

Exploring the Perceptions of Home-Educated Students About Experiential Learning and College and Career Readiness

By: Patrick D. McDermott

February 29, 2024

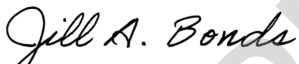
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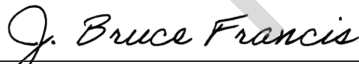
Approved:



Katrina M. Pann, Ph.D., Associate Professor, St. Thomas University
Committee Chair



Jill A. Bonds, Ed.D., Adjunct Professor, St. Thomas University
Committee Member

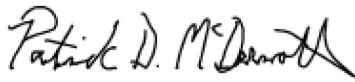


John B. Francis, Ph.D., Adjunct Professor, St. Thomas University
Committee Member

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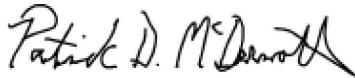
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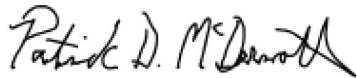
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Abstract

This qualitative research study addressed a notable gap in existing literature by examining the perceptions and relationship between experiential learning and college and career readiness within the homeschooling context. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 13 homeschooled students from northwestern Florida. To gather data, indepth, semistructured interviews were conducted via Zoom or face to face. The research findings revealed valuable insights into the participants' perceptions and experiences, addressing three research questions and identifying nine themes. The findings provide an enhanced understanding of college and career readiness, emphasizing the significance of soft skills and noncognitive abilities alongside traditional academic knowledge. The outcomes highlight the crucial role of experiential learning in shaping students' goals, fostering holistic development, and preparing them for the challenges of postsecondary education and the workforce. While recognizing the study limitations, future research directions are provided, including exploring faculty viewpoints, analyzing homeschooling policies across different states, and investigating specific subsets of homeschooled students, such as those who use various approaches like Charlotte Mason, Unschooling, or Classical Conversations, to uncover variations in their college and career readiness. This study proposes a reevaluation of college admission standards to include experiential learning, highlighting its crucial contribution to overall student development. The research also brings a unique perspective by focusing on student viewpoints, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the diverse dimensions of homeschooling.

Keywords: Florida, home-educated students, experiential learning, college readiness, career readiness, semistructured interviews, soft skills

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Lillian Mary McDermott. May you continue embracing the joy of learning in your own unique way and continue in “designing and living the life you love!”

Love,

Daddy

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

There is a growing consensus that students who graduate high school should have the basic knowledge and skills to afford them to be successful in their chosen or given career path (American College Testing [ACT], 2019b; Hackmann et al., 2018; Kurlaender et al., 2019; Mokher et al., 2019). These paths can be in higher education institutions such as colleges, universities, and technical schools. The military and the general workforce are other pathways a student could choose (Hackmann et al., 2018; Mokher et al., 2019). There is a national concern, however, about the large number of high school graduates who are underprepared for college-level courses, do not know how to develop career goals, and lack college readiness (ACT, 2019b; Conley, 2014; Mokher et al., 2019). In terms of data provided by the ACT on 2019 graduates in the United States, 37% met the ACT college readiness benchmark, which was down from 2018 (ACT, 2019b). In 2019, about 97,000 graduates took the ACT readiness assessment in the state of Florida, and only 22% of Florida high school graduates met all four of the ACT requirements (ACT, 2019a). This study addressed the problem of lack of college readiness by exploring this phenomenon through the perceptions of home-educated high school students. It is essential to define college readiness, as many postsecondary institutions are starting to review these characteristics (ACT, 2019b; Conley 2014; Kolluri & Tierney, 2020; Sommerfeld, 2011). These characteristics of college readiness

can be identified as necessary skills, performance strategies, and techniques to be successful at the postsecondary level (ACT, 2019b; Conley 2014, Sullivan, 2012).

College readiness also consists of the nonacademic skills that students need to have when entering a postsecondary institution (Conley, 2014). Some of these skills include (a) general knowledge; (b) interpersonal skills, leadership, motivation, career orientation, and appreciation for diversity; and (c) civic and social responsibility (Chase & Morrison, 2018; Conley, 2014; Skinner et al., 2016; Sullivan, 2012). College readiness also means that students know how to develop reachable goals (Conley, 2008). College readiness is a process involving choices, goal setting, skills, and beliefs (Hackmann et al., 2018; Kolluri & Tierney, 2020).

It is essential to mention that not every student preparing for college is coming from a traditional secondary educational school setting. Homeschool education is a rising trend in the United States (Chase & Morrison, 2018; Murphy, 2013). In 2018, the number of home-educated students was over 1.6 million and continues to rise (Zeise, 2018). Home education affects the lives of millions of students but is understudied as opposed to other educational options and settings in the United States.

Experiential learning can be defined as “the involvement of active and purposeful contextualized content in a direct learning experience in which students are able to build and use their own experience to learn” (Kolb & Kolb, 2017, p. 5). Experiential learning may occur in two ways: through direct learning experiences or through everyday learning occurrences (Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Heinrich & Green, 2020). Experiential learning comes with several advantages. The primary advantage is that students gain critical thinking abilities (Coker et al., 2017; Rosier et al., 2016; Skinner et al., 2016). These

learning opportunities can help students sharpen their critical thinking abilities and expose them to a variety of approaches to problem solving. Through self-reflection skills and purposeful observation, experiential learning assists students in encouraging learning (Skinner et al., 2016). It is important to be able to work with others, as it helps to improve leadership abilities, interpersonal skills, and exposure to a global viewpoint and diversity (Coker et al., 2017; Skinner et al., 2016). Lastly, these experiential learning opportunities provide homeschooled students exposure to unfamiliar environments within an academic or nonacademic setting (Coker et al., 2017; Rosier et al., 2016). Some argue that experiential learning increases career development and provides a love of learning as the students move from school to their careers (Coker et al., 2017; Skinner et al., 2016).

Experiential learning can occur in a traditional school setting and can also be a large part of home education. However, homeschool students are often left out of the research, particularly when discussing how learning through experiences influences college readiness (Chase & Morrison, 2018; Davies, 2015; Thomas, 2017). Given the growing concerns over college readiness of U.S. students and the potential of experiential learning in addressing some of these concerns, it seems imperative that further research be conducted on this topic. In addition, research on the growing population of homeschooled children, who often use experiential learning as part of their curricula, is very limited. There is a gap in the literature specifically regarding experiential learning and college readiness among home-educated high school students (Chase & Morrison, 2018; Conley, 2013, 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Researching experiential learning and college readiness among home-educated students will serve to broaden the scope of knowledge of how experiential learning ties to

college readiness, specifically among this under-researched population. This qualitative study explored these phenomena through individual interviews with home-educated high school students. Chapter One includes the background, context, theoretical framework, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, rationale, relevance, significance of the study, nature of the study, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The foundation of this study was to explore the perceptions of homeschooled students as the information pertained to college and career readiness and experiential learning.

Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework

Background

College Readiness

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) is an organization representing more than 15,000 professionals and practitioners from around the world who are committed to helping students in their process and decision to pursue postsecondary education (NACAC, 2020). The NACAC conducted a study in 2019 and found that high school grade point average (GPA), grades in college preparatory classes, curricula, and standardized test scores were the key criteria used for accepting students (Clinedinst, 2020). The next factors were the student essay, a student's demonstrated interest, recommendations, class rank, and extracurricular activities and experiences (Clinedinst, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant changes in college admission procedures. Starting in fall 2020, some institutions introduced test-optional admission for incoming freshman classes. This shift required college admissions professionals to adapt to this new norm (Anand & Bhatia, 2021; NACAC's Task Force

on Standardized Admission Testing for International and U.S. Students, 2020; Neutuch, 2020; Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2021).

In response to the pandemic's unprecedented disruption, the NACAC formed a task force to address standardized admission testing for students during COVID-19 and beyond. Their discussions in August 2020 highlighted the reshaping of the fall 2020 incoming college application cycle (NACAC's Task Force on Standardized Admission Testing for International and U.S. Students, 2020; Neutuch, 2020). According to a report issued by the Rockefeller Institute of Government (2021), both public and private universities collectively waived the requirement for Scholastic Aptitude Test and ACT scores for the fall 2021 application cycle due to limited access to these tests. An initial evaluation of admissions policies for public statewide university systems in the fall 2021 term indicated that 53 of 55 public systems chose a test-optional admissions policy in response to the significant impact of COVID-19 (Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2021). Florida's extensive public university system opted to maintain the testing mandate, resulting in a notable decline in applications. Some colleges and universities experienced a drop of up to 50%. The study suggested that numerous institutions across various states plan to continue their test-optional approach, at least through the 2022 and 2023 admission periods (Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2021).

The pandemic has altered the fundamental infrastructure of college admissions processes that relied on standardized testing, which has been rendered essentially inoperable due to COVID-19 and health concerns (Anand & Bhatia, 2021; Neutuch, 2020; Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2021). Neutuch (2020) addressed how college and university admission offices would interpret junior year spring semester grades in

their admission decision-making processes when examining possible incoming students for the class of 2021. Based on the nature of the pandemic, higher education and admissions professionals reviewed a variety of variables when admitting students, particularly in the fall 2021 and fall 2022 terms. Now, more than ever, NACAC urges admission professionals at colleges and universities to adopt a comprehensive approach to admissions, even in the absence of standardized test scores. As of July 2020, approximately 1,500 institutions across the United States had embraced a test-optional policy (NACAC's Task Force on Standardized Admission Testing for International and U.S. Students, 2020).

The use of metrics other than testing is being developed not only for home-educated students, but also for all students who want to enter postsecondary institutions. The students' experiences might move up in importance in terms of an admissions factor. Students who have experiential learning experiences could be deemed college and career ready rather than looking at test scores and other major factors (Anand & Bhatia, 2021; Clinedinst, 2020; Conley, 2013, 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2017; NACAC's Task Force on Standardized Admission Testing for International and U.S. Students, 2020; Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2021).

This study was aligned with the need to reexamine other metric systems that deem a student college and career ready. Not only are higher education processes needed to adapt due to the pandemic, but also many families have chosen to homeschool their students, and those learning experiences are very different than those in a traditional school setting (Coalition for Responsible Home Education [CRHE], 2020; Neutuch, 2020). In this scenario, there is a growing belief that using more qualitative information

such as personal essays, extracurricular activities, and high school accomplishments is essential. These additional data are seen as crucial for understanding how admissions offices make decisions when standardized test scores are not considered (Anand & Bhatia, 2021; Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2021).

Homeschool Education

Home education has been legal in all states since the 1990s (Davis, 2015; Murphy, 2013; Riley, 2016). Even though just 3% of kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) students in the United States are educated at home, this number has risen since 1999 and indicates signs of a continued growth as a schooling option (Cataldo, 2011; Murphy, 2013). Homeschooling or home education can be explained as education for children at home rather than in a public or private school environment (Cataldo, 2011; Davies, 2015; Murphy, 2013). Teaching homeschooled students is mostly performed by a parent or guardian, some of the time by tutors, or among several families in a co-op setting. Home education families are able to create innovative curricula, customize experiences, redesign learning paths, and build partnerships with many organizations (Chase & Morrison, 2018; Murphy, 2013; Riley, 2016). Many home-educated students participate in experiential learning activities (Chase & Morrison, 2018; Firmin et al., 2019; Riley, 2016).

In early 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many families had to transition to homeschooling as schools nationwide faced closures. Some parents adopted a hybrid approach, combining resources from their school district with home education (CRHE, 2020). As of March 2021, there were approximately 4.5 million K-12 homeschooled students in the United States, as reported by Ray (2021) and the National Home

Education Research Institute (NHERI, 2020). The homeschooling community has been experiencing a steady annual growth rate of 2% to 8% in recent years. Notably, there was a significant surge during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021, as indicated by CRHE (2020) and Ray (2021).

Experiential Learning

A central component of homeschooling, experiential learning, has the potential to greatly influence the identified factors that encompass college readiness (Coker et al., 2017; Conley, 2014; Heinrich & Green, 2020; Neuman & Guterman, 2017a). In a recent study, National Center for Education Statistics data showed that the primary reason parents homeschooled their children was because of concerns about the general environment in schools (Coleman, 2017). In the same study, 39% of parents reported wanting to provide a nontraditional experience for their children (Coleman, 2017). Parents who were able to tailor, provide support, and be involved in their children's homeschool experience contributed to their students' academic success (Firmin et al., 2019). These curricula contributed to a "lifestyle of learning" (Firmin et al., 2019, p. 45), which is considered a type of experiential learning. In the study by Firmin et al. (2019), parents had their own markers of success; some used test scores, college admission, scholarships, awards, and other competence markers; however, a majority of the families explained that their children's tailored education, which included experiential learning, was important to their success.

Thomas' (2017) study provided a brief overview of homeschooling and curricula homeschooling families use to develop lessons, resources and methods of learning. The study provided a basic understanding of resources that assist homeschooling families.

Homeschool families have a variety of options when developing curricula (Thomas, 2017). There were four options discussed: traditional, eclectic, mixed combination, and classical (Thomas, 2017). The study showed that 68% of homeschooling parents selected the eclectic alternative for their approach to homeschooling, which included unschooling and aligned with experiential learning based on the responses (Thomas, 2017).

College Readiness and Experiential Learning Among Homeschooled Students

When reviewing the current literature in the field of education, there are not many studies exploring all three areas of the current study (i.e., college readiness, homeschooling, and experiential learning) together. There is ample literature on experiential learning and readiness that helps illustrate the developing of skills (Coker et al., 2017; Conley, 2013, 2014; Gaylor & Nicol, 2016; Hackmann et al., 2018; Heinrich & Green, 2020; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). There are many scholars who address and define experiential learning in a variety of settings (Coker et al., 2017; Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Kolb, 1981, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978/2019). The literature supports the concept of learning new skills or soft skill development learning through hands-on experiences or doing (Coker et al., 2017; Gaylor & Nicol, 2016; Greenberg & Nilssen, 2015; Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Kolb, 1981, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978/2019). When experiential learning is utilized and readiness defined, it can be suggested that college and career planning and readiness will be developed by using hands-on learning which is an essential characteristic of experiential learning (Coker et al., 2017; Greenberg & Nilssen, 2015; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). This characteristic can be seen regardless of the level of education: high school or postsecondary. Readiness is when a student is perceived to be prepared to enter college or