

Breaking Free from the Social Stigma of Homeschooling in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The social competencies of homeschooled students have long been a focal point of scrutiny within educational discourse. Many families remain apprehensive about adopting homeschooling due to prevalent misconceptions surrounding the practice. This apprehension often translates into a social stigma that becomes evident when homeschooled students reintegrate into conventional schooling environments. As a result, these students are frequently subjected to discrimination, stereotyping, and cyberbullying. This paper aims to explore the underlying reasons for the stigmatization of homeschooled students and proposes strategies for mitigating these challenges. It introduces a novel framework—the FIT-IN Framework—which seeks to facilitate the destigmatization process. The framework emphasizes proactive steps such as Finding solutions, Initiating interactions, and Taking opportunities, which are designed to foster Intentional socialization and cultivate New meaningful relationships. Establishing deep and sustained connections among homeschooling families, educational institutions, and the broader community is critical for facilitating smoother transitions for homeschooled students. This paper also underscores the necessity for further research into the efficacy of the FIT-IN Framework and its applicability to other socially stigmatized groups.

KEYWORDS: homeschooling, socialization, social stigma, cyberbullying

Introduction

The emergence of homeschooling has become one form of phenomenal alternative amidst the Covid-19 pandemic with an emphasis to allow the potential of an individual to thrive. Contemporary trends in homeschooling involve a much more diverse group of families with a wider range of reasons for selecting home schooling as the educational method of choice (Icmi & Suryono, 2019). In the Philippines, Article XIV, Section 1(2) of the 1987 constitution states that the Department of Education has to effectively “establish, maintain and support a complete, adequate, and integrated system of education relevant to the needs of the people and society” (HSLDA, 2019). Furthermore, Article 220 of the Family Code also specifies that the “parents and those exercising parental authority shall have, with respect to their unemancipated children or wards, the right and duty to keep them in their company, to support, educate, and instruct them by right precept and good example, and to provide for their upbringing in keeping with their means.” Thus, the homeschooling program has become a viable option for an increasing number of Filipino families who are faced with circumstances that prevent their children from attending formal school (Department of Education, 2022). The key feature of the homeschooling environment was the role and responsibility of the family, especially the parents in the homeschool setting where they assume the role of the teacher in terms of their child’s education. The term “parent-teacher” implies that the mother or father not only fulfills the typical role of a parent, but also accepts responsibilities as the “teacher” accountable for executing lessons, delivering instructions, and reporting their student’s grades (Carpenter & Gann, 2016). Homeschooling is therefore viewed as a convenient, flexible, and engaging program allowing both the parent and the student to set the pace, and independently control the course of the learning process (Liwanag & Liwanag, 2020). However, the growing misconceptions regarding the socialization of homeschooled students continue to present a challenge. Irwin and Berge (2006) described that socialization is about people being able to mingle and establish connections on one or more levels. They speak with one another, share ideas and information, and confirm the connections made through an agreed upon means. Unfortunately, homeschooled students are branded as socially incompetent

as it is believed that they are isolated from society and denied the socialization opportunities that they need to succeed as adults (Jolly et al., 2013). This misconception widened the gap of the homeschool program in becoming an acceptable norm in the society. As a result, when homeschooled students transition back to regular school, they face obstacles due to the preconceived notion of their lack of socialization skills. Multiple researchers and authors argued that homeschooled students are prone to social stigma (Lois, 2013; Sackett & Fletcher, 2017; Watson, 2019). Drawing on theories of social stigma, it formally began with Erving Goffman's work in the 1960s where he defined stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and that reduces the bearer "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963 as cited in McWilliams, 2017). It is characterized by being stereotyped, prejudiced, and discriminated against which prevents establishing and maintaining meaningful connections (Frost, 2011). Consequently, people who are subjected to stigma are more likely to experience worse psychological well-being, harassment, violence, or bullying (Chopra & Arora, 2020). What makes it worse is that cases of bullying are still on the rise and continue to happen widespread as it follows the transition in adapting to a new online platform. The term cyberbullying emerged and it is commonly defined as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (Smith & Slonje, 2010 as cited in Lynch et al., 2015). Cyberbullying intentionally excludes a particular person or continually harass a person or group in the cyber environment. A key characteristic of cyberbullying is that it can include cellphone bullying, intimidation, harassment, embarrassment, or exclusion through the use of technology. A single published message may work as a reusable act of bullying, causing more and more painful comments for the victim. Because the internet serves as a communication function and a space for socialization, the result of bullying to the victim may be a complete loss of relationship building, development and socialization opportunities. It remains to be a social problem showing clear evidence for major deficiencies in establishing social networks (Fernández-Antelo & Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2021; Shin & Choi, 2021; Utemissova et al., 2021; Yang, 2021). It is alarming to note that homeschooled students are vulnerable to such predicament. Therefore, addressing the social stigma of homeschooling in the Philippines is imperative in ensuring that homeschooled students are empowered when they make transitions to go back to regular schools. In this regard, this paper intends to answer the following research questions:

1. Why are homeschooled students stigmatized?
2. How can homeschooled students break free from the social stigma?

1. Scope and Methodology

Research Design

The methodological framework for this study is qualitative in nature and follows a descriptive phenomenological approach. A descriptive phenomenological approach focuses on the description of participants' experiences and seeks to describe, not just explain, the participants' lived experiences. Qualitative strategies, such as interviews, were used to gather rich descriptive data of lived experiences of the participants and their direct actions associated with experiences to enhance understanding of the situation of the study inquiry.

Population and Locale of the Study

Purposive sampling was conducted. According to Curry, Webb, and Latham (2016), a purposive sample is the one whose characteristics are defined for a purpose that is relevant to the study. The inclusion sample selection criteria set includes novice homeschooling families who are enrolled with a homeschooling provider for the Academic Year 2022-2023 and have a co-op membership. For this research, the term novice teacher is defined as any teacher with 5 years or less of experience. Eight homeschooling families participated in the study.

Materials and Instrumentation

In this study, varied forms of qualitative data such as individual interviews, homeschool journals, and primary source documents were analyzed. Interview questions were open ended and general to understand the social dilemmas experienced by the participants in this study. Moreover, the researcher asked the participants' permission to peruse the respective homeschool journals that they occasionally send to their local co-ops. The journal contains snippets of relevant information and documentation of significant events throughout their homeschooling journey. Lastly, the researcher requested the participants to provide relevant documents like pictures and videos that would support the data that they will provide.

Data Gathering and Procedure

The procedure implemented in the data collection was carried out after a consent form was obtained from the participants. Data collection in this study was carried out through in-depth individual interviews, homeschool journals, and primary source documents. Individual interviews were conducted in a duration of 45 to 60 minutes. Afterwards, the participants were asked to send their homeschool journals and documents via email.

Treatment of Data

In an effort to attain a comprehensive understanding of the social dilemmas experienced by novice homeschooling families, qualitative data analysis allows one to make sense of data in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories, and regularities. The common approach in dealing with such data is to present it as text which can subsequently be reduced to codes and categories. The data was analyzed by both direct interpretation and combination of instances in the form of themes. Data analysis followed a three-step procedure. The first step involved getting to know the data. The second step involved bringing the data into focus or analyzing it. The third step was categorizing the data into themes. After themes were developed, patterns were identified from the themes to establish a smaller number of categories (Palaiologou, Needham & Male, 2016). To establish reliability, the researcher used triangulation of data sources for comparison. Specifically, data source triangulation was selected since it involves the collection of data using the same method but from different sources.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were applied in the whole process of this study. Participants were asked to accomplish an online consent form prior to partaking in this study. It was emphasized that participation in this research was voluntary. Moreover, the participants were assured that their identity will be concealed and respected to maintain privacy with regards to gathering and storing of data. All collective knowledge and data that were disclosed throughout the study were kept with utmost confidentiality.

2. Result and Discussion

Social stigma has been portrayed as having a negative effect on the lives of the stigmatized (Frost, 2011). Homeschooled students have often been misjudged, evaluated based on preconceived notions, or labeled as lacking in particular abilities, particularly social abilities. Various research suggests that the reason why homeschooled students are prone to stigmatization, societal exclusions, and cyberbullying is due to the unconventional nature of the program they were in (Lebeda, 2007; Yin et al., 2016; Ray et al., 2021). Opponents of homeschooling claim that by not experiencing public school contexts, homeschooled children are sheltered from the larger society and thus fail to acquire the necessary social skills needed to form meaningful peer relationships (McCabe et al., 2021). Critics charge that homeschooled children are isolated from the outside world, rendering them socially and educationally handicapped. They label homeschooled students as socially awkward, lack essential social skills, and have difficulty relating to others in social situations. Nevertheless, this is simply an outdated stereotype. In a study conducted by Drenovsky and Cohen (2012), they emphasized that homeschooled students also have access to extracurricular activities that fosters socialization. Homeschooling networks and resources aid homeschooling parents so that they may offer a diverse curriculum with opportunities for community engagement on field trips. Homeschooling networks may also provide settings for interaction with other homeschooled students. These students also have opportunities to participate in the same types of extracurricular activities that other students pursue. Chansaengsee et al. (2017) corroborated this in their study when they raised in their research that joining co-op homeschool groups is essential since the children had a chance to interact with others in the group and they could adapt themselves and develop any other social skills such as being team players, learning how to accept being a loser and a winner. Most parents in the group recognized the significance of society to shape the children to live their life happily. In fact, Guterman and Neuman (2017) indicated in their findings that parental personalities and the way homeschooling is practiced correlated significantly with the social encounters of homeschooled children. Parents' conscientiousness was associated with a greater number of social encounters and more structure in homeschooling. This is supported by the study conducted by Mincu and Sârbu (2018) where they concluded that most of the parents in the homeschooling group rank social development as very important and are very concerned with developing their

kids' social skills and involve them in many and varied extracurricular activities. Thus, the socialization of homeschooled children differs from that of children in the traditional system, but by no means can they be considered inferior. Hamlin and Cheng (2022) examined the experiences of adults who were homeschooled as children and found that most of their participants who were homeschooled for all or most of their K-12 education had less exposure to mainstream school-based social opportunities but reflected that homeschooling had not hindered their ability to navigate society effectively. In sum, numerous research argues that the actual socialization opportunities for homeschooling are endless.

In a proactive effort to alleviate, if not extinguish, the social stigma that vulnerable homeschooled students inevitably encounter when they transition to regular school, the researcher designed a novel sociological framework called the FIT-IN Framework as an attempt to break free from social stigmatization. As the name suggests, when homeschooled students are exposed to social environments, they are expected to “fit in” or belong. This framework serves as a guide that helps the stigmatized student to achieve a sense of belongingness in order to break free from the stigma. Just like fitting puzzle pieces together, each component of the framework such as Finding solutions, Initiating interactions, and Taking opportunities must be strategically placed together in order for Intentional socialization and New meaningful relationships to occur.

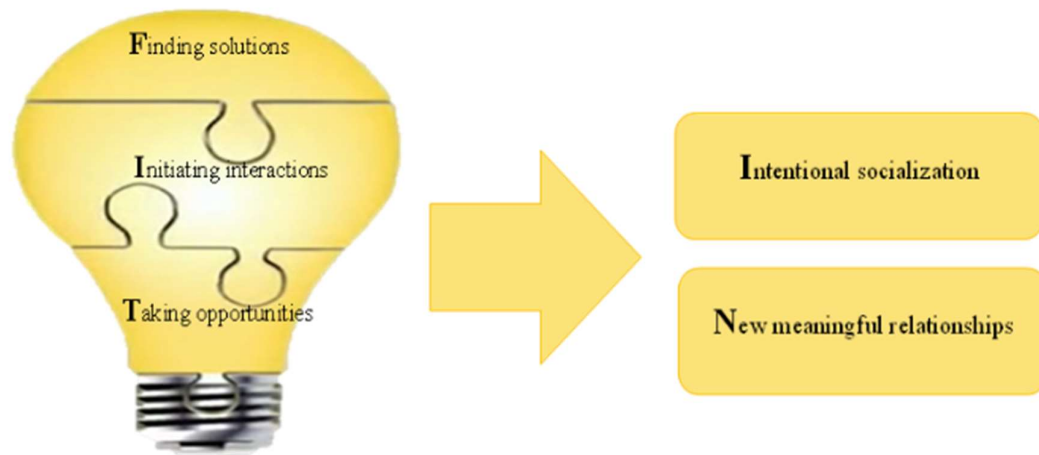


Fig. 1. The FIT-IN Framework

Finding Solutions

The first component of the framework is Finding solutions. This step suggests that searching for concrete actions in resolving issues in stigmatization is necessary. A solution-oriented approach aids in assessing one's situation and develop an effective tactic to deal with it. Thus, a multifaceted approach is needed to stop the spread of stigmatization. One concrete step in finding solutions is to stop the spread of misinformation and deception regarding homeschooled students by widely disseminating reliable information and fact-checking the prevailing misconceptions. It is vital to find a relevant platform, such as social media, that would spread awareness of the negative impact that social stigma creates to address misconceptions and misinformation (Haimson et al., 2014).

Initiating Interactions

Lack of interaction leads to homeschoolers missing out on opportunities to meet with peers from various social backgrounds. Tilhou (2020) mentioned in his study that parents are aware of the value of social interaction and collaboration and went to considerable measures to make up for any. Friend and Cook (2003) as cited in Olivos (2009) view collaboration as a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal. Conversely, with the rise of internet use in recent years, homeschoolers have been able to collaborate and connect with each other across vast distances. This connectivity has opened avenues to various resources, and for ways to interact (Steinmeier & Yoon, 2010). Online communities have produced a new kind of virtual social connection that would spark interactions with the aim of eradicating social stigma.

Taking Opportunities

The availability of chances for community building and collaboration options are seen as essential opportunities to improve socialization. This includes cooperation groups, or “co-op” memberships where students attend classes taught by other parents or paid tutors, and online courses. Homeschooled children are given the opportunity to receive socialization through co-ops where several homeschool families from a region get together regularly for activities such as physical education classes, tutoring, field trips, and fun days off. Co-ops can be typically found around the country which not only helps the children make friends from similar backgrounds, but it gives the parents a chance to get out of the house and spend time with other adults (Willis, 2018). The opportunities that homeschool students can get from co-ops was emphasized further by Sabol (2018) wherein he noted that co-ops organize to provide social interaction for the children, emotional support for the parents, opportunities to discuss curriculum choices and delivery, park day playdates, and enriching field trip experiences. It serves as an opportunity for homeschooling families to gather for fellowship and social time. This is aligned with the study conducted by Burke and Cleaver (2019) where they emphasized that outsourcing with others was identified as a common strategy parents use as an opportunity to enrich collaboration.

It is important to note that in the first three components of the FIT-IN Framework, the role and responsibility of the family is crucial. The family is the basic unit of the society and according to societal standards, family serves as the primary social group of students. Hence, a key feature of the homeschooling environment is the role and responsibility of the members of the family in the homeschool setting to develop social skills and competencies. These components will lead to the final stages of the FIT-IN framework which are Intentional socialization characterized by actively engaging and participating in social environments and will create New meaningful relationships sustained overtime that will generate positive outcomes.

3. Conclusion

Homeschooling provides an alternative option for parents who feel that the traditional school system is unsuitable for their children amidst the Covid-19 global pandemic. However, aside from the pros, it has its cons too. There are controversial social issues encompassing the program because of widespread misconceptions about societal exclusion of homeschooled students. They are vulnerable to stigmatization that perpetuates numerous negative implications especially when they transition back to regular schooling. Nevertheless, the flawed assumption that traditional schooling offers socialization experiences that homeschooling cannot was expounded in this paper. Traditional schools are not the only place that children can learn socialization skills. There are other institutions, groups, and activities outside the home that can provide students with age-integrated opportunities to gain needed socialization skills (Romanowski, 2006). In this regard, a novel framework called the FIT-IN framework was further explained as a model to break free from the social stigma. Ultimately, homeschooled students and their families are encouraged to maintain intentional socialization and new meaningful relationship. Deep and sustained relationship building between and among homeschooling families, educational institutions, and the community is key to smooth transitions (Warren & Harden-Thew, 2019).

Students are more likely to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need for life both inside and outside of school when strong ties between the home, school, and community are established. With that said, there is a need to emphasize how important it is for them to interact with their family, peers, teachers, schools, and communities in order to improve their social skills that will lead for them to them break free from the stigma. It requires consistent dedication of the parents and have their time committed to be able to deliver an adequate program for the student that would mitigate the risk of social stigma. Likewise, teachers and school leaders are tapped to strengthen the formation of meaningful socialization among students so that they will not be put through a compromising situation. They may find it useful for post-pandemic planning to focus on the socialization of students, especially those who are vulnerable to social stigma. Crafting programs on values integration and character building is believed to be valuable. Policymakers are also called for to create new guidelines that would deter stigmatization. Students should be encouraged to take part in social action for an inclusive society where they will be the leaders for social justice equipped with relevant skills to create better change for humanity across the globe. In this regard, it is recommended to make a comparative study on how the context of social stigma affects homeschooled students in other countries as opposed to the Philippines. It is indispensable to view contrasting sociological philosophies in the lens of these countries and how the similarities and differences in their

structure, ideologies, principles, beliefs, and values impact their methods and system. Moreover, further studies on the impact of the FIT-IN framework and how it can be employed using the lens of other social groups who experience stigmatization is also of the essence.

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