

Homeschoolers' Experiences with the Public Library

A Phenomenological Study

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The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of homeschoolers using the public library. A phenomenological design using interviews, a survey, and a writing prompt was used to give voice to the public library experiences of seven homeschool participants. From the data, three primary themes surfaced. First, most of the participants felt that the library was a home away from home. Next, many of the participants valued how the public library saved them money, and finally, many of the participants voiced a desire for more library daytime programs, especially daytime programs that catered to older, homeschooled children.

When modern day homeschooling began in the 1970s, it was largely considered to be a fringe practice of primarily Evangelical Christians.¹ Now, the number of those who choose to home educate increases every year. In fact, according to the US Department of Education, the homeschool population has doubled from 1 to 2 million in the last decade.² The makeup of homeschooling families has also changed—the once predominately White, middle class, evangelical population has become more diverse, with a variety of ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses now represented.³ While the makeup of homeschooling families has changed, there are several commonalities. For instance, authors Allan and Jackson state, “The common denominator is that, often those conducting homeschooling will draw on the resources of the community to support resources accessed from home.”⁴

Particularly, one community resource homeschoolers tend to utilize is the public library. According to the National Center

for Education Statistics, almost 80 percent of homeschoolers use a public library.⁵ Similarly, Thomas noted that homeschool parents tend to maximize community resources and that some families based their educational program around the offerings of libraries, museums, and state parks.⁶ Willingham elaborates, stating, “Homeschoolers often develop close associations with local librarians, frequenting their local libraries often, but freely using interlibrary loan systems, as well. Homeschooling families will often decide whether or not to purchase a media product by borrowing from the library first, to determine if the product fits their needs.”⁷

Indeed, the ability to customize and choose their own curriculum is something most homeschool families value.⁸ While previous studies have highlighted the demographics of library users, there is limited research that explores the lived experiences of homeschoolers who utilize the library.⁹ As such, the purpose of this study was to give a voice to homeschool participants who use the public library.



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Related Literature

Library Use

According to Moore et al., more than 95 percent of the US population lives within the service area of a public library.¹⁰ In 2011 alone, there were more than 1.5 billion visits to the United States' nearly nine thousand public libraries and their seventeen thousand associated branches.¹¹

Homeschoolers, in particular, use the public library widely—Bauman found that 78 percent of the home educators in his study utilized the public library for their homeschooling.¹² The benefits of the public library abound; for instance, Cowley notes that “public libraries are free, neutral shared spaces—inclusive and open to all. They are vital for sharing information and gaining knowledge.”¹³

Erich takes it a step further, contending that public libraries provide “formal education, life-long learning, after-school activities, information culture, leisure time activities or access to information. Another aspect covered by the public library is related to social cohesion, the area of the institution becoming a meeting place and a community development center.”¹⁴

Skelly, Stilwell, and Underwood concur, noting that the public library does much more than just provide books. Modern libraries have extended their services to highlight resources for health, employment and education.¹⁵ Specifically, however, public libraries encourage literacy and life-long learning.¹⁶

Bhatt reports that library use increases the amount of time individuals spend reading by twenty-seven minutes a day and decreases the amount of time spent watching television by fifty-nine minutes a day.¹⁷ In the same vein, Krashen notes that leisure reading increases literacy levels, improves cognitive functions, improves emotional states of mind, and provides economic advantages.¹⁸ Bhatt also states that library use significantly increases the probability of homework completion and good behavior among school-aged children.¹⁹

Homeschoolers and Curriculum

According to Thomas, one of the benefits of homeschooling is that home educators have the freedom to design their own curriculum.²⁰ Hopwood, O'Neill, Castro, and Hodgson also note that, since there is no uniform curriculum used by homeschooling families, there are limitless curricular options and methods for them to follow.²¹ Hanna found in her study that homeschool families tend to be creative in their curriculum choices,²² while Davis found that many home educators employ a number of sources to develop their curriculum.²³

Similarly, Bauman found that homeschool families use a variety of curriculum options.²⁴ A heavy emphasis on reading

in the curriculum, however, is common in many homeschool families and reading often (both to and with children) is a popular method of teaching in many homeschool families.²⁵ Willingham states, “Homeschoolers routinely clear library bookstore shelves, enthusiastically shop at Scholastic warehouse sales, and prowl bookstores and conventions for interesting books and potential learning resources.”²⁶

Still other homeschool families build their curriculum around special goals or student interest.²⁷ In Bell, Kaplan, and Thurman's study, home educator participants used materials other than textbooks, took the student's preferences into consideration when choosing curriculum, and encouraged the pursuit of the student's own interests.²⁸

Research Questions

Central Research Question: How do homeschool families describe their experiences with using the public library?

Sub-question 1: What do homeschool families value about the public library?

Sub-question 2: How do homeschool families think the public library could better support them?

Design

To examine the experiences of homeschoolers and their public library use, a phenomenological design was used. Phenomenology looks at the personalized experiences of individuals and focuses on the shared, lived experiences of individuals,²⁹ thus making a phenomenological design the best fit for this study as the goal was to simply give voice to the participants' experiences with using the public library.

Participants

Seven participants shared their experiences in this study. While the number of recommended participants for a phenomenological study varies in the literature, Creswell recommends five to twenty-five participants,³⁰ and Morse recommends having at least six participants.³¹ Participants were recruited through an online posting to a local Florida Homeschool Facebook Group. Two postings were made, through which seven participants were found, all of whom resided in Florida. Information about the participants can be seen in Table 1 below (pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities).

Data Collection

Three data collection methods were used to understand the experiences of homeschoolers' public library use—interviews,

Table 1. Participant Information

Name	Number of Children Homeschooled	Age of Children	Frequency of Library Visits
Melissa	1	6	1x a week
Heidi	3	5, 8, 9	2x a month
Morgan	3	11, 14, 15	1x a week
Tianna	1	11	1x a week
Jelena	6	5, 7, 9, 12, 15, 17	2x a month
Belinda	2	9, 11	1x a month
Rita	1	6	5x a week

Table 2. Library Information

Name	Length of Visit	Av. # of Items Checked Out	Number of Branches Visited
Melissa	2 hours	5	1
Heidi	1 hour	30	3
Morgan	1.5 hours	4	1
Tianna	1.5 hours	0	3
Jelena	As short as possible	5	1
Belinda	30 minutes	10	1
Rita	2 hours	5	10

a survey, and a writing prompt. The survey was administered first, to gain some basic demographic information and to better understand what a typical library visit entailed for the participants. While surveys are typically found in quantitative studies, they can also be used in qualitative studies as a source of triangulation.³² Information from the survey was used to compile table 1 and table 2.

The writing prompt (“Please describe a typical visit to the public library”) was administered in conjunction with the survey to help better understand the participants’ experiences with the public library. The third and final data collection method was a semi-structured interview. According to Yin, interviews are an essential part of a qualitative study, and as such, the interviews in this study served as the primary source of data.³³

Two of the interviews took place in person at a location that was convenient to the participants, while the remaining six interviews took place via Skype or Facebook due to the distance of the participants from the researcher. The interview questions are outlined in table 3.

Questions 1 and 2 were designed to help answer the central research question of this study—“How do homeschool families describe their experiences with using the public library?”

Questions 3 and 4 were designed to see if participants used the public library as part of their curriculum, as the literature shows that homeschool families tend to use a variety of creative sources when compiling their curriculum.³⁴

Table 3. Interview Questions

What is your primary reason for visiting the library?
How do you utilize the public library?
Please describe how you compile curriculum for your homeschooling.
Do you utilize the public library as part of your homeschool curriculum? If so, how?
What do you value about the public library?
How could the public library better support homeschoolers?
Do you have anything else you would like to tell me about in regard to your public library use?

Questions 5 and 6 were designed to help answer both sub-question 1 and 2 of the research questions. Finally, question 7 served as a catch-all question that allowed participants to give voice to whatever they felt was pertinent to the interview.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research depends on a deep understanding of the collected data.³⁵ As such, thematic coding and analysis were employed to better understand the data. Initial codes were developed for the research question, and then combined and compared in axial coding, allowing for a more concise and thorough understanding of the phenomenon.³⁶ All the data was hand coded and color coding was also used to help the researcher better determine the salient themes.

Themes

Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis. First, the participants viewed the library as a home away from home. Next, participants felt that the library was a money-saver. Finally, participants in this study felt that more library programs were needed. A discussion of each of the themes follows below.

Home Away from Home

Of the seven participants, five shared that the library was more than just a building housing books—it was a home away from home. In fact, when Morgan was asked what she valued about the library, she said, “just the whole home feel of the library.” Morgan said, “My kids love to hang out at the library. Not even to check out books, but just to hang out.”

Similarly, Tianna related that she enjoyed the library not only as a quiet space, but for the good environment. “So a lot of time we will go there because it is a good environment. It is the coffee shop environment but for little kids, but they still feel like they are in a learning environment.”

Tianna added, "We go during school day hours when it's quiet and use the children's space to do school work. It gives us a change in our environment and a quiet place to work."

In a similar vein, Melissa and Rita relayed that they enjoyed the library because it was an alternative to doing work at home. For example, Melissa shared, "I honestly really like it that it is something for the kids to do to get out of the house. And just to experience new books and to get a feel for the library so it is not a foreign place to them when they get older."

Likewise, Rita felt that the library was a good space to learn apart from the home. In fact, Rita visited the library five or more days a week to utilize the library as schooling environment.

However, while five of the seven participants noted that the library was a "hangout" spot for them, two said they spent very little time in the library. For instance, Belinda lived in a county where books were delivered through the postal service, so when she did go to the library it was for a specific purpose, not to hang out. Jelena also noted that she ordered books and primarily only went into the library to pick up books.

Money Saver

Half of the participants in this study noted that they valued the library for the free materials and services it provided. Since homeschoolers must purchase their own curriculum, having a place to obtain free educational resources was valuable to the participants. For instance, Heidi shared that her favorite part of the library was "definitely the free resources. In homeschooling we are just on one income. So, it saves us a ton of money and it also allows us to try different things."

Likewise, Jelena shared that what she most valued about the library was that it was cost-effective. "For all the supplemental materials, it would be too much to purchase those." Melissa agreed, stating that she valued being able to get books she needed from the library without having to order books from an outside source. However, while half of the participants did note that they appreciated the free resources the library offered, two felt more could be offered. For example, Melissa suggested the library offer curriculum from different sources and grades so homeschoolers could try out the curriculum before making a purchase. Likewise, Rita suggested that libraries offer additional free programs.

More Programs Needed

The third theme to surface from the data was that participants felt the library needed to offer more programs, particularly programs during the school day that catered to homeschoolers and older children. For instance, Morgan shared, "I think if they had more homeschool geared activities like clubs or

something like that we would love it in our library. It seems like everything is geared towards public school children when they are out of school. When they are out of school they will have a plethora of activities for them to do and we join in on those things, but it would also be nice to have those things during the school year."

Likewise, Tianna said, "Definitely doing things during school hours, during the day time. They love to have things at 3:30 p.m. or 4 p.m when school lets out, and we are done with our day by then and we don't want all the chaos of the public school environment that tends to happen. We would love to see them grow the programs that they have during school hours."

In a similar vein, Rita and Heidi felt libraries should develop programs and classes that catered specifically to homeschool families. For example, Rita did not like that she had to pay for classes at the library. "I believe that they could provide some type of homeschooling classes which could be basically at no-cost instead of charging \$35 for a class that lasts two hours only. For example, there are some libraries that offer Mommy and Me classes that are only up to 5 years old then what happens from 6 years old and up? There are other older kids that are homeschooled."

Heidi added, "We are in a big homeschooling community, so I think there should be something specific to homeschoolers. I like that idea of getting homeschoolers together and having a book club or just something to cater more to homeschoolers."

Discussion

As a phenomenological study, the value of this study was primarily in giving the participants a voice. That voice corroborated and extended existing research about the public library and about homeschoolers. For example, many of the participants used the library as much for the environment as they did for its services. This is in keeping with Erich's assertion that the library assumes the role of a multifunctional cultural center and community development center.³⁷

Since the environment was so important, public libraries should seek to make the surroundings welcoming to homeschoolers. For example, meeting spaces such as conference rooms or multipurpose rooms should be made available for homeschool groups and individuals. Public libraries may also want to invest in additional seating, particularly comfortable seating like couches as several of the participants noted that they enjoyed "hanging out" at the library.

However, while Willingham noted that public libraries often cater to homeschoolers by developing daytime programs to serve them, the participants in this study did not have access to these libraries, demonstrating the need for more libraries to develop programs that cater to homeschoolers.³⁸

In particular, public libraries may want to develop additional programs for older kids, as Skelly et al. note that modern public libraries offer a range of services to cater to all their clientele and the participants in this study felt that there was a dearth of daytime programs for older kids.³⁹ For example, just as many public libraries have a summer program schedule, they may also want to develop a homeschool program schedule for the school year. That could include daytime programs in a variety of subject areas like coding or consumer science areas like budgeting and nutrition.

Additionally, while all of the homeschool participants in this study related that they used a variety of sources for their curriculum, instead of just one boxed set of curricula, which is in keeping with research,⁴⁰ only one of the participants used the public library for their curriculum, with the other participants only utilizing the library resources for supplemental things like pleasure reading and interest reading.

While several of the participants did note their appreciation for being able to obtain these supplemental books for free, several participants also noted that they would also like to be able to obtain curriculum from the library. For example, when asked about what the library could better do to support homeschoolers, Melissa replied, "I guess with advertisement for co-ops or curriculum or different books. I don't know if they carry curriculum, but if they did, better advertisement for that would be beneficial."

Similarly, Jelena related, "We moved down here from Northern Virginia and they had some of the history curriculum books on CD and you could check them out. That was super helpful, but down here they don't have them."

Based on these responses, public libraries may want to invest in curriculum purchases. Curriculum publishers may even provide libraries with free sample copies, as several publishers offer sample textbooks (also known as inspection copies

or evaluation copies). If libraries were able to make these textbooks available for loan, or possibly just for in-library viewing depending on resource availability, homeschool educators could make more informed curriculum purchases.

Conclusion

This study helped us gain limited, but valuable, insight into homeschoolers' use of the public library. However, as a qualitative study, there is an inherent lack of ability to generalize the findings from this study to a larger population.

Additionally, since all the participants in this study utilized Florida public libraries, libraries in other states may not have the same setup or offerings, again limiting the empirical significance of the findings. Despite these limitations, public libraries with large homeschool populations should consider providing more specific supports to homeschool families, including offering more daytime programs, specifically daytime programs for older, homeschooled children. When purchasing books for the library, librarians may also want to consider purchasing curriculum as several participants in this study voiced an interest in trying out curriculum.

Catering to homeschool families is important; as Willingham notes, "Homeschoolers will always be a large, anomalous group, and they'll always be closely connected with our public libraries."⁴¹

Finally, to expand the knowledge of homeschoolers' experiences and use of public libraries, additional research should be done in this area, particularly in areas outside of Florida. Future studies may want to just examine the experiences of homeschool families with older homeschooled students, as the age of students affected the responses of several of the participants in this study. &

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