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“Everybody’s Homeschooled Differently” - A pilot qualitative study of the lived experience of homeschooled college students

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“Everybody’s Homeschooled Differently” - A pilot qualitative study of the lived experience of
homeschooled college students

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Abstract

There are preconceived notions that homeschooled students suffer both academically and socially, especially in the college setting. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of academic and social transition from homeschooling to a public university in homeschooled students. A phenomenological approach is used, which addresses individuals' unique experiences and interpretations of those experiences based on their upbringing. A qualitative design is used in this study with semi-structured interviews in which participants were asked to talk about their social and academic transition experiences. The sample group includes previously homeschooled students that currently or previously attended a public university. Each interview was based on an identical series of open-ended questions and participants were encouraged to expand on their background. The data were then analyzed and reduced based on patterns that best represent the academic and social transition from homeschooling to a public university. Analysis revealed common themes of academic excellence, changes in socialization, and maintaining connection with family support networks. These results may provide insight into the experience of homeschooled students and their experience of the transition, for family members, or academic staff-members that provide support to these young adults during transition.

Homeschooling is an increasingly prevalent practice, both in America and elsewhere, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan (Bunday, 2013). According to the National Home Education Research Institution (NHERI), more than two million children were home-educated in 2010, and NHERI estimates that the number will rise by 2 to 8% in subsequent years (Ray, 2015). Home education can provide a high-school degree, but for higher education, it is necessary for young men and women who were formerly homeschooled to transition from being taught by their own parents in their own homes to the traditional educational settings. Concerns affecting many traditionally-schooled students, such as separation anxiety and homesickness, may be exacerbated by anticipated social impairment from lack of exposure, a common societal expectation for students raised without daily exposure to peers. Increased stress and anxiety may have serious detrimental effects on the health, academic performance and life-quality of homeschooled students when they transition into higher education settings, including depression and even physical damaging disorders such as diabetes, gastrointestinal distress and chronic insomnia (Thurber and Walton, 2012).

Although researchers have studied homeschooled college students, academic performance, proficiency, and confidence, few have used qualitative methods to explore the college experiences of students who were homeschooled. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience transitioning to college in homeschooled adults. The following research question is answered: What is the lived experience of transitioning to college in homeschooled adults? There are research-based findings and preconceived notions that homeschooled students struggle more both academically and socially, however this study aims to explore salient experiences of the young adults.

Review of Literature

Researchers have used quantitative methods to compare academic performance in homeschooled students and traditional, non-homeschooled, students. Using high school seniors' ACT composite scores, Wichers (2001) determined that ACT composite scores were reliable predictors of first-year college GPA. The researcher also found that homeschooled students performed as well or better on the ACT than traditional students (Wichers, 2001). Jones and Glockner (2004) found that homeschooled students did not have any more difficulty than traditional students when seeking admission into college. The average ACT composite test score for homeschooled individuals was 22.8 compared to the average of traditional students being 21.3 (Jones & Glockner, 2004). This does not only apply to public high schools, but for Catholic high schools as well. For example, Snyder (2011) found that students who were homeschooled had higher ACT scores than those in a private Catholic school. Cogan (2010) found that the mean GPA of 2.78 in homeschooled students' first year of college was consistently higher than that of 2.59 for traditional students. Further, Cogan (2010) compared GPAs of homeschooled students versus non-homeschooled students through a four-year curriculum. Findings showed that the average fourth-year GPA of homeschooled students was 3.46, while non-homeschooled students showed an average of 3.16. The researchers did not take into account the personal feelings of comfort level regarding academics. These feelings could vary among homeschooled and non-homeschooled students and affect academic performance. Also, because this is a relatively new area of study, there is little known about the experiences of homeschooled students when they attend traditional colleges. This study will partly address that gap in knowledge.

In comparable studies of homeschooled and traditional college students, researchers have frequently studied social abilities, such as comfort and proficiency in social situations, emotional distress, self-esteem, depression, and loneliness (Cohen and Drenovsky, 2012). In a study for the Moore Homeschooling Foundation, Taylor studied homeschooling students' self-worth on the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale and found that the self-concept of the students compared positively with that of publicly-schooled peers, with homeschooled students scoring higher than their publicly-schooled peers in every tested category. Cohen and Drenovsky (2012) studied self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, as well as depression with the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D). They found no significant difference in self-esteem in the two groups of students. However, they did find that homeschooled college students reported significantly lower depression scores than those who had never been homeschooled. Peyton (2013) found that college freshmen who were previously homeschooled experienced no more communication apprehension than their traditionally schooled peers. In addition, students of racial minorities were found to perceive themselves as confident students who fit into the college environment. Taj'ullah X (2014) explored the transitional experiences of homeschooled African American students into Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and found that students associated their feelings of not fitting in with being naturally shy and introverted. In reference to friendships, researchers have also found that homeschooled students are just as capable of having quality friendships and feel comfortable initiating friendships as well (Garofalo 2014). Few qualitative studies have been done to describe homeschooled students' experiences of college. This study addresses that gap in knowledge and may increase understanding about homeschooled adults' college experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by phenomenology, which describes the lived experience of individuals and their unique viewpoint of events and experiences in their lives (Smith, D.W., 2013). It is a perspective which assumes that each human being sees the world through an individualized “lens” of personal experience. That is, the experience of one individual may be far different from that of another individual. There is uniqueness to each person’s views. Regarding this type of study, the meaning of the events is looked at rather than the event itself. The situations these individuals were put in are assessed through an interviewing process in order to be understood. Each individual's perspective is different, but they may display similar themes throughout their answers.

The goal of this theory is to describe the "lived experience" of a phenomenon. In this study, the “phenomenon” is the transition of homeschooled students from high school into a large, urban, public university. The co-investigators examine the personal experiences of students and their lived experience of the transition from a home-education environment to university-level schooling.

According to the phenomenological theory, upbringing and personal experience play a central role in the development of personal worldview. Personal constructs vary among individuals, and in the case of homeschooled individuals, these constructs are part of a framework to view self in social and academic experiences. What homeschooled college students select to talk about during semi-structured interviews will be determined by the students, who may not talk about what the interviewers expect them to talk about; hence, the approach to truly “explore” worldviews with open minds and to construct the themes described in interviews with

many homeschooled persons in college. Based on the literature, it is expected that students attending the public university who were previously homeschooled will not have any more difficulty than traditional students when it came to getting admitted. Also, relating to academics, it is expected that homeschooled students excelled when it came to GPA. Another finding of a quantitative study based on previous findings is that there would be no difference between homeschooled students and traditional students in “social confidence,” self-esteem, and depression levels. However, this is a qualitative phenomenological study, so experiences of previously homeschooled college students will be explored.

Methods

Design

The research methodology that was used in this research is qualitative. According to Schmidt and Brown (2012), qualitative research is a type of research where human behaviors are described by words rather than numerical values. More specifically, a phenomenological framework was used in which each participant received the same set of questions and was asked to talk about their lived experience of transitioning to college.

Sample

The co-investigators used a purposive sample, intentionally selecting homeschooled students; however, the participants were volunteers and were willing to share their experiences. Participants in this study were chosen because they were able to provide first-hand information regarding the subject being studied. Seven willing participants who met the criteria were selected, and were able to tell their stories. The setting was a baccalaureate nursing program at large urban public university in the Midwest United States. Each participant was currently a

student of this large, urban, public university at the time of their interview. Demographic measures (that neither excluded nor included participants) included age, gender, race, and college major. Exclusion criteria included attendance at a public or private high school before college enrollment and college education at a university other than the university campus studied.

Sampling and Data Collection Procedures

The sampling method used in this study was purposive. Snowball sampling is a technique often used in purposive studies. This sampling procedure involves recruitment of key informants from referrals from other participants. Upon recruitment, participants were told the purpose of the study, the research question, and that their information will remain confidential and anonymous. They were informed of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time if chosen. A consent form was given to each participant, which included consent to have the interviews audio recorded (Appendix A).

Data was collected through an individual interviewing process which lasted approximately 50-60 minutes. Each participant was asked the same questions and encouraged to openly talk about their college experiences (Appendix B). Interviews were conducted in the fall of 2015 and occurred in the Honors Common Room in the Honors College at the large, urban, public university. Refreshments were provided to the participants, and they were assured of their anonymity. Each interview was recorded using the co-investigators' phones, then transcribed to be assessed for themes and similarities. The data collected in the study was kept anonymous. The data was stored through Google Drive and accessed only by the co-investigators and faculty sponsor. Following completion of the relevant research, all data was electronically deleted.

Results

Sample

The sample was comprised of seven health profession college students in an inner-city university in the midwest U.S. with a student body of approximately 25000 students. All participants were white, below the age of thirty, and female, with the exception of a single male participant. The sample included two freshmen, one sophomore, one junior, and three seniors. One of the senior participants was returning to college education after a four-year break. Six of the seven lived at home with their families and commuted, and one participant lived in off-campus housing with a sibling and unrelated roommate.

Findings

Regardless of varied homeschooling experiences, transitions to the college, and interview time length, several themes emerged, based on commonalities across participants. They were: Academics: "A desire to learn," Socialization: "Everything is a conscious effort," and Living Environment: "It's surprising how much you need your family still."

Academics: "A desire to learn"

All participants described academic performance to be a major concern and indicator of education of children, including those who are homeschooled. During the interviews, the majority of participants identified themselves as "straight-A students" and as having "a steady performance" both before and after the transition to institutionalized schooling. When describing her academic performance during homeschooling and formal/traditional schooling, one female participant commented, "My grades and performance haven't changed, but the work and view I put behind it have definitely shifted." Multiple participants also recalled feeling the need to put

in extra effort and excel in college, citing multiple obligations and motivations; “It’s expensive to go to college, so I need to perform,” “Before, I didn’t care how I did in school. There was no one to compare to. Now, I have to work harder,” “I had to push myself and have internal motivation,” and “you have to be self-motivated.” In the first years of transitioning to college settings and courses, these pressures to do well academically motivated several of the participants, who described spending large portions of time studying; time that might have otherwise been considered as free time for socialization or recreation. In the words of one former homeschooler, “I was pretty much the classic academic hermit.”

While the importance of showing high academic performance was perceived as an important criterion or marker across interviews, several participants described that they were surprised with the changes in atmosphere from the informal classrooms of homeschooling to the more structured learning environment of college lectures. While some homeschooling parents may be highly educated, participants talked about how the knowledge base of multiple teachers educated in their subjects and trained to teach is almost impossible to replicate by parents. Therefore, parents often involved credible outside sources to bolster the education of the homeschooled child. In spite of those homeschooling experiences of learning, when comparing structured college classroom learning to homeschool learning, a female participant said, “it’s nice to be taught science” instead of learning the sciences largely through reading and self-teaching. Other participants stated: “I was expecting there to be more supervision,” “I have the choice to do whatever I want with my time--I am responsible for it,” and “A lot of stuff was structured [during homeschooling] and then I came here and it was all up in the air.” Other participants identified the change of pace from private classrooms and freeform learning to

structured classroom lectures as one of the major transitions they experienced. Although participants described differences in academic approaches to homeschooling versus college learning experiences, they voiced largely positive responses regarding the transition: “It has given me good perspective on what to study,” “I’ve never had anyone question my intelligence based on my homeschooling,” and, “It has been a good transition getting reinforcement on the lecture material.”

Socialization: “Everything is a conscious effort”

The second theme that emerged was about the social experiences of transitioning from homeschooling to a large university environment. Many of the participants mentioned family members, friends, or acquaintances who planned to enroll at the participants’ college, or who already attended their college, suggesting that they had not needed to form entirely new social networks in the new environment. Further, more than one of the participants mentioned that non-homeschooling friends expected homeschoolers to be asocial and less adept at forming friendships, or in the words of one participant, “non-sociable, long-skirt-wearing creeps.” However, several participants also described how their social lives had decreased since the transition to college and how they wished they had gotten involved earlier than they did in on-campus socialization. As one interviewee put it, “I would have gotten involved in organizations and friend groups sooner, taking advantage of what college has to offer aside from classes.”

Many talked about how their socialization before their transition to college was largely dictated by the activities and hobbies they engaged in outside of schoolwork, e.g., a group of friends and acquaintances would form among peers in a choir, another group at the family’s church, etc. “My social life previously was a really tight-knit group.” Through this kind of social

grouping, a fairly extensive social network was formed, which would meet at regular times and provide opportunities for socialization.

After the transition to college, participants described how socialization became “more intentional” and required deliberate action and communication with newly formed connections. This awareness was acknowledged by one participant, who said, “I came to college and had to reach out and make friends; it was not ready-made connections.” Other participants further supported this statement: “It’s a social and growing experience, not just for your brain,” “Early on I didn’t want to talk to that many people or get to know anyone, but the longer you’re in class, the more you talk to people and start to make friends.”

This need for intentional, deliberate action and communication to socialize, combined with a drive to perform well academically in college, led to a decreased social life for many of the participants, supported by a participant, who said, “College became more about the academics and less about the social part as time has gone on.” When asked to talk about anything they regretted about the transition process, several participants mentioned their lack of socialization and on-campus interaction as a major regret, despite the benefits and value of living off-campus or commuting from home. In the words of the participants, “I miss being on campus and having that college feel, but I don’t miss the giant payments” and “It’s a give and take.” Several participants also acknowledged that their college experiences would have been different had they lived on campus. One interviewee said, “It didn’t feel like a true college experience because I commute and haven’t lived on campus;” another commented, “There’s always a doubt in my mind. It would be a different experience if I lived on campus.”

Living Environment: “It’s surprising how much you need your family still.”

Participants described that as a natural result of the homeschooling experience, family played a significant role in their transitions to college. Before the transition, parents played the roles of the teachers. However, as the participants transitioned from homeschooling to non-homeschooling settings, many participants recalled changing relationships with their parents and family. Similarly to students following a more traditional course of study, some homeschooled young adults moved to college with goals of gaining independence and breaking away from their home environments. As one participant stated, "I tried to make the distance from here to my parents' house as large as possible. I tried to be as independent as I could be." There were mixed statements from participants who had moved to live with family after a year or more on campus. Some statements supported that they would not have changed moving so far away from home, such as "I think the challenges I faced were good challenges, so I could learn how to become an adult." On the other spectrum, some students wished they would not have made such a big move, saying: "I moved 3.5 hours away from home, and I think that was actually negative. Looking back, I think I should've stayed closer, done a more gradual transition, and saved more money that way too, and been less stressed out about bills."

On the other hand, others stayed close to home or remained living at home and commuted throughout their entire university experience. "Sometimes the commute is a pain, but I'm happy at home, and I still feel connected here." A majority of the participants were currently living with family or in off-campus housing, rather than choosing to pay fees for on-campus housing, stating that "To still be able to be in family life is nice" and "I like that I'm closer to people that I love." Family connections remained an important part of the students' lives, as motivation to succeed or as a supportive network that provided life-oriented teaching beyond the

former scope of their academic teaching. "Having that support system in place, even though I had to make all new friends, when I left, I knew I had friends and family that still cared about me to go back to if I totally just failed out."

Discussion

The researchers interviewed seven college students about their transitions to university schooling and used ten open-ended interview questions. From the trends of the interviews, there were a variety of experiences and feelings about the college transition process. Three themes emerged during data analysis: Academics: "A desire to learn," Socialization: "Everything is a conscious effort," and Living Environment: "It's surprising how much you need your family still."

In general, participants did not describe having difficulty gaining admission into the university, which supports findings of Jones and Glockner (2004). Participants also talked about having minimal difficulty maintaining previous high levels of academic performance, in line with findings by Cogan (2010), although the motivation and work level behind the academics were different to match the different classroom environment, changing from largely external motivation from parents to a more internal form of motivation to succeed in higher education. In regards to socialization, researchers have found that those that were formerly homeschooled perceive themselves as confident students who fit into the college environment (Cohen and Drenovsky, 2012). In these interviews, participants voiced that at first, levels of confidence were lower: "[I felt] that I had a giant 'H' on my chest, like everyone was going to know I was a homeschooler." But, as time went on, participants consistently described that confidence levels grew. As one participant stated: "...as time goes on, I don't feel like I have to identify as a

homeschooler anymore.” Lastly, family remained a large part of their lives for the most part, supporting and motivating them, whether they lived with their family or moved far away from them for college.

Limitations

Study limitations include the small and homogeneous sample; all participants were caucasian, and all participants, except for one, were female. The sample was also from one college at a single university, limiting the range of responses. For greater generalizability, a larger sample from departments and colleges at universities, preferably across the state or country, would have been preferable.

Implications

Although findings are limited, the study does increase understanding about the experiences of students transferring from homeschooling to a public university. Findings suggest that these students may likely be high achievers in academics, although unaccustomed to the academic environment. Information on the feelings and experiences of students new to the environment may be helpful to academic advisors, teachers or even the parents of children transitioning out of homeschooling, so they can provide focused and appropriate guidance to children in the midst of potentially, stressful experiences.

As a pilot study, the study provided preliminary information about the lived experience of homeschooled students transitioning to a public university. In the future, the simple expansion of the study to a larger sample more diverse locations and backgrounds would widen the applicability of the study and provide more true-to-life results. Students from a variety of racial backgrounds, fields of study, and varying geographical locations, and in greater numbers would

all increase the trustworthiness of findings. In addition, future research should include a more detailed examination of homeschoolers and academics. For example, since participants in the study frequently mentioned that they felt the need to excel in college, to the extent that several prioritized it much more highly than social interaction and on-campus experience, there is potential for a study based in academic anxiety in students from non-traditional forms of schooling transferring to public schooling. In addition to studies of formerly homeschooled college students, further study could also focus on the experience of children who transition into a public high school, examining and contrasting the experiences. These studies could provide information to homeschooling parents in the process of planning their child's academic timeline, e.g., should parents enter children into public schooling during their high school years, only for the purpose of college, when the child prefers, or possibly at no point in their education? Information from children who have experienced the transition at different points in their lives could be valuable to homeschooling families as well as to the educational institutes into which they may transition.

Conclusion

In summary, participants reported maintaining excellent grades from their time in homeschooling, although motivations to study and maintain grades varied during and after transitions of school environments. These included competition with their fellow students, financial obligation, or motivation from parents. Socialization was more deliberate in college, where scheduled activities were less of a source for interaction. Finally, family support was a comforting and/or motivating factor in students' transitions. In some cases, students were motivated to be as independent as possible, moving away from family and striking out on their

own, while others testified to the solidarity of their family as a support system during the major transition. Although participants acknowledged some of the challenges of transitioning to a more structured learning environment, one participant said, "Transitioning is difficult at times, but from my experience, I think it's exaggerated by people outside of the homeschool world."

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Appendix A

Title of Study: Lived College Experience of Formerly Homeschooled Adults

Introduction: You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Hannah Bullock, Irene Penkalsky and Maria Alexander, nursing students in the College of Health Professions, School of Nursing at The University of Akron.

Purpose: The purpose of this project is to study the lived experience of students and former students of the University of Akron who were home-educated previously to college.

Procedures: If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview about your experience in college, your expectations for your college career and how they related to your actual experience. There will also be additional questions about your age, gender, race, and your major throughout college. You will not be asked to give any identifying information at any time.

You are eligible to participate in the study if you are currently enrolled in the University of Akron or have previously been enrolled within the last five years. You are not eligible if you attended a high school or middle school before your attendance of the University of Akron, graduated more than five years before this interview, or if you are attending or have attended a university other than the University of Akron. No persons will be excluded based on gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation or marital status.

Benefits and Risks: The researchers will provide refreshments in reimbursement for time spent during this study, and your participation may help provide a new perspective on the experience of students coming to college from a home-schooling environment. It's entirely up to you whether you choose to answer, or how much you would like to say on the subject. There is a risk

to your anonymity in that you will be describing your personal life experience; while the unique nature of each story is valuable, it also slightly decreases the anonymity of the study. However, none of the interview questions are designed to intrude on sensitive or personal information, and if you are concerned you have no obligation to divulge anything private.

Right to refuse or withdraw: Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdraw from the study at any time will involve no penalty. Failure to participate in no way affects your academic standing.

Anonymous and Confidential Data Collection: No identifying information will be collected, and your anonymity is further protected by not asking you to sign and return the informed consent form.

Confidentiality of Records: Data are collected with an online survey. The interview is recorded by the interviewer and transcribed into an electronic document so that the participants' interviews can be analyzed for repeated themes across multiple experiences. In order to further protect the participants, the transcribed and recorded information will be deleted after the research is complete.

Who to Contact with Questions: If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Hannah Bullock (hjb20@zips.uakron.edu), Maria Alexander (mpa20@zips.uakron.edu), Irene Penkalsky (ilp4@zips.uakron.edu), or Christine Heifner Graor, PhD (Advisor) at (330) 972-6422 or graor@uakron.edu. This project has been reviewed and approved by The University of Akron Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the IRB at (330) 972-7666.

Acceptance & Signature: I have read the information and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. My completion and submission of this survey will serve as my consent. I may print a copy of this consent statement for future reference.

Thank you for considering our research study!

Appendix B

1. What were your feelings when applying for college?
2. What were your living arrangements during your time on campus? (i.e. did you live at home, in a dorm, an apartment, or other?)
3. If you commuted from home, do you wish you would have lived on campus? Why or why not?
4. In what ways, if any, has your college experienced changed/evolved during the time that you have been/were here?
5. What factors influenced your college transition experience/process, either positively or negatively?
6. What things would you change in regards to the transition process?
7. In what ways, if any, did the college experience differ from what you were expecting?
8. How would you describe your social life in college compared to your social life previously?
9. How would you describe your academic performance in college versus learning at home?
10. What questions (if any) would you have included in this interview, or not included in this interview?
11. Do you have anything you would like to ask me(/us)?