top of other measures including immunizations, evidence of health and medical services, assurance of subjects being taught in English, and certification that the supervisor having legal custody of the child has no criminal offenses within the past five years (HSLDA, 2015).

Using New York as another example of a highly regulated state, under the “home school statute” section there was a full program of duties and obligations. The state requires a rather lengthy list of subjects that must be taught including patriotism and citizenship, substance abuse, music, visual arts, and physical education along with many others (HSLDA, 2015). As part of home education responsibilities in New York, parents are required to file quarterly reports that document the number of hours of instruction completed, a description of the material covered, and a grade or narrative evaluation in each subject (HSLDA, 2015). These regulations, which must be supervised, have caused the New York City Department of Education to employ a full-time director of homeschooling to manage the estimated four thousand homeschooling families (Hennessey, 2014). On the other end of the spectrum, Texas provides a good example of a hands-off approach (Hennessey, 2014). When reading the requirements for Texas under the “home school statute” section, it simply says, “None” (HSLDA, 2015).

Therefore, the amount of regulation by which a homeschooling family abides is largely determined by the state in which they live. Most states are somewhere in the middle of the

extremes, and, as a whole, most homeschoolers have few deep disagreements with the requirements they operate under (Murphy, 2012). The success and acceptance of homeschooling, as indicated by the victories in court, have occurred in a remarkably short period of time (Stevens, 2003). Although homeschooling alliances have continued to press toward a more deregulated environment, they are not without pressure from those who believe there should be some governance enforced by the state (Reich, 2005).

Reich (2005), in favor of homeschool regulation by the state, formed two arguments: the citizenship argument which, by providing children with a civic education, avoids the development of civically disabled adults; and the freedom argument which, by cultivating a child's freedom, avoids the development of what Reich called "ethically servile" adults (p. 4). Although other proponents for state regulation have offered their own ideas (Waddell, 2010), Reich's arguments help serve the purpose of acknowledging that there are a number of interests at play when making regulatory decisions: the parents, the children, and society at large (Kunzman, 2009).

Homeschooling in the United States has been regulated on a state-by-state basis which has resulted in a wide spectrum of state supervision, from no regulation on one end to high regulation on the other. Despite the fact that homeschooling associations have achieved a great amount of success, and continue to push for more freedoms, there have continued to be opposing forces working to regulate home education practices. All of these factors naturally have an influence on the curriculum and instruction motivations of homeschooling families. This summary of regulations helps put into perspective the choices that parents make concerning their academic decisions. Aside from regulatory requirements, very little is known about the curriculum and instruction motivations of homeschooling parents (Collom, 2005).

The research on home education has primarily focused on the history of homeschooling and the reasons why parents choose to homeschool (Taylor-Hough, 2010). Isenberg (2007) stated, "Despite its size, scarce data on homeschooling have impaired our understanding of even the most basic questions" (p. 387). Murphy (2012) believed the lack of data may be attributed to the traditional practice of concentrating research on public schools (p. 14). Murphy also suggested "The unregulated nature of home-schooling comes into play here as well. The decentralized nature of homeschooling, the fact that it unfolds in hundreds of thousands of 'mini schools' with only a few 'students,' also causes considerable problems for researchers" (p. 14). These factors and others may be reasons why no scholarly literature could be found that accounted for the motivations of homeschoolers concerning their academic routines.

So, what decisions do parents make with their freedoms? From where do they draw their curriculum and instruction motivation? As Luke (2003) and Hardenbaugh (2005) have suggested, the practices that make homeschooling effective may find their way into other educational settings. Public and private school educators may benefit from the divergent thinking of home educators.

Conceptual Design

The conceptual design for this study was based on the idea that there needs to be more interaction and communication among educational decision makers. Dewey (1916) stated, the realization of a form of social life in which interests are mutually interpenetrating, and where progress, or readjustment, is an important consideration, makes a democratic community more interested than other communities have cause to be in deliberate and systematic education. (p. 71)

Dewey, along with other past and present theorists such as Paulo Freire and Parker Palmer, believed that we, as a community, are stronger when we share ideas, collaborate, and

work together. Each sector of education—public, private, and home—works independently to a large extent, and toward various ends in some cases (Belfield, 2004). Unfortunately, as Hurley (2013) observed, “if a goal or teaching practice cannot be stated in observable outcomes and quantified, it cannot be a part of the current schooling discourse or curriculum” (p. 67). The diversity of thought and goals may prove beneficial on some level, for variety and choice are advantages that citizens of many other countries do not have (West & Woessmann, 2009). However, there is also the possibility that making attempts to listen, reflect, and interact with each other through pluralistic discourse will make each division of education all the more effective.

With this in mind, it should be noted that the homeschooling community has an unusual relationship with other educational entities by possessing a unique body of knowledge due to the fact that many families within this educational community have experienced public and, in many cases, private schooling (Isenberg, 2007). This is due to the fact that homeschooling was not made legal in all 50 states until 1993 (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011). Additionally, not only do these families have a background in multiple forms of education (Bielick, 2008), they also have more than likely given serious thought, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of their options, before they made the decision to homeschool.

As stated earlier, the researcher intends that the results from this study provide yet another layer of information which may benefit the larger educational discourse. The researcher entered this study with a background of teaching in secondary education. He observed others, and often felt the pressure himself, to craft a series of lessons that were derived directly from curriculum packages and state standards. In addition, he noticed the powerful impact that testing had on instruction. Although he has never experienced homeschooling firsthand, he has given thought to how education would unfold without the current pressures that most public school teachers feel. This curiosity has prompted the implementation of this study—what can we learn from homeschooling families? The researcher believes there needs to be more dialogue between each of the educational sectors—addressing and listening to the needs and motivational aims of parents is one way to accomplish this.

Methodology

Type of Qualitative Inquiry

This study used the ethnographic research approach according to the ideas of Spradley (1979) and Zemliansky (2008). The ethnographic approach, being qualitative in nature, is more focused on descriptions than statistics. With its emphasis on methods like observing and interviewing, this type of research lends itself well to abstracting the thoughts and perspectives of the subculture to be studied—homeschooling families. Thus, the ethnographic approach naturally accounts for the specific cultural elements that has comprised a significant portion of this research. According to Zemliansky (2008) the goal of the ethnographer is to create a deep and credible snapshot of a culture that he or she is studying, and this is what this study aimed to accomplish.

Although part of the research design for this study involved a survey which produced numerical data, the essence of the research was qualitative and descriptive. The goal was to describe the motivations of homeschoolers. Researchers using qualitative methods, work to gain understanding and meaning from verbal narratives and observations rather than numbers (McMillan, 2012). Qualitative studies are often “more sensitive to and adaptable to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). This qualitative study used the following data sources to collect information

about the motivations behind instructional decisions: individual interviews and a survey questionnaire.

A reflexive journal was also used for this study to provide credibility. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the reflexive journal provides a base for a number of judgment calls within the research study. The journal was a useful tool for noting insights, describing changes within the research and researcher over time, and the journal helped provide a rationale for methodological decisions (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

This study was approved by the researcher's Institutional Review Board. To ensure confidentiality, data stored on the computer was password protected. All field notes and other documents were kept in a protected location. Participants were identified by an ID code. Other than e-mail addresses, no other identifying information was requested from participants. The collected e-mail addresses were not given to any other organization. The survey portion of this study was implemented through Qualtrics (2015), thus ensuring confidential responses.

Triangulation (Erlandson et al., 1993) was met by using multiple data sources (interviews, documents, surveys) and a variety of data collection methods (Qualtrics, email, Internet). Referential adequacy materials were comprised of websites, journal articles, and books containing information about homeschooling practices. To ensure understanding from the participants, member checking, or verifying information about the data was used as information was collected from the participants. Additionally, peers and professionals outside of the study read the work and gave feedback as the study progressed.

Participants

Approximately 830 recruitment emails were sent to homeschool directors throughout the United States. Convenience and opportunistic sampling were used for this study (Erlandson et al., 1993). One example of a website used for locating homeschool directors was "a2z Home's Cool." The emails to the directors contained a link to complete the survey used for this study. Upon receiving the recruitment email, the directors were asked to send the survey link to their association members. Parents were also encouraged to refer other homeschoolers to the study. This method of gathering more new contacts over a period of time through the recommendations and referrals of the participants has been called snowball sampling (McMillan, 2012). The parents who responded to the survey numbered 1,282, and they resided across the United States, representing every state with the exception of Maine.

Data Collection

The survey was composed of twenty closed- and open-ended questions. The use of the survey questionnaire in this study was for the purpose of collecting information from a large number of homeschool respondents. McMillan (2012) recommended the questionnaire due to its versatility, efficiency, and generalizability. Completed survey responses were sent to the Qualtrics Research Suite (Qualtrics, 2015) for simple statistical analysis. Of the 1,282 surveys partially completed, 1,055 were totally completed providing an 82.3% completion rate for the survey. The data were organized into spreadsheets.

After completing the survey, the participants were given the opportunity to request to be interviewed. Of the more than 500 interview requests, nine interview participants were chosen based on the order they responded and the region in which they lived. The participants represented each of the four regions of the United States—Northeast, South, Midwest, and West (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Interviews were conducted by email.

Interviews were implemented according to the viewpoint of Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993). Interviews were used to add greater depth to the information obtained

through the surveys. The semi-structured interviews provided the in-depth thoughts of the homeschooling parents (Erlandson et al., 1993). This study included accessing a geographically wide range of participants. Therefore, the interviews were conducted via the internet, according to the guidelines of Meho (2006, p. 1291).

Their responses to the semi-structured interview questions were explored until the research questions were thoroughly answered. There was the opportunity for multiple email exchanges between the participant and the researcher. The collected data were categorized into spreadsheets.

Data Analysis

The data from both the surveys and the interviews were analyzed according to the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Thus, the data was unitized and then categorized into themes. The categorization process involved multiple steps of creating general concepts which were then further broken down into themes. For an example of this process, one parent responded to the motivation question by stating, "Based on my child's need for therapies" (119). This response was initially categorized as "student needs." After the last round of categorization, this response became part of the "special needs" theme. This process resulted in a type of constructed meaning, much like that ascribed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008).

For the purposes of this paper, participants have been represented by the order in which their information was recorded into the spreadsheet. Thus, the second participant will be represented by the number 2. Additionally, the themes derived from the data will be listed in alphabetical order. The researcher inquired about multiple subject areas within the survey, however, in this paper, the researcher has only focused on the reason behind the parents' curriculum and instruction choices.

Results

The research question focused on the reasons or motivations from which homeschoolers implement their educational routines. Participants were provided options by which they could select the best reason for their chosen educational routine. Table 1 presents this information.

Table 1 Reason for Routines and Schedules

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Suggested from a curriculum package	6	1%
A personal preference	388	37%
Based on your child's or children's unique learning style	472	45%
Other	193	18%
Total	1,059	100%

Table 1 demonstrates the individualized nature of homeschooling. Most parents' (45%) motivations were derived from their child's unique learning style. Very few, only 1% of the respondents, reported that they set their educational routines based on the suggestions of a

curriculum package. This question provided an “Other” option by which parents could fill in their own response.

The “Other” responses for this question, in some of the cases, could be incorporated into the first three answer selections. For instance, one parent wrote, “Personal research on learning and teaching methods” (350). This answer response, although categorized as “Other,” was similar to the provided answer response: “Personal preference.”

There were also some “Other” responses that merely stated their reason was a combination of the three given selections. In these cases, participants would respond with something like “All of the above” (150). However, there were many responses from the participants that did not fit the three given answer selections. The following themes came from the participants’ responses: child’s interests, community resources, experience, faith, family reasons, special goals, special needs.

Child’s interests

Some families developed a schedule that was not necessarily based on their children’s unique learning style, but rather their particular interests. This theme demonstrated the value parents placed on student based learning. The responses found within this theme centered on the students’ interests. For example, one parent shared her reason for their academic decisions:

Our schedule is adapted to our children's interests and abilities. Our oldest is interested in languages, so we sought a highly-qualified tutor in Classical Greek and in Latin for her. Our middle child is interested in musical theatre, so we all became involved in community theatre. Another child was a late bloomer, so all academic work in the early years had to be designed without requiring reading. We adapt the routines and schedules to the child. (143)

Other parents shared similar thoughts, such as answering that their schedule “flows” based on various aspects including the activities that the children were involved in (250).

Community resources

Many parents maximized the various opportunities and resources their communities had to offer. The availability of these resources heavily influenced the organization of their schedules. Some families based their educational program around the times and schedules of museums, libraries, and state parks. For example, one participant responded, “We schedule around community resource classes and activities. Then we build in solid basic time for math and language arts” (104). Another parent said, “Availability of activities or opportunities dictate our schedule” (81). The responses within this theme highlighted the value parents placed on their community resources, to the extent that the curricular motivations were built on community activity.

Experience

Some families attributed the design of their academic schedule to experience. The responses within this theme emphasized the growth and development that the family had experienced through their years of homeschooling. As one parent stated, “We've established this routine after watching what works best over the years” (114). Another parent responded, “After homeschooling for 15 years, I have figured it out. I select the best curriculum and then modify what needs to be done” (107). Another parent simply commented, “Years of trial and

error” (105). Some parents highlighted the freedom and flexibility with which they approached their academic schedules-- “none of the routines are set in stone” (402). This theme captured the change and evolution that occur for homeschooling programs based on the family’s experiences.

Faith

Several families attributed their academic decisions, and the reason for their schedule to their particular faith. One parent answered, “We let God lead our day... We are free to follow God’s leading every day and have learned far more from following bunny trails than we EVER would have learned from a curriculum” (253). Some families mentioned the fact they wanted to raise children that would honor God. A parent responded, we “glorify God by having a schedule putting Him first and doing our best to raise a successful daughter” (322). The responses within this theme brought an awareness to academic motivations that would not be considered mainstream, and that curricular and instructional decisions are not always derived from traditional “academic” perspectives.

Family reasons

The motivations within this theme centered around family matters—personal family commitments, job arrangements, and financial circumstances, all played a role in academic decisions. Several parents responded simply with an “It’s what works for our family” type of statement (26). This manner of response summarized the various aspects that parents thought about, such as “personal and financial circumstances” (1024). Other factors included the parents’ work schedule. In some situations, both parents worked or the family traveled a lot. One parent answered, “... based on being entrepreneurs” (369). Another parent answered the question by saying, “Based on our family’s likes, dislikes, dad’s work schedule and activities” (1136). Parents also shared the reasons why routines may not always go as planned. For example, a parent expressed,

There are times when the educator doesn't feel like educating and the learners don't want to learn, and those days turn in to free days. I try to keep them to a minimum. We educate all year so we can go away anytime we want. (344)

As with the themes *faith* and *experience*, this theme brings an understanding to the complexities of families, and how a variety of factors may play a part in academic decisions.

Special goals

There were homeschoolers who made decisions based on personal, individualized goals. The responses within this theme centered around an important goal or aim the parents and students had made together. For example, one parent answered, “to prepare them for SAT” (83), and another responded, “Leadership Education philosophy” (574). Still another parent wrote, “It’s a big priority to me to craft a home life and schedule that (1) fosters a close, collaborative, nurturing and fun family culture and (2) meets my kids’ developmental needs in the life stage they are in...” (82). For these families, their curriculum and instructional decisions were built around special goals that provided the foundation for their homeschooling experience.

Special needs

Some families made academic decisions that were motivated specifically by the special needs of the child. Responses within this theme highlighted the parents' recognition that education must account for the special circumstances of the child. One parent answered, reporting that their schedule is determined by, "trying to juggle 2 kids with different needs" (308). Another parent responded, "Due to their special needs, I found that routine enables them to feel more confident, knowing what to expect, and helps with their behavior" (971). Still another parent shared that their academic schedule is, "Based on my child's need for therapies" (119). This theme, like some of the others, emphasizes a component of education that might be overlooked in other educational settings.

Discussion

As noted in the Background section, no scholarly work was found related to homeschooling curriculum and instruction motivation. There have been a number of studies that have dealt with the reasons to homeschool (i.e., Dumas, Gates, & Schwarzer, 2010; Noel, Stark, & Redford, 2013; Van Galen, 1991), some studies about who chooses to homeschool (i.e., Huseman, 2015; Isenberg, 2007), and a few studies about the educational tools that homeschooling families use (i.e., Hanna, 2012; Wilhelm & Firman, 2009), but these studies did not capture the motivations behind educational decisions. Thus, the current study supplies a fresh perspective of the motivations behind homeschoolers' curricular decisions.

Although parents must take their state's academic regulations into account, no parent in this study attributed the state's mandates as their sole reason or motivation behind their educational routines. Families came up with their own reasons, often very personal reasons, when deciding how their academic day would unfold (i.e., special goals). In addition, not many parents reported using their purchased curriculum guides as their source for creating routines and schedules. The results of this study illustrate the freedom and flexibility that can be naturally found in homeschooling.

The themes capture the drawing power of homeschooling. Inherent in homeschooling is the authority to design an educational program that does not necessarily begin with academics. As the parents in this study have expressed, there are a number of motivational factors that could be considered outside the scope of traditional education. Even the themes that might fall into what would be considered mainstream educational thought, reveal particular elements that families may give more attention to, as compared with alternative educational personnel.

Implications

The findings of this study can be used to understand the often neglected thoughts and ideas of all parents, including public school parents. With few sources to collect the perspectives of public school parents, this study may help educational administrators and officials understand the thoughts and values of parents at-large. If homeschooling parents see value in community resources, it is likely that public school parents also feel this way. Additionally, if homeschooling parents make educational decisions based on family reasons, faith, student goals, and special needs, public school parents would likely have these same desires. Are public schools providing the variety of choices that parents are wanting? Can public schools find more ways to allow for customized schedules that fit the changing preferences of public school families? Our public schools need to find more ways to connect with parents, listen to their needs, and understand their educational goals.

If the needs and values of all parents, including homeschoolers, are truly addressed, it may open up a number of doors toward a successful collaboration between homeschools and public schools. Although this type of collaboration may not be desired by all homeschoolers, there are many who would welcome such a system. Homeschooling parents reported that they were highly involved in their communities, often taking full advantage of the resources and activities within their cities. In fact, some parents reported setting their schedules around community events and activities. Could public schools do more to tap into the desire homeschoolers have to be in the community? The possibilities, although boundless, could begin with more outreach to the homeschooling community.

It is understood that there are currently mixed educational programs functioning within the United States (Bielick, 2008). However, what if more were to be done to unite the two forms of education? What if schools were more accessible, “open houses,” available to all homeschoolers as one participant put it? This is a logical goal for a community to have. Establishing these types of arrangements where public schools are seen as an inviting place for homeschoolers may, like the relationship one has with other significant elements of a community, create a desire for homeschooling parents to associate more closely with public schools. Additionally, these arrangements may help cultivate an environment in which parents want to participate in the public schools’ educational activities. Public schools have the potential, and should be yet another valuable community resource in addition to all of the other ones listed by the participants.

What better “program” to participate in than the offerings of public schools, staffed with educated professionals, equipped with modern resources, all purposely designed to teach students? What public officials must consider is the accessibility of public schools. Is there a place for non-traditional students within their educational program? Schools can do more to include the great variety of learners—private school students, online students, and home-educated students.

Limitations

The results of this study, due to the extensive nature of the sample, may be generalizable. In addition, the researcher described the nuances of the context so that similar research could be conducted. However, this research was implemented using a sample of homeschooling families that not only had direct access to the Internet and email, but these were also families connected with a homeschooling group or association. Though Ray (2010) reported that 98.3% of homeschool students had a computer in the home, many families may not have access to the Internet. Thus, the parents in this study may have represented motivations and reasons that are not necessarily consistent with homeschoolers who are not connected to the Internet and/or are not connected with a homeschool group or association.

Recommendations

If this study were to be conducted again, the researcher would not have provided response choices for the research question. The question concerning motivation would have been open-ended, allowing parents to think about, and write about their own thoughts. In the current study, three response choices were given, but there was no space for parents to provide an explanation for the first three responses. Only if parents selected “other” could they explain and give voice to their thoughts. This “other” choice is what allowed for the homeschooling parents to express themselves. Another option might be to provide the first three answer choices, and then also provide a space for the participants to clarify their response if they desired to do so.

Conclusion

The methods and practices that come out of homeschooling communities should continue to be examined by public school officials. Especially important are the motivations and reasons behind these academic decisions. Listening to parents will help bring a greater awareness of what is important to families. Therefore, understanding the values, especially as they develop and transform, will allow public school officials and others to stay connected to the contemporary thoughts and ideas of parents and their children. In addition, homeschooling practices, and the reasons behind them, may positively influence how public education is realized in future generations.

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