

Public Libraries and the Homeschooling Patron

by Debby Morley and Toni Wooten

Disillusionment with current public education practices has led thousands of families across the United States to seek another mode of education for their children; homeschooling is the chosen alternative for many of them. Defined and regulated by individual states, the practice of homeschooling has achieved some form of legalized status throughout the United States. North Carolina, from which the sample for this study was chosen, legalized this method of education in 1985, and defines a homeschool as "...a nonpublic school in which one or more children of not more than two families or households receive academic instruction from parents or legal guardians, or a member of either household" (G.S. 115C-563(a)). The state also requires homeschools to register with the State Office of Nonpublic Education. One result of this state-approved status in North Carolina is the rapid growth in the number of registered homeschools in the state — from a total of 381 families (809 students) in the 1985-86 school year to 2479 families (4127 students) in 1990-91 — a growth rate of 550 percent. Such increases are being seen nationwide, indicating that homeschooling is gaining credibility and is more widely recognized as a viable alternative education practice.

Since public libraries traditionally have been viewed as "educational" institutions, providing information services to all users, the homeschool family might naturally have an affinity to such an environment. Their emergence in large numbers onto the public library scene has demonstrated this fact, and their information-seeking goals are clearly education-oriented. These clients may be entering with high demands for the library's reference department, or with the goal of locating materials on their own to supplement their educational program. As a result of the wide range of behavior patterns among these families, libraries have developed varying relationships with these user groups.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what relationships do exist between the homeschool family and the public library in North Carolina; however, its implications go beyond state or regional boundaries. Although homeschooling is of growing interest and concern throughout the United States, little has been reported in the literature and few empirical studies done. The benefit of such research is the bringing to the forefront the information and service needs of this ever-growing user group to ascertain whether these needs are adequately met by library professionals. To facilitate gathering such information, this study was designed to determine how much the homeschool teachers (parents) depend on libraries for educational materials and what role (active or passive) is

being played by public librarians in the homeschooling process.

Literature Review

Although much research has been done on homeschooling and library services individually, substantially less information is available on how the two areas relate to one another. During the literature search two major perspectives surfaced which were applicable to this current study. First, library literature provides a library perspective to servicing homeschool families, and secondly, research on the general phenomenon of homeschooling approaches the topic from an educational/sociological standpoint.

The two groups of literature have posed a predominantly positive image of homeschoolers. What is clear from the limited body of literature that exists linking public libraries and these home educators is that the librarians who have developed ties with their homeschool community have had positive experiences. However, the literature does not provide much empirical research on the homeschoolers' perceptions of the library, nor have in-depth studies been done to determine the information needs of this group from the library perspective and whether these needs are being met. The purpose of this current study, therefore, is to augment this body of literature on homeschoolers and their use of public libraries.

Research Design

Data was obtained from homeschooling teachers and public library professionals in Mecklenburg, Wake, Buncombe, and Guilford counties of North Carolina. These four counties, which have the largest number of homeschoolers in the state, represent the growing phenomenon of homeschooling in the United States. The names of registered homeschooling teachers and the names of public library professionals were selected on a random basis.

The "homeschooling" questionnaire was sent to a sample of forty homeschooling teachers who are registered with the North Carolina Office of NonPublic Education. This questionnaire was designed to investigate the homeschoolers' perceptions of public libraries along the themes of obtaining and using curriculum, the role the public library plays in implementing the curriculum (i.e., meeting the information needs of the homeschoolers), and what these families perceive to be the awareness level of librarians with regard to library use of homeschooling patrons. The "public library" questionnaire was mailed to a sample of thirty public library professionals. It inquired about their awareness of homeschooler patrons and

their awareness of the information and library needs of these homeschoolers. Results of the two surveys were synthesized to provide a composite view of the relationship between homeschoolers and public libraries. Finally, the relationship of the results to the hypotheses was investigated along with conclusions and a discussion of the impact this phenomenon may have on the public library profession.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were established at the onset of the study:

1. Homeschool teachers depend on the public libraries to provide resources for the homeschooling programs.
2. Public libraries do not play an active role in the homeschooling process.

Research Findings

The research findings from the two surveys are reported separately, with trends integrated in the "correlation of results" section.

Homeschoolers' Survey Results

Twenty-one out of forty homeschooler surveys were returned, yielding a response rate of 58 percent. The sample population surveyed has been homeschooling for an average of approximately five years, with the range being from two to eight years. These numbers contradict previous research which asserts that "as many as one-third of the homeschool families have been at it for two years or less"¹ It seems clear these families have a vested interest in continuing the practice.

The first area of questioning was on curriculum.² Seventeen (81 percent) of the families responded that they order their curriculum materials from a commercial source. Fourteen (67 percent) of the families also develop their own programs, especially for certain disciplines, such as history and science. Use of the local school system's curriculum occurred in two (10 percent) of the cases. Some families reported the use of more than one method of acquiring their curriculum materials.

Because the State Office of Nonpublic Education frequently receives queries from these homeschoolers as to where school curriculum guides can be found, the families were asked if they had ever requested the school's curriculum through the public library. The twenty (95 percent) "no" responses showed either an assumption that the material would not be there or ignorance of the fact that it might be available. The one respondent who had asked for the curriculum found it unavailable. However, another commented, "Home schooling is growing in North Carolina by leaps and bounds. I do not think the public libraries are as aware as they should be of the need to carry school curriculums from local private and public schools."

The researcher also asked whether their curriculum was supplemented from sources other than the library. Fourteen (67 percent) of the respondents wrote in some specific sources, and four respondents (19 percent) left the question unanswered. The purpose of this question was to determine whether or not any of these families subscribed to an information broker which they accessed through a home computer. No evidence of this activity was given.

The second area of questioning, the role of the public library in carrying out that curriculum, revealed that nineteen (90 percent) of the surveyed families use the public library in their educational programs. No respondent reported using it exclusively for curriculum. Seventeen (81 percent) use the

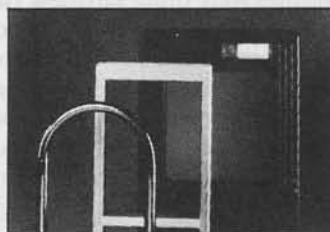
public library for supplementing their curriculum. In addition to curriculum supplementation, ten (48 percent) use libraries for recreational materials. "Other" responses included use of library for research for reports and needs in specific curriculum areas.

In determining the quality and availability of library service, questions were asked pertaining to these families' use of the libraries. Needed materials were "usually" found by eighteen (86 percent) of the respondents. Two families wrote in the descriptives, "sometimes" and "occasionally." No one "always" found the sources they needed and one family (5 percent) reported "rarely" finding desired materials.

In order to locate their sources, fourteen (67 percent) stated they borrow from more than one library. Seven (33 percent) stated they did not; one respondent commented that the distance between libraries makes it unfeasible to visit other facilities. Of those who do use more than one library, seven (50 percent) stated as the reason that no single library had all they needed. Some families commented that they ordered books from other branches to be sent to their own library. Yet one respondent asserted that having to wait was not convenient, and consequently they often went to another branch to pick up a needed book. Access to several libraries appeared somewhat important. Eight (57 percent) of those who reported using multiple libraries have equal access to those facilities. Four (29 percent) of the respondents are true "library-hoppers," enjoying visiting and using several library collections.

This survey was also aimed at determining whether or not these families ever used the library as a group or participated in any of the programs provided. Only eight respondents (38 percent) reported using the library in a group activity. Examples of these group activities reported in the survey were

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homeschool bookclubs, homeschool support group meetings, and library skills instruction. In addition, three respondents reported attending scheduled storytime programs.

The responses to the previous questions showed heavy use of libraries by the homeschool families. The last question was asked to see whether these users feel that the library professionals are aware of their homeschool activities. Only seven (33 percent) reported that "yes," their librarians knew they were homeschoolers, twelve (57 percent) reported "no," and two (10 percent) were not sure. Many of these families may be private with that information and not think it important or may expect to receive negative reactions and do not wish to jeopardize their relationships with the librarians.

The final section of the survey requested any additional comments the respondents might wish to make regarding their experiences with public libraries. The comments were divided into three overall themes: "strokes" for public libraries, suggestions, and dissatisfaction with libraries and/or librarians. In grouping these comments, a more composite picture of these homeschool families and their relationship with public libraries emerged.

Several positive comments towards libraries and librarians were offered, concurring with other researchers that homeschoolers experience basic satisfaction in their library use.^{3,4} These families report feeling fortunate that the library

is there. They like having public libraries to turn to for curriculum sources rather than "having to go to the expense of buying." Adjectives used for describing librarians here were "helpful," "supportive," and

... public librarians are not proactive in anticipating any of these homeschool families' needs

"receptive," all implying positive experiences for these users. By far, the highest accolade was provided by one respondent, who asserted, "We homeschoolers appreciate librarians!"

Though most of these families were quite satisfied, they still had suggestions to offer to libraries. More homeschool support materials in the adult collection are desired, as are more copies of individual books, especially those that might be in high demand for an educational program. One respondent would like to see a "program or network set up through the library" for homeschool families which could result in activities such as lectures and workshops, booksales/trades, and films for children.

While these suggestions were given in a positive, helpful way, genuine dissatisfaction with libraries and librarians was also evident from some of the comments. Some libraries were reported as having limited activities. One respondent wondered if this could be a result of "lack of staff or funds, or if it's a lack of interest or time." This perception of lack of interest is mirrored in other comments about some libraries not being encouraging to the home-school families. One respondent objected to having to go to a larger branch to find certain books, and another reported total disillusionment with children's librarians, saying they are "always stuffy and short-tempered. They need to loosen up!" Whether this less-than-perfect librarian image is reserved only for homeschooling patrons is not indicated here.

Lastly, two of the respondents challenged the library's collection policies. One stated that the libraries seem "quite biased" in their book selection and that "openness to other sources" for book review information does not exist. The other wrote a rather long criticism, warning libraries that "politically correct biasing of purchases and accessibility of books, magazines, and information should be resisted at all cost," and that there is "great power in knowledge to do good if you have all the facts...and greater potential for doing wrong...when all the information is not available and used."

Public Librarians' Survey Results

Twenty out of the thirty questionnaires about homeschooling patrons were returned by the public library professionals surveyed, resulting in a response rate of 67 percent. All but one responded that they are aware of patrons who are homeschoolers.

One library professional reported that "at times it is difficult to meet the needs of homeschoolers as they do not have a high level of commitment." Another respondent had observed that "they (homeschoolers) seem to be much more comfortable using only the listed books, and are not as agreeable as 'general' patrons to substituting different titles (even when the substitutions are newer and more accurate!)." Another reported that "the children are usually undisciplined and have trouble adapting to a group atmosphere (such as storytime, etc.), and that we find both the children and the parents unschooled in basic library resource materials, and how to use them. Only one of the four library professionals who supplied attitudinal information had a more positive response. "We do enjoy our homeschool patrons. They're some of our most intelligent and most interesting patrons."

As the findings show, most homeschool families develop curriculums that at minimum address the state requirements for homeschooling. Access to public school curriculums greatly assists the homeschooling family in developing a program of study at home. One respondent reported that the four homeschooling families that use the library try to pattern their school curricula on that of the public schools and therefore use the same materials offered to public school students. The public library professionals surveyed were questioned as to whether they had curriculum guides for the public school districts in their area and whether they assisted homeschoolers with curriculum development. All respondents revealed that their collections do not contain curriculum guides, nor do they assist homeschoolers with curriculum development. One reported that "we have several homeschoolers in our community and they never indicated a need for curriculums". Three (15 percent) of the library professionals who completed the questionnaire commented that they did provide upon request, titles from the curriculum materials that homeschoolers had obtained from another source. One library professional shared that their children's librarian works with parents who are teaching at home to help them select various books for units they are teaching. It was revealed that the homeschooling parent usually requests books on special topics that he/she is teaching at the time, and that the librarians are usually able to find the materials they request.

Although Gemmer labeled homeschoolers' desire to get textbooks from the public library as a misconception by librarians, one respondent wrote that "we are frequently asked if we can have the actual textbooks that various families need, but, as with the public school system, we

cannot provide textbooks."

Nine (45 percent) of the library professionals responded that the homeschooler patrons do request special materials or services. It was reported that many of the homeschooling families "are intense users of the library in that they check out a very large number of books per family and ask for a relatively large number of items to be transferred to the branch for pick up there." Another referred to "home educators" as being their biggest circulation generators at 20-100 items/family. Several respondents commented that their collections contain various books about homeschooling and that patrons sometimes asked for these. One library professional reported that most of the requests for homeschool information are from parents considering teaching their children at home and that their collection contained *Home School Manual* and *The Big Book of Learning* for these patrons. None of the libraries included in the sample subscribe to any of the leading national homeschooling magazines or newsletters.

Although several articles in the library literature mention setting up a vertical file containing information for homeschoolers (i.e. a copy of the state law on homeschooling, a list of homeschooling associations, the local school system's curriculum guide, etc.), none of the libraries that participated in the study maintains a vertical file on homeschooling.

Nineteen of the libraries surveyed (95 percent) do not provide technology resources (i.e. software or modems) to homeschoolers. Some added that this is a service that they cannot afford to provide to any of their patrons. One library does support a Youth Computer Room with Apple computers and software available to all school age patrons including homeschoolers.

Six (30 percent) of the library professionals answered "yes" to the question "Do you provide programs for homeschooling groups?". Library tours and library instruction were mentioned by two (10 percent) of the respondents as programs they have provided to homeschoolers on an as needed basis. One (5 percent) mentioned storytime as a program that has been requested by homeschoolers. Three respondents (15 percent) communicated that they had children's programs on a regular basis, and that homeschoolers were welcome to attend, but that no special programs for these patrons had been developed. One respondent wrote that, "one of our most successful and popular homeschooler programs/services is a yearly bulletin board display of 'Home Grown Art', since these families have no display outlet for their best arts and crafts outside of the home."

While the findings of this survey seem to indicate a more reactive than proactive stance by the library in serving the homeschooler patrons, one respondent did mention that "we recognize that homeschooling is gaining popularity in our

area" and "that for the first time, a group of librarians will be meeting to discuss homeschoolers, their needs and how the library can respond."

Correlation of the Results

The integration of these two sets of findings reveals areas of commonality between the viewpoints of the homeschooling family and the public library professionals, as well as points of variance. These are discussed below.

Both surveys concur in the reporting of low involvement of homeschoolers in library programs. The number of homeschool families reporting using libraries for group programs is statistically close to the number of surveyed libraries who report having provided programs to this user group.

Both sets of respondents also mention extensive use of library materials by homeschool families. In spite of this activity, librarians do not see themselves as actively involved in curriculum development, nor as needing to treat this group

in any way above and beyond normal patron service. However, source books for homeschool families are provided and are reported as being heavily used, especially by those considering homeschooling.

A vertical file folder on homeschooling would effectively augment those parent handbooks found in the nonfiction collection, but the public libraries sampled have not sensed the need to provide up-to-date vertical file information on homeschooling in their collections. This may be due to patrons not even knowing this collection of documents exists (or that the library could be a source), and/or librarians forgetting it can be helpful as a general collection of information on current topics. The benefit of such a service would be to reinforce the library's image as an information-provider.

Additionally, public librarians are not proactive in anticipating any of these homeschool families' needs (i.e. curriculum

guides, homeschool publications, etc.). Because curriculum guides are not available in any of the libraries surveyed, these homeschooling patrons may not even be aware that these could be provided by libraries, an assumption supported by the fact that only one of the families had requested them at any time. One homeschool survey response may have indicated a general attitude towards public school curriculums, saying "they only have 1/2 the story and 1/2 the truth," so why should they be interested in these school curriculums?

Finally, the report of the library's awareness of these homeschoolers is the one area of discrepancy between the two surveys. The libraries all reported knowing of homeschooling patrons, but almost two-thirds of the homeschool patrons stated that libraries are not aware of their activities. This difference can be interpreted in two ways. First, librarians may be more aware of homeschoolers using the library than these families think they are. Second, many more of these families

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may be using the public library than librarians realize; this survey's random selection process may have happened to choose more of those who have not made their activities known.

Conclusion

The results of these surveys, as discussed above, lend support to the original assumptions for this research. First, this study reveals that homeschool families do depend on public libraries for their educational materials. The extent of use for original curriculum planning varies, but supplementation appears to be a major role of libraries in the education programs. Also, reports from librarians agree with the assumption that public libraries do not play an active role in homeschoolers' use of libraries, nor do they appear to want to do so. This involvement, too, may vary from library to library, but aside from general reference assistance or reader's advisory, these professionals do not appear to be taking a proactive stance in serving the homeschooling patron.

Discussion

This study shows a population of students and teachers who extensively use public libraries to fulfill their educational needs. The study also reveals a library profession that treats these homeschoolers no differently than they would any other patron group. Rather than being proactive in their library service, these professionals prefer to remain reactive, addressing situations when confronted with them. However, the rapid growth rate of the homeschooling population translates into more and more homeschool families searching out public library resources to help fulfill their educational objectives. This situation places library professionals at a pivotal point where they must decide whether their own community's homeschooling population merits a conscious effort to reach these users or whether the library's current level of service is sufficient.

Additionally, whether the approach chosen is proactive or reactive, library professionals should remember that the public library is the library for most of these homeschool students; therefore, the caliber of their library experiences should be of even more concern if they are to become life-long library users. Adequate study materials, reader's advisory, and reference networking, all provided in a positive atmosphere, would contribute to development of a pro-library attitude, as well as towards the satisfaction of homeschooler information needs.

This study also signals the need for cooperation and communication between public librarians and the homeschool users in order to serve this group adequately and

to educate non-homeschoolers on the basics of the educational practice. Ignorance of the ideologies intrinsic in this choice of schooling can be a major stumbling block in quality library service. And reticence on the part of homeschoolers to clearly define their needs does not contribute to removing this obstacle. Open communication is necessary if public libraries are to play the role expected of them by homeschool families and if these families are to receive the educational support they need from the public library.

Finally, although this study's sample was restricted to one region of the country, it has implications nationwide. With the increasing popularity of alternative school options such as homeschooling and educational vouchers, public librarians throughout the United States must erase their own paradigm of the traditional student and be willing to meet the needs for whatever educational practice is chosen. This adjustment in thinking will reinforce the image of the public library as an educational institution, one that considers public service a priority.

References

¹LaRue and LaRue, 34.

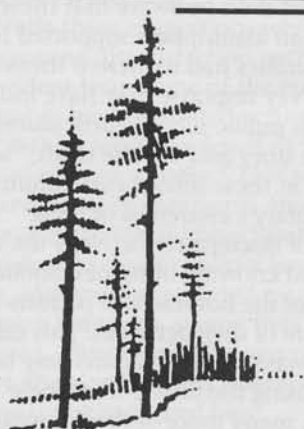
²For this study, curriculum is defined as the planned sequence of activities followed in implementing an educational program.

³Van Galen, 245.

⁴Gemmer 1991, 22.

Editor's Note:

For sample questionnaires and information about the literature search please contact Dr. Elfreda Chapman, Department of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



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