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## **The Decision to Home School Children: Primary Parental and Student Motivators**

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### **Abstract**

In the United States the many parents are deciding to teach their children in their home. This paper explores the factors that influenced the parents' and the students' decisions to home school. Many parents and their children epitomize Margaret Mead's (n.d.) assertion, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." The author conducted a series of one to one interviews with the parents and the following factors were revealed: 1) academic standards, 2) educational reasons, 3) religious values, 4) safety, 5) physical or mental limitations of their child, 6) religious training, 7) societal reasons, and 8) concerns about public education. Once the interviews were completed and coded, each parent received a summary of her/his interview and de-identified summaries of all other interviews. Then as a group these areas of concern were discussed. The first result of these group discussions was the development of consensus definitions for the above factors and secondly an ordinal ranking of these defined factors was created. The factors are listed in order of importance. The author conducted a series of one to one interviews with the students (all 10-12 grade level) and the following factors were revealed: 1) academic standards, 2) educational reasons, 3) safety, 4) societal reasons, 5) religious values, 4) religious training, 5) social networking concerns. Once the interviews were completed and coded, each student received a summary of his/her interview and de-identified summaries of all other interviews. Then as a group these areas of concern were discussed. The first result of these group discussions was the development of consensus definitions for the above factors and secondly an ordinal ranking of these defined factors was created. The factors are listed in order of importance. The operational definitions of the factors developed by the two groups were analogous; but the ordinal ranking was differentiated.

**Keywords:** *Home school; academic achievement; educational reasons; safety*

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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose**

There were four purposes to this paper. There were two qualitative equivalent purposes of this paper. The first purpose was to ascertain the primary factors parents identified in their decision to home school their children and guide them in operational developments of those factors. The second purpose was to ascertain the primary factors students identified in their decision to accept and support their home schooling and guide them in operational developments of those factors. Once these factors were identified and operationally defined the author compared and contrasted their commonalities and ordinal ranking. The author also quantifiably described the students' SAT/ACT scores to the state and national averages.

### **Rationale and background**

Dewey asserted (1897, 1900, 1902, 1916, & 1938) that ideals of democracy and social reform are intertwined and therefore influence each other different in a number of aspects. Therefore education is not a place to increase student academic achievement level but rather students are educated to learn how to live; to actualize their full potential and thereby create the greater good. In essence he closely links education and social change: "...education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction" (1897, p. 16). Dewey stated, "...to prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities" (1897, p. 6).

It is evident that more American parents are rejecting conventional classrooms in favor of educating their children at home. In 1994 there were approximately 340,000 home schooled students (.68%) this increased to 1.1 million students (2.2%) by 2003 and in 2007 this number had increased to 1.5 million (2.9%) (Grady, and Bielick, 2010; NCES, 2009; NCES 2006; & NCES, 2001). This series of increases when compared using the 1994 data as the base represents an increase of 323% in 2003 and to 427% by 2007. The number of children in America being educated at home is still growing. The reasons parents are choosing to remove their children from public or private school institutions are diverse.

### **Methodology**

This author is associated with many home schooling parents and students in the North-Central Florida area. He is a Science/Math teacher resource for home schooling parents and students and has taught many homeschooled students in his home and in their homes. The author used an ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis in this study.

### **Sample Selection**

The participants in this study were recruited in November 2011 from the North-Central Florida by word of mouth, through the local informal home schooling associations, and through local churches. The following selection factors were used to develop the participant pool:

- 1) The participants must be a dyad of parent(s)-student(s),
- 2) At least one parent must be providing the majority of the home schooling to his/her student(s),
- 3) The students must be in the equivalent of the 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grades,
- 4) The parents and students agree to supply the researcher with their SAT/ACT scores, and
- 5) The parents and students agree to a series of one-on-one interviews and a number of group discussions over a period of 6 months.

Through usage of the above selection filters nine (9) parents and twelve (12) students were identified and became part of this study. These participants are reflective of their home schooling culture and to the extent their culture is congruent with other home schooling cultures there could be a limited form of generalizability.

### **Data Collection Actions**

Since I am embedded in the home schooling networks in my area I decided to use an ethnographic approach to most data collection, and a descriptive analysis between the SAT/ACT national/state scores and the students' respective SAT/ACT scores. Ethnography is a qualitative research method utilized to further develop an understanding of a cultural phenomenon which reflects the knowledge and system of meanings guiding the decision of parents to home school and students to accept home schooling. Ethnography is often used to collect gathering empirical data a human culture,

in this case home schooling. To collect the qualitative data I used the following techniques: 1) participant observation, 2) one-on-one interviews, and 3) group discussions.

I have been collecting data using participant observations for the last 2 ½ years. This data were collected by using journals of my experiences as I taught and interacted with home schooled students in the following subjects: 1) biology, 2) chemistry, 3) physical science, 4) algebra I, 5) algebra II, 6) physics, and 7) trigonometry. All of the student subjects in this study have been students of mine in many of the subject areas listed above. I also know all the parent subjects in this study through social and church related activities. I also have been journaling my experiences as I interacted with the parents and students of the students in many differing milieus.

During the qualitative one-on-one data collections I will use an unstructured interview approach and the Negotiated Rule Making process. In essence I will have a series of conversations with each parent participant about her/his reasons for home schooling his/her children, and a series of conversations with each student participant about her/his reasons for accepting and valuing home schooling. Moreover, during the one-on-one interviews and group discussions I used the techniques used in Negotiated Rule Making to help the subjects develop their understandings of the questions and associated issues. Negotiated Rule Making is the process used in some federal regulation making to develop a consensus view between diverse groups

To secure the quantitative data I collected all students' official ACT/SAT and descriptively compared their scores with the Florida ACT/SAT scores as well as the US ACT/SAT scores.

## Results and Conclusions

### Qualitative Data

The factors that emerged in both interview groups (students and parents) were operationally defined by the parents and students in a very similar manner. But while the parents identified '*physical or mental limitations of their child*' and '*concerns about public education*' as the fifth and eighth most important factors for home schooling their children, the students did not identify these two factors at all. Rather the students identified the factor '*social networking concerns*' as a reason to be home schooled.

Table 1. Ordinal Ranking of Parental and Student Factors for Homeschooling

Ordinal Rank	Parental Factors	Ordinal Rank	Student Factors
1	Academic Standards	1	Academic Standards
2	Educational Reasons	2	Educational Reasons
3	Religious Values	3	Safety
4	Safety	4	Societal Reasons
5	Physical/Mental Limitations of Student	5	Religious Values
6	Religious Training	6	Religious Training
7	Societal Reasons	7	Social Networking Concerns
8	Concerns About Public Education		

**Operational Definitions of Qualitative Items and Discussion** While the above table columns contain very similar terms, it is necessary to examine the operational definitions each group assigned to the above terms. This section will discuss those operational definitions. The parents and students agreed as to the first two reasons for home schooling.

**Academic Standards.** This term was defined by parent and student groups to mean, *college preparation level work, to be able to think objectively, to be able to critically analyze subject areas, opinions, and scholarly materials.*

**Educational Reasons.** This term was defined by the parents to mean, *the ability to succeed in life whether that was college, technical college, apprenticeships, or the work force.* Conversely, the students understood educational reason to mean *the ability to succeed in college.* While these terms are disparate the expanded parental definition reflects their more extensive life experiences, whereas the students have a more narrow vision of educational reasons, i.e. college.

**Religious Values & Safety.** These two items were ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> for the parents and students. Religious values were ranked 5<sup>th</sup> by the students and safety was ranked 4<sup>th</sup> by the parents. The operational definition of religious values for both these was very similar. Parents saw religious values as *the ability for students to live their values. By this they meant being Christian young people that reflect Christian values and the ability to do so without coercion from faculty, students, or other educational powerful people.* Students on the other hand so religious values *the ability to do all the things their*

parents discussed but also the freedom to speak about their Christian beliefs and defend those beliefs using apologetics and logic.

**Societal Reasons.** This item was ranked 4<sup>th</sup> by the students and 7<sup>th</sup> by the parents. The operational definitions of societal reasons by parents and students resulted in a large degree of similarity, but the emphases of the groups were dissimilar. Parents defined societal reasons as *the betterment of society concerning a safer and more prosperous society*. Students also perceived these two attributes of societal reason, *but their principle definition was the increase in a Christian based society*. When I discussed this attribute the students talked about the degraded moral standards of society and the lack of an objective basis for an ethical standard of right and wrong.

**Physical/Mental Limitations of Student.** This aspect of factors that influence home schooling was only a factor according to the parents. The parents ranked this factor 5<sup>th</sup> in importance. The students did not see this as important. The parents defined this factor as *the right environment for their children to excel to their maximum potential*. Because this factor was not seen by the students as important I had a series of discussions with them about their ability to excel. *All the students were focused on becoming the best they could be in all subject areas, and they show themselves as success people*. This view by the students could be an effect of their young.

**Religious Training.** This factor ranked 6<sup>th</sup> was defined by both students and parents in the same manner. Both groups' operationally defined religious training to mean *the ability and freedom to read and study the Holy Bible to further their understanding of God's plan for the world and the one pathway to salvation*. They saw this as *enabling them to fulfill the great commission set forth by Jesus Christ in Matthew*, "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:16-20 New International Version).

**Social Networking Concerns.** An item that influenced home schooling selection was only a factor according to the students. The students ranked this factor 7<sup>th</sup> in importance. The parents did not assign any value to this item. The students defined this item as *the ability to openly interact with many people of all ages in order to establish friendships and other relationships*. I asked the students in a series of follow ups questions why they wanted to establish these relationships. Their main reason was enrichment of their lives and the enrichment of others due to the new and growing relationships. Because this factor was not seen by the parents as important I had a series of discussions with them about what they thought of social networking concerns. Most parents perceived social networking as Facebook, texting, etc. *The parents were focused on helping their children become well rounded educated adults but they did not see this aspect of education*. This view by the parents could be an effect of their age.

**Concerns About Public Education.** This was a factor only for the parents. From our discussions it seemed that this was a reflection of the other seven factors. The parents agreed with the statement, *the schools do not care about students in the main; they (schools) only see students as a means of getting money*.

Table 2. Descriptive Comparison of 2010/11 ACT/SAT Scores [FL & USA] with Student Scores

Stu #	ACT Score	FL ACT Score	% Diff	US ACT Score	% Diff.	SAT Score	FL SAT Score	% Diff	US SAT Score	% Diff
1	19.9*	19.6*	1.53%	21.1*	-5.69%	1489	1447*	2.9%	1500*	-0.73%
2	20.3**	19.5**	4.10%	21.0**	-3.33%	1551	1473**	5.30%	1509**	2.78%
3	21.5*	19.6*	9.69%	21.1*	1.90%	1687	1447*	16.59%	1500*	12.47%
4	19.6*	19.6*	0.00%	21.1*	-7.11%	1474	1447*	1.87%	1500*	-1.73%
5	20.6*	19.6*	5.10%	21.1*	-2.37%	1547	1447*	6.91%	1500*	3.13%
6	20.0*	19.6*	2.04%	21.1*	-5.21%	1490	1447*	2.97%	1500*	-0.67%
7	22.4**	19.5**	14.87%	21.0**	6.67%	1755	1473**	19.14%	1509**	16.30%
8	21.6**	19.5**	10.77%	21.0**	2.86%	1952	1473**	32.52%	1509**	29.36%
9	19.7*	19.6*	0.51%	21.1*	-6.64%	1548	1447*	6.98%	1500*	3.20%
10	19.8*	19.6*	1.02%	21.1*	-6.16%	1511	1447*	4.42%	1500*	0.73%
11	19.6*	19.6*	0.00%	21.1*	-7.11%	1437	1447*	-0.69%	1500*	-4.20%
12	20.0*	19.6*	2.04%	21.1*	-5.21%	1589	1447*	9.81%	1500*	5.93%

\* 2011 data, \*\* 2010 data Students scoring above FL or USA scores

## Discussion of Quantitative Items

The discussion of these quantitative items will be descriptive only. There are not enough data points and subjects to attempt inferential analyses. There are two main points of descriptive comparison for this group is:

- 1) These students [except for one student #11] all scored higher on the ACT and SAT when compared to the Florida state average. The extreme difference between the numbers of subjects in these groups is another reason that inferential analyses are inappropriate, and
- 2) These students when compared to the USA ACT and SAT averages revealed a different outcome. In this case 14 of possible 24 scores were below the USA ACT and SAT averages, while 10 scores were above USA ACT and SAT averages.

An observation of these data streams is the home schooled students in this student reflected a similar scoring pattern as other Florida students about the FL/USA SAT/ACT scoring differential. This aspect of the study is ripe for further investigation using quantitative inferential analyses is an adequate number of home schooled students can be recruited to ensure a valid comparison between the two groups.

## Limitations

The primary limitation is one that is directly linked to qualitative research; qualitative defines the reality it purports to measure. If you think about it, terms such as "Academic Standards", "Educational Reasons", "Religious Values", "Safety", "Societal Reasons", "Physical/Mental Limitations of Student", "Religious Training", "Societal Reasons", "Social Networking", and "Concerns About Public Education" only exist according to a definition. In this research the participants themselves developed the definitions. You cannot comprehend or discuss any of the above factors unless you first define what it means to you.

Once a term is operationally defined that term is functionally real to the researcher and all participants. Now you know exactly what you mean and it can be measured. Unfortunately, it also means that your scale of measurement shapes your understanding of the term. In practical terms consider the term "aggression." Aggression only exists to the extent that you are able to come up with a way of measuring it. The measurement you make then indicates a person's level of aggression. However, we need to ask ourselves the basis upon which we can conclude that this is a valid test? What if someone else were to come up with a different test for aggression - which would be a more valid measurement?

While qualitative research is often described as being data-rich results the results are not projectable. Because the analysis is subjective and deals with a small sample size, projectability is not possible. Another common misconception is the expectation that qualitative research will always produce definitive conclusions. In reality, the results will not provide the researchers with definitive conclusions, but usually will provide enough information to establish a firm basis for decision making.

## Implications

The primary implication of this research is both parents and students are driven by enlightened self-interest. The parents firmly believe that their actions are beneficial to their children. Many of the participant parents have been home schooling their children for 10-12 years and are dedicated to the giving their children the best possible opportunity to excel in their academic outcomes and educational reasons. The students are also operated in what they perceive to be their best interests in home schools. Both sets of participants agreed on the two primary movers of their actions; academic outcomes and educational reasons.

The foundational implication is all of the participants see educational considerations as the principal determinant in students' success in post-secondary and life endeavors.

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