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## Home Schooling Children With Special Needs: A Descriptive Study

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HOME SCHOOLING HAS been an educational practice in the United States since colonial times. Its popularity has ebbed and flowed over the centuries. Within the last 2 decades, the home schooling movement has been experiencing a resurgence and gaining momentum (Mayberry, Knowles, Ray, & Marlow, 1995). Current home schooling population estimates range from 500,000 (Lines, 1996) to 1.7 million students (Ray, 1999) with a current yearly rate of growth of about 15% (Kennedy, 1997). Researchers have not yet established the number of children within that general population who require special education. However, it is apparent that there is a significant number of these students as evidenced in literature within the home school community, such as *Home Education Magazine* and *Home School Court Report*.

With the growing home school population, there are also tributes to its success in learner outcomes (Farris, 1997; Klicka, 1995; Ray, 1997; Rudner, 1999). Duvall, Ward, Delquadri, and Greenwood (1997) even suggested that learning disabled students who are educated at home experience greater academic success than their counterparts in a public school setting. The apparent legitimacy of home schooling as an educational practice as well as the increased success of home school advocates in garnering favorable state regulations have brought encouragement to the movement.

The atmosphere of success and relative acceptance of home schooling has brought about a number of consequences. More parents are continuing to withdraw their children, some of whom have special education concerns, from conventional schools to educate them at home (Dahm, 1996). However, at the same time, many of these parent-teachers are seeking access to conventional schools to enroll students on a part-time basis in academic courses and extracurricular activities, or to make use of resources and programs for both students and parents (Dahm, 1996; Lines, 1996; Terpstra, 1994). In Iowa, Dahm reported that a

proportion of these families desiring part-time enrollment had special education needs.

In interpreting policy resulting from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education (OSEP) advised that school districts must include home educated children in their child-find activities (National Association of State Directors of Special Education [NASDSE], 1998). All children deemed eligible under federal funding provisions can be served through the public schools—whether in attendance there or in private or home settings. School districts must also determine ways to accommodate these students and include them in their accountability reporting. Additionally, a growing number of state legislatures are enacting regulations to accommodate home schoolers' access to public schools, and school districts are developing programs to follow suit (Hawkins, 1996). Educators can develop programs and accommodations that will be effective if they have a greater understanding of the nature and needs of the population with whom they are concerned. This study provides descriptive information on the home school special needs population. Furthermore, it provides insight into (a) why parents of special needs students are choosing to educate them at home, (b) how those home schools are conducted, and (c) what the families' perceptions are of the success of their undertaking.

### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to provide a description of the factors that characterize special needs home schooling students along with their families and school settings. Additionally, a comparison will be made to the general population of home schooling students, including their families and school settings. Specifically, this study answers the questions:

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Adam (4 years) and Grace (19 months).

Category	Ray (1997)	Duffey (1999)
Mean educational level - F	15.6 yrs	14.8 yrs
Mean educational level - M	14.7 yrs	14.3 yrs
Major occupation category: Father	Professional I/II (tied at 17%)	Professional I (19%)
Major occupation category: Mother	Homemaker/home educator 88% Professional 5%	Homemaker/home educator 74% Professional 10%
Formal teaching – Mother	88%	87%
Formal teaching – Father	10%	8%
Formal teaching – Other	3%	5%
Major race/ethnicity – Mother	96% white	88% white
Major race/ethnicity – Father	96% white	89% white
Average number of children	3.3	3.3
Average age of child in study	10.5 yrs	9.8 yrs 9.0 yrs (special needs)
Two-parent families	98%	97%
Computers used in homes	86%	91%
Teacher certification – Mother; Father	15%; 6%	12%; 6%
Major curriculum choices	Parent designed 76% Package 24%	Parent designed 58% Package 23%
Major extracurricular activities	Sunday school 84% Field trips 77% Group sports 48%	Sunday school 77% Field trips 75% Group sports 44%
Average number of years in: home education/child conventional education/child	4.8 0.4	3.8 3.6

**Table 2.** Comparison of the results of Ray’s study to the results of survey of special needs families.

### The School Day: Juggling Children and Chores

*I quickly took my seat in a lounge chair in the living room and pulled out my notepad as Diana and all three children sat cross-legged in a circle in the middle of the rug. “There are seven days, there are seven days, there are seven days in a week. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday,” they sang. Grace, with hand gestures, indicated that she wanted to sing “Deep and Wide.” Caleb helped her with the hand motions as they sang the children’s Sunday school song. Adam played with a small motorcycle keeping rhythm with the song while they sang. The singing over, Diana led Caleb into the dining room to locate the day’s date on a large calendar that hung on one wall amid completed school worksheets and drawings. Adam followed the two, and Diana put him to work at the large, antique dining table. “Circle the letter N,” she instructed him as he grabbed a crayon from a plastic container.*

*While Adam was getting settled, Caleb wandered back to the living room and banged out some “music” on the old, upright piano in the corner and then spied a small, toy lizard. He playfully placed it on my head when Diana summoned him back to the dining room. I*

*moved to a chair in the schoolroom to have a better view of the events in there. Caleb sat down next to his mother at a child’s table and chairs placed in the bay window section of the dining area. Diana presented a lesson on plural noun endings. Explaining the rule, she wrote on a marker board. Caleb quickly grasped the idea and spelled correctly the examples she placed on the board. “I am smart!” he yelled. He giggled frequently and interjected, “This is fun!” while changing each “c” ending to “ches.”. Moving to the large table, he completed a worksheet vocalizing throughout the exercise and painstakingly writing in large, block letters the spelling words. Diana moved from Adam to Caleb and back constantly providing positive feedback to their work. In the meantime, Grace wandered around the room jabbering happily and still “singing.”*

*As Adam successfully completed his preschool lesson, he left the room and Diana resumed the lesson on plural endings moving back to the marker board. Again, Caleb grasped the concept of changing “fe” to “ves” and completed another worksheet. While Caleb and Diana were continuing their teaching/learning sequence, Grace was getting increasingly noisy and*

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*wouldn't have gotten or they would have had to wait and they would have gotten frustrated."*

### Analysis of Observations and Interviews

Individual family profiles and cross-case themes emerged in the analysis process. Although there were the similarities that created the themes, it became apparent that home schooling is still a unique practice. The profile of each family and the needs of the children produced distinctively different "schools." These home schools sought to provide a "child-centered" education customized to the needs and ability of each child, but probably a more accurate description of that education would be "needs-based" and "mother-directed." The needs of the children were important in these families. However, the needs of the family were equally esteemed. Home schooling has given the families an element of control over lives seemingly disrupted by challenging learning needs. The mothers were the strong voices in all of these families. The father's support of the practice was evident through the mother's reporting.

The learning needs noted in this study may have been more stressful due to a father's occupation, lack of local school system resources and support, and multiple disabilities in a family. As great as the commitment is in home schooling, it became the solution to life's challenges for these families. As one mother stated, "I think [home schooling] has kept us together over the last 7 years." As to regaining control, another mother stated, "What I really like about home schooling is that you get your own kid back. That is certainly true with regular kids, but especially with special needs kids."

### Discussion

THIS STUDY WAS an attempt to describe the phenomenon of home schooling special needs children and was exploratory in nature. Although the focus of the study was a segment of families within the greater population of home schooling families, there was still a wide range of diversity contained therein. The unique status of each family due to demographic and educational background as well as the nature of the special need must be kept in mind when making generalized statements about the population and their practice of home schooling.

This study did not attempt to draw conclusions concerning academic and social progress of the home schooled children as compared to conventionally schooled children except to report the perceptions of the parents. However, there is a natural tendency to do so. In order to accomplish this task, it would be valuable to look into the specific areas of diagnoses to determine

efficacy of the practice for those children. Duvall et al. (1997) recommended that more studies of experimental design on home schooled learning disabled students follow their work. No matter what the choice of methodology, the focus of the population should be narrowed to the disability. Then the question of whether autistic children or hearing impaired children learn more effectively in a home school or conventional school setting could be answered. Similarly, the often asked question about adequate socialization could also be answered when narrowing the population to a specific special education category.

Duvall et al. (1997) focused on academic engagement time as the critical variable in determining whether home schooled children with learning disabilities could make adequate academic gains. More research should be considered to study the effects of academic engagement time and other practices such as direct teaching. Since the unequal amounts of one-on-one instruction became an issue in this study, how many home schools are able to provide an equitable arrangement for the students? Is there any relationship between the amount of instructional time received and academic progress?

The value and effectiveness of any educational process, content, or context is in the final product. Taking a look at that product for only a moment in time can produce some interesting data, but looking at that same product over time probably delivers a much clearer and more telling picture. Longitudinal follow-up data about the participants in this study could produce a commentary about the effects of their schooling on their transition into conventional schooling at any level or into the work force. This recommendation might also be extended to include a survey of school districts to determine numbers and profiles of special needs children transitioning into local schools from home schools. Just how successful are these students in academic achievement and social adjustment? Which students make the transition and which do not?

Philosophies have been major points of contention between the home school community and the professional educators. A study that compares and contrasts the views and perspectives on education of the two communities would be valuable to help bridge the philosophical gap. We have seen the criticism home schoolers have leveled at public schools. What are the areas of concern professional educators have about home schoolers?

One final recommendation for research is born from my arduous task of enlisting research participants. Interviewing home school parents as to their reluctance

## PERSPECTIVES<sup>1</sup>

### Home Schooling as a Key Factor in a Political Election: A Case Study

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AS AN EDUCATIONAL movement, home schooling continues to experience phenomenal growth. Currently, an estimated 1.5 to 1.7 million children (Golden, 2000); Ray, 1999) are home schooled in the United States. Research on the academic achievement and social adjustment of home schooled children abounds, as well as research presenting the beliefs, practices, socioeconomic levels, educational background, and ethnicity of home schooling parents. Although some voices have offered negative commentaries on the practice of home school (e.g., Apple, 2000; Lubienski, 2000; National Education Association, 1990; Peterson, 1997), research studies indicate that home schooled students perform well in terms of both academic achievement (Ray, 1997, 1999, 2000; Rudner, 1999; Wartes, 1988) and social and psychological development (Kelley, 1991; Medlin, 2000; Shyers, 1992). Home education is thriving; its ranks are swelling, and its children – according to the most current research – are flourishing.

Given these firmly established facts, one cannot help but wonder what impact the home schooling

movement might have on other aspects of society, particularly the political. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the impact of home schooling in the political arena, specifically the role this educational choice played in a race for Tennessee state representative of the 38<sup>th</sup> district. Prior to looking at the specific, however, a brief look at the national political landscape will help to place matters in better perspective, as follows.

#### **Home Schooling in the National Political Arena: An Overview**

THE HOME EDUCATION movement is not only experiencing a growing acceptance within the popular culture (Kantrowitz & Winger, 1998; Lines, 1996), it is also finding an increasingly strong and rapidly expanding voice on the political front. The history of home schoolers' lobbying efforts is a highly impressive one by any standard. In 1999, Congress – in response to “heavy lobbying from organizations that promote home schooling” – implemented an exemption for home schooled children (Burd, 1999, p. 1), in that they would

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<sup>1</sup> “Perspectives” is a new feature of *Home School Researcher* in which authors thoughtfully address issues, topics, and questions related to home-based education that are of interest to researchers, scholars, or to a more general audience. The articles in Perspectives are not subject to the regular review process and should *not* be considered peer-reviewed publications.

## McDowell

Unfortunately for Bill Cooper, his constituents were from rural east Tennessee, not suburban Houston.

### The Interview with Les Wunningham

The interview with Les Wunningham took place over the phone, and he didn't actually have much to say about the particular political races in question. He was, however, very polite, unfailingly pleasant, and highly professional during the course of the conversation. In response to questions, Wunningham answered that he didn't believe that home schooling as an issue played "any significant role" in these elections.

Wunningham then "switched gears" slightly, and added that "any politician would want to be responsive to home schoolers," who are "accepting a lot of responsibility in educating their own children." "Home schooling is a positive" [rather than a negative], he asserted. In this interview, Wunningham seemed to be very favorably inclined towards home schooling as an educational choice, a fact which would seem to be born out by his voting record in the Tennessee congressional assembly. It could not have been presumed — given the tone and substance of his campaign rhetoric — that Wunningham had such a positive stance toward home schooling. It could be presumed, however, that had Bill Cooper sent his children to private school, the arguments used against him might have been very similar. That having been said, what do the successes of Wunningham's political maneuvers tell us about the perceptions of home schooling as an educational choice in the larger community of the 38<sup>th</sup> district? Why is this issue worthy of any attention and discussion?

### Why is This Case Study Important?

Simply, the issues raised by this case study are important because they speak to the perceptions of educational alternatives in differing communities, in this instance, a mostly rural community in east Tennessee. Home schooling as an educational choice was met — by and large — with resistance there. Does this signal anything important for other educational alternatives currently in place elsewhere in the United States that might be approved, eventually, for national implementation? Will this community — and others like it — be similarly resistant to "School Voucher Programs," "Charter Schools," and other educational initiatives? Only time will tell if such rural communities are able to embrace new and different educational possibilities.

### Conclusion

PERHAPS THE MOST interesting aspect of this case study is the fact that the home schooling movement — despite its well-publicized victories in various legal battles, its

steadily growing acceptance by the public at large, its powerful and effective lobbying group in Congress, and its national headlines for outstanding academic achievement — continues to be considered an unhappy "odddity" in some communities. Clearly, home schooling as an educational choice does not in and of itself sound the "death knell" for political aspirations, as many of the elected officials in Congress choose to home school their children.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, however, the successful home schooling politician must have a constituency both receptive to and accepting of his or her educational choice.

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<sup>4</sup> The following members of Congress currently (i.e., as of April 2001) home school their children: Senator Rick Santorum (R – PA), Rep. Todd Akin (R – MO), Rep. Jeff Flake (R – AR), Rep. Jim Ryan (R – KS), Rep. Don Manzullo (R – IL), and Rep. Dave Weldon (R- FL).

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