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## **Home-Schooled Students' Perceptions of the Transition to Public School: Struggles, Adjustments, and Issues**

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TODAY IN AMERICAN culture, almost everyone is familiar with home schooling. Most people either know someone who home schools their children or at least have heard of a family that has selected this rapidly increasing alternative to public and private education. By all accounts, the movement has been growing steadily over the past few years. Early estimates indicate that approximately 15,000 students were home schooled in 1984 with that number increasing in 1988 to between 200,000 and 300,000 students (U. S. Department of Education, 1988). Circa the fall of 1999, it was estimated that there were between 1.2 to 1.7 million students grades K-12 home schooled in the United States (Lines 1998; Ray 1999). This growth not only testifies to parents' demands for alternative and less institutionalized options for their children's education, but has established home schooling as a significant and legitimate force in the American educational landscape.

There is evidence of increased support of home schooling. Apple (2000) argues that "if one of the marks of the growing acceptance of ideological changes is their positive presentation in the popular media, then home schooling clearly found a place in our consciousness" (p. 256). The popular media offers positive portrayals of home schooling in the national press, television and radio talk shows, and numerous widely read, popular magazines. The American public sees and reads about home schooled students who win or do well in National Spelling and Geography competitions, home schooled students who enter prestigious universities, and how universities now recruit and accommodate home schooled students. They see the results of various studies (for example Rudner 1999) about home schoolers' academic achievements compared to their public school counterparts. However, one aspect of home schooling that the media or research studies fail to report, centers on home schooled students who, after a significant period of time, enter the public school system.

Although most parents plan to home school their children through the high school years (Ray 1999), for many families their reasons for home schooling change as their children mature and they decide to enroll their children into conventional schooling. Thus, after several years of being schooled at home, many children eventually enter public education and face various struggles and issues as they adapt to their new learning and social environments.

The purpose of this study is to describe, from the home schooled students' perspectives, the struggles and issues they face as they enter the public school classroom. In particular, the study describes the reasons why families discontinue home schooling and the ideological conflicts that are persuasive when home schooled students transition into public schools. Finally, several suggestions are provided for families who are considering the transition from home school to public education.

### **Methodology**

#### **Objectives of This Study and Research Design**

The guiding research questions for this study are as follows:

- Why do home schooled students enroll in public schools?
- Are there any adjustments or issues that home schooled students face as they transition to public school?
- How do administrators, teachers, and peers view home school students?
- Are home schooled students' values and beliefs tested as they enter public school?

In order to investigate these questions, qualitative research presented the ideal framework because an essential aspect of qualitative research is the importance of providing the informants an opportunity to speak

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face as they enter public school. Bear in mind that there is no claim for generalizability and the conclusions are loosely and generally drawn.

### **Suggestions for Parents Who Are Considering the Transition to Public School**

THIS STUDY SUGGESTS that there are several struggles and adjustments home schooled students face when they transition into public schools. Based on these findings, I offer several recommendations regarding what parents can do to help a home school student's transition to be less stressful and help their children achieve academic and social success in their new school environment.

First, students who experienced successful transitions to public school indicated that a major reason for this success was their previous acquaintance and relationships with a significant number of the students who attended their local public school. Developing these friendships enables home schooled students to experience smoother transitions into the public school system. Therefore, parents who are considering enrolling their home schooled children into public school should seek out and provide opportunities for their child to meet and develop relationships with students who attend the local public school. These relationships were mostly developed through community team sports. However, sports may not be an interest for some children and parents must find other available avenues for their children to interact and develop relationships with public school students such as scouting, church activities, visits to places like the public pool, and other community activities involving children. In addition, the friends of parents who enroll their children in public school can be a vital resource that may aid in their child's transition.

Second, for many home school students, they have limited conventional schooling experiences and the experiences they do have are based on other children's perspectives. Parents need to discuss, teach, and provide experiences for home schooled students that will prepare them for the transition. For example, one participant stated that his mother "tried to make things as close as possible to public school towards the end of my home school year. My last month of home schooling had more structure than before." Home schooling parents should prepare their children for their transition to public schools and classrooms, answer any questions regarding public education, prepare them for academic aspects and skills that home schools might not address such as test taking, and be willing to discuss the new experiences with the students. One student stated "I talked with my parents everyday after school about

issues that came up during the day... this really helped." Finally one student suggested that

Before any decision is made to place a student into a school setting, if possible allow the student to experience the school, taking classes, doing assignments just like it would be if enrolled (as much as possible). The reality cannot be seen in one day but this will enable them to get a sense of the reality of public schooling.

Although this option may be difficult, talking to students who attend public school or better yet, students who have made the transition to conventional schooling, would be beneficial to home school students who are considering enrollment in public school.

Third, develop ways that can be used to provide students with opportunities to deal with challenges to their values and beliefs. Home schooled students need to be exposed to oppositional perspectives as they study literature, social sciences, and the sciences. For example, extensive studies that compare and contrast evolution with creation would seem to prove useful as they enter public education. Home schooled students need opportunities to be able to develop and articulate sound arguments for their beliefs and views (if these differ from public school). More important, these students should begin to think out how they will deal with conflicts to their beliefs and values when they face these in the public school classroom.

Finally, there are multiple factors that shape and influence the home school experience for each individual student. This, in turn, will affect the individual student's experience as they enter public school. These include, but are not limited to, the primary reasons the family home schools, the number of siblings that were simultaneously home schooled, the personality and maturity of the home schooled child, and the specifics as to the structure and style of the home schooled environment. One student stated, "One must keep in mind that every child's threshold is unique. School can work to the advantage of many students who are ready to embrace the system." The key element is that parents must know their children very well and must be capable of objectively and honestly evaluating their child's strengths, weaknesses, readiness, and maturity level. Only then will parents be able to meet their child's specific needs and aid them in their transition to public schooling.

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## What Are British Home Educators Opting Out Of?

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### **A Brief History of Schooling From the 1500s to the 1980s**

HOME EDUCATORS ARE parents who have opted out of the “educational system” of the society in which they live. This definition is only meaningful if one can specify what it is that has been opted out of. In the case of Britain such specification is difficult since the British educational system has, for the last twenty years, been going through a period of rapid change whose pace, under the influence of current political, technological, and economic changes in British society, has recently accelerated. This paper has therefore the difficult task of attempting, in short compass, to characterize a moving target. It will do so in the form of a brief history which will for simplicity’s sake confine itself to England and Wales and ignore Scotland which, American readers may be surprised to learn, has its own legal system, its own form of currency, and its own educational system.

Before the 1500s, the only educated (literate) people were the clergy and the only educational institution was the Church. The fifteen hundreds saw the establishment of fee paying schools for the laity called grammar schools, so called because they taught English, Latin, Greek, and elementary mathematics and it was in one of these that Shakespeare acquired his “small Latin and less Greek.” These fee paying, though endowed, schools prepared their male pupils for entry at the age of fourteen to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge which provided what little secondary education was available.

It was not until the nineteenth century that any great effort was made to create a literate population. The motivation of this effort was religious: the masses had to be taught to read so that they could read the Bible. Unfortunately, from the point of view of the creation of a coherent educational system, the nineteenth century was a time of the proliferation of religious denominations which dissented from the established (English national) Church of England. All

these religious groups were concerned to inculcate their own religious principles in their pupils as a way of ensuring that they had members in the next generation and were therefore in competition with each other. While this competition increased the quantity of educational provision, it also increased its diversity.

After 1870, the granting of the vote to a substantial section of the working classes inspired the national government to establish a system of universal schooling. The motivation this time was political not religious; as one of the supporters of such provision remarked: “We must teach our new masters their letters!” And that was about all the system was designed to do. Some form of schooling was made compulsory for all children between five and eleven. National schools were set up to supplement the education provided by the religious schools. The curriculum of the new schools was (with one exception) confined to the three ‘R’s - Reading, ‘Riting, and ‘Rithmetic. The establishment of a universal system of national education was impossible because of the opposition of the religious groups who were allowed to maintain their own church or denominational schools and who insisted that religious instruction was part of the curriculum of the new national schools.

In the twentieth century, the educational system expanded with the piecemeal creation of secondary schools and financial aid to the religious schools in return for their employing properly trained teachers and following a centrally prescribed curriculum. The school leaving age was raised in 1918 to 14. There was also some provision of technical schools. A proper system of education was not really instituted until the 1944 Education Act which provided for free education until 15 for all. It developed a clear terminology for describing educational levels and classes of school appropriate to each: primary (5-11 years), secondary (11-18 years), and tertiary (18 years +). Secondary schools were to be divided into three types (the “tripartite system”): grammar schools for the

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(note a, June 15, 1998). On opening the bag I found a further note which explained that one “teaching” session had been taped, but that the quality was not good and had therefore been “wiped.” “Apologies for not doing any more, but there simply hadn’t been enough time” (extract from note b, June 15, 1998). One of the two hour tapes I had given them was jammed and had been replaced by another. (I have since managed to mend the jammed tape and when played, it has recorded snatches of muffled conversation between Sally and Briony barely audible under the soundtrack of the film *Jungle Book* which I assume was playing on the television or video.) A slightly encouraging “rider” was that Sally had made some notes during some sessions and about her thoughts in general and would be sending me these in the post. To date I have not received them, nor managed to regain contact with the family either by telephone (numerous calls during the day and evening with no answer) or in reply to my letter to them in July. The latter explained that I would very much like them to be involved in my research project and invited them to negotiate ways of continuing this with me. After writing it I felt that I needed to “reward” their kind efforts to date (initial interview) and reassure them not to feel that they have let me down too much. I currently feel that I will persist in my attempts to make contact with them again as they not only represented my sole engagement with a homeschooling family, but had valuable links with a local Education Otherwise network.

With hindsight, however, I feel that I must pose a set of self-reflexive questions about my methodology and whether or not my fieldwork experiences to date (within this small-scale study) have produced data worthy of analysis, bearing in mind my initial investigation into the power balance in the parent-child relationship and its influences on the teaching methods used and the quality of learning for the child educated at home. Where possible, I will discuss the following issues with others (colleagues on the Ed.D. course, my tutor, friends, and family):

1. Should I have negotiated the taping/recording exercise with Sally and Briony more thoroughly? What were the reasons I did not?
2. Was the length of time for the self-recording too long?
3. Were there any early clues in my contact with the family of their vulnerability (to case study research involving interview, self-recording, etc.)?
4. Moreover, were there any indications from the initial interview and my observational notes that they would “drop out” — e.g., infringing on their private life, revealing problem areas that they would not have otherwise revealed and felt the need to address?

Assuming then that privacy is a matter of importance in everyday life, including research

that purports to present risks no greater than those in everyday life, the problem becomes one of recognising when a risk of invasion of privacy is present. (Melton, 1992, p. 65, 66)

Am I in fact engaged in a study of the privacy of the family as part of case study approach to homeschooling? In common parlance privacy can be described as “I know when I see it.” It is an elusive constraint that has unclear and probably idiosyncratic limits. Indeed, privacy may be described better as “I know when I feel it”— personal violation (body search, body language interpreted), gossiped about (quotes from interviews summarized or quoted), having one’s mail read (quoting from letters, stories, etc.), or having one’s house entered without permission (permission to enter, but not explicitly to answer all of these questions). Privacy is difficult to define, yet it can (or its perceived invasion), as I have discovered, be a major block to case study research. They will not explicitly say that they do not want to be involved in your study any more — they will just vanish into the distance!

### Concluding Thoughts

THIS PAPER HAS, in essence, been a self-analytical piece. It has mapped out my methodological journey from initial contacts with two families, interviews with them which led to a small-scale study proposal, then faltering steps into fieldwork guided by a desire to learn more about their homeschooling experiences and in particular how their parent-child relationship affected learning. Along this route I have followed my own instincts as a researcher, parent, and teacher (with occasional pauses for self-reflection), and accepted guidance from a range of authors and colleagues. However, what emerges as the most important aspects for me to take on board in this methodological analysis has been the issue of recognizing the limiting affects of privacy and how I can fine-tune my researcher sensitivities and research tools to strengthen my case-study investigations.

In asking for an interview with one person, I plan to invade her privacy — expose at least some of her private self. This “invasive” approach can, of course, be made more “comfortable” for the person being interviewed — negotiating clear boundaries for questions, talking to her on her “home-ground,” and offering the chance to censor or alter the “account” on reading the transcript or listening to the tape. My self-appointed task to “invade” a family’s privacy, I feel, necessitates an approach which has to take this “comforting” aspect very seriously and rigorously. The self-reflexive questions I have posed above should help me in this quest for a refined methodology. I need to make contact with other homeschool families and will

require a better “template” for my planning and intervention stages. As I have explored in this paper, I will also need to re-focus this investigation into parent-child relationships within the homeschool family to look more closely at the notion of “natural learning.” I will also need to increase my understanding of the powerful influence on my methodology — the privacy of the family, which, in my limited fieldwork experience, I have found to be particularly poignant to those who practice homeschooling.

By trying to “get inside” families who homeschool, perhaps I am also attempting to understand my feelings about how a family operates, how I as a parent “educate” my children (who all go to school) and, perhaps more pertinent to my “outsider researcher” stance, how I as a teacher using the research methods I choose, understand the complexities of “education” and the role that parents and children play in developing their learning.

Author’s Note: The names of the case-study families have been anonymized.

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