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A Handbook for Homeschoolers

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A Handbook for Homeschoolers:

Compiling Advice and Resource Guides from Experienced Homeschoolers

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Abstract

The purpose of this honor's project was to determine whether or not experienced homeschooling families have valuable pieces of advice and wisdom to offer families who have just started homeschooling. The study of this transfer of information is especially important given that previous studies about homeschooling consistently find that homeschooling is typically quite successful and that the percentage of homeschoolers in the US has increased dramatically over the past decades, especially during the pandemic. This honor's project is a descriptive case study about the experiences of seven different homeschooling families from a local community in Northeast Ohio. Each of the families from this project participated in a series of interview questions that dealt with a variety of topics, allowing them to discuss information and resources that would be of assistance to newer homeschoolers. The final result of this research was an online website titled "A Handbook for Homeschoolers" which housed the contents of those interviews.

A Handbook for Homeschoolers: Compiling the Advice and Resource Guides of

Experienced Homeschoolers

In order to be introduced to the problem addressed in this research project, the reader should first examine the following statement from the Ohio Department of Education:

"Parents are guardians who decide to homeschool their students and are completely responsible for choosing the curriculum and course of study. They… take responsibility for educating their children. There is no state financial assistance for families who choose this option." (Ohio Department of Education, 2022)

As this statement demonstrates, parents who decide to educate at home are facing a whole new way of life. They are fully responsible for overseeing the academic experiences of their children and will be subject to assessment at the end of each year in order to ensure that an appropriate standard of progress is occurring (Ohio Department of Education, 2022). These new homeschooling families will be embarking on this educational journey without any assistance from traditional sources of academic oversight, even though they will be taking full responsibility for teaching their children, a task with which many of them have had little or no experience.

Regardless, the number of families who have chosen to homeschool has steadily increased in recent years, and the last official count of homeschoolers, taken in 2016, estimated that approximately a million students in the United States are receiving their education at home (Wang et al., 2019). The homeschooling approach has proven quite successful; students who are homeschooled typically outrank their public schooled peers on standardized testing by anywhere from fifteen to thirty percentile points (Ray, 2017). An article from *The International Social Science Review* titled "The Impact of Homeschooling on the Adjustment of College Students"

found that students who have made the transition from a homeschooled background to college indicate that they perform better in college coursework and tend to report more positive feelings about their experiences with higher education than students who have not been homeschooled. They also seem to deal with feelings of depression at lower rates than average public schoolers (Drenovsky & Cohen, 2012).

As a student who was homeschooled all the way up until college, I can verify that those three indicators of success were true in my own life. However, when my parents started their homeschooling journey, they did not have access to advice or counsel from other homeschoolers who had already successfully educated their own children, and as I've watched my family through the years, I have come to realize that a significant disconnect exists between new homeschooling families and "veteran" homeschoolers. Veteran homeschoolers are defined for the purposes of this paper as those who have been a part of the homeschool community for a period of at least five years. Newer homeschooling families could greatly benefit from the accumulated wisdom that these veteran homeschoolers have gained as a result of their experiences as home educators, but without a clear pathway for that advice to travel, the transfer of knowledge is often limited and intermittent. This project was designed to consolidate the advice and resources that veteran homeschoolers have to offer and provide a way for new homeschooling families to access that information. The consolidation process involved a series of interviews with experienced homeschooling parents as well as several homeschooled students, and the end product of this project was an online resource guide that contains the content from those interviews.

Expediting this transfer of knowledge is incredibly significant in the aftermath of the pandemic. According to an article from *The Los Angeles Times* from earlier this year,

homeschooling had been quickly growing in popularity between the years of 1999 until about 2012 and then had continued to grow by about 3.3% until the outset of the pandemic (Newberry, 2022). However, the number of homeschooling households more than doubled from the spring of 2020 to the fall of 2021, rising from 5.4% to 11.1% (Newberry 2022). The article questions whether or not all of those newcomers will continue in the coming years since the health threats of Covid-19 are now less significant than they were in 2020. While the data for the most recent school year is still incomplete, preliminary polls and research suggest that the number of homeschoolers in the US will decrease dramatically from the pandemic years, although there will still be a sizeable portion of the population who choose not to return to traditional schooling (Ray, 2022).

Review of the previous research in this area of homeschooling reveals some of the substantive and methodological limitations associated with this topic. The first issue is related to the fact that homeschooling, by its very nature, is completely individualized. Each family is responsible for creating their own curriculum, schedule, and academic plan for their children, and this high level of diversity makes any type of research other than case studies challenging to conduct. (Kunzman and Gaither, 2020). The second issue is more methodological in nature. Because homeschooling is such an independent approach to education, families who homeschool operate mostly outside of the reach of public school systems and other aspects of governmental oversight which also makes research more difficult (Kunzman and Gaither, 2020). Research (outside of statistical analysis) is harder to conduct since these families are typically less easily identified and reached by researchers than other sets of the educational population might be (Bisson, 2022).

Literature Review

Doing a search on Google about new homeschoolers or homeschooling advice quickly reveals that most of the results are narrative style books or blog posts. Searching for peer reviewed research can prove to be almost as unfruitful because many of the academic research journals available on sites such as JSTOR, ERIC, or Google Scholar are either severely outdated or not widely published. However, an invaluable resource for this project has been a 2020 publication from *The Journal of Educational Alternatives* titled "Homeschooling: An Updated Comprehensive Survey of the Research," which is a current version of their 2013 collection. This publication seeks to compile all of the recent academic research on the topic of homeschooling -- a body of research made up of 469 separate articles. The research is subdivided into nine different categories, including topics such as the reasons prompting parents to choose homeschooling (which is an additional category that was not included in the 2013 version of the publication), the demographic background of American homeschoolers, the academic successes of homeschooled students, and the various factors that influence homeschooled socialization (Kunzman and Gaither, 2020). Two of the most relevant sections of this research collection are the portions that discuss the motivations for homeschooling and the curricula and practice of experienced homeschoolers.

According to the section on motivation, one of the most influential studies on this topic is Jane Van Galen's research done in the late 1980s which suggested that almost all homeschoolers fall into two separate categories in terms of their reasons for choosing to homeschool. Many families decide to educate their children at home for religious reasons, usually related to Christian or conservative viewpoints; in contrast, the second category bases their decision on the desire to provide an alternative academic experience, usually because the parents subscribe to

different beliefs about pedagogical practices in education than traditional school systems do. Although subsequent researchers have attempted to dispute Galen's findings, citing the limitations that such a dichotomous grouping presents, most of the research done over the past few decades came to the same conclusions. However, two researchers, Neuman and Guterman (2017), recently examined this idea from the perspective that motivations can fluctuate and coalesce with each other, and as a result of various interviews with a number of homeschooling families, the were able to successfully expand Galen's two categories, noting that while some parents certainly do choose to homeschool because of their views on education or because of their personal ideology, many families also educate their children at home because their home and familial situations were best complemented by homeschooling (whether from a lack of other options or as a free choice). This study offers a degree of nuance that previous research lacked, although it still confirms the older findings and upholds the basic ideas about homeschoolers' motivations in regards to their academic autonomy.

The second category of relevant research discussed in the collection involves an analysis of the curricula and practices that homeschooling families choose to implement in their daily lives. That section of the collection describes how one researcher, Jennifer Lois, spent three years in close contact with a homeschooling community in order to study the emotional effects that homeschooling mothers experience over time, such as role strain and burnout (Kunzman and Gaither, 2020). She discovered that parents who were new to homeschooling often became frustrated as they sought to manage their roles as mothers and homemakers while also trying to organize their curriculum, remain neutral towards their students while teaching, and separate normal life activities from school work (Louis, 2006). In order to alleviate that tension, most new homeschooling mothers slowly transitioned into a "less-structured, more eclectic approach" that

allowed them to integrate other areas of their lives with their schooling (Kunzman and Gaither, 2020, p.266). A second study that is mentioned in this section is one of the only longitudinal studies ever conducted on this topic, and it found that over time, homeschooling families are much more likely to utilize technology, participate in local programs offered by libraries or cooperatives, and incorporate outside help or ready made curriculum into their lives (Kunzman and Gaither, 2020).

The research collection also describes some of the current trends in homeschooling research. First, an increasing number of researchers are beginning to study families who educate from home because of how prevalent that method of schooling is becoming in modern society, both in the United States as well as globally (Kanzman and Gaither, 2020). As this subject gains popularity within academic research circles, authoritative and scientific studies will become increasingly common. Second, several recent developments will aid new research in overcoming the common limitations involved with studying homeschoolers. Several extensive collections of data, including the National Study of Youth and Religion and the National Survey on Drug Use and Health will allow researchers to access crucial statistical and analytic information necessary for further study (Kanzman and Gaither, 2020). In addition to new data, research trends lean towards an expanded view of homeschooling, encompassing additional areas of study, such as homeschoolers with special needs or homeschooling families from various cultural and ethnographic backgrounds. According to the authors of the 2020 research collection, the topic of homeschooling "will remain fertile ground for research -- not only as a fascinating educational phenomena in and of itself, but also for what it pushes us to consider about the purposes of education more broadly" (Kunzman and Gaither, 2020 p. 304).

A few of these articles specifically addressed the main idea behind my own research project -- namely, the transfer of knowledge and advice from experienced homeschoolers to newcomers in the field. One article in particular proved to have a direct relationship with this idea. It was titled "Role Strain, Emotion Management, and Burnout" (mentioned previously in this section) by Jennifer Louis. This article focused on the ways that new homeschooling mothers learn to cope with their newly assumed role as a teacher by emphasizing the fact that new homeschoolers often seek out experienced homeschoolers in order to get their advice about commonly-faced problems. Relating stories from their own lives, many of these experienced homeschoolers expressed caution about the sometimes dramatically negative effects of instilling an abundance of structure into a school day and encouraged parents to engage their children in more organic and student-centered individualized learning encounters instead (Louis, 2011). By the end of her period of study, the author of the article found that mothers who followed this advice and loosened the scheduled aspects of their lives reported much higher levels of self-confidence and feelings of efficacy or success.

Purpose of the Study

`   While Louis' work was heavily centered on the experiences of new homeschoolers, the research process discussed in my research project focused much more on than the advice that veteran homeschoolers are able to offer. The body of knowledge and resources that families who have been homeschooling for an extended period of time possess and the applications in which new homeschoolers could utilize that advice constituted the main variable under examination in my project. Because this is a descriptive research project, my study focused on recounting the ongoing present state or condition of the variable in question. In order to clarify the variable's characteristics, however, defining its components of the variable is key.

The advice that veteran homeschoolers have to offer largely depends on the fact that they have been long-time home educators and experienced significant levels of success in their endeavors. Homeschooled students are more likely to express higher feelings of satisfaction in terms of their personal autonomy and tend to view themselves as more competent than students who are educated in the public school system (Riley, 2015). In addition, homeschooled students are 78% more likely to demonstrate advanced achievement on standardized tests than students who attend public school and are also more likely to earn higher GPAs while in college and become involved in leadership positions once they become adults (Ray, 2021). Some educational theorists speculate that the reasons for this apparent success might be due to the two parent structure that is often present in homeschooled family structures or to the educational opportunities for effective time usage and extreme individualization that the homeschooling approach offers (Ray, 2022).

My research project centered around the idea that homeschooling success is greatly enhanced when newcomers to the endeavor are assisted by the experience of the veterans, and my central question reflected that belief by asking "What information and principles of advice do veteran homeschoolers have to share with parents who have just recently started homeschooling? Are there specific resources that would be beneficial to families who are new to this educational approach?" This research question guided the formulation of my project. As briefly mentioned before in the introduction, "veteran homeschoolers," those who have been homeschooling for at least five years, possess a significant amount of learned wisdom from their lived experience, and since new homeschooling families could benefit from this insight, I wanted to create a project to bridge that gap. Veteran homeschoolers possess valuable principles of advice that they could

share, and that families who are just starting their educational journey would be able to gain practical insight and learn to take advantage of useful resources as a result of that advice.

Research Design

This section begins with a discussion about the IRB process for conducting human subjects research. Next, the process for identifying and selecting participants is described, and finally the data collection methods are considered.

IRB Review

In order to answer my research question, I first had to take part in a series of instructional videos from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, known as the CITI program. The program offers training courses in the areas of ethical considerations involving human subjects research in a wide variety of different applications (CITI Program, n.d.). I participated in the social and behavioral training on research specifically with human subjects and received a certification signifying completion. After completing the training, I submitted an application to the University of Akron's Institutional Review Board which contained an extensive description of my intended procedures, a copy of all of the paperwork (consent and assent forms, email scripts, and interview question templates) that I planned on using with my participants, and several statements about confidentiality and data collection associated with my research. The IRB reviewers suggested several revisions to the project, but once it was approved, I was cleared to begin my research.

Participant Selection

Because I was homeschooled my entire life before beginning college, I knew that there were many experienced homeschoolers in the local area, and even though I had grown up with many of these families I still followed the protocol that the IRB reviews recommended in order

to maintain the integrity of my research. Instead of contacting the families directly, I sent each of my ten prospective participants a scripted email, informing them about my project and requesting their assistance in the interview process. The email contained an attached consent form and stated that the participants would signify their consent by signing the form and returning it. Seven of the recipients returned the form, agreeing to participate in the interviews, although one family offered to contribute the perspectives of both the father and the mother for the interview. Each of the families that I contacted were from the local area, which for the purposes of this research is limited to the Northeastern Ohio counties of Summit, Portage, and Stark. In addition, each of the families were long-time homeschoolers, who had been homeschooling for a period of at least five years. I sent each participant a copy of the interview questions ahead of time and then coordinated times to meet with them to conduct the interview.

When I selected these participants, I attempted to choose families who represented diverse factions of the homeschooling community. For example, I chose two of the selected participants because they both taught in the public school system before raising their own children and have continued to renew their teaching licenses as they homeschooled. One of the participants homeschooled both her children and her grandchildren, and I invited families with special needs students and families who have students that qualify as academically gifted. One of the potential participants lived in a rural town, one lived in urban areas, and some lived in more middle class or suburban areas. Another family that took part in this study homeschools multiple children so the parents have an elementary student, a middle school student, a high school student, and a student who is currently attending college. In addition, I also invited one family to participate because their children went to private school for the majority of their education, and the family only began homeschooling once their children entered high school.

Data Collection

The interview consisted of three sections of questions. The first section dealt with background information on the participants while the last section asked participants to list the various curriculum, resources, and programs that they utilized in their daily practice to homeschool. The middle sections which contained the most important questions, all of which touched upon various aspects of homeschooling. Regardless of the section or content area, however, all of the questions were formulated into two separate strands. The first part of the question directed the participants to speak on their own personal experience. The second part solicited any advice participants might have to offer about the content from the question that new homeschoolers might be able to apply to their own lives. Included in the interview were questions about the ideation behind nontraditional methods of socialization, behavioral challenges in the context of academic and parental interaction, management of the physical learning environment, and the importance of relationships within the homeschooling community. In regards to all of the responses that participants offered, perspectives varied from individual to individual, but general threads of agreement often made themselves apparent throughout the course of my research.

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Results

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The interview consisted of ten distinct questions about homeschooling**.** Each of the questions from the interview and the subsequent findings will be discussed in detail below, although the participant responses will be kept confidential in order to protect their identities.

Age-Appropriate Socialization

The first question asked, "How do you ensure that your children are being socialized in age appropriate contexts? How would you address concerns that new homeschoolers might have

about socialization?" Because the amount, type, and quality of socialization that homeschooled students receive is often a topic of concern for new homeschoolers, I chose this question to begin the interview process. Although the answers that I received to this question varied slightly between individuals, many of the answers were quite similar to each other.

Participant A listed examples of various activities that are offered in the community -- such as local plays, library events or hiking programs -- that can give homeschoolers the opportunity to become involved with other families, but stipulated that these opportunities are only useful if new homeschoolers are proactive in their search for social outlets for their children since socialization doesn't happen automatically in the world of homeschooling. Participant B listed some of the very same activities and programs as Participant A, but her answer varied slightly. Instead of emphasizing the role of parents in social situations, she focused on the tendency of children to socialize themselves and find other peers with which to interact. In her experience, parents should simply place their children in contexts that provide opportunities for socialization and then let them form friendships on their own from there. She also highlighted the fact that because homeschooled students are constantly at home or out in the community during the day, they often experience a large assortment of authentic social encounters which prepare them for life in the "real world." She described how her children are able to competently interact with individuals from any age range because they grew up watching her do the same as they went about their daily lives.

Not all of the participants' opinions on this topic agreed with one another. Participant C, who had homeschooled her children much earlier than the rest of the participants in the project, described how socializing her children had been fairly difficult. She stated that she had relied almost entirely on church activities and neighborhood kids for socialization when her children

were in school. She admitted that there were many more opportunities for homeschoolers to take part in community events now, but that those advantages were not available to her during the late 80s and 90s. According to Participant D, connecting with other families is a vital component of success and she mentioned that homeschooled co-ops or scouting troops were often quite helpful in facilitating meaningful peer-to-peer interactions between children. She also, however, stressed the importance of parental involvement as families seek to form relationships with other families in the homeschooling community. Without a sustained focus on starting those relationships, she believes that homeschooled students are not able to receive adequate levels of social experience. Participant E was quite adamant in her response to this question, stating that she had gained more friendships in her time as a homeschooling mother than she had possessed throughout the entirety of her previous adult years. She asserted that the quality of socialization homeschooled students receive is entirely dependent on the amount of concerted effort that parents make in that area of their lives. She encouraged new homeschooling families to search for a group of like-minded homeschoolers, if they could find one, and to start their own group if they could not. Participant F likewise articulated her belief that creating opportunities for socialization in the lives of homeschooled students was a crucial aspect of homeschooling success. She admitted that creating new friendships can sometimes be as difficult for parents as for their children, but emphasized the importance of being proactive in this area. Even though finding connections and opportunities of socialization might prove to be more elusive for some families than others, Participant G stressed the advantages of modern life in solving some of those difficulties. She described the ways in which social media has provided much more extensive networks of connections for homeschooling families and encouraged new homeschoolers to utilize online platforms in order to find avenues for socialization.

Behavioral Issues

Question two, which asked, "Does your family experience any behavioral issues in the academic areas of your family life? What advice would you offer to new homeschooling parents who need to balance schooling and disciplining their children simultaneously?" was one of the more difficult questions for the participants to answer. Participant D had pulled her children out of the public school system when they were somewhat older, so she did not think that she was able to offer much advice in this area. Because her children had already learned how to act in a classroom when they were in elementary school, their family did not struggle as much with keeping their daily lives separated from their school lives. She did note that the balance between those two aspects becomes harder to manage as children move into highschool. She attributed this difficulty to the fact that the boundaries of control are not as clear adolescents as they begin working, expanding their social groups, or going through the emotional difficulties associated with the teenage years. When conflict does arise, however, she says that viewing that conflict like a boss in a work environment who needs to set differences aside and focus on accomplishing a task in a cordial, efficient manner often allows her to handle various situations in their family more effectively.

Several of the other participants did not feel like they were able to offer much advice in this area either, but their hesitation came from the fact that the tension between their simultaneous role as a teacher and parent had posed significant problems for them as they homeschooled their children. Participant F admitted that their family had endured sustained periods of conflict with their children, but remarked that while she had not yet discovered exactly how to deal with the tension between her academic and parental responsibilities, giving up should never be considered as an option because the education of homeschooled children is

dependent on the determination of homeschooled parents to keep doing school with their kids, regardless of the difficulties. Participant E noted that her struggles with her children often arose from their resentment of her being both their teacher and their mother and because they disliked having their parents overseeing their schoolwork. In her experience, however, Participant E found that talking about those difficulties and working towards understanding the perspective of *both* the parents and the students often somewhat rectifies the situation. Recognizing that tension and then simply remaining aware of it during day-to-day interactions within the home often allows her to manage their schoolwork much more smoothly. Participant G's response closely resembled that of Participant E, but she offered an additional practical method for dealing with conflict. She described how she had encouraged her children to self-monitor their responses during the school day and take short breaks to relieve their stress levels and help them focus on their work, although she also mentioned that if they were unable to complete their assigned work on a given day, they would lose the privilege of playing with friends in the neighborhood. This strategy helped her children learn how to regulate themselves, which alleviated some of the role tension that she had to deal with as both a mother and teacher.

Participants A expressed similar concerns as Participants E and F but also observed that since motivation for academic endeavors transitions from extrinsic to intrinsic once children move into middle school, combining home instruction with a hybrid co-op model can provide students with the social interactions and accompanying motivation that can often help release some of the tension between homeschooling parents and children. Homeschooling co-ops can also provide families with the accountability that they need in order to remain academically and relationally successful as their students age into a more self-directed mode of learning. Participant B offered a somewhat different perspective on this issue. She indicated that when

new homeschoolers seek out her advice in this area, she typically reminds them that they have been dealing with the struggle of being a parent and a teacher ever since their children were infants. When kids are little, parents constantly move from being a parent and dealing with problematic behaviors to being a teacher and modeling life skills that children need to acquire at a young age. She also mentioned the analogy that Participant D described about the similarities between their experiences with homeschooling and their experiences in the workforce, citing the ability of a boss to separate out personal and professional roles when dealing with people under their supervision.

Importance of Forming Connections

Question three asked, "What importance do you place on forming connections with other parents in the homeschooling community? How would you suggest that families who homeschool cultivate those relationships?" Three separate trends emerged from the participants in response to this question. The responses represented a spectrum of opinions about the concept of forming connections. Participant C, who (as mentioned previously) was a homeschooler almost a decade before the majority of the other families in this project, stated that in her experience, relationships with other homeschooling families was unimportant and that parental dedication to the ideals of homeschooling mattered more than community relationships. None of the other participants shared this opinion, although some of them disagreed with this viewpoint more than others. Participant B's response offered some insight into the reason for this discrepancy by outlining the extent to which homeschooling had become easier in recent years given the large variety and significant accessibility of resources and opportunities in the community that now exist. She mentioned that Covid-19 had made homeschooling somewhat more visible in society, which has allowed homeschoolers more ease of access into groups and

programs in the local area. Once again, she mentioned the importance of parents being intentional with the process of socialization and encouraged new homeschoolers to learn to rely on other families for support and assistance as they work out their own method of homeschooling.

Three of the participants had a slightly different perspective than that of Participant C, one which fell more towards the center of the spectrum of opinions gathered during the interview process. Participants A, D, and G all characterized communal relationships between homeschooling families as extremely helpful, but not absolutely necessary for success. Although Participant A mentioned the advantages of being able to connect with other homeschoolers, she also stipulated that if new homeschoolers want to experience the highest level of success possible within a co-op or similar type of group, they should ensure that their personal goals of philosophy of homeschool should closely resembled that of the community that they join. Participant D explained how simply talking with other homeschooling families about the daily struggle and problems they face can help new homeschoolers, especially, find confidence and sustainability. Participant G noted that while exchanging advice, encouragement, and sympathy with other parents who homeschool is extraordinarily helpful, it does not need to occur overwhelmingly frequently. Especially once children are in middle school and highschool, she believes that even meeting with other homeschooling parents once a month can be sufficient for maintaining relationships in a community.

The opposite end of the spectrum was formed from the responses of participants E and F. They both referred to community as an indispensable aspect of homeschooling, without which success would not be possible. Participant E, in particular, stated that being able to express frustrations and concerns related to homeschooling allows parents to minimize the impact that

daily stressors have on their relationship with their children. In order for new homeschooling families to find connection points within the community, Participant F reiterated her previous statements about socialization opportunities that local programs offer and encouraged parents who are just beginning to homeschool to be patient as they seek to form new friendships with other homeschooling parents, reminding them that while it might take some time for the connections to form, they can prove to be absolutely vital to their efforts as they homeschool.

Practical Aspects of Homeschooling

Question four dealt with some of the more practical aspects of homeschooling by asking, "Have you found any scheduling methods or organizational aids to be especially helpful as you homeschool? What various perspectives of homeschool planning do you think that new families should consider?" Several viewpoints were also represented in the responses to this question, but most of the participants shared points of commonality in their answers. Participant C advised new homeschoolers to choose a curriculum that outlined each day's activities or objectives and provided all of the needed materials in a comprehensive, predictable format. She stated that this method of organization helped keep her on track when working with her students. Participant G used a similar curriculum, but stated that instead of strictly following the curriculum schedule, she organized her children's work into a planner, outlining the assignments that they needed to complete within a two-week time frame and then re-evaluating their progress every two weeks to assess what they still had to finish.

In contrast to these two responses, the rest of the participants' answers all revealed a consistent trend of flexibility and adaptability. According to Participant F, new homeschooling families often fail to realize that homeschooling allows students to assume personal responsibility for their schoolwork, an invaluable skill and life lesson that kids sometimes

struggle to learn in the more structured format of public school. She discussed the importance of helping students organize themselves in whatever way best suits their personal learning style and the physical layout of the home. Having all of the necessary materials for the school day within accessible reach of a central location, such as a kitchen table, has helped her family manage their school day effectively. Participant E also mentioned that collecting books, notebooks, and other school supplies in an individual box for each child helps keep things organized, but firmly stated that schedules fluctuate daily and that organizational methods often adapt themselves over time as well. Because of this fluidity, Participant B noted that taking advantage of opportune moments during the day for school is a crucial key to time management as a homeschooler and warned new homeschooling parents about disregarding real-life situations and experiences as learning and emphasizing the idea that homeschooling is not limited to traditional forms of book-work. She advised homeschooling parents to allow their kids to partake in the flexible and authentic nature of doing school at home.

Participants A and D described slightly different aspects of organization and scheduling. Participant A expressed some of the same observations that other respondents provided, however, she focused more her opinion that while being too dedicated to maintaining a strict schedule can be frustrating and cause insecurities for homeschooling parents, a definite balance exists between freedom and structure in the homeschooling world, admitting that it would be better to err on the side of having more structure than necessary to ensure that progress in being made in terms of removing distractions and accomplishing essential goals during the school year. Participant D voiced her concerns that new homeschoolers might struggle with how to handle scheduling with older students because of how much the transitions that students make each year as they grow older affects the structure of their school day. She recounted how her children had

gradually adjusted their schedules and encouraged parents to include highschool students in the planning and management of their education by asking their kids how they personally envisioned their schedules working out in order to best promote their academic success.

Common Homeschooling Problems

Question five dealt with the issues that are commonly associated with homeschooling and asked, "Based on your experiences, what would you say are the most common problems that are associated with homeschooling? How could new homeschoolers avoid these pitfalls?" Throughout the interview process, three distinct categories of thought emerged from the participant responses. In the first group, participants discussed the importance of the core subjects in homeschooling, although they referred to those critical areas of instruction from two completely different contexts. Participant F indicated that her observations of the approach of unschooling, which emphasizes the idea that living is learning and traditional academic work is unnecessary, can be appealing to certain groups of new homeschoolers, but that if it is not executed extremely well and with rigorous standards of educational experiences, it can be absolutely disastrous. She stressed the importance of embracing the freedom that homeschooling offers while also ensuring that the core subjects (such as language arts and math) were still being taught. The parents, in her opinion, should be extremely cognizant of their responsibility to provide the appropriate amount of quality education to their students, which requires a tremendous level of commitment and engagement from homeschooling families. Participant E also mentioned the importance of providing instruction in the core subjects, but her comments centered more on the importance of not being too rigid with younger learners. She described how easily new homeschoolers can panic as they work to ensure that they complete an adequate amount of work with their students, but reminded them that if their language and math skills are

being addressed sufficiently, the other aspects of education can be so much more fluid in the elementary grades. Participant E's husband also was involved in the interview process, and he remarked that he believed the most common problem that homeschooling families face involved the conflicts and distractions that arise when siblings interact with each other throughout the day. He did not offer any practical solutions for this pitfall, although he laughingly referred to the usefulness of a padded cell for the more difficult children.

The second category of responses for this question focused on feelings of insecurity that new homeschoolers experience, especially when they first embark on their homeschooling endeavors. Participant A asserted that as long as parents are putting in the necessary work required for successful homeschooling, they will indeed be successful, at some point. She stated that parents gain confidence with practice, and that the key to productivity is to cultivate effective time management skills and to refrain from comparing themselves negatively to other families. Participant B echoed these sentiments, conveying her belief that if parents wait until they feel overwhelmed by frustration before seeking help, they will eventually give up on homeschooling. She encouraged new homeschoolers to find experienced homeschoolers who could offer support and advice as they work through their struggles. Participant D also stated that community was the solution to self doubt, especially as students advanced into more complicated subjects and social situations.

The third group suggested that one of the most prevalent problems that new homeschoolers faced involved the additional stress of balancing daily tasks (such as housework) with the academic components of homeschooling. Participant C outlined the various ways in which she adjusted her personal schedule in order to include her household responsibilities while still creating time to do school with her children, although she insisted that outside of extending

her active hours during the day and into the night, she believed that this problem was unavoidable. Participant G, however, proposed a practical approach that might partially solve this problem. She described how her experiences in the classroom before she became a homeschooling parent convinced her that a large percentage of the work that students complete in school can actually be eliminated in the homeschooled setting because of the individualized nature of the structure of home instruction. She observed that without the pressure of having to keep a class of over twenty students occupied and productive, much of the extra or unnecessary portions on worksheets or in assignments should be discarded. These adaptations allow parents to accomplish their goals and meet the standards more effectively than they would be able to outside of their home.

Retrospective Reflections

Question six required participants to reflect on their own experiences with homeschooling and asked, "If you could offer advice to yourself back when you first began homeschooling, what would you tell yourself to do differently? In what ways could families that are just beginning to homeschool apply this knowledge?" Most of the participants were able to answer this question quite easily. Participant A stated that she would have told herself that while attempting to create her own personal eclectic curriculum was an admirable ideal towards which to strive, that approach is extremely difficult when multiple children are involved. She advised new homeschoolers to give a new curriculum the chance to work but to not be afraid of changing after a reasonable amount of time instead of locking themselves into one and only one resource. Participant B elaborated on her views about the role of textbooks compared to the role of apprenticeship by discussing how her children would have benefited more from homeschooling had she created a curriculum that supported their interests and allowed them to explore their

interests or learning styles. She recommended that new homeschoolers design their instruction in such a way that their possible career or academic goals are addressed -- as much as possible -- in the actual textbook work that they complete.

Participant C simply responded that she would have started utilizing a curriculum that provided a comprehensive schedule and clearly delineated daily workload much earlier if she had discovered that type of resource during her first few years of homeschooling. Participant D expressed that she would have admonished her past self to not worry as much as she did when she was a new homeschooler. She remarked that she had found recognizing the generalized benchmarks that students need to reach and putting the rest of homeschool endeavors in perspective based on that knowledge to be a more effective approach. Participant E's response somewhat resembled that answer, although her statements revealed that she would have told herself to relax her expectations since her kids experienced much more success as homeschoolers when they learned in a more organic, student-driven nature, especially when they were in the younger grades. She believes that new homeschoolers should attempt to follow the semblance of a schedule during their school year, but that they should more importantly strive to foster a love of learning through a more flexible approach to academics.

Participant F claimed that she would have told herself not to recreate public school. She would have encouraged herself to build up enough confidence to design her own curriculum and support the learning styles of her children through unit studies and lapbooks instead of more uniform curriculum choices. When asked how she believed that new homeschooling families should apply that advice, she reiterated that parents should take advantage of the extensive knowledge they possess about the nuances of their childrens' personalities and situations to address their strengths and weaknesses in the most individualized method possible. Participant G

responded by repeating her statement from question five in which she stated that children would succeed in school as long as they were making some type of forward progress, regardless of how quickly they were moving through the actual curriculum.

Assessing Outcomes

Question seven, which asked, "How do you measure success with your students? What indicators of academic, social, or emotional achievements should new homeschool students display?" was a more difficult question for participants to answer. Many of the responses that I received only included a few of these components, but two of them included a complete discussion of all three indicators of success mentioned in the question. According to Participant F, she monitors academic success by chapter tests, and when assessing all of the daily worksheets or activities that her students complete, she looks for comprehension and understanding instead of specific grades alone. In terms of social success, she measures her children's competence in that area by placing them in situations where they have the opportunity to demonstrate good citizenship, kindness towards strangers, and empathy towards their peers. Emotionally, she is raising her children to be intuitive and competent as they become more independent within her home. New homeschoolers, she maintains, should determine the qualities that they are seeking to foster in their children and then strive to meet those specific goals as they interact with their kids on a daily basis.

According to Participant B, she evaluates the indicators of success that her children demonstrate in the following three areas. She attempts to gauge whether or not they appear to be content and moderately happy as an indicator of emotional well-being and analyzes their academic success by their abilities to read and then understand the information that they have consumed as well as their abilities to write or speak in a way that accurately communicates their

thoughts and ideas. In addition, she determines their social competence by examining their capacity to problem solve when interacting with real-life situations (which includes mathematical, logistical, and interpersonal difficulties).

Other participants offered partial descriptions in response to various aspects of the main question from the interview. Participant D mentioned that while their family values the results of state testing in order to ascertain that their children are progressing academically, they are more concerned about their children's response to the long term social goals that they as parents have outlined for them, which include being equipped to pursue their God-given calling in life and being able to defend a biblical view of the world. Participant A views success somewhat differently. Instead of focusing on more long term goals, she strives to keep her expectations for her children challenging without being frustrating. She seeks to give them opportunities that propel them forward towards the formation of new skills or the integration of additional knowledge while still supporting them although she also works to avoid frustrated or angry responses from her children as they find themselves thus challenged. Participant G's response contained references to the idea that a successful educational model should address the entire child's well-being. The parents carefully observe their children in order to ensure they are making and then maintaining fulfilling friendships and are not exhibiting self-absorbed patterns of behavior.

Participant D presented her opinions about measuring success by stating that she believes the most valuable indicator of success in her children is displayed when they accomplish difficult tasks or reach challenging goals in their lives. The idea of persevering through hardship featured prominently in her response in terms of academic endeavors (such as writing projects, an aspect of school that has proved to be distasteful to her children). However, she also described several

somewhat unpleasant scenarios that had occurred in their personal lives over the past few months, and she characterized the way in which her children managed to finish out the commitments that they had made was the most important demonstration of success that she had observed her children display in recent years.

Modifications of Home Environment

Question eight asked, "How do you modify your home environment in order to facilitate a space that is conducive to learning? What practical suggestions would you offer to new homeschooling families who are looking to create an appropriate space for educational experiences in their home?" Given that this question dealt with a fairly straightforward topic, most of the participants offered relatively succinct and similar answers. Participant C stated that her chosen method of organization as she homeschooled centered mostly around her kitchen table. All of the books and supplemental materials that her students required were simply stacked on the table and then left there when the children were not directly involved in school-related activities. In recent months, however, she admitted that she had begun to introduce modifications to her home in order to eliminate the piles of schoolwork that often cluttered their living space. Her husband crafted several small stands with bookshelves for her to place in the corners of the room, and this is where the majority of her school supplies were in the process of migrating.

Participant D's response closely resembled that of Participant C. Participant D noted that her children require separate spaces as they complete their school work because they distract one another much too easily which had prompted her to send her students into different areas of the home to study or work on their assignments, but she remarked that designating a specific location in the home for school supplies has helped her keep the living environment much more suited to learning encounters. Participant G also expressed this viewpoint, proposing the idea that

since learning can occur anywhere, homeschooling parents should adapt their living environment to best suit the needs of individual learners. For her older kids, the space that suited their learning styles was their bedrooms while her younger students worked more efficiently at the kitchen table. Participant A also acknowledged that setting a specific space in the home for school supplies allowed her to homeschool more efficiently because that space allowed her to separate herself -- at least, in some aspects -- from the scholastic side of her responsibilities as a parent once the school day had ended. In light of this experience, she advised new homeschooling parents to consider the fact that since their home also acts as their school building, they should attempt to make the physical space in which they work in school with their children as inviting and enjoyable as possible.

In contrast, Participant E mentioned that their family tends to merge their living spaces with their school spaces, although she recognized the difficulty that this arrangement sometimes posed to her children, who occasionally relocated themselves up in the family's attic. However, because of this situation, Participant E recommended that new homeschooling families experiment with the physical layout of their home until they work out which configuration or organizational style offers the highest level of functionality for their specific unique needs as a family. According to Participant B, new homeschoolers should be aware of the time and financial constraints that often limit the physical spaces inside of home in terms of a more traditional school room. They should work to adapt their school day in order to accommodate whatever physical environment they may happen to experience on any given day. For example, she described how her children had often taken spelling tests while in the van and worked on book reports while sitting outside or on the couch. She also stressed the importance of accommodating different types of learners within the home and reflected that perceptions of acceptable school

spaces often shift to reflect a variety of changes that take place in family values and experiences over time. For Participant F's family, this flexibility allowed them to successfully homeschool from the kitchen table, although Participant F observed that their ability to use this shared living space as a school room was only possible because she designed everything to be accessible from her place at the table. She stated that she was able to keep all of the materials, books, and additional supplies that she needed for her school day within her reach, and she encouraged new homeschoolers to model their school spaces in their homes after that principle as well, regardless of how the actual physical layout presented itself.

Advice to New Homeschooling Families

When I created the next question on my interview list, I inadvertently repeated the same exact topic addressed in question seven, so instead of including that information again for question nine, I will instead quickly summarize the comments that participants offered as part of the background section of the interview concerning the advice that they would offer to new homeschooling families who are struggling with negative reactions from their families and friends because of their decision to homeschool their children. Some of the participants did not experience any negative reactions when they announced their intention to homeschool, but those who could relate to this issue gave almost identical pieces of advice. Participant D warned homeschoolers against believing that everyone in their circle of family and friends will eventually come to fully support homeschooling, commenting that the initial negative reactions that she received eventually morphed into dubious tolerance of her choices to homeschool. Participant A stated that as long as both spouses in a marriage are fully committed to the plan of homeschooling, the approval of people outside of the family is helpful but not necessary for success. Participant G recounted the conflict that arose between other close family members and

herself because of her experiments with homeschooling, but reflected that while remaining firm in her decision, she also learned the importance of respectful discourse when informing other people of her interest in homeschooling. She also emphasized the closeness of the relationships that parents and children have with each other and asserted that parents have both the right and the capacity to decide what the best method of schooling is for their own family. Participant A mentioned that concept as well while also encouraging new homeschooling parents to confidently embrace their convictions about homeschooling as a way of life. She observed that those who reject the notion of homeschooling at first will often reconsider their opinions once they witness the positive opportunities that homeschooling offers.

Additional Advice

Question ten asked, "Are there any other pieces of advice that you would like to share with the local homeschooling community that were not addressed in this interview?" About half of the participants declined to add any additional pieces of advice, but the question sought to elicit any remaining thoughts or comments that the interview might not have afforded them the opportunity to express. Participant E urged new homeschooling parents to view their connection with their children as more valuable that their academic goals, and her husband specified that the balance between maintaining reasonable, realistic expectations and educating students in an environment that is academically rigorous and challenged should be carefully motinited to ensure that parents are best fulfilling their role as the both the primary caregivers and the primary educators in the lives of their children. Participant B advised new homeschooling families to find an end-of-year assessor who also homeschools because someone in that role with that background and personal experience would be able to provide feedback and encouragement as new homeschoolers learn how to best conduct their learning directives. In addition, Participant A

outlined her belief that although homeschooling can potentially pose a risk if not executed properly, it also holds the possibility of immense rewards and contended that if parents truly have the best interests of their children at heart, investing the appropriate amount of time and effort into this endeavor, their chances of success are quite high.

Recommended Resources

At the conclusion of the main portion of the interview, participants were asked to list the various resources that they would recommend. Their responses included both curriculum choices as well as a list of programs or services that they had found useful. The most commonly mentioned curriculums and programs/services are listed on the website that I created in conjunction with this project. (Access to the website can be found here: https://sites.google.com/view/the-homeschooling-handbook/home.) New homeschoolers who access the "Handbook for Homeschoolers" website can browse through the short lists of resources and use the provided links in order to further examine them and determine whether or not they might fit well into their family's homeschool routine. The website contains all of the advice described in the previous sections of this paper as well as additional information about homeschooling from the perspective of teenagers who are currently being homeschooled themselves. I conducted four of these student-centered interviews with adolescents from four different families whose parent(s) had participated in the main interview process. The questions and answers that I obtained from these students are presented on the website, but even though all of their responses were engaging, insightful, and would likely prove to be of special interest to new homeschooling parents, the content from those interview questions will not be discussed in detail in this paper, many of their answers contained information that might have compromised their identities if revealed. The responses that could be shared safely and completely confidentially were

published on the website but will not be presented in detail in this paper due to privacy concerns associated with working with minors.

Conclusion

In order to summarize the findings of this project, it is important to consider the guiding question that prompted this research to take place. My question speculated that the local leaders of the homeschooling community in the area surrounding Summit county possessed valuable advice and suggestions that new families who had recently begun homeschooling (especially due to the hardships imposed by the pandemic) would find helpful. After I completed and then analyzed the responses that each of my participants gave, I consolidated all the questions along with their corresponding answers into the "Handbook for Homeschoolers" website so that others could easily access the findings from my research project. Those findings provided evidence to support my hypothesis. The parents who participated in the interview process willingly imparted a large quantity of advice and resource recommendations based on the knowledge that they had each gained from their years of experience as homeschoolers.

In regards to the specific interview questions, I drew several specific conclusions based on the responses that I received. For the first question (which addressed the idea of socialization in the context of homeschooling), the general consensus among my participants seemed to be that as long as parents are intentional about taking advantage of all of the opportunities that various groups and activity offer in their local communities, their students would receive an entirely sufficient amount of socialization experiences. The second question about the tension that exists between the role of teacher and parent for homeschooling families was more difficult for my participants to answer, but most of them expressed the idea that being aware of that tension and working to balance it was the most effective way to manage it, although some of the

interviewees encouraged new homeschooling parents to use self-regulation techniques with their children, involve their children in local co-op opportunities to help them develop a sense of motivation, or view their relationship as similar to that of a boss and employee. Question three dealt with forming connections within the homeschooling community, and this question prompted conflicting responses from my participants with almost all of them arguing that it was either extremely helpful or that it was entirely necessary. Although the most common answers to question four, which asked participants about organization or scheduling methods, involved the idea that flexibility was critical to success in this area, some of the respondents also expressed the opinion that adapting a fully structured curriculum could also be a more effective method of achieving this goal than using eclectic curriculum choices. Question five asked participants to describe common problems that new homeschoolers often experience, and the most common responses that I received centered around issues about delivering instruction in the core subject areas, building competent confidence as an educator, and managing the dual responsibilities in the home as both a parent and teacher.

Question six was relatively easy for my participants to answer because it asked them about the retrospective advice they would have offered to themselves when they first began homeschooling, and I received a variety of answers ranging from curriculum choices, long term goals, and versatility options available to homeschoolers. For question seven, participants had to characterize the ways in which they measure success with their students. While many of the answers only dealt with one or two of the aspects in the interview question, some of the participants noted that they look for indicators of comprehension and understanding instead of depending solely on test scores or grades. In addition, most of them mentioned that they focus

just as much on their children's personal character qualities and social capabilities as they do on their academic performance.

Question eight questioned the principles that guide homeschoolers as they modify their home environment to facilitate education which prompted a variety of answers, most of which involved practical suggestions about effectively utilizing living spaces, providing separate locations for different students, and adjusting their approaches based on the learning styles of their children. Instead of using question nine (which was mistakenly a repeated variation of question seven) in the main analysis section of my paper, I discussed the comments that my participants offered about dealing with negative reactions concerning homeschooling from family members, and many of those comments revealed that my participants believe that new homeschoolers should remain confident in their decision, describing their previous experiences with parents or grandparents who eventually transitioned from critics to supporters once they observed the advantages that homeschooling offers. The final question in the interview asked participants if they posses any additional advice that they wished to share with new homeschooling parents, but only about half of the parents who took part in their interview process responded to this question, mentioning their perspectives about maintaining parent/child relationships, forming realistic and rigorous goals, and choosing homeschool assessors.

Although the body of research involved in this project provided me with an opportunity to create a practical, accessible resource to share with my local community in the form of the "Handbook for Homeschoolers" website, I know exactly which avenue of study I would pursue in the future. If I were able to redesign this project, I would have utilized a two-fold approach that focused on the new homeschoolers themselves instead of just the experienced ones. It would have been beneficial to interview both sets of families in order to first determine which specific

questions that parents who are just starting their homeschooling journey would have been interested in asking "veteran" homeschoolers before conducting the interview that was discussed in this project. Using this procedure would have allowed me to more closely produce a resource that addressed real-life questions from which newer homeschoolers would benefit. Even though this design provides an interesting possibility for future research, I would most likely need to address objections that colleagues might raise about the general design of my research. As noted in the previous section regarding the limitations of this project, this study only involved a very small and a specially selected group of participants, which significantly restricts the usefulness of any conclusions that present themselves as a result of my research. The justifications for choosing a descriptive case study were provided in that same section, but if I were to undertake any subsequent research efforts, I would need to remedy those limitations of design in order to improve the validity of my findings.

As I reflect on this current project, however, I find that I am extremely satisfied with the results. My interactions with the CITI training and the University's IRB application taught me many valuable lessons about the respect and ethical considerations that are required when conducting research with human subjects, and I enjoyed the process of examining the previous research about homeschooling and related issues much more than I originally expected. As I conducted the interviews, I recognized the clear need for additional efforts that need to be made in this area of research. The experienced homeschoolers that I was able to interact with during this project posses an abundance of advice and knowledge that would be of use to new homeschooling families, and while I am proud of the online resource guide that I created, participating in this research project has taught me that I need to find further means of working

to serve and invest into this community of learners and I look forward to dedicating my efforts to the next generation of future homeschooled leaders.

Limitations

Several factors limited the design of this project. First, sample size under consideration was quite small since only seven of the ten families that were invited to participate in the interviews consented to engage with my research. Second, those particular families were chosen to take part in this study because I knew from my previous experience as a homeschooled student and then later as a teaching candidate that they had experienced significant levels of success in their endeavors as homeschoolers. This knowledge exposes another limitation in the design of this project. Because the participants were specifically selected as a result of their expertise in this area of education, the selection process was not at all random or representative. However, the purpose of this study was not to examine a representative population; rather, it was designed to highlight the advice that the families in this descriptive case study could offer with the final goal of creating a practical resource that new homeschoolers could realistically utilize in their daily lives. Lastly, this project's most significant limitation involves the prior relationship that I have with my participants. Even though they were contacted in accordance with the methods outlined by the University of Akron's IRB regulations in order to maintain a certain degree of objectivity between myself as the researcher and these families as participants, it is still possible that their responses were influenced by the personal relationship that I have with each of them. In order to lessen the effect of this limitation, I conducted myself with the highest level of professional distance possible when communicating with my participants and when conducting the interviews.

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