

Parents' motives for home education: The influence of methodological design and social context

Thomas SPIEGLER*

Friedensau University, Germany

Abstract

Parents' motives for home education are one of the most researched topics within home education research. The focus of this article is on the question of the degree to which the results regarding these motives are influenced and shaped by the applied methods and the social context. The empirical basis is a meta-analysis of twelve research examples from the last two decades. It is concluded that the diversity within the results can partly be traced back to fundamental differences in the methodological design, to the absence of detailed theoretical modelling and remarkable differences of the survey instruments and that the role of the social environment and the process of the construction of motives in a certain social context deserve more attention.

Keywords: home education, home schooling, parents' motives, reasons

Introduction

In this issue home education is placed between the terms “fundamentalism” and “human right”. This contradiction represents the range of different attitudes towards and judgements about this special educational approach. How home education is seen depends not only on the legal framework around it but also on the public perception of the parents' motives. Motives that are far away from the mainstream especially have the potential to evoke the label of fundamentalism. Therefore, it may not be surprising that those who

* Correspondence: Dr. Thomas Spiegler, FB Christl. Sozialwesen, Theol. Hochschule Friedensau, An der Ihle 5 A 39291 Friedensau, Germany. Phone: 03921.916202. E-Mail: thomas.spiegler@thh-friedensau.de

are not familiar with this approach often ask for the parents' motives and that this point is one of the most frequently researched questions within the home education research. It already started more than 20 years ago (e.g. Van Galen, 1988) and in most of the countries with at least a small stock of home education research we usually also find some data about the parents' motives.

At the first glance the question about parents' motives seems to be self-evident, easy to answer and researchable without further difficulties. But a closer look at the body of research in this area indicates that this impression might be misleading. The current state of research can be summarized as follows: Little theoretical foundations, a wide range of methods and results that differ to a great degree. Some shortcomings of this research have already been pointed out and suggestions for improvement have been made (e.g. Nemer, 2002; Rothermel, 2003).

The focus of this article is on the question of the degree to which the results regarding the motives are influenced and shaped by the applied methods and the social context. The empirical basis is a meta-analysis of twelve research examples from the last two decades.¹

Overview of the Research about Parents' Motives for Home Education

The number of research articles dealing with parents' motives for home education is today so large that it would be beyond the scope of the article to try to list them all. Therefore, the discussion of specific problems in this field is based on a small selection of contributions.

The following table presents 12 studies that focus on or include the question of parents' motives for home education. The criteria for selection were to build a sample that includes research from different decades, different regions and, most of all, with differing methodological approaches – in short: To cover the variety of research in this field. In all cases the table includes a description of the methods and a very brief summary of the findings. Results in the cited studies beyond the topic of motives for home education are not presented here. The data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the US are listed separately as they used different instruments to measure the motives.

<i>Methods</i>	<i>Results</i>
Van Galen (1988)	
Participant observation at meetings of homeschoolers,	Van Galen identified two categories: Ideologues and Pedagogues. Ideologues are de-

¹ I would like to thank Christine Brabant and Christian Beck for their valuable criticism and comments that led to improvement of this article.

<p>23 interviews with parents from 16 home educating families in a south eastern state of the USA and document analysis.</p>	<p>scribed as conservative Christians who object to what is being taught in schools, wish to strengthen family relationships and to pass on a specific religious worldview. Pedagogues chose homeschooling for pedagogical reasons. They homeschool in order to offer a more flexible and independent way of learning which follows the child's innate desires (p. 55).</p>
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Mayberry (1988; 1989)

<p>A state-wide survey of home education families in Oregon (<i>n</i> = 461) with an open-ended question for the motives and 15 in-depth interviews. The analysis of the material was done with techniques for qualitative data (1988, p. 37; 1989, p. 173).</p>	<p>Mayberry identified four general categories of homeschoolers, based on their motives. Her largest category (65%) are the "religious" who "believe that it is their duty to install particular religious beliefs and values in their children". Parents in the category "academic" (22%) are convinced that home education can better ensure academic achievement than public schooling can. The "socio-relational" called type (11%) focuses on family unity and assumes that homeschooling offers a more appropriate social environment for education than the peer interactions at school. The fourth group (2%) chose homeschooling to follow their New Age philosophy, emphasizing interrelatedness of all life and peaceful coexistence (1988, p. 37f). Later Mayberry integrated these four categories into Van Galens dichotomy "ideologues" (religious and New Age) and "pedagogues" (academic and socio-relational) (Mayberry, 1989; Mayberry & Knowles, 1989).</p>
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Knowles (1991)

<p>A subsample (23 adults from 12 homeschooling families in Utah) of a larger study was researched with a variety of ethnographic data-gathering techniques including qualitative interviews. Knowles' focused on the life histories of the par-</p>	<p>Like other researchers Knowles saw that parents refer to contemporary problems with the educational environment and practices at school and that they formulate pedagogical beliefs about homes being better places for learning than schools (p. 211). Additionally, he stressed the role of the family, school and learning experiences of the parents during their childhood. He found that they refer to</p>
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ents and the relevance of former experiences on the present decision for homeschooling. negative school experiences which they do not want replicated in the lives of their own children and that the childhood of many parents was influenced by a dysfunctional and disrupted family environment (p. 223).

Thomas (1998)

100 Interviews with home education families (58 in Australia, 42 in England). Sampling over “nonaligned” networks - “religious or other ideologically committed organizations” were not approached (p. 6). Participant observation in some families.

Thomas distinguishes in his analysis of the reasons for home education between parents whose children had never been to school and those who withdraw their children from school (p. 28f). The most frequently mentioned influence in both groups are media, reporting about home education, and meetings with other home educators. Beyond that, the first group cites perceptions of academic and social limitations of schooling, homeschooling as a continuum when children reach school age, school experiences of older siblings and Christian values. Those who withdraw their children from school refer to the child’s dislike of school, bullying, learning difficulties at school or the belief that the child would achieve more at home and different expectations concerning values in education (p. 29).

Arai (2000)

Semi-structured interviews with 23 home education families in Canada (Ontario and British Columbia).

Arai found that the decision for homeschooling is for most parents a long process. In explaining their reasons they refer to different problems they see at school, like poor school environment, low academic standards or moral/religious conflicts. He does not construct a typology and states that the types of the US research do not capture the reasons for homeschooling in Canada.

Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman (2001)

Analysis of data from the Parent Survey of the National Household Education

The parents’ answers were coded into 16 categories and analysed concerning their frequencies. The most frequently mentioned reasons

<p>Surveys Program in the U.S. (NHES, 1999). The number of homeschooled students (defined as enrolment in public or private school =< 25 hours a week) in this study was 275 (16,833 non-homeschooled students). Parents were asked with an open-ended question for their reasons for homeschooling. They could provide as many reasons as were applicable.</p>	<p>are: Can give child better education at home (49%), religious reasons (38%), poor learning environment at school (26%), family reasons (17%), to develop character/morality (15%), object to what school teaches (12%), school does not challenge child (12%), other problems with available schools (12%), student behaviour problems at school (9%) and child has special needs/disability (8%) (p. 10).</p>
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<p>Hetzel (2001)</p>	
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<p>A survey among homeschoolers who are enrolled in the Community Home Education Program in a specific region in California with focus on the factors that push parents out of school and those that pull them into homeschooling. 332 of a possible 871 families answered the questionnaire, which included scales with push/pull factors derived from former research.</p>	<p>According to the mean on a three point Likert Scale, the top four push factors are: "Negative peer influence", "class size too large", "poor moral climate" and "children not learning enough". The top three pull factors are "one-to-one instruction", the possibility to integrate family values in education and the wish to influence the moral climate of the child's education (p. 5f).</p>
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<p>Brabant, Bourdon, & Jutras (2003)</p>	
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<p>A questionnaire survey among home educators in Quebec ($n = 203$). It included a list with 50 statements about home education motivations (based on a literature review and discussions in a web-forum). The participants were sup-</p>	<p>Between 72 and 80% answered for the following motives with "great" or "very grate" importance: More individualised teaching, family project for the pleasure of living and discovering together, curriculum enrichment, parents are in a better position to educate, importance of family relationships, better socialisation through family/community life and not appropriate child-adult-ratio at school.</p>
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posed to indicate to what extent each of the statements was important in their decision for home education. A descriptive analysis of the data shows which statements had been rated with the highest importance. At a second stage, a factor analysis was applied to explore possible factors behind the single items.

The seven extracted factors are (sorted in a descending order of average importance): Family project (strengthen family relationship), objection to social and pedagogical organisation of school, child's choice or better enrichment at home, inappropriate socialization at school and long separation from home, interest to pass on specific religious or moral orientation, negative school experiences and finally special needs of the child.

Rothermel (2003)

A questionnaire survey among home educators in the UK. From the 1,000 returned questionnaires (20% response rate) 419 were selected for this analysis, 412 had answered the open-ended question for the motivation for home education.

Rothermel categorised the answers in 19 different motives. The most frequently mentioned are: Disappointment with education and schools (31%), parents who say that they always intended to home educate (30%), bullying (25%), depression, exhaustion or sickness of the child (24%), the belief that education is the parents' responsibility (20%), mismanagement of children with special educational needs or gifted children (20%) and to enable a situation in which children work/develop at their own pace/potential (19%). In general, Rothermel found that the motives form two groups, one related to experiences at school and the second related to family ideology.

Collom (2005)

A questionnaire survey among parents whose children were enrolled in a Home Charter School in South California ($n = 235$, response rate 71%). Based on former research the questionnaire included a list of 16 motivations for enrolment in Home Charter. For each of these the

The factor analysis of the 16 items led to four factors: Criticism of public schools, feeling attracted to home charter, ideological reasons and family and children needs. The results of a regression analysis indicated that only few of the measured demographic variables are able to predict the parental motives.

parents were supposed to rate on a five-point scale how important this reason was in their own decision for home education. Then a factor analysis was applied to the data.

Princiotta & Bielick (2006)

Analysis of data from the Parent Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program in the U.S. (NHES, 2003). The number of homeschooled students (defined as enrolment in public or private school =< 25 hours a week) in this study was 239 (11,755 non-homeschooled students). The questionnaire presented a list with possible reasons for homeschooling, asking which of these reasons applied to the parents and which one was their most important reason for homeschooling.

The following list gives the percentage of homeschooled students whose parents reported the particular reasons as being applicable and the percentage who reported it as being the most important reason (p. 13):

- Concerns about the environment of other schools (85%/31%)
- To provide religious or moral instruction (72%/30%)
- Dissatisfaction with academic instruction (69%/17%)
- Child has physical or mental health problems (16%/7%)
- Child has other special needs (29%/7%)
- Other reasons (20%/9%)

Spiegler (2008)

Participant observation at meetings of homeschoolers, qualitative interviews with home educating parents, content analysis of contributions to an E-mail group, detailed analysis of 32 home education cases in Germany.

Spiegler interprets all motives as criticism of the school system and summarizes the three most important as follows: 1) Parents assume that their possibilities to impart *values* are too limited or interfered with by schooling. 2) The *process of learning* does not offer enough space for individual needs or approaches and self-determined learning, or it focuses on issues that are 'wrong' from the parents' viewpoint. 3) Parents are concerned about the *well-being* of their children (often linked to bullying, psychosomatic disorders or school phobia). For

most parents are more than one of these motives important.

The diversity that is claimed for the parents' motives seems to be true as well for the research of these. In the following I compare the presented examples regarding the way they conclude from a sample to the larger population and concerning the main motives they found.

The results are generalized in two different ways: Counting frequencies and building typologies. The frequencies of certain motives are based on closed-questions (e.g. Princiotta & Bielick, 2006), open-ended questions whose answers were afterwards categorized (e.g. Rothermel, 2003) and also the data of Thomas' more qualitative design are analyzed in this way (1998).

The studies which use typologies are also based on different methodological designs. On the one hand we have qualitative research with a small sample-size. In these cases typologies are a common way for conclusions for a larger population (e.g. Spiegler, 2008). On the other hand, typologies are the result of a multivariate data-analysis, which includes the possibility to measure how strongly parents refer to a certain factor (Brabant, 2003; Colom, 2005).²

Although this analysis does not aim for deducing new or more "true" motives by comparing the single studies, the visible similarities shall be mentioned. The majority of the motives are statements that home education enables something more or better than school does. At least four main areas can be identified to which parents refer if they speak about the anticipated benefits of homeschooling that guided their decision: 1) Curriculum, academic level and educational approach, 2) values and moral instruction/socialisation, 3) well-being and safety of the child and 4) family unity, which refers to the consequences that schooling has on family life due to its structure. The majority of the reasons in the above cited studies fall into one of these categories.

Method Effects in the Research about Motives for Home Education

My basic thesis at this point is that our present state of research about parents' motives for home education is strongly shaped by the applied methodological instruments. Using the above summarized examples, I describe in the following some of the critical points in quantitative and qualitative research in this field. A comparison of the NHES data from 1999 and 2003 reveals that the question of whether or not open-ended or closed questions are used has an important influence on the results (Bielick et al., 2001; Princiotta & Bielick, 2006). In the 1999 study 17% mentioned "family reasons".³

² The design of Mayberry (1988, 1989) differs from both; she concluded from an open-ended survey question to four types (later two) and also counted the frequencies of parents per type.

³ It is not clear what this category means in detail.

The questionnaire used four years later did not offer a category like this and this motive disappeared. Among the above summarized studies, no two used the same list of statements.⁴ It is obvious that this leads to different results even if the questionnaires were applied to the same sample.⁵ Whether “class size” (Hetzl, 2001), “physical or mental health problems” (Princiotta & Bielick, 2006) or “family project” (Brabant et al., 2003) are among the parents' motives depends first and foremost on the questionnaire.

A second problem is the different levels of generalization in the questionnaire statements and categories. The most frequently mentioned motives are often very general statements, to which nearly all home educators could agree. Examples are “can give child better education at home” (Bielick et al., 2001) or “disappointment with education, schools” (Rothermel, 2003). These statements are much broader than others and include minor statements like “poor learning environment at school” (Bielick et al., 2001). Research shows that the home education movement seems to be in some countries divided into very different milieus (Stevens, 2001; Spiegler, 2008). From a theoretical perspective it is obvious that there are some motives that apply only to a certain milieu (e.g. bible-orientated education) and others to which home educators from different backgrounds could agree (e.g. dissatisfactions with school). As the agreement to a statement/category depends on its level of generalization, it should not be surprising when Bauman states that a quantitative analysis of the NHES data about parents' motives does not really support the two-class model of religiously or academically motivated parents which was based on qualitative research. On one hand the two-class model might be over-simplistic (Rothermel, 2003, p. 87), but on the other some items in the NHES data seem to be so general that the diversity does not become fully visible (Bauman, 2002).

Another difficult term is “religious reasons”. It is often used in the quantitative and qualitative American research on motives for home education. Research done on Christian homeschoolers shows that there are some parents who believe that God wants them to homeschool their children. Without deeper analysis this might be interpreted as religious reasons.⁶ However, in this category also often fall all those parents who have based specific conceptions regarding moral education, influence of peers, lifestyle or importance of certain topics in education (e.g. creationism vs. evolution) on their religious convictions. Using A. Schutz's terms, it is the difference between “because” and “in-order-to” motives (1951). The religious orientation of the parents can be seen as the “because” motive in the past that sup-

⁴ Beyond these 12 examples there are some studies that used items from previous research in order to enable a better comparability (e.g. the NHES Survey, 2007).

⁵ A general introduction to the problem that questionnaires have an important influence on the results gives Schuman & Presser (1996).

⁶ In this case it would be interesting to ask what they believe why God wants them to homeschool. “God wants me to do it” seems to be a rhetorical pattern in certain parts of the Christian community that serves as an unquestionable excuse for different forms of behavior that otherwise might be questioned by some members of the community.

ports a decision for home education “in-order-to” reach a certain educational goal in the child’s future. To subsume all these (“in-order-to”) motives under the same term “religious reasons” conceals the details. In order to reach a better comparability of the frequencies of motives in quantitative research it would be necessary to have a system of statements on the same level that is comprehensive but not overlapping. As this is not yet available, multivariate analysis techniques like factor or cluster analysis are helpful instruments. These operations are much better able to deal with overlapping items than a simple analysis of frequencies (see e.g. Brabant et al., 2003; Collom, 2005).

Qualitative research about parents’ motives often uses typologies to describe the different reasons (e.g. Mayberry, 1988; Spiegler, 2008; Van Galen, 1998). A basic criterion for a typology is that it is based “on an attribute space which results from the combination of the selected attributes and their dimensions” (Kluge, 2000). Most of the presented typologies of motives lack a clear theoretical basis in this point. None of the typologies in the research overview categorizes the data according to different dimensions of clearly defined attributes. Instead of that we find overlapping types or very particular classifications (e.g. “New Age” in Mayberry, 1988). Based on Van Galen’s dichotomy Nemer once developed an attribute space defined by the variables “pedagogical” and “ideological” motivations (Nemer, 2002). It was a suggestion towards better typologies that has not (so far as I know) been adopted, maybe due to it being very vague and difficult for it to operationalize variables. Therefore it remains a field for future research to develop a better theoretical framework for typologies of parents’ motives.

A further difficulty of some qualitative based typologies is that they do not distinguish between motives for home education and an ideal-typical description of a “lifeworld” (Lebenswelt) (e.g. Mayberry, 1988; Van Galen, 1988). The description of dichotomous milieus was a helpful orientation at the beginning of home education research and ideal types [in Weber’s sense (1985, p.191)] are still a useful instrument for understanding the development of the contemporary movement (Spiegler, 2008; Stevens, 2001). But the diversity of motives requires a presentation that distinguishes between a data based description of motives and other variables that are part of ideal-typical constructions (e.g. religion, educational approach, socio-demographic variables, etc.). Parents with the same motive, especially if this is very vaguely described as “academic” or “pedagogues”, are not homogenous enough to base a typology of the movement on these categories.

The Twofold Social Construction of Parents’ Motives

The previous part described challenges that go along with the construction of appropriate research instruments and the selection of analysis tools. Even if we found perfect answers to these questions, it would be a simplification to consider the motives only as measurable attributes of the parents. These motives also reflect a certain social context. They are social constructions at least in a twofold way. One way is related to the process of the decision for

home education, the other to the process of researching or asking for the motives.

The first construction is based on the fact that the social environment (including the school system) determines which benefits parents can expect from homeschooling. If the choice of home education is seen as a more or less conscious decision in which parents compare public/private schools with their view of home education, it is obvious that what parents see as the benefits of homeschooling are not independent characteristics of this approach or their personal preferences. Rather, it can be understood as relative benefits that depend on the characteristics of the available schools. The same parent could have different reasons for homeschooling, depending on the environment he or she is living in: More safety in an area with an above average juvenile delinquency at school, more family time if the school system demands eight hour school attendance per day for young children or more academic progress if the local school does not offer a good learning environment. Parental motives for home education emerge at those topics with the most significant differences between the parents' conception of school and their educational preferences. Insofar, they are partly constructed by the social environment, especially by the school system.

Further social influences in this process can be seen regarding the costs of home education and the parents' concepts of an appropriate education. Whether parents, who think that their educational preferences could be better met by home than public schooling, decide on home education depends to some extent on the costs this has - in some places homeschoolers face sanctions (e.g. Germany, Spiegler, 2009), often homeschooling reduces the possible time to work and generate income and in some areas it is socially accepted whereas in others it can cause social exclusion. The acceptance of home education and the parental attitudes towards this approach are also shaped by general cultural concepts. The concepts of education, individuality and social affiliation vary on an international level. This also contributes to the social construction of parental motives.

The second process of social construction takes place when parents are asked for their motives. Parents' answers to the question regarding their motives are not stable and absolutely true facts but rather a construction in a situation determined by certain expectations, ascriptions or accusations. Decades ago Mills described this with the concept of "vocabulary of motives" (1940). Following the interactionism and Mead, Mills sees vocabularies of motives as one component of a "generalized other", hence as a "mechanism of societal control" (p. 908). Lois applied this theoretical basis to home education (2009). Even in a place where homeschooling is legal and (compared to other regions) relatively widespread, home educators are often accused of deviant behaviour in the form of "irresponsible mothering". According to Lois, homeschooling mothers are seen as "academically arrogant", "socially overprotective", "morally self-righteous" and "relationally hyperengaged". Therefore, they use their descriptions of motives to defend themselves

against these accusations and reconstruct their behaviour as “good mothering”.

Social researchers who try to measure parental motives are confronted with a phenomenon that is socially constructed in two ways. The social environment and especially the school system shape the parents’ rationales for their decision. And when parents talk about their rationales they reconstruct them depending on accusations, expectations and norms of their social setting. Our findings concerning the so-called “parents’ motives” are not a comprehensive picture of the parents’ educational preferences but the result of a certain social structure and an interactional process of the construction of meaning.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the examples it can be said that the methodological design has an important influence on the available data about parents’ motives for home education. The diversity within the results can be partly traced back to fundamental differences in the methodological design, to the absence of detailed theoretical modelling and remarkable differences of the survey instruments. This also limits the possibility to compare results from different studies. Furthermore, it may be helpful to pay more attention to the role of the social context. The latter is an influential frame for the decision about home education and the process of reconstruction of motives (e.g. in an interview or a questionnaire) is related to expectations and norms of a certain social context.

Nevertheless, our state of knowledge in this area is a good basis for the further development of the research instruments. A promising approach could be to place the motives for home education within a bigger frame of research about parental attitudes towards education which would improve the possibilities for national and international comparisons. Only then is it possible to assess in what respect homeschooling parents are different from parents whose children attend schools (see for an example towards this Belfield, 2004) and to what degree regional differences regarding the motives for home education are based on more general national differences.⁷



Thomas Spiegler, teaches sociology and methods of social research at the Department of Social Sciences at Friedensau University (Germany). His doctoral dissertation about home education was the first empirical research project about this movement in Germany and received an award in 2008 from the German Sociological Association.

⁷ E.g. the available data indicate that motives related to religious convictions are in Canada and UK of less importance as in the U.S. (Arai, 2000; Brabant et al., 2003; Rothermel, 2003)

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