

## RESEARCH ON PK12 EDUCATION

# Learning from Homeschooling Routines

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### ABSTRACT

This study provides a rare opportunity to look inside the homeschool and to observe the routines of homeschooling families from across the United States. With more than 1000 survey participants, and nine parents selected for interviews, the compiled data were analyzed through open coding techniques. Meaningful aspects that arose from the routines of homeschoolers included collaboration with other educational entities, the use of community resources, faith, individualized instruction, and the flexibility of school structure. The findings of this research may provide meaningful information for Christian teachers, parents, and others in our search for the optimal educational environment.

## Introduction

When evaluating our current state of education in the United States, homeschoolers are typically left out of the discourse. As Hurley (2013) might say, they do not fit education's corporate model that emphasizes performance, products, and data— "if a goal or teaching practice cannot be stated in observable outcomes and quantified, it cannot be a part of the current schooling discourse or curriculum" (p. 67). However, there are a number of reasons why homeschoolers should be of particular interest.

They have been consistently increasing in number (Smith, 2013), and some estimates put the number of homeschoolers in excess of two million (Ray, 2011). In addition, homeschoolers are becoming known for their exceptional academic performance. While test scores for the homeschooled are not always easy to collect, the reports that we do have are impressive. According to Ray (2015), not only did the home-educated score about "15 to 30 percentile points above public-school students on standardized academic achievement tests," they also "typically score above average on the SAT and ACT tests which colleges consider for admissions" (para. 1 & 5).

Can Christian parents and educators, even those who do not homeschool, learn something from the educational methods of homeschooling families? Analysts such as Luke (2003) and Hardenbaugh (2005) believed the practices

that make homeschooling effective will find their way into public education, and enhance the quality of conventional schooling. Could these practices also find their way into private schools? Understanding non-traditional homeschooling routines and methods may be one avenue of improving Christian education.

### **Purpose**

This study focused on understanding homeschool instructional routines. Specifically, the focal question of this study was: What curriculum resources and educational routines emerge as patterns across the various homeschools? The research question was designed to reveal the choices homeschooling parents make concerning educational routines. For this study, routine is meant to define the regular way the homeschooling families implemented instructional activities. Questions about the homeschooling family's routine helped determine several aspects: What are the arrangements that exist in the day for particular activities—formal and informal instruction and extracurricular activities? Who is involved? What methods of instruction are being used?

There has been a great deal of knowledge about the routines and schedules that have been implemented in the public school systems and why they were implemented (West, Gabrieli, Finn, Kraft, & Gabrieli, 2014). However, much is still unknown about how homeschoolers divide their school day (Taylor-Hough, 2010) and why they do so in a given way. Do they have a daily routine that they follow for academic study? Do they have a weekly schedule? Does part of their weekly routine involve collaboration with other families or homeschool groups, or with community partners? If there are multiple students, how does the parent-teacher divide the instructional time? When do parent-teachers prepare themselves for teaching?

Asking such questions can help form certain patterns or themes, informing educators about the values and preferences of homeschoolers. Providing a rich description of the context of homeschooling can potentially prove successful in other educational settings. Thus, this research wades through the mechanics of the school day—what does it look like to see the homeschooling family function?

For this study, *homeschoolers* is defined as students who spend a portion of their educational time in the home or an alternate place, other than the public school, under the supervision of the parents. This definition was based on the definitions from Lines (1999) and Lips and Feinberg (2008). This definition does not exclude those who are enrolled in a public school part-time. The emphasis in this definition was that they spend a portion of their educational time under the supervision of the parent. Sometimes, for convenience, the term *homeschoolers* not only represented the students, but also the parents and others who were intimately involved in the process.

## Background

If there is a common theme from the literature about what takes place during home education, it is the significant lack of research (Collom, 2005; Duvall, Delquadri, & Ward, 2004; Reich, 2005; Taylor-Hough, 2010). Isenberg (2007) expressed that the scarcity of data on homeschooling has impaired our understanding of even the most basic research questions such as how families combine homeschooling with conventional methods and why. Taylor-Hough (2010) commented that the research on home education has mainly focused on such issues as the history of homeschooling and the motivations of homeschooling parents, rather than on the methods employed by homeschoolers. Murphy (2012) summarized the general agreement among analysts,

While attention has been lavished on the motivations for homeschooling and the demographics of these families, considerably less work has been directed to ‘seeing’ inside the homeschool. This is especially the case on the pedagogical side of the instructional program ledger, the methods used in homeschooling. (p. 106)

Despite the growth and the acceptance of homeschooling, comparatively little research has been done on home education. Murphy (2012), outlining the reasons why homeschooling gets such little attention, stated,

The well-developed practice of concentrating research on public schools probably explains some of the dearth of research.... The unregulated nature of homeschooling comes into play here as well. The decentralized nature of homeschooling, the fact that it unfolds in hundreds of thousands of ‘mini schools’ with only a few ‘students,’ also causes considerable problems for researchers. (p. 14)

However, although the specifics are obscure, a number of generalizations are typically linked with home education. For example, homeschooling has historically conveyed the idea that education naturally unfolds throughout the day (Perry & Perry, 2000; Williams, Arnoldson, & Reynolds, 1984). Kunzman (2012), describing a day in the life of a homeschooling family, observed:

The Wilkins’ view their homeschooling as an endeavor that extends beyond traditional schooling boundaries of time, place, and subject; the whole of life provides educational opportunities, and oftentimes in more authentic and powerful contexts than what traditional schooling has to offer. (p. 75)

Thus, some home education advocates would argue that learning is maximized in the home environment. Or, as Sheehan (2002) explained, “Education is viewed as an interconnected array of subjects related to daily life” (p. 192). Williams, Arnoldson, and Reynolds (1984) made a similar remark about how all of the learning opportunities in the home are unified with other life experiences, thereby maximizing instructional time.

Another generalization about home education activity is that it extends into the community (Kunzman, 2012), allowing families to build associations with mentors and friends in special places (Sheehan, 2002). Service learning can happen through volunteer community work, special studies and events, political internships, missionary excursions, animal husbandry, gardening, and national competitions (Ray, 2004). Hanna (2012) noted the value of field trips and extended travel, both of which may be more feasible in the homeschooling context. For these reasons, some have argued the case that homeschoolers are actually more involved in civic activities than their public school counterparts.

Yet another aspect unique to home education practice has been the amount of parental involvement in the lives of homeschooled students. Highly related to the large quantities of time and generous amounts of energy that parents invest into home education were the pedagogical advantages that are naturally found in homeschools: “one-on-one tutoring, increased teacher feedback to the student, direct instruction by the teacher, increased academic engaged time, mastery learning, cooperative learning, and increased contextualization of teaching in experiences in the home and community, and increased involvement of parents” (Ray, 2000, p. 91–92). Furthermore, it was clear that parental involvement, which allowed for natural individualized instruction (Cai, Reeve, & Robinson, 2002), has proven to be a key factor in terms of the effectiveness of home education curriculum and instruction.

Particularly important to this study was the factor of time. Murphy (2012) noted, “Very few studies explore the breakdown of how instructional time is allotted across subjects. Even less available are studies that explore usage within subjects” (p. 108). Murphy (2012) cautioned that time was a difficult factor to calculate because homeschool families typically did not divide their time into school time and other time, but rather have a more seamless concept of instructional time. Murphy provided evidence that the amount of instructional time averages about three to five hours per day (p. 108).

A study by Hertzell (1997), which focused on the time allotted for reading and writing, found that, on a daily average, families devoted 135 to 225 minutes on literacy related activities (i.e., parent reading to child, child reading to parent, silent reading, writing [p. 60]). Other than the Charlotte Mason Method’s suggestion of completing academic subjects in the morning and allowing free-time in the afternoon (Taylor-Hough, 2010), little information was found about the routines and schedules of homeschoolers. Although no scholarly articles on the subject were found, a number of websites expressed personal preferences and suggestions when creating a homeschool schedule.

Thus, based on the literature there appears to be considerable scope for exploring and investigating the curricular methods, schedules and routines that homeschoolers’ employ, and why they have chosen them. Once explored, the results of this study may allow homeschooling parents yet another

opportunity to enter the discourse of educational practice, offering new understandings about the needs, preferences and desires of homeschooling families. Furthermore, the insights obtained through the collected data may be directly applied to advancing the quality of mixed educational programs, and education at-large.

## Method

This study used surveys and interviews to capture the various homeschooling routines practiced throughout the United States. The survey, accessed online, was composed of closed- and open-ended questions. Survey responses were sent directly to the online Qualtrics Research Suite (Qualtrics, 2015) for simple statistical analysis. Participants represented each state within the United States, with the exception of Maine. Of the 1,282 surveys that were started and partially completed, 1,055 were totally completed. This set of studies provided an 82.3% completion rate for the survey.

Participants were also given the opportunity to request to be interviewed. Nine interview participants were chosen representing each region of the United States—Northeast, South, Midwest, and West (US Census Bureau, 2000). The interviews provided an opportunity for the researcher to gather more in-depth information in addition to that collected from the survey. The survey participants have been represented by P (Participant) and the order in which their responses were recorded in the spreadsheet (Row 7 will be represented by 7). For example, the second recorded survey response for the routine question will be represented by (P2). The interview participants have been represented by their region and the order in which they completed the survey. Thus, the first participant from the Southwest region of the United States will be SW1, and the second person who completed the survey from the Northeast will be NE2.

The survey and interview questions focused on three subject areas: 1) homeschoolers' curriculum and instruction choices, 2) the reason behind their curriculum and instruction choices, and 3) their perspectives of mixed educational opportunities. This discussion will only focus on the first question. The collected data was organized into themes similar to that ascribed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008).

## Results

Groups from across the homeschool spectrum, pedagogues and ideologues, were represented within the collected responses. The statistical percentages given below are based on the number of participants who chose to answer a given question. At least 1,055 participants responded to each of the survey questions.

**Hours of academic instruction**

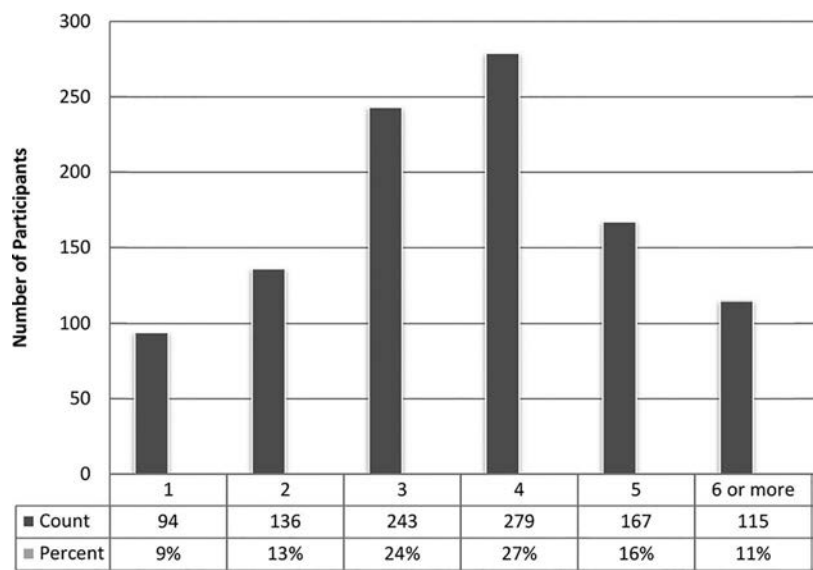
Parents were asked to indicate the amount of time their child or children spend in academic instruction for a typical school day. Figure 1 demonstrates that the majority of homeschooling families (73%) had a learning day that typically lasted 4 hours or less. These numbers should only be used to get a general idea about the homeschooling day. For example, a number of participants expressed that a child’s free time (which they did not count as academic), composed of reading, independent projects, or educational hobbies, could be considered academic. Many of the participants indicated spontaneous learning activities, or what they called “teachable moments,” were opportunities that happened throughout the day for homeschooling families. These teachable moments sometimes fell outside of the academic hours. For the interview participants, the number of hours of academic instruction ranged from three hours a day to six or more hours a day. Of these, the mode number was 4 hours per day.

**Description of homeschooling routines**

Participants were asked, “Briefly describe a homeschooling day. What does your routine look like (instruction, breaks, free-time, etc.)?” This section will follow a pattern derived by the themes that came from the survey data.

**Collaboration**

This study clearly reveals that many homeschooling families do not operate in isolation. From professional teachers, personal tutors, other homeschooling



**Figure 1.** Hours of student academic instruction per day reported by participants, by count and percent.

parent-teachers, community cooperatives (co-ops), public schools, private schools, and colleges, many homeschool families have a vast network of educational resources.

One parent described how both of her children were involved in various educational activities outside of the home:

THIS term looks like this for my 18 year-old: He's taking 15 hours through an early college admission program at the local Community College and 2 courses at a homeschool resource community ... My 15 year old is currently taking 2 online classes (math and Spanish), Mock Trial and Model United Nations, and orchestra at the local high school. (P108)

This blending of multiple resources outside of the home was not an uncommon finding in this study. Many parents reported their involvement with a co-op, or group of homeschoolers under the instruction of various volunteer homeschool parent-teachers. One parent stated,

We are very involved in a local, freedom-based learning cooperative (inspired by both Sudbury schools and unschooling philosophies/principles), many of our weekdays include time spent with our friends of mixed ages at our learning cooperative ... Although we are "homeschoolers," we spend most of our days out of the home, interacting with the world around us and learning together in a myriad of self-directed and self-chosen (and both adult and peer supported) ways with our friends of many ages at our learning cooperative. (P714)

Co-ops can provide a significant amount of a homeschooling child's academic instruction. For some families, co-ops can take up the majority of the day. West 2 pointed out,

On co-op days, we are there from 8 to 3. The classes she is in are in 1 1/2 hour blocks. The classes are the instructional part of the class. Homework is done on non-class days just like a community college. Homework, tests, assignments, and projects are turned into the co-op on their class day. (W2)

Families may meet with their co-ops multiple times each week or only once a week. A parent described her child's association with the co-op stating the child "meets with other students one day a week from 9:00 AM–3:30 PM in a teacher led classroom environment. The other 4 days are spent doing assignments and research that will be discussed the following class day" (P15). Another parent noted that her child was involved in two different co-ops.

A number of parents pointed out their child's involvement with a personal instructor such as a French tutor, speech therapist, specialized dyslexia tutor, and algebra tutor, among others. South 1 said, "One of our relatives is an artist and when she is around she instructs him. He has also taken art at a local private school and at a local art museum homeschool class and camp workshop" (S1). Some parents incorporated their extended family as part of the homeschool. One parent said a certain amount of time is spent with grandparents to learn about "gardening, sewing and cooking" (P674).

In addition to one-on-one time with personalized tutors, many families communicated that they spend a considerable amount of time with other families and groups, sometimes learning, traveling, or just playing. One family shared they “are part of a Christian physical education group and participate in 3 hrs of PE on Monday afternoons” (P227). Northeast 3 spoke of her interaction with others:

When special events come up that fit my schedule or that a friend or family member can take him to, we do. Plays, concerts, beach day, museum outings, legislative hearings etc. There is much collaboration, I find these events on homeschool lists, community newspaper, and friends. (NE3)

The education of many homeschoolers was replete with a variety of relationships within numerous educational activities and learning experiences.

### **Community**

Participants in this study were well connected to the resources within their communities. From taking classes at museums to volunteering at nursing homes, many homeschoolers were found to be highly active. Northeast 2 offered a schedule that had a community-based activity for each day of the week including 4-H, dance, piano, gymnastics, and church playgroup (NE2).

A number of families mentioned the high frequency of field trips as part of their routines. For example, West 1 stated that they have a “field trip once a week, often with other families” (W1). Another parent shared, “We do field trips or a library day once a week, and on the 5th day the kids take classes outside the home, such as swimming, gymnastics, Spanish and piano” (P111). For one parent, field trips were an essential element of education:

I’m a professor so I teach in the mornings. Usually by the time I return, my son is awake and we discuss our field trip for the day. I give him the address and he has to calculate how much gas we need to get there, find the cheapest place to buy gas in a 10-mile radius, and then three things he wants to learn at the field trip. Then we spend the remainder of the week writing the essay about the trip. (P728)

Another aspect of community time for many homeschoolers was volunteering. West 1 stated that her children volunteered at both a nursing home and a preschool (W1). The daughter of Northeast 1 “volunteers at a church to serve the homeless on Sundays, and with the Chevra Kadesha at the Temple whenever a woman dies (basically as a mortician for the Jewish dead)” (NE1). Another parent said they did “volunteer work about 3–4 hours a week (at the public library and Free Geek, a computer re-cycling center)” (P75). Other community service activities mentioned in the survey included helping with Meals on Wheels and working with the local food bank.

Several homeschooling families also communicated that they enjoy attending the events and activities that their communities have to offer such as concerts, theater performances, and museum exhibits. Also, some parents,



such as Midwest 1 (MW1), take advantage of their community centers, which may provide a number of activities including swimming, dancing, and archery. Homeschoolers noted a number of clubs that were found in the community such as chess club and Lego club; and they were involved in a variety of special classes such as ballet, violin, foreign languages and tennis; and they participated in organizations like Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

Northeast 1 described a little about how she and her daughter interact with the community:

Breakfast, then lay on the bed or go to a coffee shop to do world geography ... Off to a museum to see examples of what we are currently studying in art. Then a break for kayaking or a matinee or a hike ... Some days she attends a class at college sitting next to her sister who is in her Junior year. Oil painting class on Tuesdays with an instructor. She also must interview at least two interesting people a month who were an eyewitness to history and write a report. At least once or more a year—travel to Europe, Boston, Washington, DC, New York City, to see museums, works of art, battle sites, etc. (NE1)

Enjoying the local zoo, nature center, arboretum, and state park were also shared by the participants. This section merely represents a snap shot of all of the activities and special classes that were mentioned by the participants in this study. Many homeschoolers were truly active in their communities.

### **Faith**

Long considered one of the reasons as to why many families choose to homeschool (Van Galen, 1991), faith was found to be an essential part of many homeschoolers' routines. From Bible reading, memorizing certain passages, singing hymns, and family devotionals, a number of homeschooling families took advantage of their homeschooling freedoms when it came to their faith.

For many families, a Bible related activity was one of the first things on the list for the day's schedule. One example of a morning routine included, "We begin our day around 8:00 with our Bible Study, then breakfast and chores" (P235). This finding was not uncommon. Another parent's routine: "Morning time: Poetry, Bible story, memory work (poetry recitation, scripture memory, memorization of history timeline, etc.), folksongs" (P958). Some families included singing in their morning routine, then, "do our morning worship routine which includes bible reading, scripture memory and singing" (P853).

For many homeschooling families, this time of reading the Bible and singing as a family, or what a number of parents called "circle time," was the only time the whole family was together before they split up into different activities (P928). Other families ended their day with Bible reading: "About an hour before bed we read the bible and pray and talk about our day which usually last about 30 min" (P631). Still other parents provided their children a quiet time in which they were to read from their Bibles independently.

In addition to Bible reading, some families inserted a Bible class into their educational day. One parent said, “For Bible I leave that up to them, some resources they use include Kids of Courage (a Voice of the Martyrs website for kids) the Bible and John Piper’s Desiring God website” (P167). Some students took an online Bible class while others used the Bible to study subjects such as geography or history. One parent wrote, “We typically start the day with Bible subjects like: geography of the Holy Land, Bible, Latin, Greek, Church History, a book like City of God” (P822).

A number of families reported using a curriculum package that was built on Christian principles. The curriculum packages listed by the parents, including *Sonlight Curriculum*, *My Father’s World*, and *Heart of Dakota*, were designed with a Christian perspective. Other families followed an educational philosophy like the Charlotte Mason Method, which is guided by Christian principles. Therefore, many families used biblical principles and illustrations throughout their educational instruction. One family’s routine included:

Our posted schedule for Kindergarten was: Prayer; Morning meeting (calendar, weather, holidays, etc.); Bible verse review (from previous weeks); Bible story & journal (she draws a picture and writes a sentence to demonstrate comprehension); Bible verse review (this week’s). (P939)

West 1 summarized their educational perspective, “Our faith in Jesus Christ is central to who we are and all that we do. It defines how we train and educate our children” (W1). Some parents who were not necessarily religious still provided opportunities for their children to learn about religion. For example, South 1 remarked,

This is one of the “perks” in homeschooling. I have the ability to introduce a variety of religious beliefs with an inclusive curriculum, without worrying about who might be offended and without church/state separation issues. We do not try to leave it out ... no matter which belief system we are talking about. (S1)

Northeast 2, a non-religious parent, wrote,

We are not a religious family, and self-identify as agnostics. We study all of the major world religions in order to provide understanding and cultural context for history and current events. To this end my high school curriculum includes primary source texts such as the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, Qur’an, Bhagavad Gita, and Tao Te Ching ... My children are free to choose their own spiritual path, but at this time they are happy to attend playgroup for playtime with friends and choose to discount the religious indoctrination to which they are exposed. (NE2)

The majority of the interview participants used the Bible in some form for their academic instruction. Thus, for many homeschoolers, at least a portion of their day or week was dedicated to learning about religion in general or a particular faith. This section did not go into detail about the numerous examples homeschoolers expressed of connecting with their faith-based associations including church youth groups and camps.

### *Individualized instruction*

The ability for parents to tailor-make a schedule, or the option not to, in the case of some homeschools, was consistently noted in this study. The concept of individualized instruction was one of the main reasons some parents chose to homeschool in the first place. Parents have complete control over when the school day begins, when breaks take place, how long an instructional period will last, and how the instruction will be implemented, among a number of other factors.

Some parents placed an emphasis on allowing their children to sleep as long as they needed before starting academic instruction. One parent said, “Kids are allowed to sleep until 9 -being well rested improved academics tremendously” (P559). Several parents brought up the point that a certain amount of sleep is needed for growing children. A parent commented, “Student is allowed 9 to 10 hours of sleep (important for teenagers) therefore school begins around 9” (P894).

The ability to move the academic schedule around, adjusting to the needs of the family, was highly important for some families. Families from this study reported adjusting their academic schedule so that the children could have more time with their father. One parent stated,

My husband works in the food industry and frequently doesn’t get home until 8 PM. So, in order to create more time with him, the children don’t go to bed until some-time between 10:30 and 11 PM. They tend to sleep close to 12 hours, so wake-up is around 10 AM. (P1031)

Another family reported that they planned their lunch break around the father’s working schedule: “Depending on my husband’s schedule and when he gets home for lunch, we then grade/discuss math and complete spelling, writing, and classical vocabulary. My son gets an hour or so of lunch/goof-off time with my husband” (P1034).

Controlling the schedule was important for families who lived in rural areas where it is difficult to travel back and forth if they were to attend a public school. South 1 stated,

It may seem counter-intuitive but homeschooling has been a Godsend socially because he can actually spend a lot of time with friends. Living in a rural area, no one is going to drive a half hour to your place for a play date when they have to rush home, maybe to an activity, then do homework and eat and get to bed before being at school at 8:30 the next morning, and we would barely have time to visit anyone if we had to keep up a traditional school schedule. (S1)

There were also families who enjoyed the fact that they could have multiple schedules within the same homeschool. One mother reported,

My 13-year-old gets up around 6 am so he is usually starting school by 7 am, while my 12 year old likes to sleep till 8 or 9 am. Since my 13 year old has autism this gives

him more time and 1:1 so when his sister wakes up they can do Science, English and Social Studies together. (P1238)

Another parent briefly described how each of her children complete academic work on different schedules:

The oldest child usually chooses to start early, take a long lunch break, and be done by 4 or 5 p.m. He never leaves schoolwork for the evening or weekends. The next child never starts anything until at least 10:30 a.m. takes lots of breaks and does her best work at night. The 10-year-old does school in two big chunks: 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., for about 1 and 1/2 hours each time. (P1256)

Parents also varied considerably on how they managed breaks within the day. Some parents set aside certain points in the day for extended breaks, other families took frequent breaks, and still others allowed their children to manage their own breaks. One parent remarked, “We take breaks for tea, talking, outside time at least once before lunch” (P894).

There were also a number of families who arranged their academic schedule around special training or competitions that included academic training, singing, ice skating, and dance. One parent wrote,

My triplets also have their own singing group they started themselves, with my help, when they were only 7 years old. They travel all over singing “Gaither Style” Southern Gospel Hymns and songs. They are busy practicing for their singing engagements throughout the week as well. (P999)

Another parent commented, “In 8th grade she danced for a year as an apprentice with a small professional ballet company. She was a member of the company, so it was a 9–5 job. We homeschooled around that schedule” (P991).

Parents also noted how they were able to set the times and places for learning sessions. Northeast 1 recommended changing the environment often and shortening the learning period:

We never used a desk—we did our learning at coffee shops, on the beach, laying in bed, on a blanket under a tree. Anywhere but the typical student set-up. Education must be fun, interesting, dynamic—and I rarely ever gave homework. Too much information at one time saturates the brain; they become frustrated and learning comes to a stop. Ten minutes a day per subject. (NE1)

South 1 described how she was able to adjust the break times depending on the demands of the subject: “Free time is breaks between subjects usually after an hour or two (less frequently if on a roll reading, more frequent if labor intensive like writing) for between 15 minutes and a half hour” (S1).

Some parents worked one-on-one with each child, thus creating a type of rotation-schedule. For example, Midwest 1 said, “After we finish the together subjects, I usually start with the littlest and work my way up. The oldest is

capable of doing much more work independently and works on his independent work while I work with his sisters” (MW1). Another parent reported,

Then we split up: my high schoolers go to their rooms to work and my junior high student works in the library. I teach science to my youngest boys then they start on their school work at the kitchen table while I supervise. We take a short morning break. After that I read history with the younger 3. When history is completed, I leave the younger ones to work on their own and I discuss Government and literature with my high schoolers. (P4)

Other parents, especially parents of teenagers, allowed their children to manage their own learning. Northeast 2 stated, “Older two kids set their own schedule, and complete their work independently, usually late at night” (NE2). A number of parents provided their children with a list of objectives that need to be completed for the day or week. Some parents allowed their children to proceed through the list of assignments in any order they chose. A parent described their particular routine:

Each child is given a list of assignments to complete individually or with me. Again, depending on the day of the week, the amount of school work I assign varies. The kids choose what to do first, second, third, etc. (P156)

It could be said that every participant in this study operated under a different schedule, thus providing this study with a collection of highly individualized schedules. From monitoring student sleep schedules, energy levels, and learning propensities, many parents have optimized learning through individualized instruction.

### **Structure**

The amount of structure by which a homeschool operated varied considerably from highly structured academic days with exact start times, scheduled periods of instruction, and planned breaks, to very unstructured days, with little to no routine. Some parents adopted ideas about organizing the day from curriculum guides or educational theorists. For example, a number of parents commented that they used the Charlotte Mason Method or the Waldorf method. Some parents followed a number of different recommendations. One parent said, “I would say our homeschool is ‘Cross Curricular Unit Study with a Charlotte Mason spine’ if I have to put a name to it” (P396). Another parent, explaining the order of their day, stated, “We finish our school by lunch (we use a Charlotte Mason methodology) and the afternoon is spent outside, doing hand crafts, or visiting friends and family” (P819).

Even parents who did not say their activities came from a certain educational theorist like Charlotte Mason, had a similar order to their day. The majority of responses about the homeschool routine included academic work being accomplished in the morning, leaving the afternoon-time for extracurricular activities, personal pursuits, independent projects, playtime,

and hobbies. Midwest 1 said, “We are usually done and outside playing by 2 pm” (MW1). Northeast 2 noted that after lunch, “We leave for afternoon activities which may include sports, dance, gymnastics, 4-H, piano, playgroup, errands” (NE2).

Some homeschools operated within a well-structured system. A participant described a highly structured routine:

I am very structured. We begin with the Pledge of Allegiance and our Bible pledge. Next is math (45 minutes), followed by a snack break. We spend 20 minutes on Classical Conversations, new grammar and review. The next 2–3 hours is spent on spelling, writing, grammar, and art or cursive. (P338)

Many parents fell somewhere in the middle of the structure spectrum. They provided expectations and teaching, but they allowed their children to take on some of the learning decisions. One parent described how the academic structure was negotiated:

We start in the morning with subjects that both children do together. They are mostly self-paced the remainder of the day. They have lesson plans to complete each day and take breaks as needed. We discuss what they need to do based on energy level and time constraints. Some lessons are self-taught. Other lessons are taught by me. We decide each day when I will teach and when they will work independently. (P40)

There were parents who were still trying to find that perfect balance between a rigid schedule and a more spontaneous learning day. One of the participant’s responses captured this dichotomy:

0930- Pledge, Anthem, America’s Creed, Prayer; 0945 they do two subjects of their choice following the lessons that are written on the board; Break—after two subjects are completed—one may work ahead lessons if the other is not yet finished as they enjoy break time together—our break is 20 min—5 for potty—15 for play—snack, then we all go to the barn to gather eggs, feed livestock and assess what work needs to be done in the barn after school; Return—same routine; they pick the subject and do the lessons directed on the board. Some they can do without me but most they do with me. I give one-on-one time with one child for math while the other may do language which is at the point now that it is mostly self taught; BREAK—after every 2 subjects—this break includes everybody preparing lunch together so math and health often continue in the kitchen; following lunch they play outside if weather is good and if not they will play some sort of electronic game together or a board game. TV is not on; Following lunch we review what we have left to do .. get it done ... they can break after two subjects but usually will want to push through now to finished. THAT is a typical classroom day ... BUT in the middle of a lesson, for instance, one child might ask a question that triggers a wild hair in me and suddenly we become a Montessori room. A sudden hike in the wet lands, a sudden field trip to the town our state constitution was signed or even a botanical garden or zoo trip. While I try to be traditional our routine goes out the door quickly. (P1249)

Some parents gave their children a great amount of responsibility. For instance, one parent commented,

I set the expectation for the day and week, and my daughter picks what to work on and when. I am available 9 to 5 to assist. When the day's work is completed then she is done and can have privileges such as TV, phone, tablet and general free time. (P117)

Then on the more unstructured end of the spectrum, some parents allowed their children to take the lead in learning. A parent shared the freedom their children had:

Our days are like summer for school kids but with even more freedom. We play, we learn, we experience the world and the people in it. We eat when we're hungry and rest when we're tired. Everyone has a voice in the decision-making process. Parents step in for support and safety reasons. (P120)

Still another parent described their unstructured homeschool routine:

The children do as they want, with some guidance from me. They read, experiment, game, build, draw, dance, nap—their choice ... They attend workshops, support groups, Boy/Girl Scouts, community classes, etc. They often go to a friend's house to play or we have people at our house. (P199)

These quotes and narratives merely represent the main findings and patterns found within the data. As with the theme of individualized instruction, so the theme of structure could have been broken down into as many data units as this study had participants. Each family organized their day a little differently from all the others. One family conveyed that some days are much more structured than others. Others spoke of how each season has an effect on the amount of structure they have. As the other themes in this section have pointed out, homeschoolers take advantage of the freedom and flexibility they have when designing their educational routines.

## Discussion and conclusion

Homeschooling routines differed remarkably amongst the participants in this study; however, many families shared a number of instructional practices. Although the amount of time a homeschooling family engaged in academic activity varied, the majority of homeschooling families (73%) had an academic day of 4 hours or fewer. Some of the major instructional themes that were derived from the data included collaboration with others, the use of community resources, the importance of the families' faith, individualized instruction, and the level of structure within the learning day.

Understanding the routines of homeschooling families allows those outside of homeschooling a unique view into an alternative form of education. As Luke (2003) has suggested, the innovation and creativity that make

homeschooling successful may prove to be effective within larger educational contexts. Although homeschooling practices are supported by this study, it is acknowledged that there are a number of factors inherent in private schools that homeschooling practices cannot address—a high teacher–student ratio for example. However, there may be elements of homeschooling practices that can inform private education administrators and teachers. This study attempted to insert the voices of homeschoolers into the larger educational discourse, especially in regards to curriculum and instruction.

Can public school officials acknowledge and collaborate with other educational entities? The possibilities of public schools collaborating with private schools, local community colleges, homeschool cooperatives, and content experts are endless—use some funding to hire a professional tutor on a temporary basis; invite private school students to take part in extracurricular activities; allow the public school students to participate in a homeschooling coop for an elective credit. These types of possibilities may unlock the potential of the community, and stimulate a healthy discussion of what a truly public education can look like.

Can private Christian schools maximize the many resources within their communities? With the emphasis of passing state standards ever increasing, teachers may not have the time or energy to invest in field trips, guest speakers, or time outside the classroom. Instruction can easily be diversified by taking advantage of the local resources such as libraries, museums, and state parks. While the creative teacher may find time to invite the veterinarian to the class, many students often do not have the opportunity to learn from the often-free resources just beyond the school grounds. Schools should take advantage of the rich educational resources available to them.

Are there more ways to get parents involved in their child's spiritual education? Schools could allow for elective credit to be earned by students who would like to be taught matters of faith by family or community members. Other possibilities may include developing independent study courses, which would allow students to learn from their church leaders and ministers. There may be a number of other possibilities of uniting schools with parents, family members, and other trusted community members to be a part of a child's spiritual growth.

Can schools put more energy into creating individualized education plans for students? Many schools already put in a great amount of time providing individual learning programs for students with special needs. What if these services were extended to meet the needs of all students? Reducing the amount of time and resources toward standardized testing may provide what is needed to adequately educate all students. Each child has a unique way in which he or she learns, and understanding these differences can help maximize learning. Can we dedicate more of our energy to equipping each student



so that they know that they are truly being educated with their best interests in mind?

Can schools allow more input from parents in how the school day is structured? The results of this study showed that the level of structure, whether high or low, is very important to parents. For many homeschooling families, the amount of structure is a key element in how their school functions. Likewise, public school parents may have similar concerns, but just have no way to express them. Can administrators provide more flexibility and options by which parents can customize a learning schedule that will best educate their students?

Continuing to listen to parents, understanding their needs and values, will ensure an educational system that is worthy of our children. This study has captured some of these values, highlighting engaging and innovative instructional routines derived by parents who have taken on a great deal of educational responsibilities. These insights, full of honesty and passion, may shape how education will be realized in the future.

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