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Are Homeschoolers Happy with Their Educational Experience?

Abstract

Homeschooling, as a controversial educational practice, raises many questions about its outcomes, which still remain unanswered. The homeschooling population has been growing over the past years, as has interest in this educational paradigm. The increased accessibility and use of emerging information technologies also hold significance in facilitating access to knowledge and contributing to the expansion of this educational trend. In this context, numerous families contemplate homeschooling for several reasons. Yet, the decision to homeschool or not their children is often difficult, as the outcomes are not predictable. Researchers have explored the academic achievements of homeschooling; however, a more significant question remains unanswered: Are homeschoolers happy? This paper aims to provide insight into homeschoolers' perceptions of this matter. Research findings on the life satisfaction of homeschoolers presented here were based on the anonymous responses of an online survey collected between July 2022 and July 2023 from 33 current or former homeschoolers from five countries. This study used the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) to evaluate the well-being of homeschooled individuals who self-assessed their educational experience as well. The paper also examines the advantages and disadvantages of the educational practice as perceived by homeschoolers themselves in an attempt to provide a picture of the satisfaction of homeschoolers with their educational journey.

Keywords: homeschooling, home education, emotional well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, SWLS

Introduction

As homeschooling continues to gain popularity as an alternative educational approach, questions regarding the well-being and happiness of homeschooled individuals have become increasingly relevant. Homeschooling, characterized by its difference from traditional school settings and reliance on home-based instruction, presents a unique educational environment that may influence various aspects of individuals' lives, including their overall happiness and life satisfaction. While research has explored the academic achievements of homeschooling, relatively little attention has been paid to the subjective experiences and emotional well-being of homeschooled individuals. Understanding the factors that contribute to homeschoolers' happiness is crucial for policymakers, educators, and parents considering homeschooling as an educational option. By examining the satisfaction levels and perceived advantages and disadvantages of homeschooling from the perspective of homeschooled individuals themselves, we can gain valuable insights into the broader implications of this educational approach on

personal development, socialization, and overall well-being. This study aims to address a gap in the literature by investigating the life satisfaction of homeschoolers through an analysis of anonymous survey data collected from a diverse sample of homeschooled individuals across five countries. Through this exploration, it was sought to shed light on the implications of homeschooling for individuals' life satisfaction and overall satisfaction with their educational experience as homeschoolers.

Literature review

A crucial question regarding the outcomes of education is the well-being and life satisfaction of the learners, which can be influenced by a wide range of factors. According to Bakracheva who has widely explored the topic of life satisfaction:

The portrait of the satisfied with life is the one person, who has attained personal goals and has a sense of success ensuring her/him balance and harmony. The satisfied person has positions in the community, good relations with others, feels love and is healthy. (S)he is financially stable, experiences positive emotions, travels and has a meaningful life. (S)he is concerned for the environment and the expectations of others, however, value leisure time and inner hope. (Bakracheva, 2020, p. 96)

Various studies have shown a link between extracurricular activities, leading to the development of certain soft skills and stronger cognitive abilities, as well as a sense of life satisfaction (Feraco et al., 2022; Bruna et al., 2019). According to the model suggested by Feraco et al. the participation in extracurricular activities can positively impact students' life satisfaction. In addition, they found that self-regulated learning and motivation are not only crucial for academic achievement, but also play a significant role in promoting students' overall well-being and life satisfaction (Feraco et al., 2022). Although this study did not address the homeschooling practice directly, the integration of extracurricular activities and the cultivation of self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies is at the heart of the homeschooling paradigm; thus, a link can be deduced.

Another factor contributing to the sense of fulfilment and well-being of homeschoolers is parental involvement, considered "the most important factor in children's attainment" (Rothermel, 2022, p. 17). The literature also suggests that homeschoolers, regardless of the duration of their homeschooling, showed similar social and life outcomes, including subjective well-being, as their peers, who had attended traditional schools (Hamlin & Cheng, 2021). The psychological well-being of homeschoolers has also been examined in the context of their transition to college and the author suggested that more longitudinal studies needed to be conducted in order to evaluate the long-term impact of homeschooling on the home educated individuals (Glock, 2022), as the research on this matter remains scarce.

Research design

This study aimed to investigate the outcomes of homeschooling in relation to life satisfaction, as measured by the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener & al., 1985). The SWLS is a widely used psychological assessment tool designed to measure subjective well-being and overall life satisfaction. It consists of five questions that prompt respondents to rate their agreement with statements regarding their life satisfaction. Scores on the SWLS can range from 5 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction.

Additionally, this research aimed to explore participants' perceptions of the positive aspects and weaknesses of homeschooling, their reasons in favor of the choice to homeschool, and their potential willingness to homeschool their own children. Furthermore, factors contributing to the academic and career achievements of homeschoolers, as well as those that could potentially hinder their success, were examined through open-ended questions, allowing the collection of qualitative responses.

The survey was distributed online using Google Forms. It was randomly sent to homeschooling families, organizations, social media groups, and conference participants via email or social media posts. A total of 33 responses were collected from participants residing in five countries, including Bulgaria, Canada, France, South Africa, and the USA. The data were gathered in two separate phases between July 2022 and July 2023. The initial results from the first phase of the survey circulation, where 13 responses had been collected, were presented in 2023 (Sakarski, 2023). Data analysis was conducted using Excel and employing both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Results

Demographics

The study comprised 33 homeschoolers from five countries – Bulgaria (15.15%), Canada (15.15%), France (3.03%), South Africa (39.39%), and the USA (27.27%) – with a gender distribution of 64% female and 36% male. The respondents had an average age of 22 years, ranging from 12 to 45 years old. Among the respondents, there were individuals with different levels of education, including higher education, secondary education, or education still in progress, which depended also on the age of the respondents. From the responses it was observed that the homeschooled individuals most often continued their education after completing homeschooling. 2 of the respondents, who were of high school age, had gone through homeschooling but were currently attending conventional school at the time of the survey. Other respondents mentioned that they had started their education in conventional school but later transitioned to homeschooling.

SWLS scores analysis

Results from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) indicated that the majority of participants reported feeling satisfied (42.4%) or extremely satisfied (33.3%) with their lives. Additionally, 18.2% of the respondents felt slightly satisfied, while 6.1% felt slightly dissatisfied. Notably, none of the respondents were within the dissatisfied or extremely dissatisfied range. These findings suggest that while homeschooling might contribute to overall satisfaction for many individuals, there are still some who may experience challenges or areas of dissatisfaction. Further analysis of the factors that influence life satisfaction among homeschoolers could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and impact of homeschooling on well-being.

Participants' responses to the question of whether they would still choose to be homeschooled today varied. Some expressed unequivocal affirmation, citing reasons such as the enjoyment of homeschooling and the opportunity to focus on personal interests. Others highlighted the practical advantages of homeschooling, such as the ability to pursue professional sports alongside academic studies and the development of time management skills.

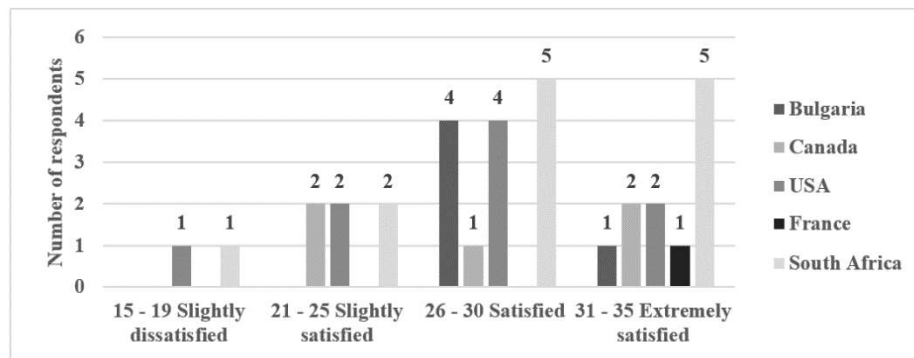


Figure 1. SWLS scores repartition by country

Some participants expressed ambivalence, acknowledging both positive and negative aspects of their homeschooling experience. For instance, while some appreciated the freedom and flexibility afforded by homeschooling, others criticized missed opportunities for social interactions and cultural experiences. Nevertheless, many participants affirmed their decision would still be to be homeschooled, emphasizing its role in shaping their character, fostering a love for learning, and cultivating core values. The responses also reflected diverse perspectives on the effectiveness of homeschooling in preparing individuals for academic and professional life, with some attributing their achievements to homeschooling while others expressed doubts about its efficacy. Overall, the responses highlighted the complexity of the decision-making process regarding homeschooling, and the diverse experiences and outcomes associated with this educational approach.

Respondents' answers to the question of whether they would homeschool their own children also varied widely. Some expressed a strong inclination towards homeschooling, citing reasons such as the desire to foster a deep bond with their children, cater to their educational needs better than public schools, and nurture values aligned with their beliefs. Others proposed a hybrid education method combining homeschooling with an external school system to provide more peer interaction. Some participants expressed uncertainty, highlighting concerns about their ability to teach effectively, the potential impact on their relationship with their children, and the practicality of homeschooling given their lifestyle and career aspirations. On the other hand, several participants expressed a clear preference against homeschooling, citing reasons such as concerns about social skills development, the adequacy of the standard school system, and the desire for their children to have exposure to diverse perspectives. Overall, the responses reflected a broad range of opinions on the feasibility and desirability of homeschooling as an educational approach for their own children.

Benefits of homeschooling from homeschoolers' perspective

The responses from the survey highlighted various advantageous aspects of homeschooling. Firstly, homeschooling provided a high degree of flexibility in scheduling, enabling individuals to explore their interests and progress at their own pace, while accommodating travel and extracurricular appointments without compromising

educational objectives. Secondly, homeschooling facilitated tailored education that addressed the unique needs and interests of each student, thereby fostering enhanced academic proficiency and a heightened enthusiasm for learning.

From personal experience, HS focuses more on learning for the sake of learning; good grades are treated as a test of performance, as opposed to being treated as the goal of learning. This can prevent the laziness that is sometimes exhibited by naturally gifted students; "If my grades are already good, why should I continue challenging myself?". (Respondent 22)

Moreover, homeschooling contributed to the cultivation of stronger family relationships by affording more time for familial interactions and incorporating familial values into the educational process.

Additionally, homeschooling offered the opportunity to integrate religious teachings into education in some families, which may not be feasible within the framework of public schooling. Furthermore, homeschooling served as a catalyst for personal growth, instilling valuable skills such as time management, self-discipline, creativity, and critical thinking. Despite concerns regarding socialization, homeschooling could also effectively facilitate social interactions through deliberate engagement with peers and diverse communities. Moreover, homeschooling engendered a healthier learning environment devoid of bullying, with an emphasis on intrinsic motivation and a growth-oriented mindset. Finally, homeschooling promoted independence and self-management skills, equipping individuals with the necessary tools to navigate real-world challenges successfully. In summary, homeschooling is seen by the questioned homeschoolers as a beneficial educational option that fosters individual development, academic achievement, and the creation of strong familial bonds.

I had a lot of free time, which in the end grew my creativity because it caused me to have to think outside of the box for things to do. It also allowed me to spend more time with family as I was growing up. I was also able to be more flexible in when I was doing school. (Respondent 28)

Findings from previous research (Abuzandah, 2022; Guterman & Neuman, 2017) also confirm that despite some challenges, homeschooling was found to be effective in developing certain desirable traits without the influence of negative peer interactions. The closer relationship between children and their parents enforces social skills development through the cultivation of stronger bonds. "The most important thing is that parents who decide to homeschool their children put deliberate efforts to enhance the social life of such children to ensure the holistic growth of a child both intellectually and socially" (Abuzandah, 2022, p. 1068).

Homeschooling experience limitations from homeschoolers perspective

The survey respondents highlighted various limitations associated with homeschooling. One significant concern was that homeschooling was perceived to offer fewer avenues for social interaction beyond the immediate family circle.

Homeschooling means a family will have to work harder to find opportunities for their children to socialize with those outside the family. This can be accomplished in so many great ways, but it just takes more effort than public school because in public school, students have many social opportunities by default. (Respondent 3)

Consequently, this shortage of external socialization opportunities was seen as potentially hindering the development of interpersonal skills and complicating the

formation of friendships, along with understanding cultural norms by some of the respondents. Furthermore, the survey revealed concerns regarding accountability and discipline within the homeschooling context. Some respondents highlighted the importance of self-motivation and accountability in homeschooling, emphasizing that the absence of external oversight could pose challenges for some students lacking discipline or for parents who were overly lenient in their approach to education. Transitioning from homeschooling to traditional schooling was identified as another significant challenge by some survey participants. Previous studies have revealed similar challenges for unschoolers in integrating the school system (Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021) or for homeschoolers while transitioning to college (Hamlin & Cheng, 2021; Glock, 2022), yet depending on various and complex factors. The structured environment and accelerated pace of formal education settings were cited as potential sources of difficulty for students accustomed to the more flexible and self-directed learning setting of homeschooling.

Moreover, homeschoolers were reported to have fewer opportunities to engage in organized group activities and sports, limiting their exposure to teamwork and competitive experiences if the family did not provide such. Compared to traditional school settings, homeschoolers were challenged by the limited access to specialized equipment, professionals, and resources, which could potentially impact their learning experiences and academic outcomes. Finally, the survey highlighted potential deficiencies in interpersonal and conflict resolution skills, as well as self confidence among homeschoolers due to limited exposure to diverse social environments in some families and classroom dynamics.

Home-schooling indirectly leads to a lack of self confidence in my own academic abilities. I felt that I would be inadequate in a more traditional school setting. This was only because of outside input however, and had more to do with societal norms than home-schooling itself. This lack of confidence was also largely disproven once I did join a more typical school setting. (Respondent 11)

Academic and career success factors

Participants identified various factors contributing to the academic and career achievements of homeschoolers. These included the development of independence, self-motivation, and self-discipline, as homeschoolers are often responsible for managing their own time and pursuing their interests. Additionally, homeschooling allowed for an individualized approach to learning, tailored to the pace and needs of each child. Participants also highlighted the importance of family support, broad interests, and background knowledge in facilitating academic success. Furthermore, homeschoolers benefit from the flexibility to pursue part-time jobs and other educational experiences, which can contribute to their future vocational pursuits. Other factors cited included active engagement in various life experiences, relationships, and the ability to find areas of talent and explore subjects deeply based on personal interests. Ultimately, participants emphasized the role of self-sustaining tools, curiosity, critical thinking, communication skills, determination, and goal awareness in fostering academic and career achievements among homeschoolers.

In assessing the satisfaction level of homeschoolers with their educational experience it is interesting to consider the provision of career or school counselling services. Among the surveyed respondents, a significant majority of 61% affirmed that

they have had access to such services. Moreover, nearly 70% of the participants expressed a belief in the potential benefits of career counselling services for homeschoolers. This highlights a growing recognition within the homeschooling community of the value that professional guidance can bring to students' educational pathways. While a minority, constituting 27%, remained undecided about the necessity of these services, only 3% indicated a lack of perceived need. These results show there's a growing discussion about the adequate support mechanisms to be provided to homeschoolers to enhance their educational journey.

Barriers to academic and career success

The survey respondents highlighted various factors that could potentially hinder the academic and career success of homeschoolers. These factors include a lack of parental involvement in co-ops and outside activities, insufficient structure and accountability, challenges in forming social connections and maintaining motivation, and the risk of becoming complacent due to the flexible nature of homeschooling. Additionally, issues such as isolation, limited exposure to unchosen experiences, and inadequate preparation for standardized testing were identified by respondents as potential barriers to success. Other concerns mentioned include poor communication skills, financial struggles, and the stigma surrounding homeschooling, which could impact the general perception of homeschoolers' education, although no empirical correlation has been clearly established. Overall, the responses underlined the importance of addressing these challenges to ensure the academic and career fulfilment of homeschooling students.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings presented in this paper are suggestive rather than definitive, as they rely on self-assessment from a restricted sample size, making generalization difficult. Nonetheless, they still contribute to the literature gap, offering insights into life satisfaction and overall satisfaction of homeschoolers with their educational experience. The SWLS scores analysis revealed that the majority of participants reported satisfaction with their lives, indicating positive overall well-being among homeschoolers. However, while many respondents expressed contentment with homeschooling, some highlighted challenges such as limited social opportunities, accountability issues, and difficulties transitioning to traditional schooling. These findings highlighted the importance of addressing these challenges in the educational process to ensure homeschoolers' academic and career fulfilment. On the other hand, respondents identified various factors contributing to academic and career achievements among homeschoolers, including independence, self-motivation, family support, and ground for the development of broad interests.

Overall, while many homeschoolers reported life satisfaction and happiness with their educational experiences, it is crucial to consider the individual circumstances and perspectives of each homeschooling family. What has worked well for one family might not have worked as effectively for another, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer to whether homeschoolers are universally happy with their educational experience. These insights provide valuable perspectives on the complexities of homeschooling and the diverse experiences and outcomes associated with this educational approach, emphasizing the need for further research and support to optimize the homeschooling experience of the individuals involved.

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