

Homeschoolers: Experiences of African American Male Students-- A Phenomenological Study

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This article reports on findings from a study which examined experiences affecting the academic success of African American male students at a University. Specifically, this study sought to determine students' experiences of homeschooling as they relate to improving academic success. Data was collected at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) located in the southern part of the United States. Through semi-structured interviews with four participants, this study identified three specific experiences that contributed to homeschoolers' academic success: 1) Homeschooling as nurturing; 2) Homeschooling as journey of self-discovery; and 3) Homeschooling as reinforcement of cultural pride. The study findings provide an insight into the African American homeschooling experience that is absent in the current literature.

Keywords: African American students, homeschooling, Afrocentricity, cultural pride

The failures of public education in the United States in general are widely covered in the literature (Hood, 1993; Mehta, 2013; Meyer, 2013; Reese, 2004). Inarguably, no group has suffered more from the failures of public education than African American students as evidenced by persistently intractable disparities such as the achievement and behavior gaps (Beatty, 2013; Condrón, Tope, Steidl, & Freeman, 2013; Frisby, 1993), the concentration of students in minority segregated schools that receive fewer educational and financial resources (Ikpa, 2004; Kozol, 1991; Noguera, 2009; Tanner, 2013), higher high school suspension rates (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012), lower percentage of students placed in gifted and talented programs (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2008), and lower high school graduation rates and college attendance rates (Logan, Minca, & Adar, 2012; Schouten, 2012). The importance of education is undeniable as a plethora of studies across all disciplines attest to the relationship between the quality and quantity of education and later socioeconomic status (Alexander & Salmon, 2007; Condrón et al., 2013; Simms, 2012; Tanner, 2013). This means that of the estimated 50 million students attending public schools today, the approximately seven million or 15% that are African American (NCES, 2015a) are consigned to a school system that has a protracted history of failing to meet their academic needs. In part, the failings of public education have increased the popularity of educational alternatives such as homeschooling.

Homeschoolers are defined as students who receive education in the home as opposed to a public or private building (Basham, Merrifield, & Hepburn, 2007). Throughout the last century, very few students were homeschooled until the 1960s when homeschooling became a popular choice of parents considered left on the political spectrum and a decade later, parents who self-identified as right on the political spectrum. Over the last 30 years in particular, interest and participation in homeschooling has proliferated (Basham et al., 2007; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Lines, 2000). Although homeschooling is often dominated by White students, multiple research studies (Lundy & Mazama, 2014; Mazama & Lundy, 2013; Ray, 2004) indicate the growing participation of African American students.

Several large, recent studies have featured African American participation in homeschooling (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Lundy &

Mazama, 2014; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2013), although African American participation is still a relatively new phenomenon. Unfortunately, the research is overwhelmingly concentrated on the reasons and motivations of African American parents who elect to homeschool. There is scant research that features African American homeschoolers themselves. The importance of this absence cannot be overstated. The literature becomes more informed with their voices because their experiences from their perspectives validate the justification of their parents to homeschool. Indeed, a body of literature that is overwhelmingly representative of homeschooling parents is incomplete. To address this void, this study was guided by the following research questions: 1) What are the academic and social experiences of African American students who were homeschooled and now attend a Historical Black College and University (HBCU)? and 2) Did they experience an Afrocentric educational paradigm during their homeschooling career?

African American Homeschoolers in the Literature

The increase in homeschooled students has generated renewed interest in homeschooling on the part of researchers (Lundy & Mazama, 2014). The most recent figures from the National Center for Education Statistics estimate that approximately 3% of all school age students are homeschooled (NCES, 2015b). African American students represent roughly 8% of students homeschooled (NCES, 2015b).

Given the growing popularity of homeschooling, understandably researchers have devoted significant attention to the academic achievement of homeschooled students in relation to their public school counterparts. In the past 15 years, multiple quantitative studies (Cogan, 2010; Ray, 2010; Snyder, 2013) compared standardized test scores, grade point averages and graduation rates of secondary level homeschooled students to traditionally schooled students. The studies validated earlier research findings that homeschooled students' academic achievement as measured by test scores and grade point averages were equal to or better than traditionally schooled students (Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse, 2011; Ray, 2010).

African Americans constitute a minority in homeschooling. As such, it should come as no surprise that there is a dearth of research regarding their participation. To address this void in the data, some scholars have sought to discover the appeal of the homeschool modeling for African Americans (Baker, 2013; Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Lundy & Mazama, 2014; Mazama & Lundy, 2012). These qualitative studies indicated African American parents consider homeschooling an opportunity to counteract the plethora of harmful effects their children are subjected to as a result of an educational system permeated by inequalities due in no small measure to the long history of racial segregation. In these studies, some parents expressed a strong preference for a culturally relevant educational environment, something, according to them, that continues to be notably absent from public schools today (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Lundy & Mazama, 2014). The value of these studies to the homeschool literature is obvious. Yet, the literature remains incomplete without the lived experiences and perspectives of homeschooling according to African American students.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized for its framework the paradigmatic lens of Afrocentricity, coined first by scholar Molefi Kete Asante (Mazama & Lundy, 2013) and defined by him as, "a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate . . . it is the placing of African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena" (Asante, 2003, p. 2). Asante and researchers like Jawanza Kunjufu, Geneva Gay, Tonia Durden, and the late Asa Hilliard, have found that "children who are centered in their own

cultural information are better students, more disciplined, and have greater motivation for schoolwork” (Asante, 1992, p. 30). The adoption of Afrocentricity as an educational construct does not merely exchange one hegemonic orientation for another like some White researchers insist (Frisby, 1993). All societies create institutions that are reflective of their cultural beliefs and values (Asante, 1992; Asante, 2003). Therefore, the foundation of truly authentic education encompasses both the community and the culture of the child (Levine, 2000). As Asante wrote, “In education this means that teachers provide students the opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view” (Asante, 1991, p. 171).

The genesis of Afrocentricity can be found in the body of literature produced by eminent historian, Carter G. Woodson. Woodson’s seminal work *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) established the standards of authentic education that later scholars, such as Asante, used to formulate the “philosophical and theoretical perspective” (Mazama & Lundy, 2013) of Afrocentricity. According to Woodson (1933), in order for education to have meaning it must be applicable and relevant to one’s own condition. “The education of any people should begin with themselves” (p. 32).

Afrocentricity was selected for two primary reasons. First, historically many researchers and scholars have in part attributed the poor performance of African American students in public schools to the permeation of European history, culture and values in tandem with the purposeful exclusion and distortions of Africans and African Americans’ unique experiences (Asante, 1991; Gay, 2013; Levine, 2000; Woodson, 1933). Second and more important, extant literature on African American parents who elect homeschooling reveal reasons related to centuries of White supremacy in education. For example, Mazama and Lundy (2013) found some African American parents believed “that a Eurocentric curriculum is bound to gravely interfere with their children’s self-esteem and sense of purpose” (p.123).

Method

Research Design

This phenomenological study involved college students who were homeschooled from grades 6-12 and now attend a Historical Black College and University (HBCU) located in the Southern part of the United States during the spring of 2015. Phenomenological studies are distinguished from other research methods by the description of common meanings “for several individuals of their lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The advantages of this methodology include a deeper understanding of people’s experiences (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Phenomenology - Research Methodology, 2015), or as Creswell (2013) explains, phenomenology is able to, “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 76). One of the biggest disadvantages is that data collection can be time intensive (Phenomenology - Research Methodology, 2015). Still, phenomenological studies are commonly used in social science disciplines (Schram, 2006).

Participants and Data Collection

The population for this study consisted of 17 students (12 men; five women) who were admitted to the HBCU between the fall of 2010 and the fall of 2014. A convenience sampling method was used for the selection process. Convenience sampling occurs when the researcher selects participants who are most accessible (Marshall, 1996) and it is often used when the size of the population is small (Morse, 2004). A benefit of convenience sampling is cost – it is the least labor intensive than other methods but it is also considered the least rigorous (Marshall, 1996).

Students were contacted through campus email addresses. Only four students, all males and all in the second semester of their freshmen year, responded to the email invitation. Two of

the four participants were siblings. All participants came from two parent families and all participants were homeschooled throughout their junior high and high school years. In-depth, semi-structured interviews and one focus group were recorded. Participants also completed a questionnaire for demographic information. Follow-up questions were answered through email.

Data Analysis

Three specific areas from the interview topics were selected for analysis: 1) how the participants experienced homeschooling; 2) the participants' interpretation of efforts to highlight the lives and contributions of African Americans in the homeschooling curriculum, i.e. with interest and relevance or dis-interest and irrelevance; and 3) how the homeschooling experience related to the participants' level of self-confidence and by extension, their college preparedness. The list of the questions is included in Appendix A.

The data were analyzed through the use of horizontalization (Creswell, 2013). Horizontalization involved combing recordings and transcripts multiple times for important sentences that provided examples of their experiences in the three areas noted above. The data were color-coded to correspond to each participant. To ensure accuracy of transcription and thus trustworthiness of the data, transcripts were shared with each participant. Once participants verified their transcripts, their responses were categorized. The categories with the most references were selected as themes. The researcher shared the themes with each participant to test the validity of the interpretations. All participants agreed with the conclusions. The major themes that emerged were: (1) homeschooling as nurturing, (2) homeschooling as journey of self-discovery, and (3) homeschooling as reinforcement of cultural pride. Using the themes as a guide, the researcher wrote descriptions of the experiences for each participant. The data were then synthesized to create a composite in each area that captured the essence of the homeschoolers' experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Researcher Bias

One of the primary characteristics of qualitative research is the role of the researcher, for it is the researcher who selects the topic, designs the parameters and questions of the study, collects the data, and analyzes and interprets the data (Creswell, 2013). The researcher's intimate involvement in the study raises valid concerns of subjectivity (Johnson, 2015; Ratner, 2002). A recommended measure to moderate subjectivity is for the researcher to recognize their subjectivity and consider how it may influence their objectivity (Ratner, 2002). My motivation for undertaking this study was premised upon my commitment to study viable alternatives to public education that can increase the college entrance rates and college completion rates of African American students. Therefore, the greatest manifestation of the bias I brought to this research study was the fact that homeschooled students who did not go to college were never a part of the research design.

Findings and Discussion

Homeschooling as Nurturing

All four participants in this study experienced homeschooling in an environment smaller and more intimate than their public school counterparts. All were involved in informal homeschool cooperatives (where two or more families share all manner of educational resources) with class sizes that ranged from four to twelve students. When asked to explain the major differences between homeschooling and traditional schooling, the number of students and the personal relationship between students and teachers were cited by each as meaningful benefits of their homeschooling experience. Vincant addressed the benefits of smaller classes:

One of the other issues we faced was that because the teachers were having to address a class of 20-25, sometimes upwards of 30 students at a time, we were forced to go at a pace of the rest of the class even though we were clearly accelerated. So being forced to go at that pace kind of stifled our enjoyment of the educational process and honestly made us a little bored. And because of that, we also started taking education less seriously. That affects your grades. Dad wasn't happy about that so as a homeschooler it is just you in your grade. I shared my household with my siblings but it was just me in my grade.

Vincant also described a deeper appreciation for having parents as teachers by pointing out how his behavior in part was motivated by the fact that he was directly accountable to them. For Landon the individual attention was important. "I think what makes me so glad I was homeschooled was the fact that I could get the individualized instruction if I have an issue, it's not even a problem for me to go to talk to the teacher." Michael acknowledged the benefit of small classes but also highlighted the relationship he experienced with his homeschooling teachers as important:

I know a lot of the students that I know in public school said their teacher don't care about them. But I can tell you mine do. I still text them. They ask me how I'm doing telling me to just keep doing my best and things like that. And that's why (pause) that's what I think was really important to me. And that's the reason why I came here (to this HBCU) cause I thought I would get that here.

Here, Anthony spoke of the small classes and the separation of students by gender for some activities. "We have separate classes for the boys and then one class for the girls as far as like personal development," he explained.

By and large, the homeschooling environment was experienced as intimate, nurturing, and to a large extent, safe. The "homeschool as safe" motif is supported in the literature. Fields-Smith and Kishura (2013) in their study referred to "the psychology of safety" (p. 276). African American parents reported that school safety, especially as it related to their African American male sons, was a motivating factor in their decision to homeschool.

Homeschooling as a Journey of Self-Discovery

As research indicates, the transition from high school to college can be fraught with challenges (Hicks, 2005). But, whether speaking of why they were homeschooled, or the purpose of education, or whether their parents gave them specific reasons for homeschooling, it became apparent that their various experiences increased their confidence in themselves as well as their level of academic preparedness. For example, Vincant's parents expected him to play a direct role in homeschooling by requiring him to set his own schedule. They also allowed his interests to drive the direction of the curriculum.

As a homeschooler I got to, we had to do the basics of course, Math, English, everything, Sciences but I really got to dive deep and experiment with what I truly wanted to do after high school and going on into my adult life. For example, there were times when I was really big on astronomy, so my parents got me plenty of astronomy textbooks to satiate that. When I was really into animals and I thought I wanted to be a vet, they got me a bunch of books on zoology and everything like that so it really gave me a chance to take control over my own education which also help me appreciate it more.

Vincant summed up why he adjusted to college so well:

"I got to know myself, and therefore, because of that, I came to college knowing who I am, I can understand other people better. I can understand my peers better. When we

talk about different things . . . because I knew myself and in knowing myself, I was able to connect with my peers.

Anthony and Michael took classes at one of the local community colleges. Anthony said college work was “a breeze,” because “they (homeschooling teachers) really push you to the limit and beyond which I feel like is a good thing.” The self-assuredness of Michael was on display when he added, “I want to be known for something. I don’t want to be like, okay, he is just another guy I went to high school with. I want people to know, okay, yeah, that’s that guy.” Landon, who also spent his senior year in Malaysia in an exchange program, expressed fearlessness when facing college challenges. “Like I say, I’m intelligent so I’m able to figure it out.”

For these participants, homeschooling was more than just fundamentally learning how to read, write, think and count. Their six years of homeschooling resulted in varying degrees of accountability and independence. It fostered a level of self-efficacy that some parents identified in Mazama and Lundy’s (2013) study as a desired outcome.

Cultural Pride

Each participant was asked to elaborate on their experiences regarding any special efforts to include the lives and contributions of African Americans in their homeschooling curriculum. Indeed, the absence of African Americans in the public school curriculum was the primary reason Landon’s parents elected to homeschool. Landon remarked:

The purpose of my homeschooling experience, what they always told me, was to make sure we were educated with a view mostly on Black culture and to make sure we were educated to show that we had an important part of history.

Landon went further. “Every day in class we were learning about Black people who did very important things in medicine, in art, in history, that I wouldn’t necessarily know.

Michael said although he studied general history, “most of it was about Black people cause our teacher, her perspective was history was ‘his story,’ the other guy’s perspective and she wanted us to know more about us. . . I learned a lot I didn’t know in public school.” His example:

We did a lot of research on like, where did Math really start? Where did Science really start? Most people think its ancient Greece, no, that’s not just where it started . . . how can they (the pyramids) be up for thousands of years but nobody ever knew how to build them so if all these scientists who get credit for being the fathers of calculus, the fathers of philosophy, the fathers of psychology but none of them can figure out those pyramids.

Anthony talked about the numerous images of sports athletes, scientists, and entrepreneurs that adorned the walls of classrooms. But they were not there as just artwork or pretty visuals. “Everybody had to find an African American or Black person in history that they admire,” he explained. For Michael his sense of pride was expressed this way:

My dad always told us to be different . . . I’m different from most (students) in a good way . . . I don’t really participate in activities, drugs. I don’t drink cause my mind needs to be at its best point at all times and I think that stuff is not going to help you. I try to treat women with more respect than the average guy does. I don’t want to be, ‘oh he was that that guy,’ or the reason girls think Black guys don’t treat women right. I don’t want to be known for that. My dad always told me to try to treat a girl the way you would want a guy to treat your sister. That’s the thing, that’s the way I’m different from most people.

Vincant was the only study participant whose parents did not make an intentional effort to infuse the curriculum with the contributions of African Americans. Yet, he related how he

learned about the Buffalo Soldiers during this sophomore year and how he became fascinated with their history. He said he and siblings visited the Buffalo Soldiers Natural History Museum so often the directors of the museum established an annual essay contest. “Every year we (he and siblings) entered that contest and every year we came out first and second. One year I was first, my older brother was second. Then the year I competed with my younger brother I got second and he got first.”

Interestingly, the cultural pride exhibited by all participants was not a zero sum game. There was no evidence the participants viewed society through a Black/White binary, notwithstanding the fact that two of the three families are members of a religious organization popularly known for their black nationalist philosophy. Furthermore, it is reasonable to presume the selection of a HBCU for college was a manifestation of the cultural pride that their parents instilled in their homeschooling education. Lundy and Mazama (2014) highlighted the significance of “homeschooling as a corrective measure” (p. 64). Homeschooling as “corrective” is the stance assumed by African American parents to navigate the direction in which they want their sons to grow.

In summary, African American students have a history of being ill-served by public schools (Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Woodson, 1933). On the other hand, the data from this study suggested the homeschooling experiences for these participants were positive and by and large validated their parents’ selection of homeschool as a viable alternative to public school. Participants experienced the homeschooling environment as emotionally nurturing in marked contrast to their experiences in traditional schools. Furthermore, the research suggested homeschooling was experienced as a journey of self-discovery and that journey, coupled with the infusion of Afrocentricity, contributed to their self-confidence as academically prepared first year college students. Even more important, the level of confidence and cultural awareness were identified in the literature as desired attributes African American homeschooling parents worked to instill in their children (Lundy & Mazama, 2014).

Limitations

Limitations are inherent in all qualitative studies due, in large measure, to the inability of the researcher to generalize. Still, there are several specific limitations of this study. First, not only was the sample size small, two of the participants were siblings, which limited the variability of experience to some degree. Second, all of the participants were male. There were four females in the population but none responded to the invitation to participate. The experiences of females may yield differing themes. Third, two of the families are members of a religion in which cultural unity, self-determination, and cultural pride are central tenets (Lincoln, 1994). It is, therefore, difficult to determine the degree to which the religion impacted the educational philosophy of the parents or conversely, the degree to which the educational philosophy impacted religion. Finally, this study would have been greatly enhanced had there been two samples of college students at HBCUs, one sample who had been homeschooled and one sample who attended traditional school.

Implications for Future Research

The addition of African American homeschoolers’ experiences in their own words is invaluable to the literature. Ultimately, their experiences from their perspectives render the judgement of homeschooling as an effective alternative. Future research possibilities include qualitative studies of African American college students who were homeschooled versus those that were traditionally schooled at HBCUs and the same population at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). Such studies would further illuminate differences between homeschooled

and traditionally schooled students in myriad of ways, specifically academic preparedness and social adjustment. Future research studies could also focus on the differences in curriculum for both populations, especially in regards to an African-centered curriculum. This area of research could further inform culturally based practices for educational practitioners and parents of traditionally schooled students.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

- What do you think was the purpose of your homeschooling experience?
- Did your parents give you specific reasons for their decision to homeschool and if so, what were they?
- As you reflect upon your homeschooling experience, how were those reasons addressed?
- How would you define education? What do you think is the purpose of education?
- Please describe what in your homeschooling experience how you understand education and how it shaped your definition of education before you entered college.
- What are the differences between homeschooling and traditional schooling?
- What did you appreciate most about your homeschooling experience before you began college? What do you appreciate most about your homeschooling experience today?
- How did your homeschool experience influence your decision to attend college? HBCU?
- Describe how you think your homeschooling experience prepared you for college academically and socially?
- Who do you consider your role models and why?
- Do you know where your curriculum came from?
- Walk me through an example of how subjects like history were covered. What kind of materials were used? Books, movies, fieldtrips, lecture?
- Was there a special effort to highlight the lives and contributions of other African Americans? Examples.
- What do you imagine would be different about you had you attended traditional school?
- Talk about ways in which you think your homeschooled experience makes you a different college student than students who were traditionally schooled?
- Have you considered homeschooling as an option for your own children? Why or why not?
- Do you think more parents should consider homeschooling? Why or why not?
- What lesson, value, or belief has attending college and a HBCU reinforced for you?
- What are your career aspirations and why?
- What do you think of the educational system in this country today?
- What do you think when you hear about statistics regarding the high school drop-out rate among black students? The low college completion rate of black students? The disproportionate numbers of black students who are placed in special education? The achievement gap between black students and white students?
- What do you think about the history of school segregation?

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