

THE EXPERIENCES OF NEW HOME EDUCATORS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of new home educators. Two main research questions guided the study: 1) How do new home educators describe their homeschooling experience? 2) What do new home educators value about homeschooling? To investigate these questions a phenomenological approach was used to examine the shared experiences of 10 educators who had homeschooled for less than three years. The data from the participants revealed three major themes: (a) Anyone can, and should, homeschool b) The time spent with their children was valued, and (c) The flexibility and adaptability that homeschooling afforded was prized.

Keywords: homeschooling, home education, new home educators

Background

Homeschooling is no new phenomenon – since ancient times home education has been employed, but as the years progressed the popularity and prevalence of homeschooling began to wane. However, in the 1970s homeschooling saw a resurgence and the modern homeschool movement began (Kleist-Tesch, 1998). This motivation to homeschool, while highly personal (Raja, 2010), was due in part to dissatisfaction with traditional school, academic and pedagogical concerns, religious values, and a desire for a stronger family life. The National Home Education Research Institute (2015) now estimates that the homeschool population in the United States is growing at a rate of 2% to 8% per annum, and that the U.S. homeschool population comes in at

close to 2 million. Similarly, in Canada the average annual growth for homeschool enrollment is 5% (Van Pelt, 2015). Indeed, Waddell (2010) notes that an “increasingly large proportion of the population” is choosing to homeschool (p. 541). As the homeschool population grows, so has the research surrounding homeschooling. However, while areas like the motivation to homeschool (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Patterson, Gibson, Koenigs, Maurer, Ritterhouse, Stockton & Taylor, 2007), and the academic outcomes of homeschooled students (Cogan, 2010; Barwegen, Falciani, Putnam, Reamer, & Stair, 2004; Duvall, Delquardi & Ward, 2004) have been well researched, there are still gaps in the research on how homeschooling families feel, what they struggle with, what their strategies are, and what their lifestyle is like (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Raja, 2012). Indeed, Raja (2012) notes that there are a variety of questions about homeschooling that still need to be answered. For example, “How do the children feel? How do the parent’s feel? Is this a life opener or an irresponsible stifling practice? What really happens during homeschool?” (Raja, 2012, p.18). Additionally, while it is clear that there is a gap in the research literature surrounding many of the experiences of home educators, the research literature particularly demonstrates a gap in the experiences of *new* home educators. In fact, while there is a plethora of research surrounding new educators in traditional settings (Almonacid-Fierro, Merellano-Navarro, & Moreno-Doña, 2014; Pogodzinski, 2014; Schatz-Oppenheimer & Dvir, 2014) the experiences of new home educators are largely overlooked. Because of that gap, the purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of new home educators.

Research Questions

The following questions framed this study:

Question 1: How do new home educators describe their homeschooling experience?

Question 2: What do new home educators value about homeschooling?

Delimitations

An examination of the literature shows that the term new or novice educator is defined by length of teaching experience, with definitions for the term ‘new educator’ ranging from less than two years (Gatbonton, 2008) to less than five years (Kim & Roth, 2011). For the purpose of this study, a new home educator is defined as a home educator with three or less years of experience. As a result, home educators who had more than three years of homeschooling experience were excluded from this study so attention could be focused on the experiences and values of new home educators.

Literature Review

Who Homeschools?

Homeschool families today tend to perceive the family as superior to other social institutions (Angelis, 2008), are confident in their ability to lead their children’s education (Cooper & Sureau, 2007), and are generally well-informed and well-rounded individuals (Saghir, 2011). Rud (2013) notes that home educators also tend to not see a distinction between home and school, viewing homeschooling as part of parenting and family life. Demographically, most home educators are White, middle class, Christian, and conservative (Masters, 1996); however, as more families choose to homeschool that composition has become more diverse (Welner, 2002) and heterogeneous (Collom, 2005; Collom & Mitchell, 2005). Indeed, Romanowski (2006) notes that homeschooling represents “a demographic diversity that includes virtually all races, religions, socioeconomic groups and political viewpoints” (p.82).

Why Homeschool?

While the decision to homeschool is highly personal (Raja, 2010), research indicates that parents make the decision to homeschool in large part because they believe they are responsible for the education of their children, have the ability to accomplish that education, and can do the best job of providing that education (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011; Kunzman, 2009; Patterson, Gibson, Koenigs, Maurer, Ritterhouse, Stockton, & Taylor, 2007). As such, some researchers note that the decision to homeschool is more than an educational choice; rather, is it a lifestyle choice (Hurlbutt, 2010; Raja, 2012; Ray, 2013). Vigilant, Trefethren, and Anderson (2013) concur, noting that home educators often choose to homeschool because they want the family to be the premier socialization agent. To sum up the research, Collom and Mitchell (2005) state, “Overall then, there is a general consensus among researchers that the decision to home school is motivated by four broad categories of concern: (a) religious values, (b) dissatisfaction with the public schools, (c) academic and pedagogical concerns, and (d) family life” (p.277).

How is Homeschooling Accomplished?

Since homeschooling is privately provided and privately regulated, the ins and outs of homeschooling vary significantly from family to family (Belfield & Levin, 2005). Indeed, Aasen (2010) notes that “the “how” of homeschooling is just as diverse as the “who”” (p.12). In regards to methodologies, home educator methodologies come in across the spectrum, with home educators on one end ascribing to a more traditional approach that mimics standard classroom instruction and home educators on the other end following an unschooling methodology that emphasizes learning through life experiences. Interestingly, regardless of where home educators start on the spectrum, over time most homeschool families gravitate towards the center, “ending

up with an eclectic mix of what best suits their family situation, children's learning styles, and their own abilities” (Aasen, 2010, p.12). Indeed, this highly customizable nature of homeschooling (Reich, 2002) makes the ‘how’ of homeschooling vary considerably from year to year (Aasen, 2010). However, while the methods used to accomplish homeschooling tend to vary significantly from year to year, home educators do tend to utilize everyday experiences (Avner, 1989; Kleist-Tesch, 1998), emphasize reading (Yambo, 2002), and integrate the Internet into their teaching methodology (Davis, 2011; Kleist-Tesch, 1998).

Methodology

To best examine the experiences of new home educators, a phenomenological design was employed. Phenomenology was appropriate, as phenomenology focuses on the shared, lived experiences of individuals; in this case, the shared, lived experiences of new home educators (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, since the goal of this study was to simply describe the experiences of new home educators, a phenomenological design seemed like the best fit (Creswell, 2009).

Participants

Purposive snowball sampling was used to recruit the ten participants for this study. Hancock and Gile (2011) note that snowball sampling allows for otherwise unreachable participants to be identified, and because home educators are known to be a difficult group to reach (Stevens, 2001), snowball sampling was an appropriate sampling method for this study. The number of participants, ten, was also in keeping with solid phenomenological research practices (Creswell, 2007). Prior to data collection all participants gave their informed consent. Additionally, to help with participant anonymity pseudonyms were assigned.

In this study, all of the ten participants were female educators from two parent families. Additionally, all of the participants were the primary educators for their children and predominately employed a direct instruction style of teaching with their children. Several of the participants with older children did note that they utilized online learning programs, but only as supplementary or subordinate learning material. Furthermore, all ten participants had at least some college education, with four of the participants completing college coursework, one obtaining an associate's degree, three earning a bachelor's degree, and two attaining a master's degree. The professional backgrounds of the participants also shared some similarities: of the ten participants, four of the participants had previously taught in either a public or private school, and one currently teaches online classes at a university. Of these five participants, however, only two of the participants had teaching certification. The remaining four participants either had, or currently have, a variety of jobs, such as a home daycare provider and office support. Table 1 outlines additional pertinent participant demographics.

Surveys

The first of the three data collection measures used in this study was an online descriptive survey. While surveys are typically associated with quantitative research, research literature shows that surveys can be used for data triangulation in qualitative studies (Glik, Parker, Muligande, & Hategikamana, 2005; Mitchell, Smith, & Weale, 2013). The primary goal of the survey questions was to gain demographic information and provide a broad overview of the experiences of new home educators. The survey questions are outlined in Table 2.

Interviews

The second data collection method used for this study was interviewing. All ten participants were interviewed in-depth, using the open-ended questions outlined in Table 3.

Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed, with the interview length varying from approximately 11 to 25 minutes.

Focus Group

To help expound on some of the thoughts brought up in the interview stage, an online focus group discussion board was created. Of the ten participants, four participants were asked to participate in the focus group discussion board. All four of the participants agreed, making additional requests to other participants unnecessary. The four focus group participants were selected by the researcher primarily because the participants knew each other. The four participants, as well as the researcher, interacted with the four focus group questions noted in Table 4.

Themes

Three themes were identified by the researcher through the use of coding. Coding was used to “describe faithfully important details of the phenomenon and to organize the data to identify underlying patterns” (Brent & Slusarz, 2003, p.284). To identify the underlying patterns in the data the data was first descriptively hand coded by the researcher. This involved coding each statement from the data transcripts and then highlighting the statements that were significant to the phenomenon. After being descriptively coded a large number of codes existed. These codes were then condensed and reorganized through pattern coding. This was accomplished by grouping the common significant statements together. Utilizing pattern coding allowed for a more manageable set of codes to be used and provided a more parsimonious analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). From the pattern coding three major themes surfaced, and are detailed below.

Research Question One

Research question one was used to ascertain information about how home educators describe their homeschooling experience. One prominent theme was revealed: anyone can, and should, homeschool. Of the ten participants, nine participants noted that any parent wanting to homeschool could, and should, homeschool.

Anyone can, and should, homeschool.

In all of the data collection methods (survey, interview, and focus group) participants noted that homeschooling was not something to be afraid of; rather, they felt that anyone with a desire to homeschool could homeschool successfully. Participants also noted their satisfaction with homeschooling, and believed that parents should homeschool if possible. For instance, Janice stated, “I just think there are so many people who are like, “Oh, I could never teach my kid” but there are so many resources out there, there is so much support, like there wasn’t before, but there is so much now, that anybody can do it.” Similarly, Ginny shared, “And I think parents who feel like they can’t do it – you are missing it, you definitely can. You are the one that taught them how to use a spoon, how to talk, how to walk – who better to teach them all these fundamentals than you?” In a similar vein, Sharon related that while she initially had trepidations about homeschooling it was much easier in reality: “I would say that it is probably so much easier than people think. I was majorly stressed out about how hard it would be and it seemed normal, like I am supposed to be doing this. So I think probably if you are wanting to do it, just go for it and you will see how easy it is and how fulfilling it is.” Agreeing with Sharon’s perspective, Tina simply said, “It’s easier than people think it is. I think if your kids are your priority it becomes remarkably easy.” Similarly, Bethany voiced her frustration with the contention that homeschooling can only be done by a select few: “I can’t stand the people who

say “I could never do that” – yes, you could, you just don’t want to. Anybody could do it – it doesn’t cost a lot of money, it’s really your time and your effort.” On the other end of the spectrum, Amanda relayed, “I’ve actually had several friends since I have started my homeschooling adventure tell me that they wanted to start homeschooling, but they were too... they didn’t think that they were capable, they didn’t think that they were educated enough. I told them, “If I can do it, you can do it.”” And finally, when asked what advice she would give to others looking to homeschool, Emilia replied, “Just do it. Don’t get too worried about it – just do it! It’s not that hard, you passed kindergarten, I promise you can do it.”

Research Question 2

Research question 2 was used to determine what new home educators value about homeschooling. From this question two major participant themes arose: 1) Time with their children was highly valued, and 2) The flexibility and adaptability of homeschooling was highly prized. Both themes were of equal rank, with the same number of participants (8) identifying with both themes.

Family time.

Data from both the interviews and focus group revealed that home educator participants in this study valued how homeschooling provided them with the opportunity to spend time with their children. For example, Rachelle stated, “So I think that is the biggest thing, is just being able to be with my kids every day. You know, be around them every day – I don’t have to take them to school, or me be at work and them be at school.” Similarly, when asked what the biggest joy in her homeschool experience with her son had been thus far, Tina replied, “Realizing what I don’t have to miss out on...He is my one and only and I get to just focus everything on him and never miss those moments.” Additionally, in response to the same question, Janice answered, “I

would just say the time with the kids” while Sharon replied, “I have loved watching all of us become a closer family unit because we are able to spend more time together.” Likewise, Bethany relayed that her greatest joy was “Being able to spend the one-on-one time with my children and not sending them away and being able to keep them with me.” Lastly, Emilia succinctly stated, “I like my kid and want to be with her more.”

Flexibility and adaptability.

In addition to valuing homeschooling because of the opportunity it afforded them to spend time with their children, participants also noted that they valued the flexibility and adaptability that homeschooling provided. For instance, Tina shared, “I love that I get to meet my kid exactly where he is at and individualize and tailor everything. He just finished 2nd grade and he is reading on an 8th grade level. In math we are right where we are supposed to be, but in the reading I can do it at middle school level. You just can’t match that in a traditional setting.” Tina also noted, “But we are extraordinarily flexible and that is probably one of the things we value most about homeschooling. [We like] to make the curriculum and books work into our life, rather than our life being about the schoolwork.” Similarly, Sharon related, “There is freedom and customization in homeschooling that we have really learned to take advantage of... We have adapted to each child's learning abilities. We are now including things that I never thought could be part of school.” In the same vein, when speaking about homeschool curriculum and the flexibility it afforded, Bethany related, “We do the same curriculum but we go at different speeds” while Amanda noted, “Our curriculum changes every year.” Likewise, Sharon shared, “I think maybe that finding a curriculum that works for you and for your child’s learning capabilities is really important.” Similarly, Jennifer noted, “I learned something last year [and that] is to be realistic and realize that each child is different. So just because her friend from

church has learned to read at a third grade level doesn't mean your first grader is going to learn to read at a third grade level." Likewise, in the focus group discussion Jennifer continued, "I feel that home schooling allows her to learn and grow in her natural style." In the same way, Sasha talked of the importance of "honing your teaching for that child's learning style" while Sharon shared in the focus group discussion that "Freedom for my children to learn in a way that was personal to them" was something she valued.

Discussion

The findings in this study proved to be helpful for both home educators and researchers. First, this study gave new home educators a voice. New home educators in this study were able to describe what their homeschool experience was like and identify what they valued about their homeschool experience. Giving these home educators a voice was helpful because it provided the home educators with a better self-awareness of their homeschooling experience. Secondly, the data from this study bolstered existing homeschool research and illuminated gaps in the literature, particularly in regards to research on new home educators. For example, while the participants in this study did not cite that their motivation to homeschool was because of a desire to strengthen family bonds, they did note that having a closer family unit was a valued byproduct of homeschooling. Indeed, time and time again, participants noted how much they valued spending time with their children and building a closer family unit. This emphasis on family relationships comports with and adds to the existing research— Mazama and Lundy (2013) note that the second most cited motivation to homeschool in the African American homeschooling community is the desire to strengthen family bonds.

In addition to reinforcing the research surrounding home educators and their desire for quality family time, this study also strengthened research indicating that homeschooling is

valued for its flexibility and adaptability. In fact, comments from participants stressed how much they valued the flexibility and adaptability that homeschooling afforded, with one participant noting, “We are extraordinarily flexible and that is probably one of the things we value most about homeschooling.” In the same vein, Raja (2012) contends that homeschooling strategies can be easily varied in order to find what methodologies and strategies work best, while Kunzman (2009) notes that “Homeschooling offers enormous flexibility in scheduling, curriculum, and teaching methods” (p. 53). Aasen (2010) concurs, noting in her research that there is a tremendous amount of freedom and customization available in homeschooling.

Lastly, in addition to bolstering the existing homeschool research this study also adds new insight into the experiences of new home educators – a group that has had little research done on it. Specifically, the data from this study revealed that new home educators were not overwhelmed with homeschooling. In fact, all of the new home educators in this study had a positive experience with homeschooling and were of the belief that anyone could homeschool. This experience and belief is in contrast to research surrounding traditional new educators – new educators in traditional schools often voice that they feel overwhelmed and frustrated (Gavish & Friedman, 2010; Tait, 2008).

However, while this study yielded valuable insights into the experiences of new home educators, several study limitations potentially exist and are worth noting here. First, this type of qualitative study has inherent limitations in that it is impossible to generalize the findings to a larger population. As such, the empirical significance of the findings is limited. Next, since this study employed snowball sampling selection bias could also be present (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). Additionally, while homeschool educators are usually female (Mayberry, Knowles, Ray, & Marlow, 1995), the gender homogeneity of the study may limit the study’s generalizability.

Similarly, since all of the participants did not homeschool the same number of children, it is not clear how or if the number of children homeschooled impacts the experiences of new home educators. Furthermore, since half of the participants had some type of teaching background, it is unclear to what extent this affected the experiences of the participants. Lastly, while it was not obvious that it was occurring, gatekeeper bias from the home educator referrers could have been present, thus introducing the possibility of participant exclusion (Groger, Mayberry, & Straker, 1999). Because of these limitations, additional research should be done in this area, particularly with a larger, and more diverse demographic set. Additionally, further studies may want to examine how the experiences of new home educators compare with the experiences of experienced home educators, as the current literature does not clearly address this question. Until then, the findings from this study serve to reinforce the existing research and shed new light on the experiences of new home educators.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Ages of Homeschooled Children	Years of Experience
Tina	Female	7	3
Bethany	Female	5, 7	3
Sharon	Female	6, 4	2
Amber	Female	12, 10	2
Jen	Female	7	2
Janice	Female	6, 4	2
Emilia	Female	5	1
Sasha	Female	5	1
Ginny	Female	3	1
Rachelle	Female	10, 8, 5, 5	1

Table 2

Survey Questions

Survey Questions

The Experiences of New Home Educators

1. How long have you been homeschooling?
 2. What are the ages of the children you homeschool?
 3. What led you to homeschool?
 4. Has your initial experience with homeschooling been positive, negative, or neutral?
 5. Has homeschooling been easier, harder, or about what you expected in terms of difficulty?
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Table 3

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

Questions

The Experiences of New Home Educators

1. Is there anything you wished you would have known before you began your homeschool experience?
 2. Did you feel you were adequately prepared to begin homeschooling? Why or why not?
 3. What has been the biggest joy in your homeschool experience?
 4. What has been the biggest obstacle in your homeschool experience?
 5. What has been surprising in your homeschool experience?
 6. Please describe a typical day of homeschooling.
 7. What advice would you give to others looking to homeschool?
 8. Is there anything you would like to tell me about your homeschool experience that I have not addressed?
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Table 4

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

Questions

The Experiences of New Home Educators

1. What kind of support, if any, have you received as a new or novice home educator?
2. What, in your opinion, are some of the biggest challenges facing new homeschoolers today?
3. How, even in the short time you have been homeschooling, have you grown or adapted?
4. How would you describe your homeschooling style?

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