

The gift of homeschooling: Adult homeschool graduates and their parents conceptualize homeschooling in North Carolina

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Abstract: Although still a marginalized practice, homeschooling is on the rise internationally and across socio-economic groups. Moreover, the current Covid-19 pandemic has shifted additional attention to homeschooling. However, much of the available research is primarily concerned with the current day-to-day practice of homeschooling and little attention is paid to adult homeschool graduates. This exploratory study, based on qualitative interviews with mothers and adult children from 12 families, examines young adults' overall evaluation of their past homeschooling experience and aims to understand how parents and children view the pros and cons of homeschooling in hindsight. The data analysis revealed that homeschoolers approach education more broadly than focusing strictly on the academic side and it identified the common theme of "gifting," which challenges the prevailing conceptualization that homeschooling is a "sacrifice." Respondents viewed their homeschooling experience as a mutually beneficial process of giving and receiving rather than a unidirectional act of "sacrifice."

Keywords: homeschooling; home education; sacrifice; gift; North Carolina

Introduction

Although the practice as well as regulation of homeschooling varies markedly across countries, homeschooling has been on the rise internationally.

In the United Kingdom, for instance, the number of homeschooled children grew 65% between 2010 and 2015, reaching almost 37,000 pupils, or about 2.6% of the school population (Jeffreys, 2015). In the United States, the numbers more than doubled between 1999 and 2012, rising from about 850,000 to over 2 million students, or 3.4% of the school population (Ray, 2018; 2020; Redford, Battle, & Bielick, 2017). Steep growth is evident even in countries where homeschooling is a rather recent development. As McDowell & Ray state, “the home education movement is a growing one. Its numbers are growing, its acceptance is growing and its power to affect the political environment is growing” (2000, p. 1). Yet, even in contexts where homeschooling has long been considered a legal educational choice, parents must battle the social prejudices against home education and make efforts to justify their educational decisions (Beláňová, Machovcová & Kostecká, 2018; Lines, 2000; Romanowski, 2006). As Morton notes, “perceptions about home education families range from “social ‘misfits’: either ‘tree-hugging hippies’, religious fanatics [to] ‘hothousing’ parents determined that their offspring should achieve academic excellence at an early age” (2012, p. 46). Here it is relevant to note that the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that for many staying at home with one’s children became the reality, and not always a welcome one. In April 2020, almost 1.5 billion children stayed home, which represents about 84% of pupils worldwide (UNESCO, 2021).

Covid-19 and Homeschooling

The unexpected Covid-19 pandemic triggered unparalleled changes in the educational landscape worldwide. It brought major challenges (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021, Parczewska, 2020) but perhaps also drew attention to new forms of communication and new learning tools (Bubb & Jones, 2020). The situation, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, has one important similarity with traditional homeschooling: children were not attending school and perhaps spending more time with their parents. However, as Scirri (2021) argues, this is where the similarities between the two end. The recent school closures cannot be compared with traditional homeschooling mainly because parents: 1) have no choice over who the teacher is, 2) cannot choose their own curriculum or a specific instructional format, 3) have no choice over the schedule and duration of the school day. And perhaps most importantly, staying at home and assisting children with their schooling during the pandemic was often not the parents’ choice. It will be interesting to see whether this involuntary experience, or their experiences of public schools’ online instruction, will motivate other families to homeschool their children after the pandemic.

Critiques of Homeschooling

The two most-commonly cited arguments against homeschooling are inadequate socialization and poor academic achievement (Aasen, 2010; Ray, 2020; Romanowski, 2006). Opponents of homeschooling claim that by not experiencing public school contexts, homeschooled children are sheltered from the larger society and thus fail to acquire the necessary social skills needed to form meaningful peer relationships. In addition, they believe that parents are not fit to educate their children because they lack proper pedagogical training and sufficient knowledge of the subject matter. This argument is used especially in discussions about homeschooling beyond elementary grades. However, most research studies show that these arguments are unfounded (Aasen, 2010; Lips & Feinberg, 2009; Romanowski, 2006).

First, homeschooling is not done in the isolation of one's home and does not produce socially handicapped adults lacking social skills. Typically, homeschooled students are involved in numerous activities outside the home, such as drama, scouting, sports, dance, church activities, and volunteer work, averaging about 5.2 activities outside the home per child (Romanowski, 2006). Consequently, homeschooled students learn to interact with people across different age groups and are exposed to a varied environment (Ray, 2004). In fact, Medlin (2013, p. 293) argues that "some indicators (...) suggest that the kind of socialization experiences homeschooled children receive may be more advantageous than those of children who attend conventional schools."

Second, some studies have found that homeschooled students not only often perform better on standardized tests than traditionally schooled children do (Rudner, 1999; Snyder, 2013), but are also well prepared for college both academically and socially (Drenovsky & Cohen, 2012; Jones & Gloeckner, 2004). In one of the largest surveys ever, Rudner (1999) tested over 20,000 K-12 homeschooled students and found not only that their test scores were exceptionally high but also that about 25% of the homeschooled students were enrolled one or more grades above their grade level. In addition, homeschooled students show higher enrolments and academic success in college. In a survey of 7,300 young adults, Ray (2004) found that 74% of homeschooled respondents had taken college classes compared to only 46% of the general population. To assess the social integration and experience of homeschoolers, Drenovsky & Cohen (2012) carried out an online survey of 185 students from a number of colleges and universities and found that formerly homeschooled students not only showed higher academic achieve-

ment but also viewed their college experience more positively than the general population. In fact, homeschooled student generally found their classes “to be easier than their high school course work” (Mulvihill, 2007, p. 650). However, some researchers argue that the findings of some of the above studies may be politically motivated, in a desire to advocate for homeschooling, and should be approached with caution. Gaither (2017) warns that these large-scale studies may have methodological limitations. While there is general agreement that homeschooling provides children with rich social interactions and contributes to academic achievement, some studies point out that these findings may be skewed because homeschooling samples are usually self-selected and thus may not be representative of the homeschooling population as a whole (Arora, 2003; Lois, 2013).

Homeschooling as Sacrifice

Homeschooling is often viewed as an act of altruism; as a sacrifice where the mothers’ interests must be placed “aside” and where the children’s interests come “first” (Isenberg, 2006; Lois, 2013). For example, Aasen (2010, p. 13) writes that, “Homeschooling is a deliberate choice requiring sacrifice of time and effort, so the very fact that they are homeschooled may make a certain value statement to children.” Similarly, Lois (2013, 2017) likens homeschooling to an intense emotional, temporal, and physical “burden” for the mothers; arguing that homeschooling mothers sacrifice their time and energy for the children with little or nothing in return. She later elaborates (Lois, 2017) on the gendered nature of homeschooling and the mother’s role as “family facilitator,” which is by definition a support role in which the mother provides for others by sacrificing her own time, goals and dreams. Similarly, Machovcová et al. (2021) argue that mothers cite meeting children’s needs as one of the major justifications for homeschooling. As such, it is a rather unidirectional act, in which the mother provides, based on her own decision but often at the expense of her own goals or aspirations, and the child receives.

Adult Homeschool Graduates

The research on adult homeschool graduates is rather sparse. The available data show that homeschooled students perform well on standardized tests and in college (Jones & Gloeckner, 2004; Lines, 2000; Rudner, 1999; Snyder, 2013), but comparatively little is known about homeschool graduates’ other skills, their overall experience as adults, and their evaluation of homeschooling practice. One exception is a large study by Ray (2004), in

which formerly homeschooled college students more frequently reported being “happy” with their than the general population and they were also more likely to be involved in civic affairs. For instance, 71% of the homeschool graduates participated in some form of community service activity compared to 37% of U.S. adults. Similarly, 88% of the homeschoolers reported being a member of a community group, church or synagogue, union, or a professional organization compared to only 50% of the general population. Finally, 95% of homeschoolers voted in public elections, whereas only 53% of the general population did so. This higher level of involvement in community and civic activities is an additional positive outcome of homeschooling, one that is not necessarily reflected in test scores or college acceptance rates.

Ray (2004) also found that 95% of the surveyed homeschool graduates were glad that they had been homeschooled and 82% said they would homeschool their own children. However, additional research on adult homeschool graduates could provide us with a more comprehensive picture of their homeschooling experience. To fill the gap, this qualitative study explored how adult homeschool graduates and their parents conceptualize their past homeschooling experience. The study focused on families living in North Carolina, a U.S. state with a relatively large population of homeschoolers.

Homeschooling in North Carolina

Homeschooling became legal in North Carolina in 1988. The legislation was passed as a result of the diligent work of an organization called *North Carolinians for Home Education* (NCHE). Since its foundation in 1984, NCHE has been providing support and resources for homeschooling families in North Carolina. It organizes an annual conference, gathers statistics on homeschooling in the state, and provides information about legislation, testing, and curriculum requirements, including a manual on how to homeschool high schoolers. In addition, it provides links to state-wide and community homeschooling groups, sports events, and field trip options (Homeschool Statistics, n.d.), and thus serves as a comprehensive resource for homeschooling families in the state. In addition, in North Carolina there are countless print and online instructional products, tutoring services, homeschool groups, opportunities to participate in public school activities, programs organized by public libraries and museums specifically for homeschoolers, online homeschooling forums and much more (Lips & Feinberg, 2009). Homeschooling families in the state can find support via a large number of homeschooling groups: NCHE lists 288 local groups plus 23 state-

wide groups and these listings may not be exhaustive. These options provide endless social and academic opportunities for homeschoolers.

Homeschooling laws in the United States differ by state and North Carolina ranks among the most homeschooling-friendly states in the country (Gaither 2017, Homeschool Statistics, n.d.). The legislative impact on the popularity of homeschooling has been clearly documented (Kostelecká, 2017; Rachana, 2014) and it is likely that the legislation is one of the reasons why the numbers of homeschoolers in North Carolina have skyrocketed over the past 15 years. In 2017, the North Carolina Department of Education estimated that there were about 130,000 homeschooled children, which is more than the total number of private school students in the state. The unofficial estimates are even higher, indicating that over 200,000 students were homeschooled in 2017 (Homeschool Statistics, n.d.). Simply based on the official estimates, North Carolina appears to have the third largest total population of homeschoolers in the U.S., ranking just after California and Texas. In terms of percentages, North Carolina ranks first in the nation, with 4.81% of its children being homeschooled (*Number of Homeschoolers*, 2017). Over the past ten years, many local newspapers in North Carolina have published stories about homeschooling, highlighting the unprecedented growth in the number of homeschoolers (Blair, 2015; Carroll, 2016; Clark, 2014; Miller, 2005; Smith, 2006). Yet, the academic research on homeschooling in North Carolina is largely non-existent. This study aims to provide an insight into the experiences of homeschool graduates in North Carolina, a state that is generally friendly towards homeschooling.

The likely main reasons for the popularity of homeschooling in North Carolina include availability of resources and the friendly legislation (Gaither 2017). Additional reasons for the rising numbers of homeschoolers may be poor quality public schools (Neuman, 2018) or religious fundamentalism (Beláňová, Kostelecká, Machovcová & McCabe, 2020; Kingston & Medlin 2006). Isenberg (2007, p. 404) argues that “there is some evidence that poorer academic quality of public schools and decreased choice of private schools both contribute to an increase in homeschooling.” According to the newspaper *USA Today*, the quality of public education in North Carolina ranks 39th out of the 50 U.S. states (Stebbins & Frohlich, 2018), and this may contribute to the popularity of homeschooling. Similarly, North Carolina is part of the so called “Bible Belt” – a southern region of the U.S. where church attendance is higher than the national average and where evangelical Protestantism plays an important role. Conservative Christians may be choosing to homeschool their children instead of sending them to secular

public schools (Beláňová et al., 2020). At the same time, North Carolina is a state with many Catholic and other Christian schools that religious parents can choose from should they wish to “avoid” public schools. Therefore, there are other options for conservative Christians than homeschooling. In terms of religion and homeschooling, the research on motivation and homeschooling generally considers two major types of homeschoolers, the ideologues and the pedagogues (Van Galen, 1991, as cited in Beláňová et al., 2020; Kingston & Medlin, 2006). However, these two categories are not mutually exclusive and, therefore, it would be an overstatement to attribute the decision to homeschool to the family holding Christian values.

Research methodology

This study focused on adult homeschool graduates and their parents in North Carolina and explored their reflections on their past homeschooling experience with the benefit of hindsight. Semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews and informal conversations were used as the main source of data. A protocol with ten broad, open-ended exploratory questions was used to guide the interviews and participants were encouraged to elaborate on their answers. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded. The researcher first attached codes describing the meaning of segments of the text. Then, an inductive analysis was used to generate higher order themes by combining the existing codes (Patton, 2002). The data were analyzed with the following research question in mind “How do adult homeschool graduates and their parents conceptualize their homeschooling experience?” The data collection was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (Grantová agentura ĀR); project registration number: 16-17708S.

Participants were identified via local community groups, personal connections, and the snowball method (Patton, 2002). The interviews were conducted in the central part of North Carolina over 13 months; from November 2016 to December 2017. About a third of the respondents lived in towns with less than 30,000 inhabitants while two thirds lived in towns of 150,000–460,000 inhabitants. A total of 22 interviews were recorded including 20 interviews with a single individual and 2 interviews with two people together. Altogether, 12 mothers and 12 grown-up children were interviewed. While the parents were all female, there were 5 male respondents among the 12 grown-up children interviewed. The average age of the children was 21.1 years and the average time they were homeschooled for was 10.3 years. Seven out of the 12 interviewed students were homeschooled “all the way” until the end of high school (13 years each), one student was home-

schooled for 10 years, and the remaining four students were homeschooled from between 4 and 6 years. In the U.S. it is not untypical for students to be homeschooled from kindergarten until the end of high school.

About half of the interviews were carried out in the respondent's home and the other half in a public place (such as a public library or coffee shop) or over the phone. The average length of interview was about 70–80 minutes. In all the participating families, the mother was the parent primarily responsible for homeschooling. All these mothers decided to stay at home to devote their time to homeschooling and the families generally lived on one income. Some of the mothers worked part-time jobs or ran a family business. The average number of children in these families was 4.4, which is at least twice the national average (*Average Number of Children*, 2004) and three families had 7 or 8 children. Not all the families were religious, although the relatively high numbers of children – and sometimes also the decision to homeschool – was likely a result of religious beliefs and practices.

Results

This paper examined the adult children's evaluation of their homeschooling experience and sought to answer the following question: "How do adult homeschool graduates and their parents conceptualize and reflect on their homeschooling experience?" The results indicated that all participants were content with their homeschooling experience and more than half of the children suggested they would like to homeschool their own children in the future. Overall, the main reasons parents opted for homeschooling were: parental wish to spend time with their own children, parents' belief that schools as institutions are too rigid and did not allow the flexibility needed for meaningful learning and exploration, religion and moral concerns, parents' belief that schools do not prepare children for the "real world," and academic reasons (the child was considered to be gifted or to have special needs). In all cases, the mothers listed more than one reason for choosing homeschooling. The reasons to homeschool varied widely as did homeschooling practices, which merely confirms the well-known fact that homeschooling spans many different social, economic, religious, and ethnic groups and encompasses very diverse values and strategies (Gaither, 2017; Yang & Kayaardi, 2004). Teasing out the nuances of the mothers' motivation proved challenging and it was even more difficult to conclude whether specific values (such as a strong family orientation or emphasis on moral values) could be attributed specifically to religious beliefs. This further supports findings that there is great diversity within the homeschooling population (Beláňová et al., 2020).

In a similar way, Gaither (2017) concluded that “even families that would be identified in surveys as stereotypical religious conservatives have, upon closer examination, complex and changing motivations for homeschooling.” Overall, in the current study religion did not stand out as a major theme in terms of motivation for the decision to homeschool.

The major benefits of homeschooling that many respondents mentioned were: retained enjoyment of learning, flexibility (in terms of daily and yearly schedule, structure and pace of learning, and location of learning), gained independence (independent thinking and taking responsibility for one’s own education), time spent with family, and real-life skills.

Parents generally echoed the three reasons for homeschooling most often described in the research literature: ideological, pedagogical, and socio-relational reasons (Gaither, 2017; Kingston & Medlin, 2006). However, this study identified two interesting findings: (1) homeschooling is not necessarily conceptualized as a unidirectional act of “sacrifice” but can be seen as a gift or a mutually beneficial act; and that (2) there might be an additional reason that is not represented in the above classification: seeing education in a broader sense and hoping to provide children with crucial life skills.

Homeschooling as a “Gift”

The most prominent theme revolved around family relationships and the idea that homeschooling is not necessarily conceptualized as a unidirectional act of “sacrifice” by the parent but can be seen as a mutual gift. Other strong themes were the gratitude of both parents and children as well as the parents’ excitement at being able to provide the homeschooling opportunity for their children and this led to the conceptualization of homeschooling as a “gift.” Parents did not mention sacrificing “their” time or energy in order to homeschool. Instead, participants described their homeschooling experience as either willingly giving or gracefully receiving attention, time, skills, independence and more; often using language such as “we were able to” or “I could choose” rather than “we had to.” This approach to homeschooling both challenges and complements the established image of homeschooling as a “sacrifice” (Aasen, 2010; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Lois, 2013; Beláňová, Machovcová, & Kostelecká, 2018), where the parent “puts aside” her own interests and goals and focuses her time and energy fully on the children. In contrast to this view, most parents in this study highlighted the ways in which they themselves benefitted from homeschooling, namely the opportunity to spend time with and “get to know” their children well and the

belief that it was more practical for them to homeschool than to enroll their children in school. These kinds of experiences point to a more mutually beneficial relationship than the more typically used term “sacrifice.”

Parents generally insisted that they enjoyed the time spent with their children: the joint exploration, the projects and fieldtrips, getting to know their children, watching them grow, and so on. They said they wanted to share their time with the children and this sentiment featured much more strongly than any regrets. One parent stated: “*I love teaching kids to read because... when that light bulb comes on... you can see it! You know, when they start putting words together ...and I just love that moment!*” (PAR1 11:01). Another parent explained: “*I really like that... I have strong relationship with all of them, however different they are, and... and they are happy to come and... talk. I like that they have good relationships with each other*” (PAR11 47:41). Another student said: “*Because I was homeschooled, I have a better friendship/relationship with my parents now, than I would if I had gone to public schools (...)* You just **know** that [your parents] care, you **know** that they love you.” (ABS10 58:31). Similarly, a student enjoyed “discovering the world of knowledge as a family” which ultimately “brought them closer together.” Even though the children spent most of their day with their mother while their father was at work, many families said that thanks to their ability to plan their schedule, they could set aside enough time to be together as a family. They ate dinner together and stayed up later in the evenings, since the children did not need to get up early. Homeschooling enabled them to have more family time.

Most mothers mentioned challenges in their daily routine, explaining that the “daily grind” was often hard and exhausting but that they saw these difficulties as ultimately rewarding. One mother mentioned that as a former high school math teacher, she had to research how to teach reading to elementary children. Another mother said that she had to try out various approaches and types of curricula to accommodate her daughter’s learning style. Yet, all these mothers enjoyed doing these things because it helped them to get to know their children better. Overall, parents reported having learned a lot about their children and having become closer with them as a result of homeschooling. None of the mothers expressed any regret about not placing their career first, nor did they regret spending the majority of their time homeschooling; which took as long as 20 years in many cases. In fact, the mothers were “glad” they could homeschool even when leaving behind a promising career as a scientist or a professor.

In addition to the general enjoyment of spending time with and learning more about their children, the practicality of homeschooling was another benefit that “made their lives easier.” A parent of three explained: *“For the first... I don’t know... eight years of homeschooling, we did not have to **run around**... you know, that much, you know. And... it was nice.”* (PAR2 15:48). Another mother explained that with homeschooling, they did not need to rush to get everyone out of the house and on the bus very early in the morning, which could be as early as 5:30 or 6:00 AM. Instead, they enjoyed their breakfast and started studying when ready.

While for some respondents this schedule was simply convenient, others recognized that they learned better in the afternoon and were often unable to focus early in the morning. One mother explained: *“All of mine [children] are night people. The only person who is a morning person in my house is me. My husband prefers to work late (...), [my son] tends to do homework between 8 and 12 [in the evening].”* (PAR11 23:40). Another mother said her other child *“does not ‘think’ until the afternoon”* (PAR6 35:05). That student later said: *“There are studies and such about how it is better for people of teenage... teenagers, to be getting up later... their biological clock doesn’t wanna get up as early and it’s detrimental to their... I guess... work ethic or whatever to be getting up earlier.”* (ABS6 42:32). The opportunity to start the day without stress and avoid driving to multiple schools and afterschool activities was an important benefit for most parents.

An additional benefit related to the ability to accommodate children’s special interests: *“It would have been much harder for the younger two to have done as much robotics as they have... if we had been in a traditional school and if they were getting up at 6 in the morning”* (PAR11 49:04). The time flexibility represented a clear plus for the participants. In previous research, Isenberg (2006) showed that mothers who have preschool children in addition to school-age children are more likely to stay home; confirming the finding that homeschooling can be a practical choice.

Overall, the common theme of parental gratitude for the opportunity to homeschool, prominent across all the interviews, led to the conceptualization of homeschooling as a “gift” rather than sacrifice” (Aasen, 2010; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Lois, 2013). When discussing appreciation for the time spent together and the practicality of homeschooling, participants talked about the ability to give their children attention and bond with them (Merry & Howell 2009) and enjoy the opportunity to be flexible about the academic and social aspects of their lives. The children echoed both of these

homeschooling gifts and expressed their gratitude for the multiple life skills homeschooling provided them with. It is important to note here, however, that the sample was self-selected and thus potentially composed of families with a rather more positive experience of homeschooling. Therefore, the results may not be representative of all homeschoolers.

Real-life Skills: Approaching Education in a Broader Sense

Another prominent theme in the children's and parents' responses was approaching education in a broader sense and focusing on various real-life skills in addition to simply acquiring academic content. These real-life skills ranged from independence and responsibility to social skills, financial literacy, and housework. This additional aspect broadens our understanding of homeschooling by adding the category of "real-life home schoolers" to the "ideologues, pedagogues, and socio-relational home schoolers" outlined by Kingston & Medlin (2006).

Gift of independence and responsibility

The respondents believed that homeschooling trained them to become independent in both taking control over their learning and being able to stand up for and defend their decisions and opinions. Practical independence took the form of the students taking the initiative in their studies, and later on, especially in high school, setting goals for themselves, planning their daily schedules, and driving themselves to various tutoring sessions. One student explained: "*My mom... both with homeschooling and then even separate from that... sort of... raised us to be independent... independent thinkers and independent action-takers*" (ABS1 3:18). This student went to school in 5th grade after having been homeschooled K-4. In 8th grade, she recalls: "*I announced to my mom that I did not want to go to school anymore.*" (ABS1 11:10). Since her mother could not stay at home at that time, the student decided to "homeschool herself." She did her research on how to homeschool and created a study plan and convinced her mother that she was able to do it by herself. The mother took the approach of "I will be here if you need me..." (ABS1 34:40) and the student managed to pass the school year following her own plan. In line with this kind of independence, a number of graduates in this study started their own business or an organization, often adopting the approach that the "sky is the limit" for them.

With independence came the responsibility for completing their work and while it was not always easy, it taught the students important skills for the future. A homeschool graduate spoke about his high school homeschooling experience:

About keeping my own schedule... Back when I was working out of a book at my own pace... I found it very hard (...) to keep doing the work (...) I mean it's got me ready in case I need to do that for – like – any classes... like... for some reason in math I missed the section on logarithms (...). When we started calculus [in school], I am like: "I never learned that! How do you do that" But I was easily able to find out where to find that out 'cause I know where to look to learn what logarithms are... and it didn't take me very long, too... One thing my mom said – which is true, is: teaching us how to learn, not [just] "teaching us". (ABS6 40:43)

students took classes outside the home during the middle and high school period. This practice introduced them to interesting people but also put them in charge of their daily schedules. One parent believed that having been given the independence early on, the children were prepared to deal with college requirements:

Yes, because they were already used to being... responsible for... getting their work done. I don't care when you get it done as long as you get it done by Friday at 3 o'clock." (...) And I think, you know, the structure of a public school does not give them that independence. They have to... the bell rings, they move... bell rings, they move... (PAR10 1:10:25)

The independence showed up especially among students who had been homeschooled all the way through high school, at which time the mother almost always assumed the role of facilitator (Carpenter & Gann, 2015) rather than instructor.

Besides taking the initiative and responsibility for their learning, most students developed a strong sense of independence and they were not afraid to defend their opinions. One mother commented:

[My daughter] learned to be herself, to find her strengths, understand how to deal with her weaknesses, and to just be... it's okay to be 'her' and she didn't have to deal with all that peer pressure... every day... and so [my daughters] get to develop their personalities more and they become very strong women. (PAR4 42:50)

A student echoed this sentiment:

I would say the... the biggest impact it had on me is just sort of teaching me that... I can do things my own way. I don't always have to... do exactly what everyone else is doing. I can... can be myself, I can make my own decisions... I don't have to, kind of, fall in with the crowd... And I think that's been really important 'cause it's something that helped build self-confidence for me (...). And if you wanna do what everyone else is doing, that's fine, too, but you don't have to. (ABS1 38:57)

Another student shared a similar sentiment: *"I think it gave us that, like, freedom to feel like anything is possible... we can do anything we want to and still like... have a full life, you know? Even if it doesn't look like other people's lives, you know?" (ABSABS2 36:01)*. Because of this, some students, who transitioned to school, experienced difficulties dealing with peer pressure and being judged for their independent choices:

Sometimes, I would wanna be by myself and I would go to the swing set and I would like just swing all through recess... just to get through it (...). If you get down time alone at recess, it means you are a loser. Like you "have to" look like you have friends! (...) Feeling the social pressure was hard. (ABSABS2 30:18)

Overall, students believed that homeschooling had taught them to be independent, responsible, and to think outside of the box and they all saw these skills as gifts for their future lives. They believed they were taught how to take an active stance and how to solve any problems life might pose. At the same time, a few respondents mentioned drawbacks connected with nurturing independence: such as peer pressure to "fit in" after transitioning to school.

Gift of practical real-life skills

Another aspect of approaching education more broadly than just the academic side was the focus on real-life skills. Most graduates described two types of real-life skills they gained: the ability to interact with many different types of people and the ability to carry out practical real-life tasks, such as managing one's own finances or cooking. According to the respondents, these skills were a result of their social interaction with people across age groups, including tutors, college instructors, doctors, shop assistants and so on.

Most families participated in activities organized by local churches, non-profits, or homeschooling groups and most students had been involved in a number of projects, groups, and initiatives. They felt they were by no means deprived of social interactions, as often suggested by opponents of homeschooling. In fact, the participants argued adamantly that homeschooling is what exposes children to “real life,” while school is just an artificial and sheltered environment. A mother explained:

*I loved the fact that **all** the different aged kids – as long as it was safe – they would **all** play together, which really is more like “real life” than... the school is! I mean... what other time in your life were you ever in the situation with thirty other exactly the same-aged people? Right! So, you have to learn how to get along with people who are older and younger than you! (PAR1 1:43)*

Another mother shared the same sentiment:

It wasn't about sheltering. Because... actually I had a family member who said to me: “How long are you gonna homeschool [for]? They have to...” and I love this... this is my favorite... “They have to go into the real world at some point!” So here was my question: “The real world? School is the most contrived environment ever! For 12 years straight, we invent these laboratories... what we call schoolroom, classrooms... and you only have everybody else in it that's your age! Have you ever had a job where you only work with people that are... 38? (...) And you all do the same thing... and you all transition at the same time... and you all are expected to be at the same level the whole time? Like... this does not occur anywhere in your life... anywhere! So, it's hilarious to me that because it's our norm, we call that ‘real life!’” (ABS3/PAR3 53:50)

In addition to gaining social skills, homeschoolers treasured the fact that they had learned to perform vital real-life tasks, such as cooking or managing time and personal finances. A student reflected that her mother wanted to homeschool “to be able to teach more than just, you know... math, science and history,” (ABS3 23:38) and added:

She taught us a lot of... sort of different skills that you would not learn in school (...) finances and money management, (...) and also about cooking, and she taught us... stuff about morals... how to be a good person and (...) contribute to society and things like that, that public school wouldn't teach you. (...) She taught us a lot about the importance

of chores and doing work that you don't want to do (...) [and it] shaped me into the person I am now: being able to easily interact with other people, you know? I can cook for myself and manage my money, and... you know, do work that I don't want to (...) so I think the best part of homeschooling was learning these other skills that you don't learn at school. (ABS1 23:05 and 36:18)

Another student remembered that while studying, her mother would be “sometimes mixing other activities in with schoolwork (...) like [we would be] hanging up laundry while doing multiple tables [in math]” (ABSABS2 6:57). And another mother described asking her 7-year-old to call the doctor’s office to set up an appointment for himself:

I think that that made him more equipped... to just navigate the world as he got older. (...) Because of his ability to communicate, his ability to look someone in the eye and shake their hand, and... and not slouch his way through life. (ABS3/PAR3 1:02:42)

Overall, these real-life skills were much appreciated by the students and often mentioned as a reason why homeschooling prepares people for life better than public schools do. It also shows that homeschoolers often view education in a broader sense; reaching far beyond academics.

Discussion

This study focused on adult homeschool graduates, a group that has been largely overlooked in research (some exceptions: Kranzow, 2013; Ray, 2004; Rudner, 1999; Snyder, 2013). The purpose was to explore and document how young adults and their parents conceptualize their past homeschooling experience. Participants covered a large range of topics and described various pedagogical, ideological, and socio-relational motivations (Kingston & Medlin, 2006) and benefits of homeschooling. However, the two main contributions of this study are: (1) the finding that homeschooling could be conceptualized in terms of “giving” and “receiving” time and attention rather than the “sacrificing” a parent does “for” their child and (2) the finding that homeschoolers tend to see education in a broader sense, valuing the independence and real-life skills homeschooling can provide.

First, this study revealed the gratitude of parents and children for the opportunity to homeschool and to be homeschooled that led to the conceptualization of homeschooling as a “gift.” While homeschooling is often viewed

as an act of sacrifice (Aasen, 2010; Isenberg, 2006; Lois, 2013), the current study shows that parents do not necessarily approach homeschooling as a sacrifice, where the mothers need to suppress their own needs and aspirations (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Lois, 2013; Beláňová, Machovcová, & Kostecká, 2018) but rather as an opportunity for parents to give to – as well as receive from – others: the children, the family, the community. By providing homeschooling to their children, the mothers gained transferable skills. Most importantly, homeschooling allows mothers to “receive” and “enjoy” precious time with their children and it “makes their life easier” in a number of practical aspects (Isenberg, 2006). Parents generally treasured the opportunity to spend time and develop strong relationships and intimacy with their children (similar to the term “attentive parenting” in Merry & Howell 2009) and framed it as a privilege for themselves. This study suggests that homeschooling can fulfil the mothers’ emotional needs, thus representing a two-way process where both sides (children and parents) benefit. However, it is also possible that the concepts of “gifting” and “receiving” may be influenced by the Christian narrative, beliefs, and the language experienced by many of the respondents in these contexts (Beláňová et al., 2020).

It is important to keep in mind that the practice of and motivation for traditional homeschooling differs markedly from the Covid-19-induced school-at-home model (Scirri, 2021). However, there is one important similarity between Covid-19 at-home education and homeschooling and it is the fact that both can come in different forms and that both seem to be a beneficial and rewarding experience for some families. However, it certainly does not mean that homeschooling or at-home education is the best choice for all.

The second major finding was that homeschoolers viewed education in a broader sense: as providing children with crucial life skills. This led to the concept of “real-life home schoolers,” thus expanding the categorization of homeschoolers suggested by Kingston & Medlin (2006), who described three major types of homeschoolers: “ideologues, pedagogues, and socio-relational home schoolers.” The homeschool graduates in this study stressed the importance of independence and responsibility, social skills, financial literacy, time management, and housework and felt grateful to have received guidance in these real-world skills. This was mainly possible because their parents assumed the role of “facilitators” of learning rather than “providers” of education (Carpenter & Gann, 2015). In comparison, parents supporting their children at home during the Covid-19 pandemic, focus mostly on the academic side and often feel overwhelmed and unprepared (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021, Parczewska, 2020).

While both concepts, “homeschooling as a gift” and “real-life home schoolers,” can help us better understand the practice of homeschooling, it is important to keep in mind that each family’s situation affects the homeschooling experience in specific ways and these findings may not be applicable to all families (Lois, 2013). For instance, independence is an important skill, but too much independence, such as a student homeschooling herself with little parental oversight, may not always be desirable. In addition, placing a major emphasis on family bonding may lead to the academic side being overlooked, and similarly enjoying a stress-free education at home may lead to difficulties dealing with peer pressure later on. However, conformity was certainly not a skill valued among the homeschoolers and many of the graduates were glad to have been able to grow and learn without this pressure. It is also important to note that difficulty transitioning to school was mentioned by students who entered school in 4th–8th grade. Students who were homeschooled all the way through high school did not generally face these difficulties when they entered college. In all, students reported feeling very capable both academically and socially.

Finally, it is important to note some of the limitations of this study. First, the sample was self-selected, which could mean that the families willing to participate may potentially have had a generally positive experience with homeschooling. By contrast, a population with negative experiences with homeschooling would be much harder to access for this kind of research. This may be the reason why the experience of the respondents in this sample was mostly positive. As a result, the responses cannot be taken as representing all homeschooling families (Arora, 2003, Lois, 2013). Second, many of the families were Christian: they had more children on average and may have held stronger family values than the majority society (Kingston & Medlin, 2006). Third, the accounts of homeschooling were given retrospectively, which means there may be a number of data issues. Looking back at their past experience, the respondents may have recalled mainly the positive experiences or may have retroactively rationalized their decisions, such as highlighting their positive relationship with their parents and downplaying the possible challenges (describing homeschooling as a “blast” rather than a “challenge”). And lastly, North Carolina is one of the most homeschooling-friendly states in the U.S. because of its legislation and the amount of resources available to homeschoolers. This may partly be the reason why many families feel comfortable homeschooling all the way through to the end of high school and why the students generally had a positive experience with homeschooling.

Funding

This research was supported by *The Czech Science Foundation (Grantová agentura ČR)*; project registration number: 21-21743S.

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