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Theory and Research in Education
2016, Vol. 14(1) 26–44

DOI: 10.1177/1477878515615734
tre.sagepub.com
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African American homeschooling practices: Empirical evidence

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Abstract

Despite a significant increase in scholarly interest for homeschooling, some of its most critical aspects, such as instructional daily practices, remain grossly understudied. This essay thus seeks to fill that void by presenting empirical evidence regarding the homeschooling practices of a specific group, African Americans. Most specifically, the purpose of this essay is to answer the following questions: Who teaches Black homeschooled children? How are they taught? And, what are they taught? What emerges is that while African American homeschooling practices vary widely based on parents' teaching and learning philosophies and ultimate objective, a common tendency is the implementation of a curriculum inclusive of African/African American history and culture. Moreover, contrary to previous claims, this study does not lend credence to the notion that Black homeschooling is overly structured and rigid.

Keywords

African Americans, curriculum, homeschooling, practices, teaching styles

With over 2 million children being currently homeschooled in the United States, as opposed to 300,000 in 1990, and a 74% growth rate between 1999 and 2007 (Gathier, 2007; Grady and Bielick, 2010; Noel et al., 2013; Ray, 2010), homeschooling appears to be the fastest-growing form of education in the United States today. The increase in the number of Black children being educated at home has also been noticeable. In 1999, it was estimated that nearly 10% of all homeschooled children were Black, and those numbers seem to be consistently growing (Coleman, 2003; Fulbright, 2006; Ray, 2010). Indeed, according to the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) estimates, the number of homeschooled Black children has tripled between 1999 and 2007.[1]

However, while academic interest in homeschooling has consistently increased over the last decades, some critical aspects of homeschooling, such as instructional daily practices, still remain grossly understudied. Hence, in the chapter Joseph Murphy devoted

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to 'homeschooling in action', Murphy (2012) lamented that not much has actually been written on the question of homeschool mechanics among homeschoolers at large: 'While attention has been lavished on the motivations for homeschooling and the demographics of these families, he remarked, considerably less work has been directed to "seeing" inside the homeschool' (p. 106). This paucity of information is even more acute when it comes to African American homeschoolers who remain a largely understudied group (Mazama and Musumunu, 2015). It is thus the purpose of this essay to present empirical evidence regarding African American homeschooling practices. While previous studies (Llewellyn, 1996; McDowell et al., 2000; Romm, 1993) have been limited by narrow geographical scopes, and small subject pools, this study sought to overcome these limitations by drawing from a much larger number of households distributed over a wide geographical area.

African American homeschooling practices: Literature review

A review of the literature reveals that no study of African American homeschooling practices has been undertaken to date. Rather, one finds three comments made in passing about this topic. For instance, in her introduction to a collection of statements by 15 African American homeschooling families, Grace Llewellyn made the two following remarks regarding African American homeschooling 'style': (1) it is characterized by diversity and therefore does not lend itself to any simplistic or monolithic categorization, and (2) it tends to exhibit a fair amount of structure (1996: 16). This second characteristic is also mentioned by two other authors (McDowell et al., 2000; Romm, 1993: 344). Romm, who interviewed four Black families, concluded that Black homeschooling parents 'are far more likely to look to educational authorities for their guides, however, and to establish a regimen which must be adhered to by their children-students'. McDowell et al. (2000) write about the 'unhappy paradox' faced by African American homeschoolers who cannot fully take advantage of the freedom afforded by homeschooling because of an acute awareness of structural racist realities, which, they argue, compel Black homeschoolers to adhere to a rather rigid educational routine (p. 130).

Research designs and data

In order to capture the voice and agency of African American homeschoolers, I, along with my colleague, Garvey Musumunu, conducted 74 interviews across a wide geographical area, stretching along the Mid- and South Atlantic, and the Midwest during the spring and summer of 2010. In addition to the interviews, we also relied on surveys, focus groups, and participant observations of Black homeschooling parents in order to provide a comprehensive view of the Black homeschooling experience (see Table 1). Indeed, the largest pool of subjects came from Chicago and its surrounding suburbs (29.7%), followed by the metropolitan areas of Philadelphia (25.7%), Washington, DC (17.6%), New York (10.8%), and Atlanta (8.1%).

A snowball sampling procedure and active recruitment from local and national homeschooling associations accounted for a majority of respondents. The interviews consisted of two parts: a survey which sought demographic and background data for each homeschooling family. This was followed by a semi-structured, open-ended interview with the

Table 1. Place of interviews (N = 74).

Interview site	%
Chicago metropolitan area	29.7
Philadelphia metropolitan area	25.7
Washington, DC metropolitan area	17.6
New York City metropolitan area	10.8
Atlanta	8.1
Columbia and Florence, South Carolina	6.7
Bridgeport, Delaware	1.3

participating parent, where issues touched upon in the survey were further explored and elaborated upon by parents. Over 80% of the interviews were conducted with one parent – usually the mother (N = 60) – representing the homeschooling family. The interviews ranged from roughly 1.5–2 hours in length and were analyzed using an open coding method, whereby the interviews' content (i.e. data) was divided into meaningful segments and then scrutinized to allow common categories or themes to emerge (Strauss, 1987). Connections were then made among the categories and subcategories in a process referred to as axial coding. In other words, we sought connections among the various emergent categories. This, in turn, led us to the final stage of analysis known as selective coding whereby a 'storyline' or main theme emerged (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). As a follow-up, three focus group sessions were conducted in the fall of 2011 to further investigate the homeschooling experiences of Black families. The focus groups consisted of —five to six mothers in a large metropolitan area in the North East of the United States. Finally, on many occasions, observations were made at forums specifically geared for homeschoolers (e.g. science museums or sporting events). The data gathered in the focus groups and participant observations were used to complement and triangulate the data gathered in the individual interviews and surveys. The information presented in this study, however, is largely culled from the surveys and interviews. Table 2 considers the demographic characteristics of the subjects interviewed. As can be seen, there is little variation in the ethnicity of Black respondents interviewed. The majority of our respondents self-identified as native-born African Americans, with only a few self-identifying as foreign born or racially mixed. In terms of family description, the average family consists of 3.2 children and most were brought up in a two parent household (91%).

In terms of education, over 80% of the mothers and over 60% of the fathers have an undergraduate college degree or more. These figures are significantly higher than the national trend of only 19.4% of Blacks with a bachelor's college degree or more in 2010 (Aud et al., 2011). (Let us note that this is consistent with what has been observed about homeschooling parents nationwide, that is, a higher than average level of education (Murphy, 2012).) This suggests substantial human capital on the part of our homeschooling parents. If human capital is understood as the skills, abilities, and knowledge possessed by specific individuals (Becker, 1964), educational attainment then becomes the most common and direct indicator of that construct. It is believed that parents who possess substantial human capital are in a better position to supervise and instruct their

Table 2. Indicators of respondents' socioeconomic background.

	%
Mother's highest level of schooling	
Some high school	0
High school graduate	1.4
Some college	17.4
College graduate	37.7
Some postgraduate	14.5
Graduate or professional degree	29.0
Father's highest level of schooling	
Some high school	1.5
High school graduate	7.5
Some college	27.5
College graduate	37.3
Some postgraduate	2.9
Graduate or professional degree	22.4
Household income	
US$4000–US$24,999	15.6
US$25,000–US$34,999	12.5
US$35,000–US$49,999	10.9
US$50,000–US$74,999	18.7
US$75,000–US$99,999	17.2
US$100,000 or more	25.0

children in further acquisition of human capital (Lareau, 2000). These well-educated parents aside, our figures do suggest a bimodal trend that ought not to be ignored. In effect, a substantial number of homeschooling households have parents with no college degree. Although this trend is higher among fathers – who for various reasons are not as involved in homeschooling instruction as mothers – our data suggest that almost 20% of mothers and close to 40% of fathers do not possess a college degree.

While we cannot claim broad generalizability as our sample was not randomly selected, is geographically limited to the East coast and the Midwest, and is not large enough to pretend to represent the whole African American homeschooling population, we feel nonetheless that this study successfully captures African American homeschooling practices to the extent that, in the course of our research, we reached a point of 'theoretical saturation' (Charmaz, 2013), whereby interviews did not yield any new information but simply echoed previous interviews.

Findings: African American homeschooling instructional practices

What appeared clearly is that Black homeschooling practices display a wide range of diversity, thus making it difficult, as suggested by Llewellyn (1996), to indeed make sweeping statements about African American homeschoolers' techniques and strategies.

Moreover, and contrary to previous research, there is no evidence of a particularly high level of structuration of Black homeschooling. Here again, diversity prevails, with boxed curricula and strict routines, on one hand, and unschooling, on the other, and a wide range of composite practices in between. Rather than a high level of structure, our findings reveal a great deal of flexibility and variability even among the same family, with pragmatism rather than strict adherence to a particular educational practice often being the norm. Again, an eclectic rather than rigid approach seems common among homeschoolers at large (Murphy, 2012).

In the section that follows, I will attempt to answer the three following questions: Who teaches Black homeschooled children? How are they taught? And, what are they taught?

Who teaches Black homeschooled children?

Inside the home. Our interviews overwhelmingly identify Black *mothers* as the main teachers (95%) in Black homeschools. This finding is consistent with what is known about homeschooling in general (Murphy, 2012). Fathers are often the main breadwinners, while mothers stay at home to plan and deliver the education of the children. However, there are, of course, exceptions such as homeschooling single mothers, working from home or outside the home. In such cases, grandparents might also be involved to assist with the home education. One would incorrectly conclude, however, that Black fathers are totally uninvolved in the home educational process. To begin with, they agree to support solely their family so that their children can be educated at home. The stress and responsibility placed upon Black fathers cannot therefore be underestimated. Furthermore, many were adamant about participating in the interviews. Their involvement with homeschooling is often after work and primarily takes the form of physical and/or artistic activities with their children, for the purpose of not only helping their children remain fit, active, and creative but also giving their wife a much needed break at the end of the day.

In addition to the mothers being the primary teachers and administrators of homeschooling, older siblings can also be involved in lending a hand with younger children.

Finally, it was frequently reported to us that as children grow older, they tend to assume greater responsibility for their own learning. Parents have learnt to trust them with not only making the best choices for themselves but also having acquired the ability to *teach themselves* well. In other words, over the years, homeschooling fosters independent learning. The following comments made by three mothers regarding their teenage children illustrate this point:

> They really teach themselves because they have learnt to learn. (Margaret, Philadelphia)

> At this point, there is very little interaction between me and them because of their confidence about where they are now. (Janet, Illinois)

> She is very self-sufficient and she does just whatever subject she feels like doing. (Rhonda, Florence)

Outside the home. However, the home is not the only place where teaching and learning take place. Many outside venues are also educational sites. Reliance on *co-ops* was also frequently mentioned (50 out of 74), although the level of structure and the frequency vary greatly. In some cases, co-ops are simply organized by two homeschooling mothers who occasionally or regularly get together to co-teach. In other cases, and this is a more frequent scenario, the group may be larger, with several mothers distributing teaching responsibilities among themselves based on their respective areas of expertise. Co-ops can be used on a weekly basis, as part of an educational program such as Classical Conversations (which includes hired instructors), or on an ad hoc basis, when mothers feel the need for it. Science co-ops were the most frequently mentioned ones, followed by art, music, and physical education. The reasons given for using co-ops are both educational and social. On the educational level, co-ops can provide children with more in-depth teaching than is available at home – this is especially true when it comes to science co-ops, where children not only learn scientific concepts but also have an opportunity to conduct experiments under supervision. Consequently, co-ops, some parents shared, 'take some of the pressure off' them. Quite predictably, the use of co-ops seems to increase as children grow older. On the social level, reliance on co-ops is dictated by the desire to have one's children learn with others and from others. Since learning at home can be isolating at times, some parents feel the need to place their children (and themselves) in situations where learning occurs within the context of larger social interactions. Finally, should their children go to school, it would be best for them to have some prior experience with group learning.

Private schools and tutors are commonly relied on for music and visual art instruction, when mothers or fathers do not have the required skills to instruct their children in those areas and, of course, have the means to pay for such instruction. Thus, we find Black children learning to play the piano, drum, guitar, saxophone, and violin as part of their home education. They may also be involved in dancing, such as African dance or European ballet, or in Karate, acrobatics, and gymnastics.

African American homeschooling families seem to be fond of taking advantage of *ad hoc classes* offered to homeschoolers by different institutions and in a variety of venues, such as libraries, science institutes, museums, art centers, and community centers. Thus, Black homeschooled children have attended bike workshops, drama and playwriting classes, film-making classes, marketing classes, computer editing classes, journalism classes, forensics classes, farming classes, cooking classes, wood carving classes, horseback riding classes, drawing and pottery classes, home economics classes, and construction work training – to name the most common ones.

Clubs, such as 4H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Eagle Scouts, Book Clubs, and the YMCA, were frequently mentioned as learning venues for Black homeschooled children. Some Black children take classes offered to homeschoolers by their *church*. These include more specifically Youth Bible Study groups and College prep classes. Finally, a few parents send their children to *community colleges* primarily for science and math courses. The main reason for doing so is their own felt inability to teach their children those subjects. However, it is also a welcome opportunity for older children to get a glimpse at college life and be exposed to some of its realities and demands.

One striking and recurrent feature among the Black homeschooling families that were surveyed is their non-involvement with their *school district*. Although permitted under the law in many states to take advantage of public school resources, few families opt to do so (11 out of 74). Those who rely on their school district tend to do so to take care of their children's special needs (most specifically, speech therapy). They might also use the local school's gym facilities or have their children take music classes. Finally, public schools may also be relied on for standardized testing – when required by the state they live in.

Let me reiterate, though, that the general sentiment toward schools, while not necessarily being marked by hostility, is one of distrust. As one parent put it, 'We do not use the school because it does not have anything to offer'. Such sentiment can hardly be a surprise though, since, after all, it often led parents to homeschool in the first place.

In addition to those different outside venues where teaching and learning may occur, Black homeschooling families also shared using multiple *outside resources* to assist the home educational process. On top of that list are, without any contest, public libraries, followed by museums, zoos, aquariums, gardens, and parks. *Public libraries* figure prominently in the lives of most of the Black homeschooling families that were interviewed. All of them, with no exception, reported using the library on a consistent basis, as part of the home educational process. Indeed, libraries provide free and plentiful access to books which can be read for practice and pleasure, to gain specific knowledge about a particular topic, to complete a research assignment and project, and to broaden children's knowledge of their environment and the world. In addition to books, libraries also grant access to computers, which can also provide useful information. However, computers were mentioned much less frequently than books and do not seem to occupy so central a place in the lives of Black homeschoolers. They are used rather discretionarily. Parents consistently and often proudly indicated that their children read well above their 'grade level'.

Museums are also places that figure prominently (92%) in the educational experiences of Black homeschoolers. While some may be leisure-driven, most Black homeschooling visits to museums are content-driven. There, parents believe, their children can explore the previously unknown, be challenged by new experiences, inspired by new information, or observe first-hand a phenomenon they might have studied or discussed in the course of their studies. For all these reasons, museums are valued as institutions providing endless and unique opportunities for effective learning, and trips to museums are part of the weekly or monthly routine of many Black homeschoolers.

Black homeschooled children visit *zoos, aquariums, and botanical gardens* for reasons similar to those mentioned above. Such places allow them to expand their world by being exposed to animals and plants that they might have studied or heard about, but would otherwise never have a chance to observe directly. However, not only does this contribute to their understanding of animal and plant life but also gives them a better idea of how humans fit into the natural world and are connected to it. Furthermore, such places often provide conservation education, which, many parents hope, would raise their children's awareness about the imperative need for wildlife preservation.

Finally, a large majority of parents (86%) reported taking their children to a *park* on a regularly basis, often times daily. The main purpose of those outings is to allow children to be physically active and play with other children.

The picture that thus emerges is one of families frequently on the move, not necessarily secluded in a private space and spending endless hours sitting at a table doing drill work. Field trips and hands-on activities are without a doubt a regular and important feature of the Black homeschooling experience. This naturally leads us to investigate the methods of instruction of Black homeschoolers.

How are Black homeschooled children taught?

The manner in which one teaches one's children is obviously predicated upon one's *teaching and learning philosophy*. Whether one believes that children are *tabulae rasae*, who need to be placed under strict guidance in order to acquire knowledge, or that children are natural learners who are best left to themselves and the world is without a doubt bound to have a great influence upon one's instructional style. Few of the Black parents I interviewed appeared to believe that their children needed daily educational micromanagement or that the best and only way to learn was by rote. On the other hand, few were willing to engage in systematic unschooling. What was reported was rather a combination of both adult-driven and child-driven approaches to learning, with some families obviously being more adept of one over the other. This finding, then, corroborates Llewellyn's (1996) view that Black homeschooling style, like that of the homeschooling population in general, encompasses a broad range of practices and is not monolithic.

Child-driven learning

Drawing its roots from John Holt's (1967) often cited statement that 'children who were provided with a rich and stimulating learning environment would learn what they are ready to learn, when they are ready to learn it' (p. 113), child-driven learning is most commonly reported among parents who gravitate toward unschooling. *Child-driven learning*, they believe, allows the child to follow their interests. The expectation is that children will learn automatically and organically as parents and children explore the world together.

Quite consistently, child-driven learning–oriented parents report listening first and foremost to their children when selecting a topic of study. Oya, in New York, for example, shares how

> I create lessons based on her interests. For instance, we once studied bats because she was interested in bats. When we started getting into bats, it just spiraled into this whole area about nocturnal creatures in general, how they need to rely on their senses, the muscular system, and you know, how things compensate for others, so, that's how our learning happens. It's a lot of conversations, a lot of research, some writing, a lot of reading.

Similarly, 'If there's something they're interested in, we basically beat it to death in every possible way', another mother, Vanessa, reported. An illustration of this 'beating-to-death' approach is further provided by Janice:

> One time, we studied homelessness. So we took a sociological spin on homes. What that means to people and their livelihood and their stability in the world. The financing of the home, the make-up of the home, the electric wiring, the paying for the electric bill, you name it.

What this speaks to is a very thorough, in-depth coverage of what children learn – which stands in sharp contrast with the often superficial and fast-pace teaching that occurs in most schools that are curriculum and test-driven.

Child-driven learning–oriented parents are also prompt to indicate that a homeschooling day is never quite over and that everything that goes on is a learning opportunity, as exemplified by the following quotes: 'A typical homeschooling day lasts all day!' (Aline, Illinois) and 'Learning is all the time for us, it's not just a few hours a day' (Evelyn, Philadelphia). In this context, the distinction between formal and informal learning is quite blurred and daily routines quite flexible. Tamika further explains how viewing one's environment as rich in learning opportunities makes it impossible not to be constantly engaged in teaching and learning. She gives the following example about science:

> I would have to keep them in a closet to not, you know, teach them. They ask me, how do you make rust? They are in the kitchen and they see a can that was left out, it started to rust. So, we get into it.

Teaching and learning tools

Of course, these parents who favor curriculum as process over curriculum as product will also be least likely to use a pre-set curriculum, but will rather rely on other sources when necessary, such as the Internet and its myriad resources (slide presentations, worksheets, videos, etc.), field trips for direct observation, unit studies, workbooks, newspapers, and magazines, to meet their children's needs and interests. One mother who describes herself as an 'unschooler' reports how

> We don't use a curriculum. I give them workbooks to see where they are and then I teach from that, if necessary. But if it's not necessary, then they can just go through and do it and get the practice. If they seem to be okay on their own, I just leave them alone.

In fact, many of those parents object to the use of pre-set curricula, on diverse grounds: pedagogy, content, cultural relevance, and epistemology. Most specifically, pre-set curricula, they argue, stifle the learner's and the teacher's creativity ('When I use a curriculum, I am not as creative, I don't do other things'); do not allow much organic teaching, and thus children cannot learn from their environment so much; are too rigid ('They force us into a box'); are 'not interesting enough', are 'boring', and 'must be supplemented a lot' ('The curriculum does not have enough stuff she is interested in so I have had to go out and pull in a lot of things'); and are not relevant enough to the lives and experiences of African American people. An additional argument of an epistemological nature against the use of pre-set curricula was also presented, with some parents insisting that instead of a curriculum for each subject, it is better to have an integrated approach to

a topic. This holistic approach takes issue then with the fragmentation of knowledge into discrete disciplines – the common epistemological organization upon which schooling and the curricula that it inspires rest. The 'beating-to-death' approach mentioned above speaks to this holistic epistemological preference.

Also, and unsurprisingly, child-driven learning–oriented parents tend to highly value field trips and hands-on activities as critical components of the discovery-oriented constructivist model of knowledge acquisition to which they often adhere. One such illustration of the high value placed on hands-on learning is provided by Mayra, in New York, regarding her daughter:

> She knows when we're in the car we can't park in front of a water hydrant. The rule is fifteen feet; so, I've explained to her what a foot is and we will get out of the car, take a ruler and measure it, so she knows where the car is in order for us to be safe.

Interestingly, and finally, more child-driven learning was reported as homeschooling went on, as if parents learn to trust their children and themselves more as time goes on and more experience is gained. Paula, in Illinois, shared what seemed to be a common experience for many Black homeschoolers:

> Well, it started with a very structured attempt at homeschooling. I thought you had to sit your kids down at a desk every day and do specific things, but that way everybody was unhappy. So we started loosening up a bit and doing different things, and it's not that we don't do anything, they do have certain requirements, but for the most part, I ask them about what they'd like to learn and we learn about that together.

Adult-driven learning

At the other end of the spectrum lie parents who believe that they or some other adults, rather than their children, should be in charge of the teaching and learning process. This view is consistent with schooling and its dominant notion that children are receptacles that must be filled by adults. Again, however, few were the parents who adhered in any extreme manner to this view. Nonetheless, those who gravitate toward it displayed the following commonalities: they tend to favor rote and mechanical learning (one mother in Delaware, for instance, reported having her son copy several pages of a book every day because '. . . to me, that's a way of learning'), rely heavily on pre-set curricula, and, as a result, set up rather highly structured homeschooling routines.

The reasons given for using *a pre-set curriculum* were diverse and included the following: ideology – this was especially common among deeply Christian homeschoolers, who felt that a Christian curriculum would immerse their children in the Christian worldview; convenience and/or insecurity – particularly, for those new to homeschooling ('When you get started, it allows you to "get your feet wet," and then you can move away from curricula', as one mother in Illinois put it); personal preference for highly structured and rigid programs of instruction; and finally, competitiveness of home educated children, 'in case they should go to school, they should know what the other [schooled] children know'. Those who rely exclusively on boxed curricula, or use online programs

for all subjects, tend to have, out of necessity, highly structured routines, leaving very little room for improvisation. Darby, in Philadelphia, whose children are enrolled in an online program known as 'K-12', provides the following account of her two teenagers' weekly routine:

> They get up at 7:00 am every morning. We start with our morning devotion. They're dressed and have breakfast by 8:00. Math is from 8:00-9:30. Then they take a 15 minute break to transition. Then they work on science from approximately 10:20 to 11:45. We do an hour break for lunch, just to chill out. Then we start back at 12:45-1:00 pm. They do English, Social Studies, and Health or Gym. Their day is about 6.5 hours long, every day, except on Friday, which is our leisure day, we only do work from 9 to 12:30.

Let us emphasize, however, that such a strictly structured regimen is the exception rather than the norm since most of the parents I interviewed reported alternating between a child-driven and an adult-driven approach to the home educational process. Parents are most likely to resort to using a pre-set curriculum when they feel the need for transmission-oriented instruction, that is, when they believe that their children need to be instructed and provided information and explanations they cannot obtain on their own. But there are also times when children should be allowed to do and figure things out by themselves. In other words, both guided instruction and active exploring take place among Black homeschoolers. This finding echoes Murphy's (2012) comment that when it comes to forms of homeschooling, 'placing families in discrete categories is often difficult' (p. 113), and Black families are no exception. Topics such as math, literacy, grammar, or spelling, for example, tend to be taught in a more formal manner, including with pre-set curricula. Science, on the other hand, lends itself to more hands-on activities and provides Black children with greater opportunities to explore and come to conclusions on their own. Thus, what I observed was not a rigid educational approach, but a rather flexible one, based on the topic under study, the children's age, and also their learning styles and needs, as well as the parents' level of expertise. These are the pre-cut curricula mentioned by the Black homeschooling parents with whom I spoke: Setclae, Abeka, Singapore Math, Classical Conversations, Accelerated Christian Education, Miquon Math, Kumon Math, Notgrass, Saxon Math, Right Start, Online K-12, Math U See, Sacks in Math, Institute for Reading and Writing, Time for Learning, Phonics Road to Spelling and Reading, Ambleside online, and Apologia. It is worth noting, at this point, that teachers in general have a great deal of say in the implementation of a given curriculum, and this applies to home-educating parents as well, it seems, since they consistently reported 'supplementing' and 'twisting' pre-cut curricula in order to adjust them to their beliefs about their child's ability and best interest and about the relative importance of content topics. Also, and consistent with Brian Ray's (2010) report that the use of fully packaged curricula among homeschoolers has declined, many parents reported having moved or staying away from any formal curriculum, while assembling a selection of appropriate books and hands-on materials which give them optimal flexibility in their homeschooling. What emerges, then, is a mixed picture of Black homeschooling practices and little support for the notion that the Black homeschooling style is more rigid or structured than what is reported about other homeschooling groups.

What are Black homeschooled children taught?

Every curriculum is value-laden, and this applies to homeschooling curricula as well. In the case of homeschooling, which is by definition parent-led, the values that inform curricula are unequivocally those of the parents. Thus, the question is, 'What are the values that Black homeschooling parents are trying to pass onto their children via the curricula that they implement?' This question, though, must ultimately be rephrased as followed: what are Black parents, consciously or unconsciously, attempting to make of their children? Besides and beyond ensuring that their children can read, write, and count well and develop overall solid academic skills, what is their ultimate objective?

As my previous research (Mazama and Lundy, 2012, 2013; Mazama and Musumunu, 2015) has made clear, Black homeschooling parents do not form a monolithic group but present a great deal of ideological diversity, ranging from Christian fundamentalists to African cultural nationalists and a myriad nuances in between. Consequently, their objectives vary tremendously, with some trying to turn their children into 'true Christians' and others into 'committed Africans'. Unsurprisingly, the curriculum used by those parents reflects their ideological choices. Not all homeschooling parents are as deliberate and consistent as those two groups, though. Many, in fact, have not necessarily reflected deeply on the curriculum as a tool to achieve a particular goal. As a result, many seeming contradictions became apparent, between one's avowed goal and one's practice. For example, the strong Black nationalistic sentiments expressed by some were clearly at odds with the curriculum (e.g. Classical Conversations) they implemented. However, despite serious differences, two major commonalities could be identified.

A curriculum that imparts self-knowledge, self-confidence, and racial pride. Indeed, it can be said that, in general, the majority of Black homeschooling parents who were interviewed for this study reported attempting to foster a new narrative about the African American/African experience.

In previous publications (2012, 2013, 2015), I highlighted the fact that many Black homeschooling parents experience the school curriculum as a site of racial and cultural oppression. Indeed, the quasi-exclusive focus on Europe, which stems from the still implicit and dominant European cultural diffusionist paradigm (Blaut, 1993), assorted with the exclusion of any truly meaningful engagement of the African/African American cultural and historical experiences and contributions to the world and to the United States, is blamed for preventing Black children from obtaining self-knowledge and developing self-confidence and is thus a source of great dissatisfaction for many Black parents. Unsurprisingly, then, the curriculum is approached and conceived by those parents as a site of resistance to White supremacy and a potent remedy to Black invisibility and insignificance. Most specifically, Black homeschooling must be understood, in such a context and at least in part, as a rather conscious attempt to make a 'crack in the wall of whiteness' (Bush, 2011: 204), by 'shifting dominant narratives and corresponding imagery'. The two main strategies to 'crack the wall of whiteness' are the elaboration and implementation of a curriculum that builds racial self-confidence (e.g. with children learning about great African civilizations and African historical figures) and positive racial consciousness and identification (through positive racial socialization). This racial

self-confidence and positive attitude toward one's blackness, in turn, are expected to strengthen learning self-confidence ('I can learn and do well because my ancestors did so'). Taneka, in New York, for instance, insists on the imperative need for her son to know about African achievements to realize his own potential:

> I want my son to achieve his full potential; I want him to achieve his greatness as a young black man. I incorporate this value into homeschooling: we do some African studies, African American history, black leaders – when he has to do a reading assignment, I'll try to find books written by black authors.

Another mother in Delaware, Mona, reports how pervasive conversations about the historical experiences of Black people are in her homeschool:

> We talk about African American history all the time. Whatever we study, we try to not isolate it because we've done everything and we've been everywhere. I'm trying to make her very aware that African Americans are everywhere, all over the place and there are no limits.

Thus, in actuality, many Black homeschoolers are redefining for themselves what counts as curriculum by claiming that the history and culture of their people are significant, with some even insisting that any curriculum for Black children should indeed start there. The new narrative that emerges is based on a rhetoric of resistance and victory, which stands in sharp contrast with the 'rhetoric of oppression' (Asante, 2003) that prevails in most public settings, including schools, and which imprisons and marginalizes Black children and their families by making them invisible within the walls of an overwhelming and oppressive whiteness. In that regard, it can be said that the curriculum developed by many Black parents is of a transformational nature, to the extent that it identifies and counters oppressive rhetoric. For instance, Kofi, in Washington, DC, shares how he taught his son that 'Columbus did not discover America' or that, when reading a book with his son about ancient civilizations, he stops to point out lies about so-called Greek miracles:

> You know, I did not want to send my son to go to school to learn lies. Like he knows Christopher Columbus did not discover America. He knows, and whenever we are talking or reading something about history and there is a reference made to the Greeks, I have an opportunity to stop and let him know that, okay, the Greeks learned from the Egyptians and from the Nubians. So, I'm able to teach him the truth. And, I really appreciate that and what it does for him.

Another example is provided by a self-identified Christian couple, David and Dorothy, who openly disagreed with the presentation of slavery as benevolent and even went so far as to terminate their children's enrollment in the cyber school that presented the enslavement of African people as a benign affair. David reports how

> This one particular Christian school had a worldview way different from ours. It became apparent, particularly when talking about the African American slavery experience. They didn't think it was 'that bad'. We were done with them. Nuh-uh. They tried to soft-peddle it, like it was almost a benevolent field trip to America, and Robert E. Lee was a great Christian man, I mean, I thought, what planet are you from?

The message/lesson taught to their children about having uncompromising respect for one's ancestors and their suffering was certainly a strong and unequivocal one. Obviously, homeschooling creates many opportunities to disrupt the grand narrative of European superiority and benevolence.

Likewise, the Black homeschool curriculum can also be thought of as reproductive to the extent that it supports and develops elements present in the Black child's culture and life by allowing Black children to achieve self-knowledge and relate to what they learn.

A curriculum that builds a whole person. Many of the parents who participated in this study indicated that they wished for their children to develop the many talents they might have, not simply their intellect. Therefore, the curriculum should consistently give them many opportunities to develop their intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative, and spiritual potentials. This approach is reminiscent of what has become known as Whole Child Education, which insists not only on the stimulation of the left brain along with the right brain but also on the importance of a transformative curriculum that fosters critical thinking and self-knowledge and presents what is learnt as an integrated (rather than fragmented) whole, while allowing the learner to relate to what is learnt and engage their social and natural environment. Many elements of this Whole Child Education inclination have already emerged in what has been shared above about some Black homeschooling parents' preferred learning philosophies, such as the selection of life-oriented topics that are then approached through a transdisciplinary lens, for example, or providing children with exposure to as many aspects of life as possible, to enhance their intellectual as well as artistic, emotional, spiritual, physical, moral, and social growth. With regard to the moral and emotional dimensions, for instance, it is telling that many parents report having their children consistently involved in civic projects aimed at improving the lives of the community in which they live. Many homeschooled Black children are routinely and consistently involved in church-sponsored community service activities and volunteer at food and clothes distribution banks. One mother in Chicago, for instance, reported how every Saturday morning, her children get up at 6 a.m. to collect bagels from a bakery which they then distribute into particular neighborhoods. The purpose of these activities, which are seen as an intricate part of the homeschool curriculum, is to produce caring individuals who are engaged in socially meaningful activities. Thus, in conjunction with the often deliberately positive racial intent of the curriculum of many Black homeschools, homeschool curriculum is also used to impart a distinct set of values through civic engagement, in this particular instance, social responsibility and compassion. Thus, as it is the case for homeschoolers in general, there is no basis to believe or claim that Black homeschoolers are anti-social and any more self-centered than schooled children (Murphy, 2014).

With regard to the teaching of specific moral values, a special note must be made of Christian homeschoolers who are adamant about their children developing a 'personal relationship with Jesus' and abiding by 'his teachings' in their daily life. This insistence should come as no surprise since African Americans' devotion to Christianity remains unequaled in the nation. Indeed, according to a 2007 Pew Report, 'African Americans stand out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation', with

78% of them reporting to be Protestants – which places them well above the 51% national average. Furthermore, it was also found that 79% of Blacks (vs 56% overall) report that religion is 'very important in their life'.

Another value that Black homeschooling parents commonly reported instilling in their children is a definite work ethic, based on mastery through persistent intellectual effort and high standards. It is true that homeschooling has a built-in capacity (Ray, 2000) to allow the time and space necessary for real knowledge acquisition, as opposed to the cursory survey of topics common in most schools that teach to the test. According to many of the parents interviewed for this study, indeed, homeschooling facilitates pedagogical flexibility, that is, allows parents to adapt their teaching to their children's needs. Since time is not an issue, it is possible to revisit a topic not well understood without being publicly embarrassed and feeling like a failure. Maya, of Washington, DC, for instance, mentioned a friend whose son has been struggling with math in a private school and who eventually and consequently had to be treated for depression. In contrast, she states,

> So, that's one of the things I love about homeschooling is that if your child is struggling, you can just go find ways to help them move through something, as opposed to, you know, a child feeling like a failure.

By the same token, homeschooling takes competitiveness out of the picture. Therefore, children are highly encouraged to engage in true learning rather than bluffing and mere regurgitation for the sake of a grade. David Lawton (2000: 28), among many, lamented that 'Unfortunately in many schools teachers and pupils enter into an unconscious contract to avoid too much effort: teachers devise ways of keeping children busy on work that will not involve too much mental exertion' (p. 32). The contract which Black homeschool parents and children enter is clearly of a quite different kind. In a similar vein, and most likely as a result of home learning habits, most Black homeschoolers reported how their children read very well and love to read. One parent even shared with me how 'In our household, if we want to punish our children, we take their books away'. Again, this stands in sharp contrast with the general disdain for books and reading frequently reported among schooled children and the subsequent disturbingly low reading proficiency levels among students at all grade levels (NAEP, 2014). Apparently, children accumulate lacunae over the years that are left unattended, and which eventually become irreversible. Obviously, the experience of most Black homeschooled children differs to the extent that their parents insist that they achieve true knowledge mastery.

Summary and discussion

The overall aim of this study was to gain insight into the homeschooling practices of African American parents – a largely understudied topic. Most specifically, this essay addressed the following questions: Who teaches Black homeschooled children? How are they taught? And, what are they taught? With regard to the first question, it became apparent that mothers are overwhelmingly in charge of the home education, especially inside the home. However, a fair amount of teaching and learning also takes place

outside the home, in venues such as co-ops, private schools for art tutoring, libraries, science institutes, churches, and community colleges, where Black children may take advantage of classes that cover a wide variety of topics. Furthermore, it was revealed that outside resources such as libraries and museums figure prominently in the lives of most if not all Black homeschoolers.

With regard to the second question, namely, the teaching styles of Black homeschoolers, it appeared that Black parents do not present a unified picture, but differ in terms of their teaching and learning philosophies, which in turn affects their teaching style. While a few share the view that teaching must be for the most part adult-driven and that drill work and learning by rote are the most efficient ways to acquire knowledge, most parents appear to believe that the right combination of child-led and adult-led learning is ideal. Thus, for many parents, children should have a strong say in what they study in order to foster their interest and facilitate true learning. Also, while few parents engage in unschooling, many tend to see the world as a classroom to be explored freely by children at all times. Consequently, parents with such an approach to teaching and learning tend to assemble educational materials themselves from different sources, such as books, workbooks, and the Internet, and shy away from pre-cut curricula. Thus, overall, there is no evidence that, contrary to previous claims, Black homeschooling is rigidly structured.

Finally, regarding the question of curriculum content, it was determined that what Black homeschooled children are taught is determined by their parents' ultimate values. While African Americans people obviously do not form a monolithic group and embrace markedly different values, it was possible, however, to identify two common trends displayed by Black homeschool curricula: (1) a narrative that fosters African/African American historical and cultural knowledge and appreciation, racial pride, and self-confidence. In that respect, African American homeschooling disrupts the pervasive and grand narrative of European superiority and altruism. (2) The development of children's multiple talents through the stimulation of their many dimensions, such as the intellectual, spiritual, artistic, emotional, social, and physical ones. An important aspect of this is the instilling of definite values, such as civic responsibility and particular work habits based on thorough intellectual engagement. In that respect, many Black homeschoolers develop curricula that reflect a holistic approach to education.

Thus, this study sheds further light onto Black homeschooling practices and should be of interest to educators and others who are concerned about the academic and overall well-being of Black children. Indeed, there has been no shortage of statements, often accompanied with disturbing statistics, regarding the poor academic performance of Black children in school (Ferguson, 2008; Noguera and Yonemura Wing, 2008; Valencia, 2015). Scholars and practitioners have offered different strategies to deal with this persistent 'problem', with not much success, it seems. This may be because schools are a reflection and critical agencies of a social system that has historically been bent against people of African descent. As such, schools continue to fulfill both a social sorting and a racial sorting function. This is most glaring in the educational experiences of most urban poor or working-class Black children, and children of color in general, with segregation, under-funding, deficient curricula, over-crowdedness, and inexperienced or under-qualified teachers being the norm. Victims of social and racial exclusion are typically blamed for their failure, while the system that produces exclusion often remains unexamined and

unchallenged (Valencia, 2010). Thus, Black academic failure may be imputed to Black parents' lack of involvement and interest in their children's academic progress and/or to Black children's cognitive inadequacy, problematic culture, and deficient work ethic.

However, not only does the growing involvement of African Americans in homeschooling debunk the myth of the uninvolved Black parent or cognitively or emotionally withdrawn Black child, but a recent study by Ray (2015) indicates that when educated at home, Black children do quite well academically. Ray surveyed and tested 81 Black homeschooled children and concluded that

> The average reading, language, and math test scores of these Black homeschool students are significantly higher than those of Black public school students (with effect sizes of .60 to 1.13) and equal to or higher than all public school students as a group . . . (p. 71)

While one may express legitimate reservations about Ray's self-selected sample, his findings are nonetheless encouraging and predictable to the extent that they point to the fact that when taught properly, Black students do thrive. What 'proper teaching' entails certainly involves, according to my study, at the very least, caring and encouraging teachers who uphold high standards and high expectations; a curriculum that nurtures intellectual inquisitiveness, cultural relevance, racial dignity, and self-respect; as well as the development of one's many dimensions and talents; and, finally, settings propitious to active and true learning.

Suggestions for future research

It is suggested that future research delves further into the potential benefits of homeschooling in order to make adequate comparisons to the non-homeschooling population. This method would also allow researchers to assess the social and psychological development of homeschooled children, as well as the lifespan consequences of homeschooling, as these children enter college. Future research would also do well to investigate the micro-level dynamics of parent–child relationships in the African American homeschooling context. Also significant would be the assessment of the correlation between parental educational level, income level, residential segregation, and other indicators of wealth and status and homeschooling practices.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. See http://www.nheri.org, cited in Chronicle Post article: http://www.chron.com/neighborhood/cyfair-news/article/More-blacks-choosing-to-home-school-their-children-1602158.php

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