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BLACK FAMILIES and HOMESCHOOLING
in the United States

Brian D. Ray, Ph.D.
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There are about 2.5 million homeschool students in grades K-12 in the United States. It appears that the homeschool population is continuing to grow (at an estimated 2% to 8% per annum over the past few years). The demographic variety among homeschool families has continued to increase. As of 2016, a nationally representative sample showed that forty-one percent of homeschool students were of ethnic minority background (i.e., other than White, non-Hispanic). Some 21% of the students lived in “poor” households (i.e., with incomes below the federal government poverty threshold). Regarding the highest formal education level of the parents/guardians, 15% had less than high school, 16% had a high school diploma or equivalent, 25% had vocational/technical training or some college, and 45% had a bachelor’s or higher degree.6 The growth of homeschooling in the United States will likely accelerate more during the 2020-2021 school year due to both increased social acceptance of homeschooling and due to government responses to the Covid-19/Coronavirus situation of the first half of 2020. A U.S. poll in mid-May 2020 found that 41% of parents said that they would likely enroll their child in a homeschool, neighborhood homeschool co-op, or virtual school once the Covid-19 lockdowns are over.7 A later May survey found that 59% of parents “… would likely pursue home learning such online school or homeschooling, with 30% saying they would be very likely to do so.”8

Growing Body of Research on Ethnic Minorities

The body of research on homeschooling ethnic minorities is rapidly increasing. Several studies have been done to date on African Americans.

Reasons Blacks Homeschool

Some studies addressed the reasons for why black parents choose homeschooling. In many ways, their reasons are the same as for other parents. The only quantitative study of its kind found that the ten most frequently-stated reasons African American parents gave for homeschooling are those shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason Parents Chose Homeschooling</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to teach the child at home so that you can provide religious or moral instruction</td>
<td>96.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the parents to transmit values, beliefs, and worldview to the child</td>
<td>95.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop stronger family relationships between children and parents and among brothers and sisters</td>
<td>87.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To customize or individualize the education of each child</td>
<td>80.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplish more academically than in conventional schools</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to provide religious or moral instruction different from that taught in public schools</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned about the school environment, such as safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure</td>
<td>72.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide guided and reason social interactions with youthful peers and adults</td>
<td>69.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disenroll with the academic instruction at other school</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use pedagogical (teaching) approaches other than those typical in institutional schools</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: parents could choose more than one reason

Qualitative researchers have been able to probe more deeply the motivations of black parents who choose parent-led home-based education rather than send their children away to institutional public and private schools. Cheryl Fields-Smith and Monica Wells Koura plumbed the narratives of black homeschoolers and found that parental phenomena of increasing black home education represents a radical transformative act of self-determination, the likes of which have not been witnessed since the 1960s and 70s.” The scholars found there to be “push-pull” factors that drove black families to exit conventional schools in favor of homeschooling their children.

One push factor is the “culture of low expectations” (p. 279) of black, especially male, children in public schools. The investigators concluded that “… this research also suggests that the very existence of black homeschoolers, coupled with their mass exodus from conventional schools is a noteworthy sociopolitical statement. This is what makes homeschooling such a powerful and social declaration for black people. Considered in this way, homeschooling may be the most provocative and courageous act of self-determination and resistance undertaken by blacks since the decolonization and civil rights movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s…” (p. 280).

Academic Achievement

The “achievement gap” between African American children and White and Asian American children in public schools is widely recognized. Ray examined the academic achievement of Black homeschool children and found some very promising statistics. The average reading, language, and math test scores of these Black homeschool students were significantly higher than those of Black public school students (with effect sizes of 0.60-0.82). Also, Black homeschool students also scored equal to or higher than all public school students as a group (including White students) in this exploratory, cross-sectional, and explanatory non-experimental study” (p. 71). That is, the following was found while controlling for gender and socioeconomic status: Reading, Black homeschool students 42 percentile points higher than Black public school students; Language, African American homeschool students 26 percentile points higher than Black African American students; Math, Black homeschool students 23 percentile points higher than Black public school students.

Those who understand the factors that are related to or causal of high academic achievement should not be surprised. Parent-led homeschooling offers to students (a) a customized and individualized education, (b) small “class-size,” (c) much dialog and interaction between students and teachers, (d) an environment free from bullying and other serious distractions, (e) strong relationships between family members, (f) flexibility, (i) adult orientation rather than peer orientation

About the Author:

Brian D. Ray, Ph.D., is president of the National Home Education Research Institute (www.nheri.org) and internationally known for his research on homeschooling. He serves as an expert witness in courts and legislatures, and is a former professor of science and education at the undergraduate and graduate level and classroom teacher in public and private schools. He holds a Ph.D. in science education from Oregon State University, an M.S. in zoology from Ohio University, and a B.S. in biology from the University of Puget Sound.

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