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Trend and Data Analysis of Homeschooling

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Introduction

In the United States, every child has the right to an education and is required by law to attend school. The government provides an enormous number of public schools throughout the country, free of charge, in order to ensure education for all, yet there are families who choose to homeschool their children instead. Hill (2010) explains that “homeschooling is not a new phenomenon. In colonial days families, including wealthy ones, educated their children at home, combining the efforts of parents, tutors, and older children” (p.1). He goes on to mention how colonial rural one-room schoolhouses provided a place for the children of several families to study together under the direction of a teacher who implemented their personal program of instruction.

Modern day homeschooling began in the 1970s by two main groups of people: the intensely religious and those of an exceptionally high academic philosophy (Isenberg, 2007). In the 1970s and 1980s, states treated homeschooling as a type of truancy, claiming that children, by law, must be in school. Initially, relations between homeschooling advocates and school authorities were very strained and often hostile. During the 1980s, advocates of home-based education came together as allies to legalize homeschooling at the state level. During the 1990s, as a result of the legalization of home-based education and the widespread use of the Internet, homeschooling began to grow and became a viable option for more families (Isenberg). These families represent a demographically diverse group of people; from Christians to atheists, libertarians to liberals, low-income families to high-income families, blacks to whites, parents with Ph.D.s to parents with no degree, all kinds of people from all different backgrounds across the country are choosing to homeschool (Ray, 2009).

Homeschooling Trends

The National Center for Education Statistics’ research finds that parents choose to homeschool for a variety of reasons. Thirty-six percent do so “to provide religious or moral instruction” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Twenty-one percent have concerns about the school environment, and 17% are not satisfied with the academic instruction. Other reasons include family time, finances, distance, and caring for a special needs child. Ray (2009) contends that there are even more reasons parents homeschool their children, citing a preference for a customized curriculum for each child, teaching methodology that is not provided in institutions, and enrichment of family relationships. Isenberg (2007) adds to this list, mentioning the lack of private schools as yet another reason parents choose home-based education.

More and more parents every year are choosing to homeschool their children. It is a trend that has grown tremendously in the last two decades. From 1991 to 1999, the number of homeschooled children almost tripled, going from 300,000 to 805,000, in the span of just eight years (Bolle, M., Wessel, R., Mulvihill, T., 2007). In the United States today, the number of children being educated in the home is estimated to be between 1.2 and 2 million, which is significantly higher than the number of students enrolled in the New York City public school system (Hill, 2010). This number also exceeds the

total of those enrolled in both charter schools and voucher programs throughout the country (Hill). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics also demonstrates a steady rise in home-based education from 1999 to 2007 (Department of Education, 2007). In addition to those currently enrolled in home-based education, many public and private school students were homeschooled for part of their education when they were younger (Isenberg, 2007), which lends itself to a tendency illustrated through several studies from 2003 to 2007; it is more common to homeschool young children. Even very well educated mothers have difficulty providing quality academic instruction after the age of 11 as the subject matter becomes more complex (Isenberg).

The trend of homeschooling has prompted futuristic school of thought, incorporating technological advancement into the trend itself; "In 2014 K-12 education will no longer be confined to four walls and a classroom. Education will take place in a variety of settings, including Cyberspace and virtual reality" (Sanbom, et al., 2005, p. 3). Computers become classrooms, and software serves to grade papers and keep records. Isenberg (2007) concurs, stating that technological progress advances home-based education and has contributed to a homeschooling growth spurt. Sanbom et al. take their futuristic scenario a step further, alleging that homeschooling will become a kind of status symbol by the year 2014 and that mothers who homeschool will be seen as "highly sophisticated" and will be the "ideal of contemporary motherhood" (p.4).

Implications of Homeschooling

Critics charge that the homeschooling movement is detrimental in three ways; they allege that it is academically harmful, socially harmful, and that it upsets the public school system (Hill, 2010). Since home-based education is relatively new and difficult to assess in an experimental group of a significant number of students, there has been limited research in the area of homeschooling due to the lack of data (Isenberg, 2007). However, there are studies that provide strong evidence against these claims. Several demonstrate that homeschooled students normally score considerably higher on standardized achievement tests than public school students (Bolle, et al., 2007; Hill, 2010; Ray, 2009). They also do as well or better on measures of social and emotional development (Bolle, et al.; Ray, 2009), and some research illustrates exceptional strength in the area of leadership (Bolle, et al.). As for harm to the public school system, the argument is that education in the home draws resources away from the public schools, however, it also lightens the load of the state by making classes a little smaller and using less of the public schools' supplies as counties are not obligated by law to allocate funds for homeschooling, while charter schools and vouchers, for example, do draw from public funds (Hill).

One comprehensive, specific way to measure the implications of homeschooling on an individual and societal level is to consider the transitional experiences of first-year college students who were homeschooled. There is not much research on this subject to date, but one investigation of this transitional path shows favorable results in virtually all areas for every student who participated in the study (Bolle, et al., 2007). The experiment, which was based on the five factors of achievement, leadership, professional aptitude, social behavior, and physical activity, illustrates "little difference in the areas of achievement, professional aptitude, social behavior, and physical activity based upon the school environment" (Bolle, et al., p.3). In the dimension of leadership, however, homeschooled students far exceed those educated in both public and private schools (Bolle, et al.). Ray (2009) lends support to this finding, asserting that adults who were homeschooled were instilled with "self-concept leadership, self-esteem, and participate in community service" (p.2). He also argues that they are more

active in fulfilling their civic duty than the general population, and are extremely likely to internalize the belief system of their parents.

From the students' perspectives, the transition proves to be a tremendous learning experience, much in the same way that it is for their traditionally educated peers: they are both nervous and eager to leave home and begin college; although they initially experience periods of loneliness, they are able to make friends quickly; and they have to adjust their study habits to coincide with more challenging courses and a greater workload (Bolle, et al., 2007). The differences, though, are apparent as well. The students admit that meeting and spending time with people whose values are much different from their own is sometimes difficult and character building. They also mention the necessity to acclimate to traditional academics and different teaching styles. Some of the participants in the study missed their family and siblings significantly and took somewhat longer to form an "identity away from home" than students with a background in traditional education (Bolle, et al.), while, on the other hand, some were thrilled to have a break from the family and be relinquished of chores like changing diapers.

In all, research concludes that home-educated students go through the three stages of separation, transition, and incorporation in their move from home to college in a very similar fashion as those who study in public and private schools (Bolle, et al., 2007), which indicates that the effects of homeschooling on the individual and society are of little consequence when compared to those of traditionally educated students. In some ways, such as leadership and self confidence, strong evidence suggests that education in the home may create a stronger foundation (Bolle, et al.; Ray, 2009). As a whole, studies on homeschooling concur that homeschooling is advantageous and should be part of our society as a school choice. Furthermore, the United States is not alone in this endeavor. Other nations are experiencing a homeschooling growth spurt as well. Countries like Australia, Canada, Hungary, Japan, Kenya, and the United Kingdom are just some of the other societies that are including home-based education as an option for the education of their citizens (Ray).

Conclusion

Homeschooling is a trend that continues to grow on a yearly basis. Legal, modern day home-based education is still new and, in some ways, experimental. Research shows that families choose to homeschool for a variety of reasons, and that the endeavor is an enormous undertaking of money, time and effort. Although families work together to provide better and higher levels of instruction, most parents who homeschool also use public or private schools. Since families typically rely on dual incomes, home-based education will probably not grow indefinitely, but will remain a viable school option for many parents. Although limited, research appears to indicate that homeschoolers can and do compete academically and socially with their traditionally educated peers, and that adults who were homeschooled are successful in the "real world." Finally, while it is impossible to predict all of the implications that homeschooling may have in the years to come, the evidence maintains that it does have a place in society. Hill (2010) insists, "In a situation where so little is understood, the potential harms of homeschooling seem far smaller than the harms of trying to prevent it or thwart it" (p.3).

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