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American Families' Attitudes to Unschooling: A National Survey

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Abstract

A national survey of American families was conducted to ascertain the extent of interest in self-directed education (SDE) in the United States. Our research took place in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic - a moment when we required a much better understanding of what parents need from the US education system. Data were gathered using an online survey aimed at parents or caregivers of young people aged 4-18. A total of 1009 adults completed the caregiver survey. Resulting data were analyzed using SPSS. Results suggest a high degree of openness to SDE. The data also elucidate several questions and concerns that parents and caregivers have about the approach. Data also highlighted differing perceptions of and attitudes towards SDE as a function of race. As the first nationwide survey about SDE, this study has made an important contribution to the existing literature on the subject. Directions for further research are discussed

Keywords: Self-Directed Education, SDE, Unschooling, Education Alternatives, Homeschooling, Student-Centered Education

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INTRODUCTION

Over literature review discusses the current state of the research surrounding unschooling in the United States. In line with the scholarly consensus, researchers consider unschooling and homeschooling to be related to one another. As such, this review begins by discussing the historical development and increasing prevalence of homeschooling in the United States. It shows that there has been a sustained increase in this approach. Unschooling, likewise, appears to be increasingly prevalent, although the extent to which is unknown. Following our discussion of prevalence, we then explore the factors motivating interest in these approaches as well as their educational and social outcomes. We conclude our review by showing that homeschooled youth generally fare quite well in terms of educational attainment and personal development, although outcomes are more mixed for unschooling.

Homeschooling Prevalence

Starting in the late 18th century, with the establishment of public education, families in the United States educated their children at home. However, from the 1970s onwards, there was a marked increase in the uptake of homeschooling as an alternative to the standard education offered in public schools (Efford & Becker, 2017; Kirschner, 2008). Homeschooling, simply put, refers to the practice of educating a child in the home as opposed to a conventional classroom setting in public or private schools (Riley, 2018).

Some estimates put the percentage of homeschooled students in the USA at 3% of the school-age population. Studies outside the USA indicate a growth in interest both in alternative education, more generally, and homeschooling, specifically (English, 2015; Rudge, 2021). While there has been a clear increase in the rates of homeschooling, its prevalence has been hard to determine. with specificity. This is due to the nature of homeschooling and different state regulations governing its use. Despite this, there is a clear consensus that the numbers choosing to homeschool continue to grow (Gaither, 2017)

Although parents choose to homeschool their children for a wide variety of reasons, the most commonly cited is to provide religious or moral instruction in line with a parent or caregiver's own values and philosophy (Planty et al, 2009). Conservative Christians have long been proponents of homeschooling, and a growing number of adherents to faiths are choosing to educate their children at home (Kunzman, 2010). Parents are also motivated to homeschool due to their own negative experiences in mainstream school, or dissatisfaction with their childrens' educational experiences, subject matter or school value. (Green-Hennessy & Mariotti, 2021; Neuman, 2018). Dissatisfaction with dominant cultural influences on public schooling is a key factor in the decision to homeschool for parents of various religious or political convictions (Hansen, 2021).

Homeschooling Outcomes

Given the relatively established status of homeschooling as an educational setting (particularly in the United States), there is a reasonably large and growing body of literature investigating educational outcomes for those who were educated at home. In a large study of over 20,000 children, Rudner (1999) found that homeschooled children outperformed their counterparts in mainstream education across all areas of the curriculum surveyed. These findings were later replicated by further research (Martin-Chang et al, 2011). In a more comprehensive review of available evidence, Murphy (2014) suggests that homeschooled young people enjoy high levels of life satisfaction and tend to view their educational experience more positively than traditionally educated peers. Similarly, Coogan (2010) found that homeschooled youth are likely to score as well - if not better than - their public school counterparts on college entrance exams. They are also perceived to be well prepared for the demands of higher education (Cogan, 2010).

Homeschooling Compared to Unschooling

Both motivation for and approaches to homeschooling vary but they seek to liberate children's educational experiences from traditional and constrained approaches. For example, homeschooling can take on highly structured methods. Alternatively, it can avoid rigid structure and prescribed curricula. The latter is known as unschooling and is considered to be a variation of homeschooling (Kunzman & Gaither 2020; Valiente et al, 2022). John Holt is credited with coining the term "unschooling" and is considered "the father of unschooling" (Riley, 2020). Holt (2005) believed that true, enduring, useful learning arises solely out of the learners' experiences, interests and preoccupations. He believed that all children have an innate, infinite drive to make sense of the world around them. Unschooling has its roots in this philosophy. This view of education aligns with more recent views of the purpose of education. For instance, Hansen describes a "holistic-indigenous" program that is "human-centered" and "liberatory" as contrasting with the more traditional "Cartesian-Newtonian" worldview embedded in traditional educational methods (Hansen, 2021, p. 68)

There are many names used to describe unschooling and there is a large and growing number of adherents to this approach to education. This heterogeneity creates a diverse constellation of practices that is united by the primacy of self-directed learning. (Sherman, 2017). More specifically, in unschooling, parents do not rely on a set materials or a curriculum. Rather, children learn through experience in daily life (Riley, 2018).

Unschooling promotes freedom of choice and the opportunity to set one's own educational direction. This looser structure means children's educational goals more closely match their unique interests, skills and learning styles. (Taylor-Hough, 2010; Wheatley, 2009). In keeping with this understanding of unschooling, the Mosaic team crafted a particular definition of the term. Our research defined unschooling as a *"process where young people direct their own learning, at their own pace, without the rigid structures of formal education. Instead of following curricula (e.g. in homeschooling), young people are given a supportive setting that fosters their natural curiosity of the world."*

Unschooling Prevalence

There are few reliable estimates of the prevalence of unschooling in the United States. Riley (2018) suggests that 12% of all homeschooled young people may be unschooled. Vangelova (2014) suggests that the number may be as high as 1 million. There is a growing number of publications detailing how to successfully unschool children (e.g. Dodd, 2009 and Griffith, 2010). There is also a growing body of web-based resources available to both current and potential unschooling families. The increase of such materials suggests there is a growing popular appetite for unschooling. There is, however, a lack of reliable estimates of the prevalence of unschooling and no data exist on perceptions and attitudes towards this approach among the general public.

In response to these lack of data, the present study sought to ascertain popular perceptions of and attitudes toward unschooling. One key goal of the research was to determine the level of interest in unschooling. Following on from this, the research sought to elucidate what questions or concerns American families had about unschooling. In doing so, this nationally representative study makes an important contribution to the literature on this subject.

The existing literature around unschooling has mostly focused on the beliefs and values of families who are pursuing an unschooling approach (Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021). Many families seek out unschooling as an alternative to the rigid structures of conventional education (DeWitt et al, 2017; Riley, 2020). Some move to unschooling after a period of more structured homeschooling (Riley, 2020), while others see it as a countercultural endeavor for both parents and children (Kirschner, 2008). In contrast, some unschoolers see the approach not only as an educational philosophy, but an alternative lifestyle whereby parents avoid a coercive role in any domain of education or childrearing (Petrovic & Rolstad, 2017). Some proponents of unschooling view it through a social justice lens.

(Petrovic & Rolstad, 2017; Romero, 2021; Romero & Yellowhorse, 2021). For example, Romero (2018) sees self-directed education and autonomous learning as tools with which students and teachers can break free from negative environments, and in the process, move toward a more liberated, socially-just future. To do so, they must recast the relationship between teacher and student as collaborative, acknowledging that teachers learn from students just as students learn from teachers.

Unschooling Outcomes

Despite homeschooling's promise of acknowledging student interests, self-efficacy (an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments), and self-concept. (an idea of the self constructed from the beliefs one holds about oneself and the responses of others), empirical research has not yet demonstrated its social justice impact. In a survey of unschooling families, Morrison (2018) found that the potential of unschooling approaches to provide a multicultural, social justice focused education is not happening for many families. Furthermore, Wilson (2015) found that even in a Sudbury school – characterized by democratic governance devoid of hierarchies, privileged voices dominate in the school as is often the case in society. Thus, it seems that, despite its potential, the transformative vision of unschooling does not necessarily lead to a radical rethinking of the educational status quo to provide more equitable learning experiences.

While the research is limited, unschoolers themselves attribute a range of powerful benefits to the approach. For example, they view it as a modality ideally suited to foster intrinsic motivation (Riley, 2018). Levin-Gutierrez (2015), posits that unschooled learning environments - unlike mainstream traditional environments - foster autonomy, mastery, and purpose; the three elements essential for intrinsic motivation, as theorized by Pink (2009). Likewise, Sherman (2015) contends that the central role of autonomy in unschooling plays a significant role in motivation and it, ultimately, can build self-efficacy, self-regulation and intrinsic motivation among youth. Moreover, proponents argue that unschooling promotes lifelong learning (Sanchez Tyson, 2019). This theoretical assertion is substantiated by the findings of Gray and Riley (2015) who found that unschoolers believed their unschooling led to them to become lifelong learners.

There are a number of reviews of the existing literature on homeschooling. Kunzman & Gaither (2013) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on homeschooling that they later updated (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020). Their 2020 update revealed a marked increase in scholarly interest in the subject. Gray and Riley (2013) conducted a study of 232 unschooling parents to ascertain the perceived benefits and challenges. Their analysis revealed that the primary challenge experienced by unschooling families was dealing with external criticism and social pressure from those who disapproved of these families' choices. On the other hand, parents reported a range of positive outcomes for both their children and family, including improved learning, better attitudes to learning, improved psychological and social wellbeing among children and increased closeness and harmony at home.

In later follow-up studies, researchers Gray and Riley (2015a, 2015b) explored adult unschoolers' perceptions of their schooling and their subsequent experiences in higher education and employment. In one study, they found that unschoolers had an overwhelmingly positive view of their educational experience. Perceived benefits included the freedom to study topics of interest on their own terms, the ability to self-motivate and self-direct, as well as a sense of personal responsibility and appreciation for lifelong learning. In contrast, only a small number attributed a perceived learning deficit to their education but most of these were able to compensate for this when required. Only three of the sample of 75 reported that the disadvantages of unschooling outweighed the advantages. They named learning deficits as a major disadvantage as well as social isolation and stigmatization.

In the second study, Riley and Gray (2015) surveyed 75 unschooled adults about their experiences in higher education and employment. The results revealed that more than 4 in 5 progressed to formal higher education and nearly half had completed or were in the process of

completing a bachelor's degree program. Findings indicated that those who had spent more time in an unschooling environment were more likely to study at university. Furthermore, those surveyed experienced few significant problems either accessing further education or adapting to the demands of this different environment and approach once attending. The majority of participants believed their unschooling prepared them for both further study and the world of work, by enhancing their sense of personal responsibility, intrinsic motivation and a love of learning.

In a small study utilizing a phenomenological approach, Gaudreau and Brabant (2021) found some evidence supporting previous findings that unschooled children develop keen interests and successfully self-direct their own learning. Findings also revealed that participation in unschooling influenced views on society, employment, and the education system, more broadly, and on the role of the state in the education, more specifically. Their results, however, reveal perceived shortcomings in learning perseverance, pursuit of complex learning goals, school integration and evaluation. Participants believed that some subjects, such as math, physics and engineering, were too complex for learners to study on their own and that children are unlikely to persevere with difficult subjects without encouragement.

Other studies, too, have found mixed outcomes for unschooled young people. Martin-Chang et al (2011) compared homeschooled children to demographically paired children educated in mainstream schools. This study found that those who were homeschooled in a structured environment (defined as an environment in which lesson plans were used) performed better than their public school counterparts. Those who follow an unstructured approach (rarely to never using lesson plans), however, performed worse than their public school educated counterparts.

Summary

Our review outlined the origins and key characteristics of unschooling and we find that unschooling is widely considered a variation of homeschooling, although it is radically child-centered and has autonomy and intrinsic motivation at its core. Despite the high levels of agreement regarding these elements, our review found that unschooling remains a contested framework lacking a clear definition.

The literature on the prevalence of unschooling was outlined and it was determined that, although it appears interest in unschooling is increasing, there is a dearth of reliable figures about its prevalence. In addition, the potential benefits of this approach - as posited by its proponents and practitioners - were outlined in our review. Thereafter, the findings of the existing literature surrounding educational and social outcomes were discussed. We conclude that the current literature suggests a mixed impact for this approach.

METHODS

Design

To complete this study, a survey was disseminated by a family philanthropy to better understand the demand for self-directed education. The survey was designed and completed by a market-research company. The overall research strategy was to conduct a public opinion survey to determine interest in self-directed education (SDE) in a US sample. This research sought to determine interest in and perceptions of SDE as well as attitudes to education more generally. The research utilized a survey instrument targeted at parents and caregivers of young people aged 4-18. Quantitative data were generated based on survey responses.

Materials

A market research company conducted a web-based survey between July and August 2021 using an instrument targeting parents and caregivers of children aged 4-18. Development of the survey

instrument was informed by a series of focus groups that asked parents and caregivers for their views on educational alternatives. The focus groups assessed awareness of and attitudes towards learning approaches and openness to SDE as well as testing descriptions of SDE. Four focus groups were held on Zoom, and each was two hours in length. Each group comprised 5-6 participants. The first focus group included parents whose children, aged 4-16, were in education alternatives. The second group included students aged 13-18 who were currently in education alternatives. The two remaining groups comprised parents who were considering an education alternative for their children. The first three focus groups were comprised of participants of various ages, genders, ethnicities, and household incomes, while the last focus group was composed of families defined as historically marginalized. To be considered historically marginalized, participants had to meet any two of the following three criteria: 1) live in a household with a person of color, 2) the highest level of education attainment is high school diploma or less and 3) have an annual household income of $50k or less. In total, 22 individuals participated in the focus groups.

The resultant survey comprised eight sections and 44 items. Participants were first presented screening and demographic questions concerning age, gender, household characteristics. Thereafter, they were asked about their interest in SDE and reasons for considering or not considering it. Thereafter, questions explored educational goals and attitudes, generally, as well as towards SDE, specifically. Participants were then presented with descriptions of SDE and asked to indicate what they liked, disliked, had questions about, and how these messages impacted their views of SDE.

Participants

Participants were recruited using an online market survey platform from July 21 to August 2, 2021. To be included in either survey, participants had to express some openness to SDE. Openness to SDE was first gauged by the question "Excluding money, transportation, and scheduling concerns, how interested are you in having your child in an education alternative where your child leads the decisions to determine what, when, or how they learn; a learning pathway where they follow their unique interests?" Participants were then asked "What are the reasons you might consider pursuing an education alternative for your children?" Those who failed to list at least one reason they might consider an education alternative for their child(ren) and selected "I would not consider an educational alternative for my child" (n=75) were excluded from the survey sample.

To be included in the survey, participants had to have at least one child aged 4-18 at home for whom they were primarily or jointly responsible. Participants were screened to ensure that they met these criteria. From the family interest survey, a total of 1406 participants were excluded for not having one or more children aged 4-18 at home, 168 were excluded for having no children aged 4-18 at home, 31 were excluded for having no input into their children's education, and 75 were excluded for demonstrating no openness to an educational alternative.

The sample was selected to be reflective of the US population by gender and age. A total of 1009 participants completed the survey. 260 of those were definitely likely to educate their children in an unschooling/SDE setting, and 200 met the criteria to be designated as historically marginalized. To be considered historically marginalized, participants had to meet any two of the following three criteria: 1) live in a household with a person of color, 2) the highest level of education attainment is high school diploma or less and 3) have an annual household income of $50k or less.

Procedure

Participants were invited to complete the survey on an online survey platform. Those who expressed an interest were asked to indicate consent and then asked to complete the survey.

RESULTS

Background and Interest in SDE

Survey participants represent a variety of demographic and racial backgrounds. In particular, this nationally representative sample (n=1009) primarily comprised parents who were married, in their 30's and 40's, with 1 or 2 children. BIPOC families were well represented. Details can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Race of Survey Respondents

(Participants were able to select multiple identities.)

Race	Percent
White	80%
African American	9%
Latinx	9%
Indigenous	2%
Multiracial	24%
East Asian	5%

Overall, 74% of survey participants signaled interest in SDE. Specifically, they were asked: "Excluding money, transportation, and scheduling concerns, how interested are you in having your child in an education alternative where your child leads the decisions to determine what, when, or how they learn; a learning pathway where they follow their unique interests?" Because this is a nationally representative sample, the findings are notable. Our results suggest that potentially millions of families in the US are interested in SDE.

In order to better understand the families that were interested in SDE, we examined additional demographic characteristics. While these results show that those interested in SDE are largely white, college-educated and have economic privilege, it is important to note that SDE holds interest to families across a variety of backgrounds. Tables 2 and 3 present these additional details.

Table 2. Education of Family Survey Respondents

Education Level	% Family Survey
College Graduate	58%
Assoc/Technical Degree	14%
Some College	16%
HS or Less	12%

Table 3. Income of Family Survey Respondents

Income Level	%
>$75K	57%
$50-$75K	19%
$25-49K	16%
<$25K	8%

Family Goals for SDE

Our analysis led to three key findings. First, families want their children to gain social and employment skills from their educational experience. Second, they want their children to be actively engaged in their learning. And, third, they want their children to have a flexible educational experience.

In general, our analyses of the survey data indicate that families want their children's educational experience to lead to productive participation in society and secure employment. These goals are more important than those pertaining to daily-life skills and lifelong learning. Just as significant, caregivers place very low importance on meeting grade level expectations and achievement on standardized tests. Details of this finding can be found in Table 4. The Table presents the percentage of respondents who chose a given goal as their top priority for their children's education.

Table 4. Educational Goals of Survey Respondents

Most important educational goal	%
Have the social skills to successfully participate in society	30%
Financially support themselves	29%
Employment doing something they enjoy/love doing	27%
Attend college or technical school	25%
Graduate from a high school	24%
Get a good job	24%
Have daily-life skills	24%
Be a lifelong learner	22%
Have the children study topics they are interested in	19%
Have the emotional skills to understand themselves and successfully form lasting relationships	19%
Meet or exceed grade level academic standards	17%
Meet or exceed grade level expectations on standardized tests	12%
Other	<1%

In addition, our research shows that families want their students to be actively – not passively – engaged in their own learning. Support for this finding can be found in additional survey results. In particular, participants were asked "What do you see as the current or potential benefits of Unschooling/Self-Directed Education for your children?" along with 13 choices as well as a write-in option. The top response, with 36% of survey takers selecting it was "Children learn academics while pursuing their interests." This response was tied with children having the opportunity to learn social, emotional and life skills. At the same time, families also want their children to play a part in driving their education. In particular, when asked about their goals for SDE, the survey indicates that 34% of families are interested in it because they want to be sure that their "children are engaged and take the lead in their own education."

Table 5. Current or Potential Benefits of SDE

Current or Potential Benefits of SDE	Percent
Children learn academics while pursuing their interests	36%
Children have the opportunity to learn social/emotional/life skills	36%
Children are engaged and take the lead in their own education	34%
Support for children's individual needs	34%
Program flexibility	33%
Expose children to alternative perspectives/expectations	31%
Flexibility to engage with other students and/or adults	28%
Support for children from knowledgeable, caring adults	24%
Connection with like-minded families	23%
Support from families on a similar path	21%
Get away from mistreatment	19%
Support for my family's cultural values	19%
Support for my family's racial identity	14%
Other	<1%

The third key finding focuses on children having a flexible educational experience. While the survey results clearly indicate that families want children to learn necessary life skills, the research also indicates that it is essential that SDE be authentically self-directed and not simply "window dressing" on pre-assigned topics and issues. Families report that they want their students to have real choice in their learning. For instance, survey takers were asked "What do you see as the current or potential benefits of Unschooling/Self-Directed Education for your children?" Participants had 13

choices as well as a write-in option. The top response was "to learn necessary life sills." However, the second choice was allowing children to focus on topics that matter to them (41%). These results and others are found in Table 5. Several high ranking responses focus on an educational experience that is closely tailored to individual student needs.

Barriers and Opportunities

Families identified barriers that can stand in the way of uptake of SDE. These barriers, in some sense, are a response to current experiences—families want to be sure these experiences are not replicated in SDE. Thus, while these findings point to potential barriers to accessing SDE, they also clearly suggest opportunities for strengthening the appeal of SDE to a large variety of families. More specifically, we identified two key findings from our assessment of barriers: (1) SDE must provide individualized attention to students; and, (2) SDE must offer clear guidance to students who engage with it. Details of these findings are presented in the following sections.

Survey results first suggest that SDE can meet a young person's needs by ensuring that its learning platforms and approaches are actually intended to be about a young person's individualized experience. Survey takers were asked: "What are the reasons you might consider pursuing an education alternative for your children?" and provided a list of 12 choices including a write-in option. The third highest response (listed in Table 6) was "support for my children's individual needs (e.g., learning differences, advanced learning)" with 40% of families selecting this choice. Top reasons were learning necessary life skills and focusing on topics that matter.

Table 6. Reasons Parents might Choose SDE

Reason	%
To learn necessary life skills	42%
Allows my children to focus on topics that matter to them	41%
Support for my children's individual needs	40%
Focus on academic skills I think are important	37%
Provide an environment more conducive to learning	35%
To learn social/emotional skills	33%
Expose my children to alternative perspectives/expectations	30%
Provide a supportive environment for social/emotional learning	29%
Support for my family's cultural values	19%
Get away from mistreatment	19%
Support for my family's racial identity	18%
Other	1%

The second, and perhaps most notable barrier, focuses on clarity in accessing and pursuing SDE. Our research indicates that any SDE efforts must provide a clear and easily understood pathway to learning and success for students. A lack of awareness around what SDE entails emerged as a significant barrier to uptake. Despite values and goals frequently aligning with the opportunities offered by SDE, more complete information is required if families are going to commit to this approach to education. Evidence for this finding can be found in the data. Families were asked the following question: "Excluding money, transportation, and scheduling, what concerns or questions do you have about Unschooling/Self-Directed Education for your children?" and they were provided eight options to choose from along with a write-in option. The top answer was "I need more information," which was selected by 51% of survey takers.

Table 7. Concerns about SDE

Concern about SDE	%
I need more information	51%
Checks and balances are needed to ensure a good outcome	31%
This alternative won't prepare my children for their future	27%
My children will miss out on important childhood experiences	26%
Children are not equipped to determine what they need to learn	25%
This alternative doesn't seem like a good fit for my children	23%
There is not enough social interaction for my children, with peers and/or adults	19%
I'm uncomfortable with other/unknown adults educating my children	14%
Other	3%

Differences by Race

Because of long-standing challenges to equity across racial identity in the American public education system, we paid particular attention to differences in attitudes toward SDE across different racial groups among survey takers. We found that there are notable differences among racial communities and their overall enthusiasm for, and attitudes toward, SDE. In general, white, Latinx, and multi-racial families are more apt to favor it. On the other hand, African American and East Asian families have a dimmer view of it. In fact, African American families are the least likely group to pursue SDE or unschooling. Table 8. presents the percentage of families within each group that are either "likely" or "unlikely" to pursue SDE.

Table 8. Position Toward SDE Among All Respondents *(High ratings noted in blue.)*

Position Toward SDE	White (n=800)	African American (n=90)	Latinx (n=87)	East Asian (n=34)	Multi/ Biracial (n=102)
Likely to pursue it	48%	30%	39%	35%	45%
Unlikely to pursue it	27%	34%	33%	44%	30%
Need more information	14%	11%	11%	24%	12%

Table 9. identifies the reasons families would choose SDE for their children. Across all families, SDE is desired because it is viewed as "good" for children.. Although this opinion was the most commonly cited reason for pursuing this approach, it is worth noting that white families are significantly more likely to hold this view of SDE.

Table 9. Reasons for Pursuing SDE

Reason	White (n=800)	African American (n=90)	Latinx (n=87)	East Asian (n=34)	Multi/ Biracial (n=102)
It is good, children like it, it's interesting	30%	17%	20%	18%	25%
Educationally sound	7%	3%	8%	3%	5%
Can learn at their own pace / individualized	7%	6%	7%	3%	13%
Good fit for my child	7%	4%	7%	3%	6%
Life skills focused and prepares for adulthood	3%	3%	2%	6%	1%
Builds confidence, social and emotional skills	3%	1%	3%	3%	3%
Current system is not working well	3%	1%	3%	3%	8%

When asked why they would not pursue SDE, there is more variation among the different communities surveyed. For both White and African American families, the primary reason is that SDE is "academically unsound." Latinx families, however, are more likely to feel "uncomfortable" about the approach. East Asian families do not feel that it is a "good fit" for their children, while multi-racial families are more likely to see the approach as "too unstructured." Additional details can be found in Table 10.

Table 10. Reasons for *Not* Pursuing SDE *(High ratings noted in blue.)*

Reason	White (n=800)	African American (n=90)	Latinx (n=87)	East Asian (n=34)	Multi/ Biracial (n=102)
Academically unsound / need core classes	9%	9%	9%	12%	13%
Too unstructured	8%	9%	5%	3%	14%
Not a good fit	7%	8%	5%	15%	10%
Uncomfortable with it	5%	6%	14%	6%	8%
Prefer traditional education	5%	6%	3%	9%	2%
Too much work / time	1%	1%	6%	9%	2%
Need to learn social skills	1%	1%	-	-	-

There are clear trends in Table 10. with the one exception that SDE is viewed as "academically unsound." This was the most frequent response among white and African American families and the second most frequent among the other groups. Furthermore, when families were asked what their children's current educational setting needed to do differently in order to better meet their goals, all groups named increased focus on academics as their number one area to improve. This finding suggests that any communications effort on behalf of SDE may want to make the case that this approach is academically robust and provides students with needed academic preparation.

Table 11 below provides one additional insight into families' views about SDE. When asked what questions they had about SDE, the primary response – across all groups – was the need for more information. In general, it appears that families need details and specifics about SDE in order to take on this approach to education. East Asian families were significantly more likely to require information about results and success rates. These families were also significantly more likely than other groups to express specific concerns about future validity of qualifications. Very few significant differences emerged between groups regarding concerns about SDE, indicating that American families shared broadly similar concerns irrespective of racial background.

Table 11. Questions or Concerns about SDE

Question or Issue	White (n=800)	African American (n=90)	Latinx (n=87)	East Asian (n=34)	Multi/ Biracial (n=102)
I need more information	53%	38%	45%	47%	57%
Checks and balances are needed	32%	32%	24%	26%	32%
Won't prepare my child for their future	28%	19%	23%	26%	25%
Child will miss out on important experiences	26%	24%	25%	24%	26%
Child is not equipped to determine their need	25%	28%	29%	26%	29%
Not a good fit for my children	23%	23%	22%	26%	28%
There is not enough social interaction	19%	20%	28%	15%	24%
I'm uncomfortable with other/unknown adults	14%	17%	14%	9%	16%

Reasons Families Pursue SDE

Data analysis revealed five primary reasons families of all races would pursue SDE. Table 12 presents these reasons. Interestingly, there is some variation among different communities and their views of these reasons. White and African American families are significantly more likely than Hispanic families to cite support for cultural values and racial identity as a reason to pursue SDE. White and East Asian families are the most likely groups to see SDE as a way to avoid mistreatment. White and Multracial households are more likely to expressly prioritize social and emotional skills whereas African American, Latinx, and East Asian respondents are more likely to focus on academic content. White, Multiracial and East Asian families are more likely to see a focus on individual needs and topics tailored to their children's interests as a benefit of SDE.

Table 12. Reasons for Pursuing SDE

Goal	White (n=800)	African American (n=90)	Latinx (n=87)	East Asian (n=34)	Multi/ Biracial (n=102)
Learn necessary life skills	41%	47%	38%	41%	39%
Focus on topics that matter to them	43%	33%	33%	47%	47%
Support my child's individual needs	41%	31%	37%	44%	50%
Focus on important academic	36%	41%	39%	50%	36%
Provide a learning environment	35%	30%	40%	32%	43%
To learn social/emotional skills	35%	32%	30%	29%	39%
Exposure to alternative perspectives	30%	27%	32%	44%	35%
Provide a supportive environment	31%	23%	24%	24%	34%
Support my family's cultural values	19%	20%	9%	21%	25%
Be in a community of like-minded families	19%	12%	22%	12%	23%
Get away from mistreatment	19%	12%	14%	18%	23%
Support for my family's racial identity	13%	17%	7%	15%	18%
I would not consider an educational alternative for my children	4%	3%	3%	-	5%
Other	1%	1%	2%	-	2%

DISCUSSION

Our research took place in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic - a moment when we needed a much better understanding of what parents need from the US education system. It provides a glimpse into parents' views not only of student driven education, but also their hopes for their children's educational experience, in general. This, in and of itself, is notable because parents' have frequently struggled to be fully represented within the public education system (Curry & Holter, 2019; Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). This is particularly true of BIPOC parents (Crosier, 2001; Olivos, 2004; William & Sanchez, 2012). Perhaps most importantly, we know that parental involvement is essential for children's academic performance and success (Jafarov, 2015). Our study provides detailed information about what parents want from their children's education. With this knowledge it is easier to build bridges toward them and work toward fuller parental engagement in the educational experience.

While our results frequently focus specifically on SDE, it is important to note that the findings have broad application - to traditional public education, private schooling, out-of-school time, homeschooling and student-driven education. Our research shows that parents hold a number of hopes - and concerns - for their children and their educational trajectory. In particular, when we asked families what they want from their childrens' educational experience (regardless of whether it is SDE or not) they stated their educational goals were: (1) ensuring their children have the social skills to successfully participate in society and (2) having their children financially support themselves (Table 4). By emphasizing employability, families continue to reflect long standing views of education as preparing adults for modern, industrial society. From this perspective, educational systems valorize autonomous decision-making (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

At the same time, parents are calling for something more. Specifically, parents view SDE as a vehicle for providing a richer educational experience. When asked what they want from SDE, they stated they: (1) want their children to learn academics while pursuing their interests and (2) for their children to have an opportunity to learn social/emotional life skills (Table 5). By saying - in nearly equal measures - that they value employment, academics and social/emotional life skills, families are asking for an educational system that can deliver on the promise of full personhood. These findings suggest that parents desire an educational experience that is holistic and integrated.

This more integrated view of the educational experience has been termed the "holistic indigenous world view" (Hansen, 2021). Such a view regards education as attending to the physical, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual aspects of their being. Crucially, this is a collaborative

project realized through the combined efforts of families, schools, communities, and societies. Such a model stands in sharp contrast to the dominant Cartesian-Newtonian educational paradigm whereby children are regarded as passive receptacles of knowledge and values. The goals of this model are political, social and economic in nature and are not concerned with the unique personhood of the child (Hansen, 2021). SDE, in contrast, has the potential to be liberatory and empowering for families and youth.

SDE, however, is not a panacea. Families clearly explain what worries them about this educational approach and what would need to be delivered by a self-directed system for it to be successful. Specifically, the path to successful engagement in SDE needs to be laid clear. One of the strongest findings to emerge from our study was the need for "more information" as a family concern about SDE. Perhaps this finding is not surprising given what we know about parental engagement in school and existing research about information flow between schools and families. Goodall and Montgomery (2013) have described an information continuum where there is a move from information giving (on the part of schools) to a sharing of information between parents and schools - and as information sharing increases, parental engagement and agency increases. In this light, it feels fair to interpret our findings not solely as a need for SDE to be fully explained to parents, but as a request by parents for full information-based engagement in their children's educational project.

There has been much popular and journalistic speculation that parents are open to considering educational approaches or philosophies that differ from those offered by mainstream education. The upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is considered by many to have increased appetite for change. The present study offers clear evidence that American parents are indeed open to educational alternatives more broadly and SDE specifically.

Our research shows that parents are cognizant of both the benefits and drawbacks of such an approach and are looking for more information to help them make informed, thoughtful decisions. Educational alternatives appeal to a broad segment of American society for a variety of reasons, be they academic, professional, social, emotional, or liberatory. The data show that parents want a comprehensive, holistic educational experience for their children - one focused on full personhood - and many consider SDE to be a potential path to such an experience. The present study has thus made an important contribution to knowledge about parents' wishes for their children and perceptions of the education system and different educational approaches.

In terms of future research, the authors recommend that further quantitative studies be conducted to ascertain whether the conclusions above will be replicated. They also recommend that qualitative studies be conducted with parents to complement the striking conclusions above with rich qualitative data. Such studies would allow for a more complete understanding of the research question and determine whether the conclusions found in the present study were fully informed by the Covid-19 pandemic, or are indicative of a deeper and systemic view of the current educational system in the United States.

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