



## **Making the Transition from Traditional to Home Schooling: Home School Family Motivations**

Kenneth V. Anthony and Susie Burroughs  
Mississippi State University

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the motivations of families that operate home schools. Four intact, religiously conservative families were interviewed and observed over one year. Findings showed that families were motivated by multiple factors to leave traditional schooling and begin home schooling. Additionally, the motivations to home school influenced the families' instructional practices. Finally, results indicated that the decision to home school was a positive decision for the families, not an outright rejection of traditional schooling. This study reveals the complex motivations to home school and may assist administrators, teachers, and policymakers in traditional schools induct and retain families considering home schooling.

**Keywords:** home education, motivations, home schooling, parental control, curriculum decision-making

### **About the Author(s)**

*Author:* Kenneth V. Anthony

*Affiliation:* Mississippi State University

*Address:* PO Box 5447, Mississippi State, MS 39762-5447

*Email:* kanthony@armyrotc.msstate.edu

*Biographical information:* Kenneth V. Anthony is a lecturer in the College of Education at Mississippi State University and adjunct faculty in history in the School of Undergraduate Studies at University of Maryland University College- Europe.

*Author:* Susie Burroughs

*Affiliation:* Mississippi State University

*Address:* PO Box 5447, Mississippi State, MS 39762-5447

*Email:* susie.burroughs@msstate.edu

*Biographical information:* Susie Burroughs is Professor of Education in the College of Education at Mississippi State University.



**Current Issues in Education**

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University  
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

**Making the Transition from Traditional to Home Schooling:****Home School Family Motivations,**

Home schooling is not a new phenomenon, but the increased numbers of home schooled children, the organization of homeschoolers into a mass movement, and the potential social impact of home schooling mark those involved in home schooling as a significant segment of the population in the United States (U.S.) today. As early as 2000, McDowell and Ray observed that “the home education movement is a growing one. Its numbers are growing, its acceptance is growing and its power to affect the political environment is growing” (p. 1). In 2005, Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute, estimated that the number of students home schooled in the U.S. had reached 2.5 million (Roberts, 2005). As home schooling continues to grow in the U.S., the number of home schooled students who attend college and move into the workforce also grows. Consequently, the motivations, experiences, and outcomes of homeschoolers have, of late, intrigued educators and researchers alike.

The purpose of the study described herein was to examine the motivations of families to leave a traditional, public school environment and teach their children at home. Of particular interest to the researchers was the intersection of pedagogical and ideological motivations in the reasoning implicit in parents making the decision to home school. Other goals of the study were to learn how the parents of the home schooled children involved in the study made the transition from traditional schooling to home schooling and why they had continued to home school their children.

**Making the Decision to Home School**

Home education has grown as an education alternative for those who are

dissatisfied with public education as well as schools in general (i.e., private and public). Jeub (1994) identified four main reasons parents home school: social, familial, academic, and religious. A 1999 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study (as cited in Basham, 2001) reported data on 850,000 children that were home schooled. From the data, three primary reasons that parents home school were extracted. The data revealed that the primary reasons cited were better education (48.9%), religious reasons (38.4%), and poor learning environment at school (25.6%). A subsequent NCES study (Bielick, 2008), reported that the number of home school students increased to 1.1 million in 2003 and 1.5 million in 2007. This increase indicates that home schooling continues to grow as an educational choice for American families. The 2008 NCES report updated the primary reasons cited for home schooling were concern about the school environment (88%), desire to provide religious or moral instruction (83%), dissatisfaction with academic instruction in other schools (73%), and non traditional approach to child's education (65%).

In a study of 235 families that home school, Collum (2005) identified four broad reasons that parents home school their children: dissatisfaction with public schools, academic and pedagogical concerns, religious values, and family needs. Other factors were also found to influence a parent's decision to home school. These included parental education level, the number of siblings home schooled, and political identification. Princotta and Bielick (2006) identified similar reasons families home educate, but the priorities of home school families they reported were different than in the NCES or Collum studies. The purposes of the Princotta and Bielick study were to estimate how many people in the United States home school and to collect descriptive data on home school families. Survey data was used from the National Household Education Surveys Program as well as interviews conducted with 239 home school families.

These researchers found that parents home school for the following reasons: disdain for adverse environment of schools (e.g., safety concerns, drugs, negative peer pressure) (31%); desire to provide religious and moral instruction (30%); and dissatisfaction with the academic programs of schools (16%).

Generally speaking, the motivations to home educate can be divided into two domains: ideological and pedagogical (Basham, 2001; Knowles, 1991; Knowles, Muchmore, & Spaulding, 1994). Ideological motivations are primarily religious and social in nature, while pedagogical motivations primarily center on the process of education. There are, however, similarities between the two domains, and a family can have reasons to home educate that are both ideologically and pedagogically motivated.

Ideological reasons to home educate predominately focus on issues related to family values (Ray, 2000); perceived lack of religion in public schools and a desire to educate children in an environment that is in tune with the family's religious beliefs (Carper, 2000; Pearson as cited in Martin, 1997); conflicts between families and schools over values and religion (Klicka, 2002); family matters or building a closer family (Holt & Farenga, 2003); and safety concerns, including moral, physical, mental, and spiritual safety (Martin, 1997).

According to Kirschner (as cited in Ray, 2000), "We find many Americans turning to 'family values' and scriptural religion in a search for stability and something to believe in" (p. 2). Those who ascribe to this ideology view home education as a means to upholding their values and finding stability that cannot be achieved outside the home. Consequently, the home education movement has, for many, taken on the feel of a religious revival and, indeed, has been characterized as such:

Home schooling has proven to be a revival of a time-tested method of individualized education. It reflects a deep concern by parents to be involved in the education of their children. The home school movement is profoundly religious, for the most part making the revival more than educational. It is a Christian revival and restoration of the family, with a focus on God's absolute moral values and principles. (Klicka, 2002, p. 439)

Interestingly, even in this appraisal of the home school movement as a revival, reference is still made to the pedagogical advantages of home schooling. It is, in reality, difficult to separate the two, especially among ideological practitioners of home education. The twin factors of the perceived irreligious or anti-religious nature of public schools (Carper, 2000) and the importance of religion in developing and educating children (Basham, 2001) combine to push some families out of public schools and into home schools. While concerns about their children's moral safety strongly influence ideologues to home educate their children (Knowles et al., 1994), some also fear for their children's physical safety (Hill, 2000; Klicka, 2002; Martin, 1997; Princotta & Bielick, 2006).

The ideological reasons to home educate students originate predominantly from a fundamentalist, religious mindset. For some whom ideological and religious conflicts with public schools are the lone motivations for home schooling, having their children educated in privately funded religious schools is an option. Beyond the conflicts with public schools, however, it has been documented that there is yet another, deeper ideological motive that drives many to home educate, and that motive is intrinsically connected to the notion held of the proper role of the parent in a child's education (Carper, 2000; Ray, 2000). For this reason, many homeschoolers proclaim that "they have abandoned institutional education for home schooling in an attempt to restore what they believe to be education in its purest form—parents teaching their own

children" (Carper, 2000, p. 6). These ideological homeschoolers believe they are fulfilling a religious mandate, and for them neither public nor private schools is an option. As explained by Klicka (2002), "In home schooling, parents can fulfill the commands in scripture to teach their children God's truth throughout each day" (p. 124). Parents who hold this belief maintain that they are exercising their rights to educate their own children as they deem appropriate. Mayberry (as cited in Ray, 2000) discovered that many parents who home school "perceived home education as a way for parents to regain control of their own lives, a way to make the impact they want on the next generation" (p. 2). Parents who ascribe to this mindset not only see home education as a right, but as an obligation they must fulfill. They perceive a fundamental difference between their value systems and mass schooling, be it public or privately funded and controlled, and they feel an obligation as parents to build a closer family (Knowles, Marlow, & Muchmore, 1992).

While ideological reasons for home schooling are first and foremost religiously oriented, pedagogical reasons for home schooling stem directly from the preferred relationship between the student and learning. Pedagogues do not view school and education as the same thing. They believe that education should occur in a less structured environment and students should engage in the type of experiential learning that they believe is seldom practiced in public schools. They also value more freedom in the curriculum than is typically allowed in public schools (Jeub, 1994). Medlin (2000) reported that home school families describe traditional schools as "rigid and authoritarian institutions where passive conformity is rewarded, where peer interactions are too often hostile or derisive or manipulative, and where children must contend with a dispiriting ideological and moral climate" (p. 107). For homeschooleders, schools create environments that actually make learning too difficult for kids (Holt & Farenga, 2003).

Within both domains of motivation to home school, there exists a feeling that traditional schools are not the best places to educate children (Knowles et al., 1994). When describing the sentiments of homeschoolers toward the prescribed curriculums of public schools, Klicka (2002) declared that, “we [homeschoolers] don’t want that controlled by the government” (p. 8). Many homeschoolers feel that schools equal a less individualized education (Zehr, 2006), and many also view home schooling as a less stressful learning environment (Holt & Farenga, 2003). Lubienski (2003) proposed that there is an “anti-institutional element to the home education movement, where parents believe that institutions can be destructive, or think that they can do a better job than impersonal bureaucracy” (p. 176). According to Gaither (2009), most parents who home school their children “choose this option out of frustration with or protest against formal, institutional schooling and seek to offer an alternative, usually conservative Christian, worldview to their children by teaching them at home” (p. 343). In sum, the pedagogues do not acknowledge the need for public schooling; and, in fact, they reject such government action as unwanted interference into an area that should be reserved to parents. These radical stances can be found among members of both groups of homeschoolers – those who seek to establish a religious education for their children as well as those who choose to home school for pedagogical reasons. However, Medlin (2000) determined that “When parents decide to home school, they are thinking more of the advantages of home schooling than the disadvantages of conventional schooling” (p. 107). Simply stated, parents choose to home school because they are convinced that the home is the best environment in which to educate their children. Because of this, their motivations to home school can be interpreted to be grounded in a more positive than negative impetus.

The question then becomes, why do home school families contend home schooling is a preferred learning environment for their children? Generally speaking, it is primarily because of the nature of instruction typically employed in a home school setting. Home school advocates defend their choice to home school by pointing to what they view to be two of the greatest strengths of homeschooling: (a) the practice commonly referred to as the “tutorial method,” (Basham, 2001) and (b) the ability of parents to individualize learning to the specific needs of the child (Klicka, 2002). Interestingly, home school parents’ oftentimes ascribe to liberal philosophies of education. It has been found that most advocate experiential learning, individual freedom, and hands-on learning in the real world (Griffith, 1998; Holt & Farenga, 2003; Jeub, 1994; Knowles, 1991; Knowles et al., 1994).

In 1992, however, researchers Knowles, Marlow, and Muchmore observed that although the modern home school movement was an “outcome of a direct reaction to the many shortcomings of public education that was commonly raised by educational reformers of the 1960s and early 1970s” (p. 195), within a decade or so, the movement had been co-opted by individuals and groups that were religiously and politically conservative. These ideologues adopted pedagogical reasons to home educate and paired them with their ideological motivations, but according to Knowles et al. (1992), when home schools are examined carefully, “... it becomes clear that they are not closely tied to the liberal roots of home education. Relatively few home schools seem to operate on the premise that homes are superior places of learning” (p.227).

It can, therefore, be concluded that the motivations of those who choose to home school are myriad and complicated, and although a number of studies have been conducted to ascertain the primary motivations of homeschoolers (Basham, 2001; Knowles, 1991; Knowles et al., 1994; Neuman & Aviram, 2003; Princoiotta & Bielick, 2006), a review of the literature reveals that

research into the subtle ambiguities that exist when determining why parents choose to home school their children is lacking. While previous research has focused on why parents home school, little attention has been given to the interconnectedness of pedagogical and ideological motivations or to the reasons why parents continue to home school. Furthermore, while the question of why parents' home school has been answered using large-scale surveys, the individual stories of families that inform those measures have not been captured. It is these stories that can serve to provide the detail and nuance into how motivations pushed or pulled families into home schooling and why they chose to continue to home school their children.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Research Design***

The study presented herein sought to fill a perceived gap in the literature on home schooling by exploring the individual stories of selected home school families and identifying the push-pull factors parents encounter when making the decision to home school their children. To this end, the research was guided by two lines of research. The first was intended to identify factors that influenced the families to home school. The second was designed to determine how the families made the transition from traditional schooling to home schooling and why they continued to home school their children. Because of the nature of the questions the study sought to answer, the case study method was used employed. As explained by Merriam (1998), "Case study is appropriate when the object of an evaluation is to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of a program" (p.39), and such was the objective of the researchers.

#### ***Participants***

Four home school families that were active in a home school organization that operated in the southeastern U.S. were chosen and agreed to participate in a year-long study. The home

school organization the families were affiliated with was a cooperative that embraced a classical approach to education. The organization was made up of primarily religiously conservative families. Though chosen from the same home school organization, the families transitioned to home schooling before they joined the group. The criteria for choosing the families were that they (a) had at least three years of home school experience, (b) had children they were currently home schooling, and (c) had at least one child who had completed the home school education and had moved on to college or into the work force. These criteria were chosen to insure a study cohort with extensive experience with home education that was willing to candidly discuss their motivations, successes, and failures. Glesne (2006) wrote that homogeneity sampling can be used to describe a subgroup in depth. The researchers used purposive homogeneity sampling from a home school group of religious conservative families in order to find a sample that would provided a rich detailed description of the research problem. This enabled the researchers to allow the participants to tell their unique stories about how they made the decision to home school. This narrow sampling increases the depth of the findings of the study but limits the transferability to other groups who differ from the sample. Table One provides demographic data on the sample families.

### ***Procedures***

Data for this study were gathered through (a) interviews with the parents and children; (b) informal discussions during and after periods of observations; (c) observation of the families at home; (d) observations of home school group activities; and (e) collection of artifacts (student work samples and weekly logs). Interview protocols were scripted using open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, comprehensive dialogue from the participants. The researchers elected to conduct formal interview and informal discussion sessions because they ascribe to the

philosophy expounded by Byers and Wilcox (as cited in Vaughn et al., 1996), which is: "If we want to know how people felt, what they experienced, what they remembered, what their emotions and motives were like and the reasons for acting as they did, why not just ask them?" (p. 18). As suggested by Morgan (1993), the number of target questions was limited to 12 with additional impromptu probing and follow-up questions asked as needed. Observations were conducted in the homes of the homeschoolers in an effort to accomplish what Sherman and Webb (1988) recommended that researchers do, which is to "gather data about the 'lived' experience of participants" (p. 125).

Table 1 Sample demographics

	Smith	Johnson	Harbor	Riley
Family Structure	Intact	Intact	Intact	Intact
Father's occupation	Constitutional lawyer	Business owner	University employee (non owner faculty)	Business
Mother's education level	B.S. History	Some college	Some college	B.S. Education/ M.S. Education administration
Children at home school	Male (16), Female (13), Female (8), Male (6)	Male (16), Male (10)	Male (15), Female (8)	Male (15)
Children at college	Male (20) Female (18)	Female (18)	Male (18)	None
Adult children out of college or in work force	None	None	None	Female (26) Male (25)

Children ever in private school?	No	Yes	No	Yes
Children ever in public school?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The data analysis began with an initial set of domains that emerged from the review of the literature. As additional domains emerged during the data analysis, the set expanded accordingly. QSR's NVivo 8 software was used to code the data collected during the interviews and the observations. NVivo is a useful tool for researchers that can be used to efficiently manipulate and query text-based data (Bazley, 2007). Data charts and matrices were used to analyze the information gathered within and across the four cases that was relevant to the research questions. Supporting data from both parents and children as well as from the multiple data sources were identified to elicit major findings of the study. Peer review and participant checks were utilized to confirm the trustworthiness of the study's findings and conclusions. The trustworthiness of the data was also bolstered by the facts that the data were collected over a period of a year and multiple data points within and across the cases were used to support each finding.

## Results

For the four families involved in this study, motivations to home school were determined to be exceedingly complex. Three elements were found to be common among the families. First, although the initial catalyst for each family might have been a conflict with the public school, there were also latent motivations that pushed the families to make the change and resort to home schooling their children. Secondly, the motivations to home school were found to directly influence the way the families operated their home schools. Lastly, additional, unanticipated motivators to continue home schooling were revealed.

### ***The Smith Family***

The Smith family was initially motivated to home school because of conflicts with the public schools. The mother was involved in her children's education and active in the public school. She began to be concerned about some of the teachings that she felt were contrary to her family's religious beliefs. She articulated the push-pull she experienced as follows:

I got involved in the schools and didn't agree with a lot of things. It was new age stuff in the schools. I always said I would never home school, but it felt like God changed my heart, and led me toward home schooling.

When asked for a specific instance that illustrated her rejection of public school instructional practices she replied:

One stands out, they were doing these guided imagery classes, and I knew about new age and all and asked questions, and they did not like it. Once I started asking questions, my son started getting checks all the time. I felt they were taking it out on him.

This mother reported that her attempts to address the issue led to further conflict with the schools. She perceived her child's teacher to be defensive when asked about the "guided imagery" activities, and when she asked to see the school system's curriculum framework, the mother said she was told she could not see it. When asked why they home school, the fifteen-year-old son replied, "When my older brother was little, he went to public school and there was something with the teachers and I don't remember exactly, but my mom found out about home school." Strikingly, even though the event happened sixteen years earlier, this story was still being echoed by the younger children who were being home schooled during the study.

In spite of the conflict with the school, the parents said that they tried to keep the older child in public schools. Two additional factors ultimately influenced their decision to home

school. The first was financial. When asked if private school was ever an option the father replied, “It was really just the money,” and the mother added, “Financially it was not an option.” The second factor was religious and family reasons. The mother was the first to want to home school but the father resisted, even though he stated that he understood why she wanted to home school. Recounting discussions they had when deliberating over the decision, the father said, “She more or less had a spiritual calling and wanted the children to have a Godly upbringing.” The mother added, “We were uncomfortable with the public school system, but really feeling like that’s what God wanted us to do as a family.” Hence, while the initial catalyst to home school for the Smiths may have been conflict with the school, the desire to do what they felt God wanted them to do with their family was the reason that they actually removed their children from the public school setting.

It was revealed through the course of the interviews that the family continues to home school for several reasons. Family and religious reasons are central to their belief that homeschooling is a better alternative than public schooling, but they also maintain that they prefer homeschooling because of the flexibility it allows and for pedagogical reasons. Flexibility encompasses both curriculum and family flexibility. During one observation, the mother was overheard telling her daughter, “You can read Aesop when we go to the orthodontist.” During an interview, the father posited that one of the best things about home schooling was flexibility regarding vacations. According to Mr. Smith, “One of the major differences I really love is vacation. We can take vacation any time we want. It still is like school, because they still learn where we go, like the Capitol Building.”

Interestingly, though this family can be described as conservative, they operate their home school by incorporating a mixture of progressive and traditional beliefs and practices. This

was evidenced by comments Mrs. Smith made such as, "Critical thinking makes them think logically and be able to understand what they read." It was observed that for the Smith family, there was a desire to go beyond the basics and teach the children to become lifelong learners, but the family did also focus on memorization of facts, poems, and Bible verses. The mother justified memorization by saying, "You memorize things that are in your head and at a later point they remember it. They put things together. It's training for self discipline." The point of memorization, for this family, was for later use as information to draw on for critical and creative thinking.

Their motivations to home school directly influenced this family's curriculum choices. Because of their religious education priorities, they elected to align themselves with a home school cooperative made up of a group of religiously conservative families. The cooperative operated on a classical education model, and it focused on helping families educate their children from a Christian worldview. The cooperative's curriculum centered on religious teachings, and the Bible was a primary text used in many of the students' assignments. The Bible was also used as a primary text in the Smith's home for the study of both literature and history.

### ***The Johnson Family***

The Johnsons were initially motivated to home school because of conflicts with the public schools. The father was a constitutional lawyer and represented conservative religious families in cases against public schools throughout the nation. Their children attended public schools until there was a conflict over Outcome Based Education (O.B.E.) and practices the parents felt were in opposition to their religious beliefs. The mother described one practice she was offended by as follows:

At our son's elementary school one year during Earth Day, one classroom had a board that said, "Ask mother earth to forgive us." I felt that violated everything I believed about God, and that was a different religion to me. My children ... did not attend Earth Day. We were always opting them out of things.

Like the Smiths, the Johnsons said that they tried to reconcile their differences with the school district. They transferred their child to another school and tried to find teachers they believed to be more conservative or traditional in their instructional practices. The decision to actually leave the public school system did not come until several years later when they had more children in school and the school system reorganized. The mother articulated her frustration with the school's reorganization by stating, "I would have been at three different schools!" Their youngest child at the time was scheduled to start kindergarten the next year. When Mrs. Smith requested a transfer for that child, it was denied. Again, she expressed her frustration by stating, "I would have had four kids at four different schools. I had said, 'Lord if you don't want me to continue this then don't grant the transfer'." For the family, the school system's denial of the transfer was the catalyst they needed to finally make the decision to home school all four of their children. Although the mother and father readily agreed that the initial conflict with the school over religious beliefs and O.B.E. were the reasons they started to home school, when questioned further they admitted that an underlying reason was that they "wanted our children to be raised in a Christian home and [we] felt home schooling was the best way to do that." Additional evidence of the Johnsons' inherent desire for a religious education for their children emerged when the parents arranged for the older children to attend a Creation Science seminar at a nearby church. The stated purpose of the seminar was to "educate children in nature,

nurture, and admonition of the Lord” and to “use the Bible to explain dinosaurs rather than fitting dinosaurs into the Bible.”

Similarly to the Smiths, the Johnsons mentioned the flexibility of home schooling as a reason to continue to home school. The father related that “one of the great things of home schooling is there is a real freedom in the natural kind of pursuit of knowledge and new things and understanding more deeply.” The family reported that they had the freedom of taking vacations during the school year because they were not tied down to a school district’s calendar. Also like the Smiths, finances were described to have played a role in their decision to home school. In one interview, the mother stated, “I would have been pleased to send my kids to a private school, but we could not afford it at \$3,000 a kid.” She quickly stated, however, that that might not be totally true, because she felt that home schooling was a better environment for her children than any traditional school setting.

With respect to their instructional approaches, the Johnson family utilized a combination of traditional and progressive curriculum and teaching strategies. The father indicted the public schools saying,

That’s one of our greatest frustrations with the public school approach, the way they tinker with pulling out phonics and the whole language approach and all this spelling is another … It almost appears as if there is a concentrated effort to keep kids from learning how to read and reading quality material.

Comments such as these provided evidence for Mr. Johnson’s disdain for much of what he perceived to be progressive in public education. Ironically, however, when discussing the ways they operated their home school, some rather progressive techniques were described. For example, he stated that “The word we like to utilize is integration. In our history we try to

integrate with our science, which we integrate with our literature, and hopefully it all ties together so that they'll understand."

Observation of the Johnson children at their home school indicated that the family operated a home school that allowed children to move about freely during their studies. There was little control exercised over when something was studied, especially for the secondary-aged children. The mother provided them their assignments at the beginning of the week and they worked at their own pace and in their own order. There were no set study periods. These practices supported one of the reasons cited by the family for continuing to home school, which was their desire to encourage their children to become independent learners.

### ***The Harbor Family***

The Harbors reported that they initially home schooled for pedagogical reasons that stemmed from difficulties their oldest son was having in public school. The mother explained, I really promise you I was not mad at the public school, but I was seeing my own child sort of fall between the cracks. By this time he was not reading toward the end of his first grade year and he was just not really picking up and catching on.

She first decided to begin teaching her son at home after school in an effort to supplement the instruction he received at the public school he attended. Eventually, however, she decided that if she was going to have to re-teach him everything after school, she might as well assume total responsibility for teaching her son at home and save him from what she perceived as wasted time at school. Though this was the initial motivating factor, it was revealed that there was another, equally strong factor. As the mother explained, "The reason to home school is not [for] knowledge itself, because I would say that education encompasses a lot more than knowledge; it includes skills. It was important imparting our values to them." She indicated that it upset her

that she was not the primary influence in her daughter's life, "I would say things to her and she would say, 'Well, my teacher said this' – just the real pull of somebody else's influence holding more weight with her than what we said."

Though the reason to home school for this family was pedagogical, there was also evidence of a religious conflict between the family and the public schools. When asked why they home schooled, the oldest son responded, "Because of the lack of God inside the public school system, and I came out of first grade not being able to read." When pressed as to why parents choose to home school, the mother ordered the motivations as follows: "I know a lot of people will say religious reasons to home school was the reason they started, but for us it wasn't the reason we started, but it is the reason we stayed."

This family also exhibited progressive and traditional educational beliefs and practices. They were traditional in the sense that they believed in a Great Books curriculum and classical education. According to the mother,

What we are having them read is not just fun or entertainment but actually to teach them how our culture developed. Why we are where we are. Why we think the way we do. Those kinds of things. Those shaping influences have shaped the people who have gone before us.

The mother went on to explain, however, that their children's education was not limited to the things their family believed. To illustrate her point she said, "We are even exposing them to ideas that we wouldn't necessarily agree with their stance or their philosophy. They greatly influenced the people before us so for that reason we do a whole lot of reading." An observation of the books in the house confirmed the mother's statement about allowing her children to learn about ideas that were divergent from their beliefs.

Like the Smiths and the Johnsons, the Harbor family operated their home school in a way that was indicative of the motivating factors that drove them to home school. This family was concerned with their son falling through the cracks in the public schools, and they decided to address his individual needs and academic shortcomings by home schooling him. After administering a standardized achievement test to their son, the parents realized that he was a grade level behind in spelling. The next year the mother focused instruction on remediating his spelling deficiencies and his problems with spelling were corrected. This supported the family's contention that home schooling provides a flexibility that public schooling does not, and this was a reason they cited for deciding to continue to home school their children.

### ***The Riley Family***

The initial motivation to home school for the Riley family was conflict with the public school over sex education. Mrs. Riley did not agree with the content of the program or the way it was implemented. She said she obtained a copy of the sex education curriculum and found that

There was a long list of things you had to do and couldn't do. If you gave them up for adoption there was half the problems. When you got to abortion, there was nothing. So if you have an abortion, you don't have to face all the problems. It said if you and your partner decide to have sex, it never said husband and wife. I saw a clip of the video they show. My kids were not happy with this and wanted to be home schooled again.

She reported that she tried to address the issue with the school district by attending a meeting, but she said she and her husband "were treated like we were idiots."

The parents explained that their children had been in home school, private school, and public school before the final decision to return to home schooling. The family did not resort to home schooling until after the children attended a private religious school. The reason they opted

for home schooling was that they found the home school cooperative and it was using a classical approach to education from a Christian perspective. The mother stated that she would have continued to send her child to a private school if there had been one that offered a classical education. The mother indicated that the primary reason they chose to home school was that they “wanted our children to have a Christ-centered education and see a whole complete picture revolved around Christian principles.” This, combined with their pedagogical motivation for a classical education, is what pushed the family into home schooling.

The family combined progressive and traditional educational practices in their home school. Reading was observed to be the primary mode of instruction, and the mother, who was a certified teacher and school administrator, reported that “They read all the time, books and articles. I feel the more they read the better the student is.” On the progressive front, the mother was trying to foster independence in her son. As evidence of this she said, “He is more independent. So he gets his assignments out on Monday and chooses what he wants to do. We don’t have a set thing on times or a set schedule.” The mother stated that she did not make out a weekly schedule for her son, but gave him the freedom to organize his education.

One of the reasons this family said they continued to home school was the flexibility it provided them. Over a period of two years, both her father in-law and her parents had been extremely sick. During that time, she was able to continue teaching her children as well as let them have increased visitation time with their sick grandparents. The family was able to care for their family and maintain their educational efforts. The mother explained, “My mother was here and we took care of her. What was so wonderful was I would go stay with her at her little apartment, and my son would go with me and I still did his schoolwork. It was a blessing.”

## **Discussion**

The families that were a part of this study reported similar motivations to home school as those present in the literature (Basham, 2001; Collum, 2005; Knowles, 1991; Knowles et al., 1994; Princotta & Bielick, 2006). The findings of this study, however, reveal nuances in the way the dual motivations – ideological and pedagogical – work together to pull a family out of a public school setting and into home schooling. The Smith, Johnson, and Riley families experienced direct conflict with the public schools their children attended while the Harbor family's break with public schooling stemmed more from disappointment than conflict. In reality, however, the conflicts and disappointment were simply catalysts that caused them to begin to think seriously about resorting to home schooling. While all of these families attempted to reconcile their differences with the public schools, in the end their efforts at reconciliation proved unsuccessful in large part because they were simultaneously being influenced by other motivations, and in each case the parents ultimately resolved to remove their children from the public schools.

For the Smith, Johnson, and Riley families, it was either religious beliefs or family issues that cemented their decisions to resort to home schooling. They all shared the belief that home schooling was what they should do because it was the best thing for their families. They wanted to raise their children in keeping with their religious beliefs, and they determined they could best do that by educating them at home. The Harbors, on the other hand, were initially motivated from a desire to address an academic shortcoming. This, combined with their desire to be the primary influence over their children on all issues, pushed them to begin home schooling. For the Harbors, the religious motivations became a motivation to stay in home schooling, rather than the reason to start home schooling.

A closer inspection of these families' motivations suggests that home school proponents cannot so neatly be grouped into the two domains identified in previous studies, that is, an ideological group and a pedagogical group (Basham, 2001; Knowles, 1991; Knowles, Muchmore, & Spaulding, 1994). For each individual family, the motivations to home school play out in different ways. Each motivation can serve either as a catalyst that sparks an interest in home schooling or as a latent or underlying motivation that is actually the primary reason to home school. The findings of this study also reveal that these motivators also reinforce, and therefore play a significant role in, families' decisions to continue to home school. For the Smiths the catalyst was conflict with public schools over perceived New Age practices, but the latent motivation was family reasons influenced by religious beliefs. The Johnsons were initially motivated by conflicts over O.B.E. practices, but the added inconvenience of taking their children to different schools combined with religious beliefs that they should teach their children at home were the latent motivators. Academic issues with their oldest son was the catalyst that prompted the Harbors to consider home schooling, but the desire to be the primary influence over the children was the latent motivator and religious reasons are the reasons that the family continues to home school. The Rileys were initially prompted to home school because of a conflict over sex education, but the latent motivator was a combination of religious beliefs and a desire to give her children a classical education.

The results of this research also reveal that the motivations to home school influence the way that families teach. The families all expressed a desire to foster independent, lifelong learners, and this was seen in the way that they approached their children's education. The parents were less teachers and more organizers and taskmasters for learning activities. In the words of one child, "Our parents aren't really our teachers – it's kind of, they'll give us the

material and then the books themselves are the teachers. Our parents are kind of just there to enforce." The parents provided the environment, resources, and motivation for the children to learn and the children do the learning. Observation, weekly logs, and interviews of all families indicated that the secondary-aged children spent about seventy percent of their learning day reading.

Another way that motivations were found to influence learning was that the curriculum was very much focused on their religious beliefs. All of the families used the Bible as a primary source for history and literature. Three of the families attended the Creation Science event. The assignments and activities that the students completed and participated in were oftentimes related to comparing their Christian worldview to the dominant (i.e., contemporary) worldview. This connects to the work of Carper (2000), Klicka (2002), and Pearson (as cited in Martin, 1997).

An appreciation of the complexity of these families' motivations challenges the myths that home school families are anti-public school. These families were found to be independent-minded families who were guided by both deeply religious and educational beliefs. In other words, these families viewed home schooling as a positive, personal educational choice, not necessarily as an overt rejection of public schooling. This finding agrees with the findings of Parker (as cited in Medlin, 2000) and Medlin (2000). A statement made by the mother in the Harbor family effectively speaks directly to this conclusion:

It's not always a statement that public schools are bad you know, but it's just what we want to do and what we feel is best for us and our families, and it's not necessarily meant as a statement against what you do.

Of significant interest in this study is that even though the conflicts with public schools that served as catalysts for these families to home school were rooted in the conservative

religious and political beliefs of the families, in practice the home schools these families operated exhibited much that could be considered exemplars of progressive education. They desired that their children become independent learners, be exposed to ideas that are contrary to their beliefs, value critical and creative thinking, and be allowed freedom of choice in courses studied. In addition, the parents fostered an atmosphere that allowed their children, as students, to determine when and what they would learn on most days, considered by most to be a true mark of progressive education.

Another interesting finding of this study was the importance of flexibility as a motivator for the families to continue to practice home schooling. Whether it was because they could address the individual learning needs of their children without concern for curriculum constraints or they could have the ability to take “learning vacations” whenever they pleased, all of the families in this study cited flexibility as one of the realized benefits of home schooling. This single, unanticipated finding may give pause to policymakers whose efforts over the past two decades to micro-manage the public school curriculum have not only lengthened the school day and the school year, but have seemingly also, and ironically, resulted in the institutionalization of a system that in many ways limits authentic learning opportunities for students of both basic and enrichment instructional material.

### **Conclusion**

The families who agreed to participate in this study were motivated to leave public schools because of ideological and pedagogical concerns. Having decided to home school their children, each family elected to operate their home school with a mixture of traditional and progressive educational practices, but each with a decidedly religious focus. It can be concluded from this study that the families were not just disillusioned with public schooling, but rather they

felt they were driven to make major life style changes and create learning environments for their children that aligned with both their ideological and pedagogical beliefs. In many ways, the home schools they established operated qualitatively differently than public schools. Most notably was the flexibility each family derived from home schooling their children, and in each case, it was the flexibility factor that ultimately became a primary motivation for them to continue to home school.

Perhaps a better understanding of the nuanced and complex motivations to home school can help public schools better meet the needs of families considering home schooling, thus serving to keep them enrolled. Further, a clearer understanding of parents motivations to home school can lead to the educational establishment specifically and society in general modifying the view of homeschoolers as a radical fringe, discontented with the greater society, and to see them as individual families that are acting on multiple motivators to do what they feel is best for their children.

Public schools might consider becoming more flexible and allowing families some of the freedoms that home schooling offers. Traditional schools can learn from the individualized nature of home schooling and potentially transform into institutions that support independent learning rather than act as dispensers of knowledge. Traditional schools can also learn from the mixed traditional and progressive methods that the homeschoolers use in their curriculum and instruction. Schools can look back to the past for material, inspiration, and guidance and also develop students who are independent minded both grounded in the traditions of the past yet looking to the future for better things to come.

While this study revealed new and interesting insights into the motivations of homeschoolers, further research is needed into the day-to-day operation of home schools and

how families manage and evaluate home schooled children's learning. Further research is also needed into the support structures, including technology and cooperatives that home school families rely on to educate their children. Finally, research is needed to expand the finding that flexibility is an important motivator that contributes to families' decisions to continue home schooling their children.

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