Philippine e-Journal for Applied Research and Development 14(2024), 49-63 ISSN 2449-3694 (Online)
https://pejard.slu.edu.ph/vol.14/2024.10.15.pdf

Beyond Survival: Appreciating the Life-Giving Essence of Homeschooling in Southern Philippines

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Received, 26 September 2023; Accepted, 7 November 2024; Published, 15 November 2024

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Abstract

Despite its limited number of adherents, homeschooling is flourishing in the Philippines, including in the south, for more than two decades now. What sustained it though beyond its initial enabling laws are still unknown; thus, this study is an attempt to address this knowledge gap by digging deep into the lived experiences of its participants, thereby identifying what gives life to homeschooling through the years. Guided by an appreciative lens, two focused group discussions, two couple interviews, and three key informant interviews were done to a total of 23 participants, comprising 15 adults and 8 children. Qualitative data were then subjected to descriptive phenomenological data analysis, which yielded five emergent themes from 25 themes. The collapsed structure focused on parents' prioritization of values education, flexibility, quality of learning, strong family relationships, and the important role of the homeschooling community. Important implications to current educational stance and regulations were discussed.

Keywords: alternative education, descriptive phenomenology, appreciative inquiry, family involvement in education, intentional parenting, intentional education

Introduction

When it comes to basic education for its citizens, does the state really know what is best? Does the state always have the final say as to what and how children learn? In democratic and economically emerging societies like the Philippines, the answer seems to be an assumed 'yes.' The Philippine Constitution after all mandated the government to establish and maintain an educational system for Filipinos (Article XIV, 1987), primarily implemented and regulated by the Department of Education (DepEd). No one seemed to question this role of the state until homeschooling came about. From its more formal origins as a blended movement of the liberal left and the conservative Christian right in the United States of America (USA) during the late 70s (Murphy, 2013), homeschooling has come a long way. Latest data showed that as of 2019, 2.8% of Americans ages 5-17 years old were homeschooled, though this figure went down from its peak of 3.4% last 2012 (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2022,). Even so, this still accounted for more than 2 million homeschooled children in the USA.

In the Philippines, homeschooling formally started in 1997 with the issuance of DepEd Memo No. 216 s. 1997, which encouraged public and private schools to open homeschooling programs as alternative delivery modes of basic education for students with medical conditions or unique family circumstance (DepEd, 2022). Though made for a specific purpose, the said order eventually opened opportunities for homeschooling in general to slowly take root in the country, within or outside of DepEd's oversight. Moreover, DepEd's use of the Philippine Educational

Placement Test (PEPT) for the placement of resuming students or for obtaining certification of completion by grade level (DepEd, n. d.) made homeschooling even more viable and attractive to a growing number of families. With a current estimated population of just around 12,000 families as of 2019 (Home School Legal Defense Association [HSLDA], 2019), the homeschooling movement is still very small relative to the 26.6 million students enrolled in regular basic education throughout the country for schoolyear 2023-2024 (Chi, 2023). Meanwhile, the legitimacy of homeschooling in the Philippines also paved the way for the emergence of several DepEd accredited and curriculum-based homeschool providers (DepEdPH, 2024). Over time, these providers did not only provide curriculum-based materials for homeschoolers but also training for parents, as well as the formation of homeschooling communities.

Given that homeschooling has been around in the Philippines for more than two decades, it is safe to assume that there must be something good and life-giving about its practice that sustained and kept it moving forward despite its smaller number of adherents. However, these forces remain largely unknown to this day. This study is thus an attempt to address this gap by investigating deeply into the life-giving essence of the practice of homeschooling from the lived experiences of its participants.

Being able to understand the life-giving essence of homeschooling in the Philippines may help inform policy makers and educational regulators in making relevant policies around homeschooling, as well as in encouraging the widespread adoption of homeschooling by the public. Consequently, this move may even help address DepEd's perineal problem of the lack of classrooms (Macasero, 2023) and the lack of teachers (Ombay, 2023). Moreover, findings may also be able to help empower those who choose to do homeschooling, as they may intentionally maximize these essential qualities to help them become more effective in their practice. Finally, awareness of these life-giving qualities may encourage Filipino parents to become more intentional in participating in their children's basic education.

Research Question and Lens

In this study, the researcher attempted to find out answers to the question, 'What is the life-giving essence of homeschooling as experienced by parents, children, and alumni?' The term "life-giving", which can also be expressed in ideas like "what worked well", "what was fulfilling", "best experiences", and the like, were all influenced by the adoption of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), with its positively biased lens in the practice of social inquiry (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). Originally applied as an action research instrument for organizational development, AI has evolved into the 4D model widely used today to work around transformational changes in organizations from a strengths-based stance as opposed to mere problem-solving (Ludema & Fry, 2008). Moreover, deliberately adopting a positive stance for this research seemed to be consistent with the widespread adoption of Positive Psychology in different fields of discipline, as well as responding to the call for more complexity in qualitative inquiry within the field (Lomas et al., 2021). Finally, it had to be noted that for the interest of this study, only the appreciative stance of AI was adopted; hence, only the first 'D', the discovery part, was used to guide the questions of this inquiry.

Review of Related literature

With homeschooling's origins centered in the US, much of the research on the field were consequently done in US context. Among the most significant meta-analysis studies done about homeschooling were those of Kunzman & Gaither (2020, 2013), Valiente et al. (2022), Ray (2017), and Murphy (2014). These studies highlighted the methodological weaknesses of homeschooling research, the ideological and political leaning of some of the studies, the absence of a governing theory for homeschooling, and the need for more research. In all these meta-studies, though, some things stood clear. Aside from the findings that suggested benefits in favor of homeschooling academically, emotionally, and socially, homeschooled children were not harmed by homeschooling. They were even found to have better quality friendships with others, have good

relationships with their parents and other adults, as well as developed a good sense of responsibility as teens but of less emotional turmoil (Medlin, 2013). This was contrary to the fears of many US-based educators and theoreticians who may be aware of the suggestive benefits of homeschooling but did not endorse this (Ray, 2013). Among the most important motivations for homeschooling in the US included religious/moral instruction for kids, safety concerns from school environment, emphasis on family life, and dissatisfaction with academic instruction in some US schools (NCES, 2022).

In the Philippines, Article XIV Section 2 (1, 2 & 4) of the 1987 Constitution, recognized the rights of parents to make choices for the basic education of their children. This was further reinforced by DepEd Memo No. 216 s. 1997, which institutionalized home education programs in the Philippines for learner-specific needs. Much recently, homeschooling's legal grip was further cemented by DepEd Order No. 001 s. 2022, or the Revised Policy Guidelines on Homeschooling Program. In this policy, public and private schools were encouraged to open homeschool programs as needed alongside their existing traditional ones, supervised by a designated homeschool coordinator. Finally, even March 3 of every year, beginning 2017, was declared as National Homeschool Day by the Philippine Senate (Simpao, 2019), further solidifying the legitimacy of homeschooling. Despite all these, research on and about homeschooling remained scarce locally, except for bits and pieces of knowledge mostly around homeschooling issues like socialization, learning needs, weaknesses of the practice, as well as adjustment issues (see Yusi, 2008; Cequeña & Mendoza, 2022; Maaghop et al, 2021; Sevilla et al., 2015; Señora & Tongson, 2014; and Leon, 2014). A few studies also focused on the identification of independent learning as a strength of homeschooling (Leon, 2012), the naming of some push factors for this practice like more time for family and some financial reasons (Liwanag & Liwanag, 2020), and the identification of motivations and challenges like religious instruction and customized learning (Reyes, 2020). Though these studies are highly insightful, they are nonetheless framed differently and did not necessarily provide definitive answers as to what sustained the homeschooling movement all these years, which what the current study aims to address.

Method

In finding out the life-giving essence of homeschooling, this study made use of Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological design (Colaizzi, 1978, as cited in Morrow et al., 2015). As finding out 'the essence' of experiences necessitated the need to be in the phenomenon or being part of it (Van Manen, 1990), as well as accessing participants' world of meanings by interacting with their daily perceptions, cognitions, and language (Von Eckartsberg, 1998), the use of phenomenology was the best fit for this study. Furthermore, what gave life, what worked well, and what brought pride and gratitude in homeschooling were all lived experiences that participants were conscious about during data collection, which are all legitimate starting points for gaining knowledge about the practice (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in Regions 11 and 12 in southern Philippines where the participants were recruited and where the researcher himself is likewise based. A total of 23 participants took part in the study, which comprised 15 adults and 8 children from two curriculum-based homeschool providers and one homeschool network operating in the two regions. The curriculum-based homeschool providers are not part of the homeschool network, while the latter operates as a support network for homeschoolers from different providers, including families who chose a more independent path. As a disclosure, the researcher, aside from being a home-schooling parent, considers himself a "supporting" member of the latter group, since homeschooling activities are mostly initiated firsthand by mothers; while fathers, including the researcher, do the more "supporting" role. Consequently, this feature placed the researcher in the best position 'to be in' or 'being part of' the phenomenon under study (Van Manen, 1990) without metaphorically being swallowed by it.

The homeschooling families from the three groups mentioned earn their living mostly from the fields of education, design and construction, healthcare, religious ministry, information technology, business process outsourcing, and from operating small and medium enterprises. With this feature, most of them can safely be assumed to belong socio-economically within the middle class. Moreover, the participating families also mostly belong to various religious denominations under the broader Protestant-Evangelical tradition.

The participating parents, who later on nominated their children, were recruited on a voluntary basis, so long as they met the following criteria: (1) they were homeschooling at least one of their children by the time of the interviews, and (2) they were homeschooling for the past two years or more. Meanwhile, homeschooled children who were included were: (1) able to express themselves in English, Filipino or Cebuano; (2) were currently homeschooled; (3) were homeschooled for the past two years or more; and (4) were between 9-15 years old. Finally, for this study's interest, the researcher did not discriminate based on homeschool curriculum used, homeschool provider, and demographic characteristics.

Data Collection

Data collection was done through focused group discussions (FGD), key informant interviews (KII), and couple's interviews (CI). One FGD was done for homeschooling parents (8 participants) for about 50 minutes, and another one for homeschooled children (8 participants), which lasted for only about 13 minutes. The FGD with parents was done first followed by that of the children a few days later. Meanwhile, two CIs were done separately online (around 50 minutes in total) at about the same week when the FGDs were conducted. Moreover, three KIIs were also done online with homeschool alumni at various times and for a total of around 60 minutes. All three KIIs were conducted a week after the FGDs and the CIs. Data saturation was assumed when the third KII's significant statements no longer warranted the addition of new formulated meanings.

Semi-structured interview guides were used to elicit lived experiences from participants across the three data-gathering techniques: FGDs, CIs, and KIIs. The guide that was used for the children's FGD was a simplified version of that used for adults. Sample questions posed to adult participants included 'what are your best experiences with homeschooling' and 'what is it in homeschooling that you find most fulfilling or life-giving.' For the children, sample questions like 'what is it that you like the most about homeschooling' and 'what is it about homeschooling that you are grateful to God for' were asked.

Data Analysis

Given that the researcher was multi-lingual, the recorded sessions were transcribed and translated into English at the same time. After that, the researcher used Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, a seven-step approach to phenomenological data analysis which included (1) familiarizing the data, (2) identifying significant statements, (3) formulating meanings, (4) clustering themes, (5) developing an exhaustive description, (6) extracting the fundamental structure, and (7) member-checking (Colaizzi, 1978, as cited in Morrow et al., 2015). Closely following steps 1 and 2, the process yielded 146 significant statements. Those that have similar ideas were grouped together before the next step was done. Step 3 resulted in 86 formulated meanings, which were then grouped together into subthemes and themes, closely following step 4. Slightly deviating from the original process, step 5 was dropped so that no further interpretation of the themes and their clusters was done by the researcher in view of the clarity and understandability of the results of step 4. The final thematic map yielded 25 themes and 5 emergent themes. Finally, the results of steps 6 and 7 were described in detail in the findings section.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Of the eight principles of qualitative research trustworthiness recommended by Creswell (2013), at least three were implemented in this study. First, data triangulation was done, as data were taken from three sources: two focused

groups, three key informant interviews, and two couple's interviews. Though certain responses stood out from different data sources, the responses corroborated with one another overall. The second method used was bracketing as well as negative case analysis. While the researcher is a homeschooling parent himself, he was able to bracket his own thoughts and experiences throughout the analytic process so that emergent themes and meanings from the data were preserved as closely as possible. Consequently, nonconforming views and experiences from participants were also reported. Finally, member-checking was done along with the necessary corrections, which resulted from the study's iterative process.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the ethical soundness of the study, the researcher secured permission from the board of trustees of the homeschooling network considered for this study. Moreover, the researcher also made participating parents sign the study's informed consent form to make sure that they understood the nature of their involvement. For participants who are minors, each child's informed assent was explained before they were asked to sign. This was in addition to the informed consent that their parents already signed on their behalf, to ensure full understanding from both parent and child participants. Moreover, despite the minimal risk inherent in the study, the researcher also ensured the conduciveness of data collection sites especially for children. No photos of children were taken to protect their privacy and security. Meanwhile, each participant's statements were coded so that the speakers were not identified with their statements. Further, light refreshments were also provided for face-to-face participants. And finally, the researcher himself, as a trained counselor, prepared for the eventuality of triggering emotional distress in participants, which thankfully did not happen.

Findings

From the use of Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenology, it turned out that homeschooling is sustained or given life by five overarching elements or emergent themes. The five included: (1) a nurturing and empowering homeschooling community, (2) the prioritization of values formation and character development, (3) homeschooling is highly flexible, (4) quality family relationships, and (5) quality of learning. Each emergent theme, component themes, and their subthemes are discussed below in detail.

1. A nurturing and empowering homeschooling community

The first among the five emergent themes is the presence of a nurturing and empowering homeschooling community, that is (a) *a source of connection and support for its members.* In line with this thought, one participant commented:

> "There was this community in [reference to a homeschooling group], right? And it's nice to meet people who are also doing the same, homeschooling as well. It was nice to talk about our experiences in homeschooling and it's nice to be able to relate to people. Homeschooling is… not common so it's nice to hear people who can really relate" (A1-R11, 10-13, brackets mine)

Another participant added:

> "We see our friends… and their kids with similar ages…it's also a 'me-time'. What a blessing… Sometimes we complain about being with them a lot… but this is something we really enjoy… both the highs and lows… but when you look back at it in its entirety, it's enjoyable and a blessing that we can do this." (FGD-P-R11, 69-72)

Aside from connection and support, (b) *the community also helps equip parents to do homeschool*. One parent commented:

> "There was also the 6 Ps that we were taught by our provider… It is nice that our homeschool provider helped us how to homeschool effectively. We have a support group and that helped us achieve

our goals." (C1-R11, 93-95)

Moreover, (c) *the community also provided an avenue where the different skills, talents and interests of child members get showcased and expressed*. One parent said:

> "In our community we have conferences, which really involves the children. Last month there was a Mindanao conference where kids can present their talents, sell their products, etc. "(C1-R11, 99-100)

More still, (d) *the community also shared and cared for one another within the community*. Two participants emphasized this theme greatly with the following comments:

> "Bayanihan… There are really things you can't do on your own… so we are grateful that everyone helps…" (FGD-P-R11, 192-193)

> "In [referring to a homeschooling network] … I have seen families before… they are so giving… It's not really about money… when you acquire the culture, its paying back to others. We also had a stage where we were just on-lookers and listeners [in the homeschooling network], and what a blessing… everyone shares… and it was really done [with a sense of appreciation]." (FGD-P-R11, 187-190, brackets mine)

In addition, (e) *the community also provides accountability for children and their parents.* Two participants commented the following to highlight this theme:

> "The kids… they know they are accountable to all of us, so we know what is going on with and among themselves. So we as parents are aware and can simply adjust... if there is trouble among them." (FGD-P-R11, 200-202)

> "It's a good thing that we do not fight… we are understanding to one another." (FGD-P-R11, 208)

Further still, (f) *children are also safe in their homes and in the community*. One father commented:

> "…At the same time, we have the community, we trust every family… we feel safe around these families. In a regular school, you will be worried about where your child is if they have not been home for some time. But in homeschool, as long as you know which family did they spend time with, I am not worried even in late nights with families in the homeschooling community. You trust the family and we are confident that our child will be safe with them…" (FGD-P-R11, 296-300)

Finally, (g) *healthy socialization and friendships among children happen in the context of the homeschooling community*. Two child participants that cemented this theme commented the following:

> "Food [Joke]. And friends. I have 'boy' friends, 'girl' friends, a lot of them, I have a lot of friends and they're great. They are not perfect, the same with me, but its fun having a lot of friends." (FGD-K-R11, 36-37, brackets mine)

> "I like the most about homeschooling is spending time with my friends." (FGD-K-R11, 52).

2. The prioritization of values formation and character development

The second life-giving element in homeschooling is that parents prioritize values formation and character development for their children and themselves. This seems to be a strong force, as shown by the themes under it, which include the idea that (a) *parents intentionally teach children faith, good values, and good character*. The following comments from a homeschool alumnus and a parent, respectively, substantiated this theme:

> "The reason why our parents homeschooled us was because… to raise

> us with, you know, a good foundation, like good values and good beliefs. So, I guess I could say that I am proud that my parents were able to raise me right, give me correct and good foundation and good values." (A1-R11, 51-53)

> "On our part, the best experience is we get to instill good values to the kids… We understand that the foundation should be established at home. There is no one who will instill good values at home other than the parents. The good thing about homeschooling is that you yourself, firsthand, can teach good values to your children… And you know what is right or wrong for them – and that foundation, values… you know they can use it in the future." (FGD-P-R11, 29-33)

Moreover, (b) *parents are also intentional and committed to their tasks as teacher-parents.* This theme was further divided into three subthemes which were well substantiated by each succeeding comment from different participants:

> i. Parents prepare properly.

> "I also need to study. Teaching is not a habit for me, but I was challenged." (C1-R11, 10)

> ii. Parents are responsible.

> "We are the ones teaching. We ourselves are the major factor for our child's learning, and not others. We made the system and it's according to what we want. My husband is for the spiritual side, while I do the creative ones. I was able to follow the structure as I want it. It is fulfilling because I also get to have the sense of responsibility… I can also see how we as parents can adjust to our child. We became more intentional in educating him. " (C1-R11, 37-41)

> iii. Parents do sacrifice for their child's learning.

> "…it's that the family provides our needs. Even our moms, they sacrificed themselves to bring us here today [referring to a homeschool event]." (FGD-K-R11, 44, brackets mine).

More still, under the same emergent theme, (c) *parents also provided good modeling and positive influence on their children.* The following comments from a homeschool alumnus clearly accentuated this theme:

> "I think I am also grateful for the ways in which they [referring to parents] influenced me through homeschooling. It's true that every student gets influenced by their teachers, especially with your favorite teachers… and I think that's the case with my parents. And I have noticed too that some of my habits, especially the way that mama thinks… I was able to get. In some ways also with my papa. There were certain habits too that I can trace from him… but the majority was with mama. Maybe because she taught me most of the time." (A3-R11, 48-53, brackets mine).

Finally, homeschooling parents see homeschooling as (d) *a way of obeying God.* The following statements from a parent and an alumnus respectively, highlighted this theme very well:

> "On my part, I feel the fulfilment of obeying the Word of God." (C1-R11, 43)

> "…One of the big ones I mentioned was the hands-on influence by my parents. I think that's something that's rare… we know we have a biblical command to train up a child… and one of the most hands-on ways you can do that is through homeschool. If you want to be a really big positive influence to your children, homeschooling is one of the most formative and influential ways… you disciple your child…" (A3-R11, 111-115)

3. Homeschooling is highly flexible

Moving on, the third emergent theme that gave life to homeschooling was that it is highly flexible. This (a*) flexibility is at times felt as freeing*. The following statements from an alumnus and a parent substantiated this theme very well:

> "…I can't really narrow it down to one example. It's more like…I love how there was so much time…there is so much leisure that homeschooling provides. You are basically free. Free to do your lessons anytime you want. I love how it's pretty much flexible…" (A1-R11, 7-9)

> "The good thing is that I can bring my son wherever I go, so I was able to cope with the demands, partly because the schedule is not ridged. That helped us achieve our academic goals." (C1-R11, 84-86)

Moreover, the flexibility of homeschooling also allowed for (b) *more time to pursue hobbies, passions and other interests by learners*. The following statements from two alumni, in retrospect, vividly appreciated this theme very well:

> "If you want to balance out your schedule and have more time doing the things you love like your hobbies and passions, homeschooling would really be beneficial for you." (A1-R11, 64-66)

> "I think the best part is discovering my interests academically, at the same time my parents were willing to… they were happy for me to explore those interests. I think in my case it was a lot of reading in literature and learning languages… Part of that was also to explore my extra-curricular interests, so for me… music was a big part of my week." (A3-R11, 7-11).

More still under the same emergent theme was that (c) *learning happens anywhere, anytime*. The following statements from a parent and two children captured the theme very well:

> "We work as missionaries, so it fits us well. We can just bring their modules wherever we go… out of town… We can just bring them." (FGD-P-R11, 18-19)

> "The best part of homeschooling is you can answer your module anytime and anywhere." (FGD-K-R11, 17)

> "I can learn what I want when I need to." (FGD-K-R11, 39)

Further still, with flexibility comes being (d) *adaptable and creative in the delivery of lessons*. The following words from two parents and one alumnus respectively, said it all for this theme:

> "…if for example, I see his handwriting going back to grade 1, then I can simply go back… The child forgets sometimes so I can just go back. Even if I am following a structure and a system, I can simply go back. It is fun because I know how my son learns…so I can simply adjust to what suits him best. I can see that my child is enjoying, that's best for me." (C1-R11, 29-32)

> "Another one is you can custom lessons for your child. Because I can see it for example… this child may be left behind in this subject in a regular school… But at home, you can be patient, or you can go faster in other areas… just like that. That's enjoyable for me." (FGD-P-R11, 72-74)

> "But mama made the choice… to mix and match them… like my English is from here, and my Math is from another provider. She mixed and matched them coz she did her research." (A3-R11, 16-17)

Still, under the same emergent theme came the next theme which was that (e) *stress is managed adequately*. This theme was further divided into two subthemes which were supported by each succeeding statement from participants

themselves:

i. Workload is manageable.

"Sometimes I actually miss it, especially during hell weeks [referring to difficult weeks now in regular senior high school] … like when there is so much homework given… research and everything. There were times that I look back… I liked homeschool because of the freedom, and the lessons… like… The lessons in homeschool are not as heavy… It is just manageable." (A2-R-11, 43-46, brackets mine)

ii. Kids' emotions are regulated.

"Though we don't want to avoid disappointment for our kids, but they can still handle it… solve it and it's [referring to setbacks] not going to be a disaster." (FGD-P-R11, 251-252, brackets mine)

Finally, with homeschooling's flexibility, (f) financial resources can be rechanneled. The following statement from a parent captured this theme well.

"Then there is that… you can rechannel your resources. Like… its expensive now [referring to regular school]… if you pay everything. Whereas [in homeschooling] you can rechannel resources to lasting things like investments, time at home, travel… things like that." (FGD-P-R11, 74-77, brackets mine).

4. Quality family relationships

Moving on, the fourth emergent theme that came out from this study was quality family relationships, which was first expressed in terms of (a) *more valuable time with family*. This theme was highly emphasized by the following statements from a parent and an alumnus:

"Time. I tell them life is short, and if ever the Lord will take you away anytime, I can say that I have spent time with my kids. Like for me, the nature of work requires me to travel a lot. I have the tendency to be very busy and to lose time with them. In homeschooling, we can eat together, I can wait for them. We can have bonding." (C2-R12, 59-61)

"I think one of them is close contact with parents… it was really mama who stayed and teach us… and then how mama was hands-on, and papa as well… there were certain subjects that was handled by papa. I think both parents, but more so, its mama… and papa in some cases… How hands-on they were. I am grateful not just for the lessons but for the time spent with us, and for what they did." (A3-R11, 44-48)

Moreover, the second theme that emerged from the same emergent theme was (b) *witnessing the child's learning and development milestones*. This theme was divided into two subthemes which were well substantiated by their succeeding statements respectively, from homeschooling parents:

i. Witnessing the growth milestones

"I have come to appreciate and realized that I know how to teach my kid how to read. From vowels, he can now read fast and is able to learn spelling. So witnessing their milestone was one of the best experience." (C2-R12, 7-8)

"…from his first milestones as a child which is important to me as a mother to witness, rather than being witnessed by teachers. And I can see them in a day-to-day basis." (C1-R11, 28-29)

ii. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the child

"For me also, I can see what they are good at… that they know how to sing [in the choir]." (FGD-P-R11, 41, brackets mine)

More still, from the same emergent theme was that (c) *children are free to express themselves*. This theme was captured clearly by the following

statement from a mother:

> "I am thankful that we have given our son the avenue to freely express himself. We did not contain him in a rigid system. I was brought up in a traditional school and there are times that I apply it to my child, but I am thankful that I am able to adjust. We cannot put education in a box. You can go beyond that, and I am proud of it." (C1-R11, 54-57).

Still under the emergent theme 'quality family relationships', the theme (d) *homeschooling builds strong relationships with family* came next, which was well accentuated by comments like the following:

> "Second, is the relationship that we were able to build with our child… So, if you want to build your relationship as a family, then homeschool is for you." (C1-R11,129-130).

Finally, still within the same emergent theme, the idea that (e) *homeschooling help build the relationship between husband and wife* surprisingly came out. The following statements capture this theme very well:

> "It also helped build my relationship with my wife because we do the planning: what's my subject to teach, what's hers. She always follows me up because I am the one busy through the week." (C1-R11, 11-13)

> "In a family, it is the father who gives identity to the kids, while we moms nurture them, so in their growing up stage, we have already poured everything before they go to the real world." (FGD-P-R11, 293-294).

5. Quality of learning

Finally, the last emergent theme that came out from this stage of the study was the quality of learning. This was first expressed by the theme that says (a) *children learn truly and deeply in homeschooling*. This theme was further divided into three subthemes which were captured clearly by each succeeding statement that followed from participants themselves:

> i. Learners learn independently.
>
> "I am fulfilled to be able to see them becoming independent… resourceful… even if we have guidance, I can see that they can decide on their own. They have good decision-making… That's fulfilling for me… that they can decide on their own." (FGD-P-R11, 43-45)
>
> ii. Learners apply what they have learned.
>
> "There are three of them at home, and sometimes, they will have problems… but then you see… you don't have to intervene [all the time]… and you can see how they find solutions, how they work it out." (FGD-P-R11, 49-51, brackets mine)
>
> iii. learners love to learn.
>
> "…but what has stuck with me is the feeling of… a sense of loving to learn. Learning new things…also developing the skill of learning, because I think learning is also a skill that can be developed. Often if you have a very good teacher, it's helpful. But it's also different when you are able to learn independently… like you are given freedom to explore some topics… though there are standards… but I think developing the skill of learning, and receiving the love of learning, almost like a gift…" (A3-R11, 35-40)

Moreover, the next theme that came out from the same emergent theme was that (b) *daily homeschool goals are accomplished*. This theme was captured well by the following statement from a mother:

> "Every time that you have accomplished what you want to teach to the child, that's how my day becomes fulfilling… If they can finish what's for the day." (FGD-P-R11, 38-39).

Finally, for emergent theme five, the last theme that came out was that (c) *homeschooling highlights the uniqueness of the learner and the family*. The following statement succinctly captured this theme:

> "Homeschooling is just another mode of learning for children who belong to families with particular goals which fit the structure of homeschooling. We cannot fit education in just one toolbox. So, if your goal is for the learning of the child in its full capacity and you have not achieved this through traditional school, then maybe it's time to consider homeschool. That's my encouragement." (C1-R11, 135-142).

Descriptive phenomenological Structure

Putting it all together and closely following Colaizzi's steps 6 and 7, it seems clear that the structure of the life-giving essence of homeschooling appears to resemble that of a social movement, driven by individuals and families who have a strong desire to teach children good values and the love of learning, in the context of strong family relationships, thriving around the natural flexibility of homeschooling, and the support of a nurturing homeschooling community. Consequently, homeschooling is experienced as an intentional attempt and effort by parents to be directly involved in what and how their children learn in the here and now, as well as with what they would hopefully become in the future; hence the intense commitment and preparations to teach and model, usually from the stance of an organizing principle like faith, or a set of core beliefs. This also comes with deliberately making time for family relationships, all in the context of a nurturing homeschooling community, that in some ways also serve as a faith community.

Nonconforming themes

Even if the interview questions in this study were crafted to reflect as closely as possible the research questions, two themes emerge that did not fit as answers to the questions about the life-giving essence of homeschooling. One such theme is the expressed difficulty of doing homeschooling for parents. *Homeschooling can be heavy and wearisome for parents.* This theme was accentuated well by the following statements:

> "In reality… its really difficult… I mean, recently, I am in a position where I find it really difficult… because from a teacher-mom perspective, you do everything… from the chores… from a full-time mom set-up, you have all the chores covered for the week, plus you need to prepare for your student that is not so eager to learn and study independently, plus the dynamics you have with one another, like how you build his character… sibling wars… My two sons are best friends and best enemies. And if they fight, it pulls me down. So it's a mixture. As a teacher/ mom, you want to accomplish things at home plus your homeschooling, so it's really heavy…" (FGD-P-R11, 262-267)

> "They also ask if we are under DepEd… so we also tried to explain [a homeschool provider] with them. It's really about character. They also see it in us… how we homeschool our kids… We also tell them that there may be sacrifices. If you are really interested in homeschooling, you will have to sacrifices something." (FGD-P-R11, 275-278, brackets mine).

Moreover, a second nonconforming theme came out which centered on *homeschooling parents encountering problems with government* just because they chose to homeschool their children, The following statements from homeschooling parents captured this theme well:

> "There is one [homeschooling law] but it needs to be strengthened. Even DepEd personal are not aware of the existence of homeschooling… the law has to be [disseminated] to the lowest positions in DepEd… even DepEd teachers do not know about independent homeschooling… This should be included in the Education curriculum… same with how out-of-school-kids are given attention." (FGD-P-R11, 315-318, brackets mine)

> "Sometimes, we are perceived as people who attack the school system… but it's not. In fact, we are helping DepEd… it's an alternative kind of learning and instruction. I hope they will appreciate it that we are making things lighter for them. We did not even ask for government funds." (FGD-P-R11, 320-322)

> "They can simply make the public libraries better… and when you take PEPT, there should be no more interrogations for homeschoolers…" (FGD-P-R11, 326-327)

These themes accentuated the other side of homeschooling. Though participants were keen in providing appreciative answers about what is life-giving in the practice, the reality of its difficult side nonetheless came out as well. Hence, homeschooling is both highly appreciated and yet also seen as difficult and challenging.

Discussion

Where this study's findings became unique is quite apparent. While Liwanag and Liwanag (2020) highlighted the themes of more time for family bonding and financial advantages in their study, their findings were framed from the lens of homeschooling's advantages as an alternative mode to school-based education, and not necessarily from the lens of what is life-giving or fulfilling in homeschooling. The same can also be said about the mixed-methods study done by Reyes (2022) where contextualized learning and religious/moral instruction took center stage but still, were framed from the slightly different lens of psychological motivation. These two studies, though highly helpful in the overall understanding of the practice and experience of homeschooling, only saw positive aspects like more time for family and religious instruction as push factors for embracing homeschooling, and not necessarily as part of the essence that gave life and sustained the practice. In other words, one may embrace homeschooling because of the presence of motivating factors like more time with family, customized learning, and religious instruction, among others. However, these did not answer the question, 'what gives life' or 'what sustains homeschooling as a practice for many years now'; thus, affirming the unique findings and contribution of this study to the overall body of knowledge about homeschooling in the Philippines. Given that homeschooling is sustained by the five essential emergent themes identified in this study, parent-educators can now deliberately maximize on these five life-giving elements to insure the flourishing of their homeschooling practice.

Overall, even if homeschooling has its own set of challenges, as discussed earlier under the nonconforming themes, homeschooling was and is still life-giving, enjoyable, and fulfilling to those who embraced it. It gave homeschoolers something to be proud of and grateful for. The homeschooling experience was meaningful for those who chose to practice them, and that there were systems, processes, and practices that worked well for them and their communities. Essentially, the strong desire to teach children good values and love for learning in the context of quality family relationships, which thrive around flexibility and the support of a nurturing community, seemed to be the life-giving essence of homeschooling in southern Philippines.

Given that the life-giving essence of homeschooling has finally been phenomenologically described in this study, the next practical step to take is for the public and government educational stake holders to start to seriously consider the widespread adoption of homeschooling as an alternative to school-based education in the Philippines. After all, if it has been life-giving for some, it can be life-giving for many. Understandably, homeschooling is not for everyone. However, if, for example, by 2030, 1% of all school-aged children in the Philippines will be homeschooled, that can translate into lesser need for teachers and classrooms in the public school system, which could translate into more government savings. Moreover, as homeschooling is also a highly empowering and intentional process, the inherent modeling of such a proactive and value-laden stance among children who may take the lead in society in the near future, may go a long way. Nobody knows exactly how, for sure; but given what we know now it is about time for both the government and the public to take a step of faith for the Filipino schooling population and embrace homeschooling, not only as a viable

educational alternative, but as a meaningful and life-giving educational process as well.

On the more practical side, however, the government must take the lead of at least creating a committee or a separate bureau under the education department to look into the potential of mainstreaming the practice of homeschooling, and not just releasing guidelines about homeschooling, which, in essence, only delegated the hard work of implementing and monitoring homeschool to already existing established schools, much to their confusion. That move was still largely 'regular school only done at home.' It was simply a kind of accommodation, void of a deeper understanding and appreciation of the philosophy and pedagogy behind homeschooling. With this knowledge on what gives life to homeschooling, the government and other educational stakeholders might be compelled to do more inquiry and/or legislation, beginning with mandating and funding future research about homeschooling in the country.

As the study's findings are limited to the homeschoolers and their communities in southern Philippines, replicating this study in other regions or with other faith-based groups or homeschooling communities will be auspicious. Finally, inherent in this form of qualitative inquiry is the risk of arbitrary assignment of meanings, themes and clusters of themes. Thus, caution in the use and application of this study's emergent themes and their subthemes is highly recommended.

Conclusion

Going back to the questions posed at beginning of this paper, 'Does the state always know what is best for the basic education of its citizens? Does it always have the final say?' Given the findings of this study, the logical answer would be '*not necessarily.*' If the Philippine government, for instance, is to truly honor the natural rights of parents to decide for their children's basic education, then it needs to listen to and give weight to what ordinary homeschooling parents, children and their small communities know about the practice and process of learning as a whole. Every home knows something about learning and basic education, and not just the educational experts. We just have to take time to listen, and maybe amplify what works. Who knows, the solutions to our most persistent educational and social problems may be found in Filipino homes that have found the value of intentional education through homeschooling.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Henry E. Lemana II from the University of the Immaculate Conception, and Mary Ann C. Cacananta from the University of Southeastern Philippines, for the competent advice and guidance they provided for this study.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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