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Parent Perspectives on Homeschooling in Minnesota

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Parent Perspectives on Homeschooling in Minnesota

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to family members who were instrumental in my completion. First, my husband who endured hours of solo parenting while I labored away in libraries. My children who, though they do not understand the work I am doing now, I hope they will learn from my example as they get older. Finally, my mother, who when I initially told her I was going back to school 14 years ago her only response was, "Good, and I will pay for half." I know she was thinking "I told you to go into teaching when you started college." Little did she know, so many years later, she would spend countless days of her summer break watching our kids while I interviewed and wrote. If it were not for everyone's support and encouragement I would not have taken the time necessary to complete this project.

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Abstract

This paper explores the perspective of parents who have experience homeschooling their children in the state of Minnesota. Five families participated in the study in an interview format. In each case the mother was interviewed as she was primarily responsible for homeschooling. Data collected from interviews showed themes among all participants in the areas of: continual assessment of the choice to homeschool, the positive affect homeschooling had on the preservation of family structure, a dissatisfaction with other education options, the importance of support systems and the issue of socialization, and the benefits of Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO). All families in the study were satisfied with their decision to homeschool their children. Research surrounding homeschooling is limited and further research could be conducted to help homeschooling families find increased success; as well as looking at the effectiveness of homeschooling in the area of career and college readiness.

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Parent Perspectives on Homeschooling in Minnesota

Introduction

As a product of the public school system, and a public school teacher myself, I always assumed my own children would go to public school, hopefully where I was teaching. After the birth of my second child I made the difficult decision to take a leave from the teaching job I loved to stay home with my family. Though I loved having them home with me, as my oldest approached three I worried about his socialization and started looking for preschools. Through this process I learned what a tough critic I really was. If I couldn't find a preschool I felt was adequate for my own children what is going to happen when they are school aged?

My husband first presented the idea of homeschooling, and as an educator I had reservations. Then in January 2016 I received an email stating I had one year left to finish my thesis paper or I would be out of time. I had started a research project on using formative assessment in writing while teaching, and before kids. But that topic, and the research I had started, seemed so distant and unimportant, not practical to the life I now had.

I was confronted with the idea of changing my topic. I was struck by what a happy accident this might be. If homeschooling was something that I was considering, why not talk with families that had done it or were currently doing it to see what their experiences were like so I could inform our decision. I was torn, the teacher in me saw such value in traditional schooling, but my mommy heart had other thoughts. What was it really like to be a family homeschooling in Minnesota?

Importance of the study

The homeschooling movement continues to grow in popularity each year. According to the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), colleges are also starting to recognize this group of students as no longer on the margins. However, little formal research can be found on the current state of homeschooling for families across the country and specifically in Minnesota. “Homeschoolers are a difficult population to study and much of the existing research is limited” (Collom, 2005, p. 307). The goal of this research is to add to the knowledge base of homeschooling and more specifically to homeschooling in the state of Minnesota.

Purpose of the research

The intent of the study is to understand the homeschooling experience of families in Minnesota. There is a great deal of information on social media that families share such as deals at the science museum or curriculum they have really enjoyed, but what does it really look like for families? This research hopes to better understand, from a parent’s perspective, what it is really like to be a homeschooling family.

I sought to understand, from those who have homeschooled, what the experience was like for their family and children. This research was personally important to help inform my decision about the choices my husband and I would make for our own children. I wanted to understand if homeschool seemed to be a viable and legitimate educational choice. While teaching I had two students, siblings though taught different years, that had been homeschooled. They were

excellent students and a joy to have in the classroom; intelligent, hardworking, friendly, followed directions, on task and independent. They did express some frustrations with wasted time and other students not following directions, which their parents, in a conversation with me, attributed to being homeschooled. I didn't know anyone else that homeschooled, and I was under the impression that the only families that homeschooled were on the extremes, right and left. I was interested in understanding what motivated families to choose homeschooling. What did families experience when they chose to homeschool? What impact did homeschooling have on their family dynamic? What challenges did they encounter while homeschooling? For those who had adult children, what did life look like after they were finished with K-12? What was considered homeschooling in Minnesota? Did students who were homeschooled also participate in the Post-Secondary Education Option (PSEO)? If so what was that like for them? This study examines parent perceptions of homeschooling in Minnesota.

Review of Literature

When attempting to define homeschooling one is presented with challenges. Homeschooling looks different in the current educational landscape than it did at the start of the movement. Families now have a myriad of options at their disposal to determine the best end game strategy for their children. Vieux (2013) defines homeschooling as “schooling which occurs outside of an institutional school setting. Where parents are the primary instructor or supervise instruction” (p. 556). Gaither (2009) says homeschooling is equal to “the use of the home to educate as a deliberate act of political protest against, and alternative to, formal educational institutions” (p. 332). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics a student is considered homeschooled if the student does not exceed 25 hours a week in a regular school enrollment. The Home School Legal Defense Association says that parents must direct at least 51% of their student’s education to be considered homeschooled.

In the 2012 book *Homeschooling in America*, Joseph Murphy offers up two core elements of homeschooling as a way to try and define something that has become murkier as families have access to a hybrid of choices for their children. Murphy says that homeschooling needs to have the following two ingredients to qualify a family as homeschooling: a rejection of public or private schooling and the use of the home as the center of educational gravity. The common thread in all definitions is with the parents at the center of making choices for their child’s education and their rejection of traditional and formal educational options.

This review of literature will be looking at the following topics surrounding homeschooling. The history of the homeschooling movement in the United States. Focus is primarily given to the most recent two centuries and particular attention is paid to two individuals credited with much of the shift toward homeschooling: John Holt, popular in the 1970's and Raymond Moore, popular in in the 1980's. Attention will be paid to previous and current regulations and legislation of homeschooling. An exploration of the research will be conducted surrounding the motivations of parents to choose homeschooling. Finally, this review will look at the quantity and quality of the research available on the issue of homeschooling and the scholarly communities' perspective on the available research.

History of Homeschooling

In Milton Gaither's 2009 article *Homeschooling in the USA*, he examines why the modern homeschooling movement emerged. He shares:

The home-based education of the past (pre 1970's) was nearly always done for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons. Sparse populations and limited resources meant that formal schools were impractical for many in colonial America or the western frontiers of the nineteenth century (p. 331).

Prior to the middle of the 19th century, and the creation of formal tax-funded schools, much of the populations' education took place in informal settings or at home with only small groups of children having access to formally created schools. The mid 1800's saw the passage of compulsory education laws and

homeschooling dwindled as children were required by law to attend intuitional-based schools. The 1950's, with *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, saw that separate was "inherently unequal" and integration of schools, theoretically, would lead to equal access to education for all students in a public setting.

It is argued that homeschooling had "waned to near extinction by the late 1970s" (Ray, 2000, p. 275). Analysts estimate that by the mid-1970s the number of homeschooled students was in the range of 10,000-15,000 (Divoky, 1983; Glanzer, 2008; Holt, 1983; Cogan, 2010). The so-called liberal left and the conservative right often disagree as to the start of the modern homeschooling movement, each wanting to take credit (Murphy, 2012). According to Murphy (2012), many scholars point to two primary people, John Holt, of the left, and Raymond Moore, of the right, for leading the modern homeschooling movement. According to them:

Homeschooling, as we know it today, may not have existed if not for a pair of Paul Reveres who alerted parents to the pitfalls of dispatching their children off to schools. The seeds of what has grown into the modern-day American homeschooling movement were planted by them 30 years ago (Lyman, 2000, p. 23).

The counterculture left were "individuals who sought to rebel against the establishment and bring their children's education more directly under parental control" (Jolly, 2012, p. 122). "By 1970 many leftist activists concluded that any real change must come instead from a compelling alternative society." (Gaither, 2008, p. 227) These families who were looking for an alternative, found a

spokesmen in John Holt. One of the two “Paul Reveres” (Lyman, 2000), Holt, was a leading and popular school reform advocate and proponent of the modern homeschooling movement. Prior to 1960, only Oklahoma, Nevada, and Utah had passed legislation making homeschooling legal. Parents outside of these states were accused of breaking compulsory education laws when choosing to homeschool their students. Many families argued that their homeschool qualified as a private school; thus, exempted them from compulsory attendance laws (Gaither, 2008).

In 1977 Holt founded the magazine *Growing without Schooling* in an effort to promote homeschooling and his idea of unschooling. In a 2009 update to Holt’s 1981 book, *Teach Your Own*, Pat Farenga defines unschooling as “allowing children as much freedom to learn in the world as their parents can comfortably bear” (p.238).

The second “Paul Revere”, Raymond Moore, was seen as the spokesperson for the religious right pushed for homeschooling in the 1980s. During this time Moore was often featured on the program *Focus on the Family* and the disenfranchisement of the religious right lead to the Christian homeschooling movement of this time (Gaither, 2009). Moore believed that students did not need to be sent to school at earlier ages. As Murphy (2012) highlights, Moore “was particularly troubled over the burgeoning early childhood movement that was sending children to institutionalized schooling at earlier and earlier ages. Moore found no empirical support for this development” (p. 103). In

fact, Moore argued that students should not start formal education before the age of eight and in some cases not before age ten (Moore, 1976).

Milton Gaither offers that four social trends, woven through recent American history, helped make the rise of homeschooling possible: suburbanization; feminism; political radicalism and privatism; and an increasingly bureaucratic and secularized public school system. The increase in bureaucracy in schools speaks to Holt's message and the counter culture left, and the secularization of the school system speaks to the message of Moore and the conservative right. "Given this pan-ideological commitment to local, authentic, private life and contempt for establishment liberalism, it is not surprising that members of both the counter-culture right and the counter culture left began to practice and advocate for homeschooling" (Gaither, 2009, p. 336). This idea of political radicalism fits with the previously discussed agendas of Holt and Moore. The other two social trends do not fit as easily with the messages of either "Paul Revere".

Gaither credits suburbanization with aiding in the families comfort and desire to stay in their homes. "The comfortable, technology-rich interior spaces of suburban homes, not to mention the traffic and ugliness of the outside environment have made homeschooling a far more compelling option for many." (Gaither, 2009, p.333). Kenneth Jackson, in his 1985 book titled *Crabgrass Frontier*, discusses how the suburban home was an oasis for families to feel autonomous in their choices. He states, "The suburban ideal offered the promise of an environment visibly responsive to personal effort, and environment that

would combine the best of both city and rural life and would provide a permanent home for a restless people” (p. 72). People wanted it all and the rise of suburbanization allowed them to feel like they could have the best of all worlds.

Gaither (2008) argued that feminism also facilitated women to have a more powerful voice in the education of their children saying:

These women were empowered, articulate, and unabashedly conventional. But through their rhetoric was stridently domestic and anti-feminist, their own lives were testimonies to the advances women had been making in education and public life for decades. They organized reading rooms, voter-registration drives, and women’s clubs. Many became public speakers, and some ran for office. Rarely did they address these seeming contradictions between their domestic philosophy and public lives head-on, but when they did their words echoed those of first-wave feminists of the late nineteenth century (p. 230).

Women had been better educated over the preceding years and had seen success outside the home. They took this success to see themselves as more than wives and mothers. They saw value in staying home but wanted to put their education and talents to use (Gaither, 2009). Homeschooling “was born in the dedicated work of thousands of activists, most of them women” (Gaither, 2008, p.235)

In a 1992 article, Knowles, Marlow and Muchmore, discuss a considerable jump in the number of homeschooled children, which they credit to a growing cooperation between public schools and homeschooling families. Joseph Murphy

(2012) points to a 1990 US Department of Education report that puts the number of homeschooling students between 248,500 and 353,500, demonstrating the rapid rise in the number of children not in traditional school environments. The National Home Education Research Institute in 1995, estimated that nearly half a million students were homeschooled, equating to about 1% of the US school age population (Pearson, 1996). Murphy (2012) claims that, "By 1998, almost everyone was in agreement that there were in the neighborhood of 1 million youngsters being educated at home, although considerable variations remained in the estimates" (p. 41). Data from a 1999 National Household of Education Surveys Program Parent Survey estimated that 850,000 students were being homeschooled, equaling 1.7% of the school aged population (Bielick et al., 2001). Reich, in 2002, stated that there were more children homeschooled than attended charter schools and more children homeschooled than attended conservative Christian academies. In a 2011 article, Ray, estimated 2010 enrollment to have reached 2.04 million, or 3.8% of the school aged population. Data from the 2012 National Household of Education Surveys Program Parent Survey estimated that 1,773,000 million students were being homeschooled, equaling 3.4% of the school aged population. From a small movement in the social extremes in the 1970's and 1980's to the current reality of 3.4% of the student population homeschooling, this social movement has started to come out of the shadows and into the mainstream.

Regulations and Legislation

The homeschooling movement cannot be discussed without also looking into regulations and legislation. The modern homeschool movement emerged in the 1970's with Holt and the rise of a counter culture ideal. Gaither, 2009, discussed the challenges of homeschooling families during this time saying:

Homeschoolers in those days were in a precarious position – misunderstood and held in suspicion by neighbors and family member, distrusted and occasionally persecuted by authorities, confused about what was legal and how to do what they were trying to do (p. 339).

For families wanting to homeschool the path was not clear and the regulation varied depending on state. Also, according to Gaither:

At the dawn of the movement in the late 1970s, 14 state statues said nothing at all about education at home but usually mentioned the acceptability of children being taught in a private school; 15 (state) explicitly mentioned home instruction in one way or another. The remaining 21 contained phrases like 'equivalent instruction elsewhere' or 'instruction by a private tutor' that could be read to imply recognition of home education as a legitimate option. The 36 states with either explicit or implied provisions for home instruction differed markedly over the specifics of their rules governing non-public school instruction and over establishing who was in charge at all. Some were very vague. Some empowered local school boards to govern such matters. Some statues established robust requirements. Six even required that any teacher of

children, regardless of venue, be certified by the same standards the state used to certify public school teachers (p. 339-340).

Homeschool advocates often turn to two cases as a defense for homeschooling rights. The first being *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, a 1925 Supreme Court decision allowing parents the right to send their children to private schools. The second case, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, a 1972 Supreme Court decision that allowed Amish families the right to end formal education earlier than state requirements. “The Supreme Court made it clear in the *Pierce* and *Yoder* decisions that government does have some legitimate supervision of nonpublic schooling, but also indicated that this influence is nonetheless limited” (Kunzman, 2009, p. 318).

Homeschooling was made legal in all states by 1993, even for parents without teacher certification (Gaither, 2009). Though home education became legal in every state, each state has differing levels of accountability for parents. The HSLDA has a database with all states requirements and a rubric, from no notice/regulation up to high notice/regulation, and resources on how to comply with regulations. Thirty-five states mandate the study of particular subjects. Fourteen states require parents maintain curriculum records while seven states require that student work portfolios be kept. “...since homeschooling’s fundamental ideals made intuitive sense to many Americans, the movement was quite successful at convincing the nation, especially the courts, legislatures and media, that it was a harmless and perhaps even noble phenomenon” (Gaither, 2009, p. 339).

Early on in the movement, the choice to homeschool was not one that came easily for families. Challenges with confusing and misleading regulation and suspicion was a great cause of concern for families. Though the regulations still vary by state, homeschooling is now seen as an acceptable educational choice in all states. Those early families set the ground work for the rise in numbers of the modern movement.

Parental Motivations for Homeschooling

Van Galen (1991) points to two categories for reasons parents' homeschool; pedagogues or ideologues. Pedagogues chose homeschooling because they feel, pedagogically, instruction at home is superior to instruction in a public school. They do not like bureaucracy they see in public education and feel it has a negative effect on creativity and personal responsibility. Ideologues choose to homeschool because they are dissatisfied with the removal of religious, moral, and ethical education from public schools.

Isenberg (2007) categorizes parental motivation to homeschool similar to Van Galen, though Isenberg simply says "families choose to homeschool for both academic and religious reasons" (p. 407). While Van Galen seems to presume that parents choose to homeschool for one or the other, Isenberg recognizes that the choice to homeschool could be some combination of both.

The US Department of Education offers up the following table, with data taken from a 2012 report from the National Household Education Surveys (NHES) Program, to show parental motivation to homeschool:

Table 1. Parents' Reasons for Homeschooling Their Children (in percentages)

Reason	2011-2012	2006-2007	2002-2003
A desire to provide religious instruction	64	83*	72*
A desire to provide moral instruction	77	83*	72*
A concern about environment of other schools	91	88	85
A dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools	74	73	68
A desire to provide a nontraditional approach to child's education	44	65	Not asked this year.
Child has other special needs	17	21	29
Child has a physical or mental health problem	15	11	16
Other reasons	37	32	20

*Note: During these years, the surveys listed “a desire to provide religious or moral instruction” as a combined reason.

Murphy (2012) points out that “many homeschool parents have come to believe that public schools are broken academically” (p. 244). This dissatisfaction with the school systems, as seen on the chart above, is on the rise, along with concern about the school environment. In the Jolly, Matthews and Nester study (2012), families were interviewed who identified their children as gifted and then made the decision to homeschool. All of the families in this study chose to homeschool only after working with public or private schools to have the needs of their children met. According to Jolly, et. al, “The decision to homeschool resulted from these parents’ recognition that their child/children’s progress in school had stagnated or in some cases even regressed, in relation to the potential and learning expectations that their gifted identification status had implied” (p. 127)

Murphy (2012) points out that “almost all homeschoolers are motivated by multiple factors” (p. 242). Ray (2016) states that parents decide to homeschool for more than one reason and gives the following list: customize or individualize the curriculum and learning environment for each child; accomplish more academically than in schools, use pedagogical approaches other than those typical in situational schools, enhance family relationships between children and parents and among siblings, provide guided and reasoned social interactions with youthful peer and adults, provide a safer environment for children and youth (includes physical violence, drug and alcohol, psychological abuse, racism, unhealthy sexuality), and to teach and impart a particular set of values, beliefs and worldview to children and youth.

Current Research on Homeschooling and the Need for More

Kunzman (2009), in his article *Understanding Homeschooling*, stated that “Describing the typical homeschool family is not unlike describing the typical public school family – the range of demographics, philosophies and practices make a generalization practically impossible” (p. 313). With an estimated 2.3 million students ages 5 to 17 currently homeschooling for part or all of their day (Ray, 2016) and that number is expected to continue to rise, it is easy to understand what Kunzman means. As Ray (2011) pointed out, “Although estimates vary widely and the question has been debated by many, the number of children being home educated in the United States has clearly risen over the past 30 years” (p. 1) “What was at one point a fringe movement of hippies and fundamentalists is now quite fashionable” (Gaither, 2009, p. 343).

Motivations to homeschool have shifted, from the counterculture left in the 1970s and religious right in the 1980s to a much more heterogeneous rational. The increased access to technology and the internet has also spawned a range of families to see homeschooling as a viable alternative to the public/private options (Murphy, 2012).

Yang (2004) found that American-born parents, urban parents, Christian parents and parents in intact families were more likely to homeschool their children. A 2012 study by the US Department of Education found that 83% of homeschool families were white, 89% were nonpoor, and from families where the parents were at a minimum a high school graduate. Homeschooling parents tend to be better educated than non-homeschooling parents; solidly middle class while being one wage earning households; mothers were most commonly the stay at home educators; families have a high amount of marital cohesiveness, meaning married, intact, two-parent families; families tend to be socially and politically conservative; participate in the larger communities where they live; having larger families than the average US family; and commonly live in small towns and rural areas. (Murphy, 2012).

Ray (2013) states that “Research to date is consistent that adults who were home educated are faring as well or better than the general adult population on all constructs (college admission and completion, amount read, community service engagement, and civic engagement) considered” (p. 329). In a study of students enrolled in a Catholic college, Snyder (2013) stated that “Homeschooled students in the study scored significantly higher than traditionally schooled students on the

ACT and SAT and in overall GPA” (p. 110). Cogan (2010), in a quantitative study of homeschooled students, at midsize private institution in the upper Midwest, found students who were homeschooled to have: higher ACT composite scores, higher one-year cumulative GPA, higher four year GPA, same level fall to fall retention rates and higher four year graduation rates when compared to traditionally (public and private) schooled students.

When discussing the current available research Murphy (2012) says, “One of the most stark conclusions one draws when reviewing the scholarly literature on homeschooling is just how thin the empirical knowledge base is on this social phenomenon and educational movement” (p. 13). As the percentage of homeschooling school aged students rises there is a call from the scholarly community for more research. Murphy analogies that the problem of quality and relevant research is common among social sciences that experience rapid growth, but points out that this excuse is inadequate:

The logical question is, of course, why has so little scientific evidence been generated on the contemporary homeschooling movement? Newness of the field cannot explain everything. After all, it is more prevalent than charter schools and roughly 15 years longer in its development (1975 versus 1990); yet the research on homeschooling can only be characterized as immature and poorly formed in comparison to the large-scale, sophisticated work on charter schools (Murphy, 2012, p. 13).

The decentralized nature of homeschooling makes it challenging for researchers to draw conclusions about achievement. Without controlled

experiments it is not possible to draw definite conclusions on the effectiveness of homeschooling compared to traditional schooling (Lips & Feinberg, 2008). There are few databases on the performance of homeschool students, and even those are held with suspicion (Isenberg, 2007). This lack of research and reliable data sources makes the criticism and defense of homeschool more subjective than objective.

In the conclusion of Joseph Murphy's book, *Homeschooling in America*, he says, "Homeschooling provides a window into understanding a great deal about how the political, cultural, and social fabric of the nation is being rewoven—probably more than any other educational intervention since the creation of the modern school system a century ago" (p. 127). With estimates of homeschooling in the late 1970s at around 10,000-15,000 to roughly 2,000,000 students, over 3% of the school-age population and rising (Ray, 2015) "homeschooling is both a powerful social and educational phenomenon" (Murphy, 2012, p. 131).

Summary of the Literature

The literature generally agrees on the history of the homeschooling movement. Most researchers point to one or both of the pioneers that spearheaded the modern movement in the 1970s and 1980s; Holt and Moore. Most of the literature agrees that the counter culture left and the religious right, though having differing agendas for leaving traditional schools, had similar affects and goals. There also is a general agreement on the definition of a homeschooling family as the parent directing the instruction in protest to other options available.

There also appears to be agreement about the lack of research available on the outcomes of homeschooling, and comparisons of this, to traditionally schooled students. Most agree that homeschooled students do as well or better than traditionally schooled peers on all measures, with current data available. All agree that the accessibility to reliable data poses a challenge to relevant research. Not all agree on all aspects of why this problem with accurate and reliable data exists.

There are differing estimates as to the number of students' homeschooling currently and previously. However; all agree that the percentage, as compared to traditionally educated students, is trending on the rise. This makes the need to reliable research and attention to the movement important.

Methodology

Qualitative Research

This research seeks to gain an understanding of the homeschooling experience for families in Minnesota. In order to truly understand the homeschooling families' experiences, I went directly to the source, those facilitating the homeschooling, the parents.

I chose to conduct qualitative research in the form of an action research project. "The phrase *qualitative* methodology refers in the broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data-people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior." (Taylor, 2015, p. 17) Bogdan further describes qualitative research in the following five categories:

1. Qualitative researchers are concerned with the meaning people attach to things in their lives.
2. Qualitative research is inductive. Qualitative researchers develop concepts, insights, and understandings from patterns in the data rather than collecting data to assess preconceived models, hypotheses, or theories.
3. In qualitative methodology the researcher looks at settings and people holistically; people, settings, or groups are not reduced to variables, but viewed as a whole.
4. Qualitative researchers are concerned with how people think and act in their everyday lives.
5. For the qualitative researcher, all perspectives are worthy of study.

(Taylor, 2015, pgs. 18-19)

Geoffrey E. Mills defined action research as:

Any systematic inquiry by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors or other stakeholders in the teaching, learning environment to gather information.... This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved (Mills, 2014, p. 9).

In this research I wanted to develop a deep understanding of the parents' experiences and perspectives and an action research project was just the vehicle for such research.

Research Setting

Study participants were current or former homeschooling families whose primary and most recent experiences took place in Minnesota. All participants that volunteered were from suburban areas of Minnesota. Legislation on homeschooling varies by states and I wanted to limit the research to understand the specific experiences of those in Minnesota. The homeschooling population in Minnesota has grown from 2,322 in 1987-88 to 18, 085 in 2014-2015 as reported by the Minnesota Department of Education. However, the state does not specifically collect information on homeschooling families; it is the responsibility of the individual school districts. Because of this many estimate that the actual number of students being homeschooled is much higher (Murphy, 2012).

Participants in the study were volunteers and the location for the interview was chosen by them to allow for their convenience. All participants chose to meet in public spaces near where they resided or worked.

Research Participants

Participants in the study responded to a general post in closed homeschooling groups on social media, asking for families willing to spend a little time sharing about their experience and adding to the literature available on what it is like to homeschool. Five families were interviewed, all mothers, who were primarily in charge of homeschooling responsibilities. All families were two parent, middle class, and suburban households. One family identified a learning disability for both of their children. Pseudonyms are being used to protect the identities of all families.

Nelson Family: Mrs. Nelson was the interviewed member of this family. The mother of four children now adults, and the primary educator in their homeschooling she happily shared her years of experience and knowledge. Mr. Nelson worked full-time outside the home. Some of his career, before becoming a small business owner, was spent traveling overseas. The interview was conducted at the family's homeschooling bookstore, before normal business hours.

This family has finished their official homeschooling journey with all four children. They are still very involved in the homeschooling community as they own a bookstore that caters to specifically homeschooling in a western suburb of

the Twin Cities. Their homeschool journey began in the state of Washington for six years. The remainder of their homeschooling was done in Minnesota.

All four children were considered homeschooled for the entirety of their K-12 education, though they all did participate in the PSEO program when they reached the age of eligibility. All four children went on to pursue some sort of higher education.

Mr. and Mrs. Nelson, due in part to their history homeschooling and to the ownership of the bookstore, are looked at as a resource among the local community. Several of the other participants in this study were familiar with them and their store, and used them when they had questions whether it be at the beginning of their journey or mid-stream.

Johnson Family: Mrs. Johnson was the interviewed member of this family. The mother of three children ages, 12, 10 and 5, and the parent primarily responsible for the homeschooling duties. Mr. Johnson works full-time outside of the home, though they work as a team to establish goals and support the education of all three children.

The interview was conducted at a park of Mrs. Johnson's choosing. All three children played on the playground, read books and rolled down the hills while we spoke. The family was entering their third year homeschooling all three children. Both of the oldest children attended public school prior to the family choosing to homeschool two years prior.

Erickson Family: Mrs. Erickson was the interviewed member of this family. She is the mother of seven children, five biological and two adopted, and

the parent primarily responsible for the homeschooling duties. Mr. Erickson worked full-time, some from home, some outside the home. The interview was conducted in the courtyard of a hospice facility where Mrs. Erickson's mother was staying.

The eldest five biological children have all graduated. All five spent the majority of their K-12 education homeschooled, with a year or two for the oldest two children spent in a private charter school near their home. The youngest two children were homeschooled up until this school year where they are now enrolled in the same private school near the family's home. The decision to enroll them in a more traditional school was based on the needs of the children and family circumstances.

All of the eldest children went on to some higher education after graduation. Some have completed degrees; others are currently enrolled and working toward degrees.

Smith Family: Mrs. Smith was the interviewed member of this family. The mother of three children, all now finished with their K-12 education, she was primarily responsible for the homeschooling duties. Mr. Smith is a public high school math teacher. The interview was conducted at a restaurant of Mrs. Smith's choosing.

All three children were considered homeschooled for most of their K-12 education. There was a one year period, from 2003-2004, where the family was in Indonesia doing mission work and all three children attended formal school during that year. All three children participated in PSEO classes when they

reached the age of eligibility. All three children have completed at minimum a Bachelor degree.

Jones Family: Mrs. Jones was the interviewed member of this family. She is the mother of two children, and the parent primarily responsible for the homeschooling duties. Mr. Jones works full-time outside the home with some travel requiring him to be out of town several weekdays a month. The interview was conducted at a coffee shop of Mrs. Jones choosing while she waited for her youngest son to finish his two hours of climbing club.

Mrs. Jones grew up in Canada and, prior to having children, was an elementary school teacher. Mr. Jones was in the Army, so the family lived in several states prior to moving to Minnesota. The eldest son attend K-2 in New York. When the family moved to Minnesota they decided to have him repeat the second grade and decided to pull him from third grade early in the school year and homeschool. The youngest son attended kindergarten and the first month and a half of first grade in public school.

Both children have been diagnosed with dyslexia. The oldest is also diagnosed as having attention deficit disorder (ADD) while the youngest is diagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Since pulling them in third and first grade, both children have been considered homeschooling students. The oldest one is currently enrolled in PSEO classes.

Data Collection

Data was collected for this research project using in-depth qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews are defined as face-to-face encounters that are

modeled as a conversation between the researcher and the informant. It is a method for understanding the informant's perspective of situations or experiences in their life (Taylor & Bogden, 1984). Each interview took about an hour at a location chosen by the participant.

Participants were asked to sign a consent form to participate in the interviews to allow for the use of audio recording to be later transcribed and the use of direct quotations from the interviews with the understanding the pseudonyms were to be used in the final research analysis.

Each interview was initially guided by a list of the following questions:

1. Tell me about your family
2. What brought you to home education?
3. How do you set goals?
4. How do you determine materials and methods used?

From the above questions additional questions were asked based on participant responses to allow for authentic dialogue and for the research to be guided by the participant responses in an effort to limit my own bias (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)

Interviews were recorded on a portable mp3 hand recorder. While interviews were taking place I also made observer comment notes of the answers each participant gave and notes on future questions to ask later in the interview (Taylor, 2015). After all interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed.

Data Analysis

Grounded Theory was used as the manner in which interviews were analyzed. Grounded theory “consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (Charmez, 2014, p. 1). Grounded Theory was developed to provide social scientists with a systematic way of generate theory from research data inductively. Transcribed notes were coded and analysis began by using coding and assigning labels (Taylor, 2015). Coding is “the process of trying to find patterns and meaning in data collected” (Mills, 2014, p. 135). Coding lead to themes emerging from the interviews which then generated theories about parent perspectives on homeschooling.

Findings

The goal of this research is to better understand the homeschooling community in Minnesota and the experiences of families within that community. With the growing trend of families looking to homeschooling as an alternative educational option for their children a greater understanding of experiences is important.

Despite being at different stages of homeschooling; some with adult children, some having homeschooled for several years, others just starting, all five families' stories had many similarities. Common themes that emerged in the analysis of the data were: continual assessment of the choice to homeschool; preservation of the family structure; dissatisfaction of other education options; support systems and socialization; and the benefits of PSEO.

“I would love to say we will homeschool all the way through high school but I am comfortable with saying we are going to reassess every year”: The continual assessment of the choice to homeschool

Despite all families being in different places of their homeschooling journey, some with college graduates, homeschooling for years, or others just beginning, all families expressed a similar perspective on their choice to homeschool; it was just that, a choice, and one they often looked at critically. No mother gave the impression that homeschooling was the only option they had or were willing to offer to their children. Every family mentions that their children had attended a traditional school setting for some amount of time and that they, at a minimum, evaluated the choice to homeschool regularly if not annually.

Mrs. Smith, with all three children now graduated says, "Every year for seven years, it took me seven years before I felt like this was what I was supposed to do and stopped assuming that I would put my kids in school the next year." She started out homeschooling her oldest for kindergarten when she discovered that legally she didn't need to send any of her children until the age of 7. With their oldest already reading, and learning during tours that in kindergarten the students in the classroom would, as she describes, "hug their letters because that's what kindergarten is about, and mine was reading. [So] we said if it's going to be a play group why not keep him home for a year." So, Mrs. Smith decided to homeschool her oldest son for kindergarten and then evaluate their educational plan. Each year for seven years the Smith family looked at test scores and overall results to decide if homeschooling the following year made sense.

The Johnson family, with three children, at the time of this study middle school age and under, takes a similar year by year approach:

We take it year by year. Every year, at the end of the year, we assess to see if this is something we want to continue doing. Except for a few moments when I am thinking what are we doing? Big yellow bus come and take them away. We reassess every year. I would love to say we will homeschool all the way through high school but I am comfortable with saying we are going to reassess every year.

The Johnson family, only entering their third year of homeschooling, had the two eldest children in public school prior to making the decision to take the education home. Both children have said that they much prefer to homeschool and do not

have any interest in ever going back to public school. Mrs. Johnsons shares, "They are very anti-public school. They have no interest, because we have asked them several time. The answer is always, "NO"." Though there are moments where the burden of being solely in charge of the education of their children can become overwhelming, Mrs. Johnson states that the parents work together to keep focused on the goals they have for their family saying, "At the beginning of the year we sit down and look at what our goals are for the kids this year."

The Erickson family with their seven children, the five biological graduated and two adopted and elementary age, echoes these concerns and doubt. Years ago, with the arrival of more children, they sent the eldest two children to a charter school for one or two years respectively. Mrs. Erickson shares, "After the first year or two we realized we were doing a good job with homeschooling, they were getting all A's." However, because of their constant reflection on the choices they were making on behalf of their children; the youngest two Erickson children were recently enrolled to attend a charter school. Mrs. Erickson shares about their decision saying, "The last two are, as of this year, are going to a Christian school nearby. We picked that for them because they are so different from our biological children; they need to connect with other people more then what we can supply." Mrs. Erickson thought it was possible that this need for connection may be due to the fact that all of the older children have graduated and moved out and on with their lives, or just that their personality needs were that different. This family recognizes the needs of their children and changes course. She states, "I feel a little like a failure, like I wanted to do it but couldn't and a

little like a teacher that doesn't have a class." For the Erickson family it is never was about the needs of the parents, but about the needs of their children, and when the needs changed for their children their plans changed in response.

For the Jones family, their experiences with attempting to have the needs of their children met in the public school setting is enough for them to feel satisfied with the decision they made. They can see the successes their children are having and feel good about their choice, but that doesn't change their reflection on their choice. Mrs. Jones shares, "It is really hard being a parent and the teacher because I feel the burden of my child's failure is even more in my hands. If I miss something are they not going to get into college?" She also says, "I think I will always wonder until they become successful adults if I have done ok. I know my kid aspires to goals and it is my job to make sure he has the tools he needs to get there. I worry about getting it all."

With all four children in college or beyond, Mrs. Nelson has a bit of a different perspective but a similar message. She no longer needs to concern herself with the worry of Mrs. Jones, as her duties of homeschooling parent and teacher are over. She feels that all of her children have gone on to become successful adults. She did acknowledge that at the beginning there was some apprehension about their choice. She had sent her oldest daughter to kindergarten and did not enjoy having her gone all day and chose to try homeschooling her in first grade. Her husband was more skeptical than her about their decision. She discloses:

If you asked him he would say we said we will do it for a year and then take the test and see. We could always put her back in school and let her catch up. But after we did the test a couple of years it was obvious that the academics wasn't an issue at all.

She also states, "After she (the oldest daughter upon completing kindergarten homeschooling) whipped out the test and has this fabulous experience we kinda never tuned back on that (homeschooling)." The first assessment of Mrs. Jones' daughter at the end of that first year of homeschooling gave the parents the confirmation they needed to continue with their homeschooling efforts.

In every family that participated in this study the needs of the children are the primary concern. Parents are reflective on their choice to keep their children home for school. Each family, throughout the process of homeschooling, questions their choice and evaluated to make sure that they were doing the very best they could for their children. All families tried some form of traditional education for a period of time and in the end all were satisfied with their decisions.

"I think they are very thankful for the relational gift it gave them": The preservation of family structure

Another theme that emerges strongly and resonates in every interview, is the importance of the family structure and the role that homeschooling plays in strengthening each family. All families mention this, in some manner, as either their initial rationale for choosing to homeschool, a byproduct of homeschooling or some combination of both.

For Mrs. Nelson the decision to start homeschooling was largely based on the sense of loss she had for the family structure in sending their children off to school all day. She shares, "It was really my momma heart that brought her home. Because we don't have five days a week, we don't have those days any more to be a family." Staying home with her children was a priority and she saw homeschooling as a way to provide her children with the education she wanted them to have, while also allowing their family to have the time and closeness they wanted. She shares:

I think they are very thankful for the relational gift it gave them; because they are each other's best friends. They are butt kickers but they are supporters and encouragers and cheerleaders for each other. They would do anything for each other. I think now as adults they really appreciate that.

Mr. Smith, a licensed high school teacher, had some initial reservations about the idea of homeschooling. Mrs. Smith states, "I think he (Mr. Smith) saw the fruits of what was going on. He (Mr. Smith) had happy well-adjusted children that we were not trying to unpack at the dinner table what might have happened in the hallway." She points to the time they had together as a family that was positive and happy, not entrenched in the demands outside of the family, as having a positive impact on the family structure.

Mrs. Johnson points to the positive affect homeschooling can have on a family when there is an age gap. When talking about the relationships her children have, Mrs. Johnson shares:

They, as siblings, are a lot closer just because they are together all day. One, they have to learn to get along and two they don't have the outside influence of anybody younger than you is a baby. I think they are closer than they would be if they were in public school, especially because he's 12 and she's five, and there is a big gap there.

She also notes that the oldest two boys are best friends and that they have a difficult time arguing, because in the end they think it is funny. The positive impact that homeschooling has had on their family is a definite benefit.

Mrs. Erickson saw the benefits of homeschooling for others in her life and thought it might be a good option for her own family. The decision to homeschool came for Mrs. Erickson when she watched her sister's experience homeschooling her own children. Mrs. Erickson shares:

My sister started [homeschooling] and [making] the connection with your own children, seeing the light go on for yourself. It is just really fun to teach someone how to read and do math. They can spend more time at home; they spend more time outside playing.

She saw her children interacting at home and having the opportunities to become each other's best friends. The bond of the family is one she felt was important and lasted a life time.

Mr. Jones' job required a great deal of travel when they decided to begin homeschooling both of their children. Prior to bringing them home, public school had been a battle for their oldest child, who they later discovered had dyslexia but at the time was undiagnosed. The night before each long work trip Mr. Jones

would have to spend hours comforting their son to get him to sleep. Mrs. Jones reflected on this remembering, “Up until this point he generally had to set aside 2 hours the night before he would leave to console our son to get him to go to sleep.” The eve of their first week homeschooling was also the eve of yet another long work trip. She shares:

That night things went really smoothly and every day after he was fine. It was like someone flipped a switch. Now that I don't have the stress of school, I can be home, I can handle that Dad is gone. We had no idea how much it was affecting him. His whole demeanor and the whole atmosphere of our household changed when we brought them home. It was calm and peaceful.

A calm and peaceful home is something that all parents strive to achieve and the Jones family found that with homeschooling.

Though the structure and challenges for each family is different, the positive impact homeschooling had on the family relationship was shared by all. The connection their children were able to have through shared experiences and the ability to learn interpersonal skills was impactful. The stress brought by attending traditional educational options was alleviated through homeschooling, allowing families to focus on enjoying their time together.

“I did a lot of research and thought, I think we can do better at home”: A dissatisfaction with other education options

All families express a dissatisfaction with the alternatives to homeschooling as a contributing factor to their satisfaction with their choice to

homeschool. Mrs. Johnson cites this as one of the primary driving factors in their initial choice. She shares:

The educational system I feel like it's broken. I love teachers and have so much respect for them and they don't make near enough money. But their hands are so tied with how they can teach, what they can teach, the tools they have to even control their classroom. I did a lot of research and thought, I think we can do better at home. Also, I want them to be excited about learning and I felt like public school was just sucking the life out of that.

Feeling like the public school system was not adequately meeting the needs of her children, Mrs. Johnson felt it best to bring them home. She felt she was better equipped to adjust the instruction to the needs of her children. She shares, "At home there really are no draw backs because they don't even know when they are ahead at this point. They are leaning what they are learning."

Mrs. Smith, like Mrs. Johnson, points out that the demands placed on teachers can adversely affect the instruction and learning that goes on for children at school. According to Mrs. Smith:

I am coming from a wife of a public school teacher perspective. I think teachers are asked to solve things that were typically solved in the family unit, but our families are stressed. So there is a lot more that goes on at school. A lot more that is required of a teacher: there are 30 of them [students] in a class, 35, so if there are 30 in a class, how does a teacher deal with everything from third grade wetting the bed issues to my parents

are getting divorced to the bullying to behavior issues? And you are supposed to effectively teach. I guess we were challenged by, even on my worst day, that's the threshold.

Mrs. Nelson also points to the challenge in the public school structure to differentiate. She shares, "Well you finished that work and now you're wiggling so now do 14 more of the same math problems. Because you are good at it they make you do more? Just to keep you busy. I am having a problem with this trend here." This same concern was echoed when Mrs. Johnson comments that "if they're getting material and they learn it and they are ready to move on and the rest of the class isn't ready to move on, you can't move on." She continues, "When I started really looking at it I realized I wasn't doing less than public school, I was just more efficient about it because there was only three of them." For Mrs. Nelson, a former public school teacher, she found that she could accomplish in "an hour and a half or two" what it might take an entire school day to accomplish.

Bullying was also a concern about the public school system that led Mrs. Johnson and her family to choose homeschooling. She says:

I worry about bullying too. I don't think it helps them to grow as people. I don't think it helps to be on the receiving end or to be the bully themselves. I just don't think that helps them to be good people.

Not feeling like the public school does enough to protect students from bullying, having experienced this herself, lead Mrs. Johnson to look for other educational options for her family.

For Mrs. Erickson it was more about the things her children would be exposed to in public school that she was concerned about. Though this was not her first reason for deciding to homeschool, it was a clear benefit for her family. She explains, "We want their values to come from us rather than their peers." Mrs. Erickson expressed concerns over a number of issues including drugs, permissive behavior, and poor nutrition saying:

[Concerns with] the way people are treated, not treated well. Drugs and stuff were there and we didn't want them [her children] to have anything to do with that. That and permissive behavior is more there now. And I have heard from teacher's teaching things that they really shouldn't be. I also like, because of my health problems, I like to be in control of what they are eating. And when they go out to school and out to events and stuff it tends to be a lot of junk food. I always work on our diet and I can see it makes a difference.

Many of the concerns mentioned by Mrs. Erickson's were a surprise to Mrs. Nelson's son when he went off to college. When discussing what her son shared with her about his experienced she explains:

He got exposed to a lot of stuff in that dorm as a freshmen with a roommate who had very different values then he did. The drunkenness or

the sexual immorality, it was just this rampant thing going on and he looking around doing whoa! But he stuck with it, he know who he was and he know what his convictions were. He found the community he needed to support him and did just fine.

This idea of morality, and who is responsible to teach that to our children was a common issue addressed among families. The idea that there is a lacking in the public school system to effectively deal with this issue. The families wanted to ensure that their children didn't fall into the trappings they saw present in more traditional school environments.

The difficulty in finding adequate accommodations for their children with academic disabilities, was a concern of the Jones family. Also a concern was the decision by the school for their oldest son to miss some or all of the extracurricular subjects, where he felt successful, to allow for additional instruction in math and reading. Mrs. Jones expresses their frustrations saying, "We started because we got tired of fighting and tired of seeing our kid that is so smart thinking that he was so stupid and being frustrated all the time."

Mrs. Smith made the point, while discussing the perspectives of her extended family, that there are options when choosing to educate your children, and that it is truly a choice. She comments:

Though it is becoming incredibly popular, it is still not the expected norm.

So most people, including my parents, would say why not public school?

No one approaches it as a neutral issue; it is already decided. Why not

public school? So you have to justify what you are doing, versus what is the best education system and why public school?

For each family the concern for the emotional, physical and moral well-being of their children was a driving factor in their choice to homeschool and in their satisfaction with their choice. When presented with the alternative or the comparative “threshold”, the idea of “I can do better” was implied, if not expressly shared. Each family in the study found the concerns they had for what they felt was happening in the public and private/charter schools reinforced the satisfaction they had in what they were able to accomplish at home.

“It’s the number one question people ask about”: Support systems and socialization

Being a homeschooling family can be isolating and the families interviewed commented on the need of all, parents and students, for a support system. For some that support system came in the form of a co-op. A co-op, in the homeschooling community, is where families get together to offer classes or programs for each other’s students. Mrs. Nelson found co-ops gave her children an opportunity to experience more structure and accountability. She shares:

Coop gave them some of that (an understanding of the demands of school) because they had a teacher besides mom and they had more strict accountability to deadlines and things like that. It was an outsider they wanted to impress. They had a little bit more group environment in those kinds of settings (co-ops).

Mrs. Jones found that co-op allowed for her to find a better balance of the mother vs. teacher roles. She shares:

For him (oldest son) to have accountability to someone else (another parent/teacher at the co-op). I needed to hand off some of that (school work) and someone else can hold you accountable. I think it would be a good idea for you (her son) to know what a regular work load would be like.

Families also found support for their homeschooling children in opportunities such as 4-H, Civil Air Patrol, Boy Scouts, Sea Cadets and sports through the charter schools. In all of these groups, families are looking for ways for their children to be involved in activities that encouraged their children to be well rounded and experience things outside the home.

When discussing homeschooling, the issue of socialization is a hot topic of conversation. Mrs. Johnson remarked that it is, "the biggest question we (her family) get." Mrs. Smith states "it's the number one issue people ask about." Mrs. Smith pointed out that she finds that homeschooled students "are comfortable with all age ranges. [They] can sit down for lunch with an adult and don't feel squeamish and need to leave the table." Mrs. Johnson points out that "they know how to talk to adults and teenagers and kids their own age and kids younger than them. How is that not socialized?"

Mrs. Nelson, an owner of a bookstore specializing in the needs of homeschooling families, fields questions about the "big "S" word all of the time." She goes on to say:

It is really just such a myth. We really find that those students in the contrived environment (traditional K-12 settings) of all their peers are good at, maybe, maybe they're; good at socializing horizontally, homeschool kids are good at vertical socialization. They don't care if you are a grandma or grandpa, a preschooler. If you like something they like, we're into it, and we are friends. They look you in the eye when they talk. It is such a non-issue.

On the idea of socialization Mrs. Nelson relayed a story from a customer about their son and how he got on board with the idea of starting to homeschool. She shares:

Family that was back in yesterday, that have sons, they just started homeschooling a little over a year ago. And one of them was in middle school the other was in fifth grade. The fifth grader is really social and loves his friends, so he wasn't sure he wanted to come home. And they were going to let him choose. So um, so he went and he is this super thinker kid, so he went to school and he logged. For two weeks, he logged how much he was able to socialize in the school day. He logged it. Then he came home after that and said, "Dad I get to socialize, it was like 18 minutes a day, 12 minutes a day. If I had my best friend over for three hours on Thursday afternoon I would have more socialization than I would get at school. I'm in. It was pretty funny that he actually crunched the numbers in that sense.

All of the families in this study know that the issue of socialization was, and is, a concern for many outsiders about homeschooling. Although, each family found this concern of others to be baseless. They make a point of finding activities that their children enjoyed and were able to interact with people of all ages, not just those in an age segregated classroom. The path for each family was different, as the needs of each family and their children were different. However, the outcome was the same, happy, well-adjusted young people able and willing to socialize with everyone regardless of age or interests.

“Hello, 2 years of college for free”: The benefits of Post-Secondary

Enrollment Option

Post-Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) is available for all students in the state of Minnesota once they reach the age of 16, regardless of enrollment choice. Every family that participated in the study mentioned that their child took advantage of the PSEO option, were currently enrolled or planned to enroll once they became of age. As Mrs. Johnson states, when asked if her children would enroll in PSEO when they became of age, “Hello, 2 years of college for free.”

Mrs. Erickson pointed out that PSEO could be very demanding. She shares, “If you got signed up for Western Civilization at Northwestern you are going to work or be pinned in front of that video machine for quite a while.” The demands of college coursework can be intense for any student and homeschool students are not exempt. Though Mrs. Erickson’s children felt prepared to meet the challenges it didn’t eliminate the intensity. All of her children took part in PSEO classes in 11th and 12th grades and as she shares, “They excelled at it.”

Mrs. Jones used her sons desire to take part in PESO to guide her curriculum choices in earlier grades. She shares, “When we decided that, ok he wanted to do PSEO, ok well then we needed to learn how to write an essay.”

Mrs. Nelson states that “all four of my kids took advantage of some college during high school because they were capable to do that.” Though she did lament that PSEO did not shorten any of her children’s time in college saying, “So now did any of them choose to go to college less years because they had credits when they went in? Of course not. They just triple majored because like, “Yay learning”.” Mrs. Nelson did credit PSEO in allowing her only son to not feel overwhelmed when he joined the ROTC program in college. She shares, “Because he came in with 55 college credits he took a lower academic load each semester so he wasn’t overloaded. So he could do all things well, instead of frying and dying.”

Mrs. Smith took the PSEO option even further and helped her children graduate from high school with degrees as well as diplomas. She discovered the CLEP test option, where students take exams, that when passed, gives students college credits. She states, “So I connected the dots. If we can do the first 2 years of college, if the subject matter is similar to high school, and I can pass out of it while in high school why am I not doing that?” She credits former Governor Tim Pawlenty for putting legislation into place that required state universities to give credit for passed CLEP test. Mrs. Smith spoke with her daughter, when she was in 7th grade, about why she wanted to go to college. They both wrote lists about

what they thought college was about and then compared. When comparing lists she states:

My list was what I thought college was going to be about. Meeting professors, all of the academic type things. Her list was, fill my fridge with avocados, make dinner for my friends, decorated my apartment. It was all lifestyle. What if you could have these very same experiences and it didn't cost you \$25,000.

She continues:

If you want avocados in your fridge, we can't have college debt. Here is what I will pay for, these CLEP test through high school. Run your race. I am not going to tell you, you can or can't. I am going to encourage you and I think you can. You don't have to look like your peers; run your race, whatever that looks like and they did.

Smith credits the CLEP test, along with PESO, as the reason her children achieved degrees debt free.

The future success of their children was the primary concern for every family in this study. For all, they found or hope to find, PSEO to be an asset to the education of their children. Some were able to attain advanced degrees while also taking advantage of the financial relief that PSEO offers. Other children went on to more traditional college experience after attaining their diploma, with some college credit in tow. As with other themes, though the path was different for all families, the relative opinion was the same; PSEO is a helpful option and one that families should explore.

All families in this study had a generally positive opinion of their experience homeschooling their children. The path for each family was as different as the children themselves. However, each family had a great deal of shared experiences and outlooks. All families were committed to doing what was best for their children and reflected often to ensure that their choices were still appropriate. For each family the relational benefits homeschooling had for the family was a contributor to their overall satisfaction with their choice. Every family felt validated in their decision to homeschool, especially considering the challenges they saw in other more traditional educational environments. A commitment to support and finding activities of interest for their children meant that each family found the concern of socialization to be a non-issue. Lastly, taking advantage of the PSEO option was important for all families to help encourage their children's growth and educational path.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of homeschooling families in Minnesota from the parents' perspective. In order to obtain data, I personally interview five different homeschooling parents from the state. I asked questions about their experience, their history, what brought them to decide to homeschool, and details regarding goals and materials/method selection.

Summary of findings

The data collected from the parent interviews provided five general themes. These themes included: families continual assessment of the choice to homeschool, preservation of the family structure, a dissatisfaction of other educational options, the importance of a support system and the issue of socialization, and the benefits of PSEO.

Conclusion

The research showed that each family in this study took the choice to homeschool seriously and were consistently evaluating and assessing their choice. Every family made the decision to homeschool their children given the information that they had available to them. They all understood that how they chose to educate their child was just that, a choice. One family even stated that the question should not be why homeschool, but should be why public school. . For each family homeschooling was never the only option. They all evaluated their choice throughout their child's education, some even sending their children

to a traditional setting for some amount of time. All came to the conclusion, at the end of it all, they hope, as all parents do, that the choices they are making will equip their children with the skills necessary to lead healthy and productive lives in the future.

Families in this study felt that they had a stronger family because of their choice to homeschool. The research showed that families felt their children were better connected, both while schooling and after when they went on to live their separate adult lives. They felt a sense of peace and less stressed when the outside demands of traditional educational choices were eliminated.

The research showed that families in this study found homeschooling to be the best educational decision for their children given their opinions on other educational options. Current, more traditional educational options, present many challenges to families. Bullying and exposure to adult problems and ideas can often be mitigated when children are not exposed to less controlled external environments. Families reported an ability to reach the changing needs of their students better when not confined by school systems and large classrooms of children.

The research looked at the area of socialization and community, as this is often a concern mentioned when looking at the subject of homeschooling. Well-rounded, whole children that had the opportunity to have childhoods, allowing them to play and experience life outside classroom walls were benefits seen by all families in this study. Socialization was not an issue, though typically a concern of those outside the homeschool community. Children are provided opportunities

to socialize with more than just age alike peers. They form relationships and have experiences with a range of ages.

The research showed that all families in this study took part, or plan to take part in the future, in the PSEO option given by the state of Minnesota. Some took courses online while others went on campuses. All experienced education led by someone other than their parents in a rigors and mature setting. Some students graduated from high school with two and/or four year degrees while others wanted to have the college experience. All students in the study had the same options as traditionally educated students, and were not limited because they were homeschooled.

The families in this study all paint a generally positive picture of their experiences homeschooling. Each family gave the impression that they were generally happy with their decision to homeschool school their children. Each family had their own experiences with an alternative to homeschooling and all returned or hope to return in the future.

Limitations

While a small sample size is not a limitation in qualitative research, it is important to consider the sample size in proportion to the larger community and demographics. I am sure there are families that have not had positive experiences homeschooling as was the case for all families in this study.

The focus of this research was on the parent's perspectives. Parents were able to speculate about the feelings of their children. However, additional and interesting research could be done to understand the perspectives of the students.

Would a homeschooling graduate plan to homeschool their own children? Were there times that they had wished they had attended a more traditional schooling environment? How was the transition from homeschooling to life beyond in college and/or careers?

The families that volunteered to participate in the study were all current or completed homeschooling successes, meaning that they felt positive about their experience, and thus their responses were biased in favor of homeschooling. Further analysis should be done to explore what might be the less positive experiences of families that have or currently homeschool.

Recommendations

This research could be of value for many. For young families looking into all of their options for choosing how to best educate their child, there are an incredible number of choices. When they are considering which elementary school to send their child, this study could help shed light on what homeschooling might look like for them.

This information could also be helpful to families that are currently enrolled in a more traditional school setting but are not fully satisfied. Maybe, like the Johnson family, they are feeling like public school is not fostering the love of learning they would like for their children. Maybe they are like the Jones' family they are tired of fighting with children who do not feel "smart" in school as their academic disability is not being affectively addressed.

Next steps in researching the homeschooling experience in Minnesota might be conducting longitudinal studies of families from the time they decide to

homeschool until their children reach 18 years old or graduation. This would increase the data each family contributes to the study and allows for greater knowledge of the overall experience for the researcher. This research could also include interviews with the students of the families, allowing the researcher to gain insight into their perspective at the various stages. It would be interesting to see if there are any themes that emerge in student perspectives over various age groups.

Further research could also be conducted by interviewing the children of homeschooling families after they graduate. Their perspective on life after homeschooling could offer valuable insight into the community and the experience. A question I am always curious about is whether or not graduated homeschooled students plan to homeschool their own children and why.

What about families that have chosen to stop homeschooling? Or those who have a desire to home school but have chosen to continue to send their children to more traditional school experiences? Why have they not decided to homeschool? Most of the research available looks at those currently or successfully homeschooling. Additional research could be done to look at those who would not consider their experience successful to better understand potential barriers or hurdles. The current research shows that most homeschooling families tend to be 2-parent, middle-class white families. Additional research could be done to look at why there are not as many families that fit other demographic groups.

The concerns of the families in this research regarding other more traditional options of education could be of interest to those very institutions. Families that choose to homeschool are all doing so as opposed to attending public schools. This information could be helpful for public schools to better understand the perspectives of families choosing alternatives. Are the issues of bullying being adequately addressed? Are schools adequately addressing the educational needs of all students and providing sufficient programs and curriculum for all students, those who are ready to move ahead and those who are not up to grade level? Several families in the study discussed the positive influence that having a broader age range in their children's circle of influence had for their social skills. The public school system is set up in almost exclusively age segregated structures. There may be value for public schools in exploring alternatives to this structure.

All families in this study were two parent households where one parent was the primary wage earner and the other was primarily responsible for homeschooling. All the families in this study were from suburban areas. Beyond this study, there are many households that rely on the income of both parents, families with a single parent, or families that live in urban areas. For these other populations the structure of homeschooling in this study would not be possible. Given the positive effects the families in this study have seen from homeschooling, future research could be done to look at ways other families from different populations can have similar successful outcomes for their children.

Only one family in this study shared a story of a student diagnosed with a disability. This family choose to homeschool because they felt the needs of their child were not being adequately met by the public school system in Minnesota. Further research could be done to look at how families with students who have a disability currently benefit, or could benefit in the future, from homeschooling due to lack or limited success in the school system.

Reflection

This research has been a labor of love and a constant source of self-reflection. Though there were other paths I could have taken to get my Masters, the prospect of doing a research project I could be proud of was a draw for me and the Augsburg program. I had a wonderful experience in all of my classes leading up to this final paper and when I reached that final class I was energized and excited to get going.

I started a project with an entirely different topic, before starting a family in a life that seems like a whole other lifetime ago. I was teaching in a public school where I felt very connected. I felt like teaching was a perfect fit for finding a balance with a family, when that time came. I started researching formative assessment in writing and looked at work I was doing with my students. I was passionate and driven. Then, in the spring of the school year, and at the data gathering portion of my research, I found out I was pregnant with my first child. My interest in my project faltered as I geared up for my next new adventure, motherhood.

After the birth of our first child, I went back to work after a relatively standard 12 week maternity leave. He went to day care and I went back to the classroom. Though I was a “career changer”, a term I was often referred to by my principal, I felt I belonged in the classroom. I loved my students, my role on the buildings leadership team and felt like I was doing work that had meaning to the world. I had always thought I wanted to stay home, but if I was working I felt I was at least doing a service for the greater good. However, the one thing I struggled to find a balance with was my master’s project on formative assessment.

Though gathering dust on a shelf, I kept telling myself I would find the time to get it finished.

Almost two years later, we had our second child. I planned to again take a 12 week maternity leave and then return to my classroom. Both children would start attending a daycare center, I told myself it would all be fine. At school, I had been responsible for groups of intervention students below grade level in both math and reading. This was a responsibility I took seriously and in which I took great pride in my students' success. I had proven to have impressive success helping students I worked with get closer to or on grade level. In addition, my homeroom class was large and the needs of the students in this group, as well as my math and reading groups, required the support of paras and team teaching. About a month into my maternity leave, there was a change in staffing. I was going to return with a significant staffing deficiency but the same load of students with the same need. I would have the same expectations for myself and expect to see my students have equal or better success as I had seen with similar groups in the past. My students deserved the best. I came to realize that at the end of the day it would be my own children that would suffer. The hours required for planning and meetings alone would mean that our two little babies would be at daycare from bell to bell. After much deliberation I came to realize that, when forced to prioritize children, my own would win every time. It was time to step down from the teaching responsibilities I loved and focus on my family. This was not a decision I made easily and will always wish I could somehow do both things well.

About six months after deciding to stay home, I was talking with some, now former coworkers, and I was confronted with the prospect that returning to work after several years at home might not be easy. I learned from their experience that it can be a challenge for mothers choosing to reenter the workforce to find positions. Around this same time we began looking for preschool options for our oldest. In thinking about our plan I asked my husband what he thought the future might look like when our children were school aged. What would I do with my time and for a job when both children were in school full time? Would I go back to teaching or explore something else? We both liked my lower stress levels and my ability to make the family my priority that was afforded by my not teaching full-time. My husband found my staying home allowed him to find a better balance of the demands of family and owning his own business. Without hesitation he said he had been thinking that homeschooling the kids, for at least elementary if not through high school, would fit our goals for the family. We were struggling to find a preschool that had rigorous academic expectations while keeping the focus on playing and building relationships. Choosing a full day, every day elementary option might be even more difficult.

We had always considered ourselves public school supporters. We were products of a public schools. We had family members who had committed their lives to public schools. I was a teacher! The idea of not sending our own children to public school was a shock to my system to say the least. My initial reaction was, "No way!" You send your kids to school, public or private, it is what you,

EVERYONE, did. However, after some reflection, I started to wonder why not homeschooling. Why was I so opposed to the idea of homeschool when I knew nothing about it? While teaching, I had only worked with two students, siblings, who had been homeschooled and they were amazing. I didn't actually know anyone who homeschooled or was homeschooled. Was I planning to send our children to public school because I truly believed it was the best option or because it was just what one did? Did I even recognize that I had options?

One day, at the bookstore, I stumbled across a book about a family that homeschooled their six children. This was entirely accidental, I had not been seeking out a book on homeschooling, and I was just looking for something to read during nap times. This memoir, *The Brainy Bunch*, is not an instructional guide about how to homeschool but one family sharing their experience, mostly the positives, about homeschooling their children. It shared the successes their oldest children had as a result of the choices they were able to make because of homeschooling; and the hopes for their younger children still actively engaged in their K-12 education. I was immediately struck by the connection their family appeared to have, the childhood and innocence they were able to maintain, and the success and accomplishments of their children.

One of my greatest frustrations as a public school teacher was feeling like all of the things I loved about school as a child myself, I didn't have time for as a teacher. Weeks were lost each year to testing. Months were lost to testing preparations. I felt students were burdened with less and less time to play and more and more time seated at their desk. I struggled to find appropriate materials

for students performing well above grade level while also finding material of interest for those falling behind the ever increasing demands. I didn't necessarily want that life for my own children. Was there another option? Was homeschooling an option?

After joining a few groups on social media to lurk at the questions and information shared to homeschooling families, I was struck by how much they all seemed to enjoy the path they had chosen. Then on that fateful day in January I received the email stating that I had one year left to finish my thesis paper or I would be out of time. I needed to face the music. That research project on using formative assessment in writing I had started years ago while teaching, and before kids, was still there and waiting to be finished. But, as stated before, the topic and the research I had started seemed so distant and unimportant, not practical to the life I now had. Could I commit myself, and my family's time, to hours of work in libraries for something I was no longer passionate about? I was confronted with the idea of changing my topic. I was struck by what a happy accident this might be. If homeschooling was something that I was considering why not talk with families that had done it or were currently doing it to see what their experiences were like so I could inform our decision.

When I finished each interview, I would inevitably call my husband on the drive home. I would be abuzz with thoughts and idea. Energized by what they shared and the success of their experience. For a short while I would be sold; this was our plan, homeschooling was what we were going to do. However; the reality of what I have always thought would seep in little by little. The

excitement and certainty I felt would waiver. I would go into the next interview feeling fairly neutral on the subject, wondering if this would be the time my opinion was sealed in one direction or another, and the cycle would continue.

After the research is all finished and typed, I still find myself a little on the fence. Maybe it is only my fingertips hanging on to what I had held dear for so long, school, traditional school. I loved school, but at this time, in this environment, is it what is best for my kids? This coming fall my son will be starting a part-time pre-K program, so I still have a year to decide about kindergarten. When people ask what our plans are I say, "Right now we are leaning toward homeschooling for at least kindergarten and we will see how it goes." I want to be flexible and do what is best for each of my children given their very different personalities. Currently pregnant with my third child, the prospect of homeschooling all three seems a little overwhelming at times. Can I really do well by all of them and help them achieve the life they deserve? Then I think, if I felt like I could do a great job in a room of 35 children belonging to other people, I can definitely do it with three of the most important human beings in my life!

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