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Parents' Voices: Virtual Classroom Bridging Homeschooling to Public Schools

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Abstract: *This research examined to what extent homeschooling parents believed that virtual classrooms have bridged the home and public-schooling systems via a case study. Data were drawn from an online survey as well as Skype and personal interviews with ten participants who were parents of home-schooled children with an understanding of the virtual learning process. Participants reported both benefits and challenges of virtual homeschooling from parents' perspectives. Discussion and implications to educational practitioners are included.*

Keywords: virtual classroom, homeschooling, parents

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Problem

Parent-led education, or what is popularly known as homeschooling, was once a norm in a majority of the communities around the world. In the past, mothers taught their children through direct physical and non-

psychical cares such as food preparation and taking care of ill children, whereas fathers spent time with their young children in play activities (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999; Bryant & Zick, 1996; Fish, New, & VanCleave, 1992; Renk et al., 2003). In other words, mothers played a role to care for and raise the children, and fathers tended to teach about the life value, providing a connection

with the outside world (Fromm, 1956; Scott & Alwin, 1989), displaying the different roles of parents in their children's education (Agarwal & Vora, 2016). The system of education changed drastically in the late nineteenth century as government-compelled education was implemented in a majority of the countries globally. For instance, in the USA, children started attending institutional schools in the 1900s. Ray (2017) pointed out that during that period, there was approximately 72 percent of 5- to 17-year-olds enrolled in these public schools, which made home-based education become extinct, especially in a majority of the developed nations (Ray, 2017). In the later 20th (the 1970s) and 21st century, there seems to have been a resurgence of homeschooling, especially in the developed countries. For instance, from the 1970s to 2015, the number of students undertaking home-based education increased from 13,000 to approximately 2.2 million (Ray, 2017). It is today recognized as an alternative form of education to the traditional-based classrooms.

There are a variety of reasons that led or contributed to the resurgence of homeschooling in the late 1960s and 1970s. According to Isenberg (2007), the three main reasons as to why parents preferred their children to undertake a home-based system of education to the traditional classroom learning method in the 1990s were: religious reasons, poor learning environment in public schools, and intention to provide their children with a quality education at home. In the 1960s and 1970s, fundamentalists felt that public school curriculum had no religious basis, and therefore their children lacked the moral values that could be effectively taught if the public institutions taught about religion (Romanowski, 2006).

Today, there are additional factors that

parents take into consideration such as their physical and mental health, special needs, and behavioural problems (Austin, Sharma, Moore, & Newell, 2013). Parents choose homeschooling over sending their children to a public school due to several reasons (Cooper & Sureau, 2007; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Isenberg, 2007; Nihan ER, 2013; Ray, 2000). Some parents face a conflict between their beliefs and the public-school program (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007). The public-school environment may not be perceived as conducive to promoting learning; for example, peer pressure from classmates can cause study distractions that potentially lead to low academic performance and mental and behavioural issues (Ray, 2000; Nihan ER, 2013; Toppin & Toppin, 2016). Additionally, students who have different needs requiring special support and are unable to attend the school sessions physically, such as those with medical conditions or hospitalized, can also benefit from this alternative type of instruction (Fernandez, Ferdig, Thompson, Schottke, & Black, 2016). Unlike in public-school programs, homeschooling allows the parents to design and select their own curriculum and arrange a personalized, structured learning schedule to maximize the learning opportunities (Ray, 2000; Nihan ER, 2013). These characteristics of homeschooling can provide a safe learning environment for students with mental health issues who struggle from peer pressure or influences that may lead them to skip classes and fall behind in learning achievement (Hoffman, 2010; Khan 2012). Therefore, a large number of students with health and special needs opt to enroll in home-based education programs (Fernandez et al., 2016; Isenberg, 2007). The curriculum and learning personalization allow home-educators to precisely address the students' learning needs from home (Cooper

& Sureau, 2007; Isenberg, 2007; Nihan ER, 2013; Ray, 2000). Unsurprisingly, home-schooled students can even outperform public-school students in standardized tests (Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse, 2011).

However, most parents are facing a variety of challenges in homeschooling as they try to provide their children with the best form of education. One of the challenges that have been associated with homeschooling is the selection of the best curriculum and materials for study (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Most parents spend much of their time reading reviews and making comparisons of the most appropriate curriculum in relation to their children's needs. Parents feel that they are losing the teaching credibility as they are growing older and an outside educator may be more effective in assisting their children in learning. Other challenges are the lack of teaching resources that the student may require, structure and flexibility of this system of learning.

Virtual schools and classrooms present the parents, children, and teachers involved with a unique form of learning through the combination of real-time, live-stream, and teacher-directed learning process with web-based activities and assessments. It also incorporates some of the best traditional-classroom based resources, such as the use of the curriculum textbooks and laboratory activities, enhancing the learning process of the students who use this form of learning (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). In addition, when the students log in to the virtual classroom at the comfort of their homes, they have access to teachers, students, different communication platforms, and other learning tools, which allows them to be in a position whereby they can exchange information and solve problems

together as a team of learners.

Virtual classrooms can act as a bridge to public schools for home-school educated children as it has been seen to have the potential of replacing the homeschooling system of education. This type of virtual learning format can offer an educational option to home-school learners through the use of various technologies (Nihan ER, 2013). Virtual classes can be taken by home-schooled students to augment the curriculum (Fernandez et al., 2016). Attending virtual school can even substitute traditional homeschooling (Saiger, 2016). While a designated teacher is assigned to facilitate virtual classrooms, parents are involved in their children's learning by serving as a learning coach at home (Black, Ferdig, & DiPietro, 2008; Nihan ER, 2013; Shoaf, 2007). The learning coach's responsibilities include monitoring children's work progress and sending the work to the school's site; once the teacher has reviewed the work, the teacher will provide feedback to both learning coach and children (Waters, Barbour, & Menchaca, 2014; Nihan ER, 2013). Parents believe that virtual classrooms offer similar advantages found in the homeschooling option, such as the learning convenience and personalization, the opportunities for parents' to directly involve in the learning process, as well as the opportunities to teach children to learn independently (Waters et al., 2014; Nihan ER, 2013). Virtual schooling additionally allows the homeschooling parents to connect with the public education system for the benefit of their children (Saiger, 2016). While there are similar advantages between homeschooling and virtual schools, investigations regarding parents' perspectives and involvement in virtual schools still need further attention (Waters et al., 2014; Nihan ER, 2013). For example, Waters, Barbour, and Menchaca

(2014) have signified the importance of exploring the reasons why parents enroll their children in virtual schools; there may be external influences, such as the environmental and social factors. Because parents have a vital role in supporting their children's learning process in the virtual learning environment, topics related to familial issues and parental involvement deserve an in-depth exploration (Waters et al., 2014). In this study, we focused on the parents' perspectives and attitudes towards virtual classrooms to understand the extent virtual classrooms bridge the home- and public-school educational systems.

1.2. Review of Research

1.2.1. The virtual classroom learning experience

Over the years, there have been different definitions of virtual schools. One definition of the virtual school is a state-approved or regionally accredited school that offers courses through distance learning methods that include online delivery (Clark, 2000). Another definition of virtual schools is schooling that uses computers to provide online education to students (Russell, 2004). Virtual classrooms refer to accredited courses that are offered to students via the internet. The teaching and learning environment, in this case, takes place within a virtual or computer system, and the students and the teachers are connected via the internet (Aparicio, Bacao, & Oliveira, 2016).

Virtual classrooms are described as being different from conventional classrooms in a variety of ways. Firstly, they have allowed the education process to shift from its traditional format of one teacher and a group of students in one place at the same time for the learning process to take place (Fabri & Gerhard,

2018; Tucker, 2007). The reason for this is that in virtual classrooms, the students can be in different locations from their teachers and other students and still be able to be provided with instructions and information that enhances their learning. Students with health-specific needs (i.e., being hospitalized or not being able to travel to a physical school site) can take advantage of this program (Fernandez, 2016). Secondly, the teachers and students in virtual classrooms use a variety of information and communications technology (ICT) to facilitate their learning process, communication and improve the collaboration between teachers and students in ways that are not considered to be typical in a conventional classroom (Fabri & Gerhard, 2018). It promotes a sense of independence for the students, potentially making the learning process to be more exciting than in a conventional classroom (Nihan ER, 2013).

1.2.2. Independence and support in virtual classrooms

A majority of teachers and students view the virtual classroom environment as providing students with greater learning independence and self-motivation than is the case in the conventional classrooms. However, it is important to point out that for some students, they are able to manage their virtual classes better than others given the independence level that they are provided in this system or format of learning (Gulz & Haake, 2009). Virtual classrooms also provide the students and teachers with effective or sufficient support and resources that are essential for them to learn, and it is upon the student to take responsibility and make the best use of the resources that are available for them. Virtual classrooms are considered to be best suited to mature students who are capable

of working optimally in an independent environment (Fernandez et al., 2016; Roblyer & Marshall, 2002).

Teachers who regularly use this platform to provide instruction to their students felt that it allows them to take a more proactive role in terms of helping them support their virtual learners as they are able to apply different teaching approaches and strategies to support and engage their students. Teachers are also able to create unique learning environments that are effective in terms of improving the learning process of their different students (Hack, 2015). Teachers and students have the ability to develop a highly supportive relationship that has a positive impact on their learning because of their personal interactions through text chats and video-conferencing (Barbour, 2012; Munawar, 2011; Waters et al., 2014). They can effectively demonstrate that they care for their students and that they are interested in their learning outcomes (Hack, 2015). Furthermore, through the virtual classroom platforms, the teachers and students are in an improved position than in a conventional classroom to set achievable goals and use different measuring techniques to assess a student's progress. There are also different strategies that the teachers can use to make follow-ups on the students, especially when they feel that student performance is not progressing as it should.

1.2.3. Personalized learning in virtual classrooms

According to the Mental Health Foundation 2015 study, approximately 10 percent of school-going children aged 5-16 have a diagnosable mental health issue (Hack, 2015). Therefore, in an average class of 30 students, three will have a mental health

problem, and this may have a devastating impact on the academic prospects of these students such as missing classes, falling behind in their classwork, and therefore becoming highly disengaged in the learning process (Hack, 2015). Online learning platforms, such as virtual classrooms are seen as effective solutions in helping students with mental health issues to be able to learn despite their health challenges (Hack, 2015).

The virtual classrooms create a flexible and safe learning environment for the students (Waters et al., 2014). For a majority of students who suffer from mental health issues such as anxiety, a seemingly simple task such as traveling to school, interacting with school peers and attending lessons can be a trigger leading to the student to develop overwhelming feelings of panic and anxiety (Hoffman, 2010). Such incidents may result in these students missing classes, developing depression, and becoming highly disengaged in their learning process. The virtual classrooms create an ideal environment whereby students who suffer from mental health issues will be less impacted or encounter triggers that may lead them to miss their classes (Khan, 2012). Even in situations whereby students have bad days, they still have access to their classroom activities, and this enhances their learning process.

The virtual learning process facilitates personalized and differentiated learning. The reason for this is that through the use of virtual classrooms, the learners or students are provided with access to personalized content that will tailor the gaps in terms of their knowledge level (Waters et al., 2014). It is also highly suited for their skill level (Waters et al., 2014). Additionally, in a virtual learning environment, teachers are provided

with a rich source of data that they can use to monitor their students' performance level, progression, level of attendance and assess the areas that students may require additional help to ensure that they are on the right track in terms of their learning process (Noel, Stark, & Redford, 2013). Moreover, the teachers are able to reduce their workloads by developing effective lesson plans that free up their time, ensuring that they can provide more student-oriented lessons and specialized support to the students who require extra attention to promote learning in the different subjects.

1.2.4. Synchronism in virtual classrooms

Virtual classrooms provide a platform whereby the instructors and students are able to interact online in a synchronous manner, and they can communicate with each other through the use of texts, audio, and videos (Barbour, 2012; Waters, 2014). They are also able to express emotions through the use of emoticons. The synchronous virtual classrooms allow the instructors to be in a position whereby they can poll the students instantly while providing the students with the opportunity to engage each other in group activities, creating the feeling that they can interact with each other in-person (Barbour, 2012).

There are a variety of features that are available in a synchronous virtual classroom that play an essential role in promoting the interaction between teachers and students. There is a content frame that allows the instructor to upload power points and other documents that the students can use in learning. There is also an e-board that allows an instructor to write notes that the students can use, clarify information from other texts, and also provide students with instructions (Barbour, 2012). Other tools that are available

for both the teachers and the students include the text chat (to allow teachers and students to interact using words and emoticons), audio chat for the students and teachers to talk via a microphone (Barbour, 2012; Waters, 2014). Moreover, the synchronous virtual classroom allows the teachers to administer the student polls, allow for the two parties (teachers and students) to share their desktops through application sharing. Furthermore, teachers and students can use webcams to see and interact with each other. The most common virtual classrooms that are in the market are Elluminate, Horizon Wimba, Adobe Connect, Webex, as well as Blackboard Collaborate (Cavanaugh, 2008; Waters et al., 2014).

Synchronous interaction that has been enabled by virtual classroom increases student satisfaction in terms of learning. The synchronous tools are essential or play a key role in improving the social interaction aspect (Barbour, 2012). The major benefits of using a synchronous virtual classroom are its ability to provide both the students and teachers with immediate feedback on the different concepts that they are learning. It encourages the students to exchange ideas and perspectives on different issues that they are studying at a particular period. It also enhances the level of interaction among all the participants that are using this platform (i.e., the teachers and the students). In addition, it strengthens their social presence and creates a support network that students can rely on when they are facing learning challenges (Nihan ER, 2013).

1.2.5. Virtual learning challenges

Although there are ample advantages that are associated with the virtual classroom learning process, there are also a variety of disadvantages. For instance, even though the teachers and students are presented with a

variety of communication tools to enhance their interaction, it is difficult to feel connected and engaged with one another (Hawkin, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Morgan, 2015). Additionally, teachers may feel isolated, posing another barrier when they need to brainstorm teaching ideas with their colleagues (Hawkin et al., 2012). It is also challenging when teachers need to read non-verbal cues within the virtual platform (Morgan, 2015). In other words, the rich, dynamic, real-time instructional adjustments afforded by the face-to-face interaction may not be experienced equally by the teachers and students in the virtual learning environments.

Another challenge is that the tools of teaching in a virtual environment have been constrained or limited, especially when the learning platforms that are used may not always support multi-modality. In the traditional classroom, other than speaking as part of instruction delivery, a teacher can observe the responses from their learners through visual cues (Hawkin et al., 2012). The teacher can be more certain about students' understanding of content and level of participation through the in-person engagement, which they may not experience equally in the virtual learning environments (Hawkin et al., 2012; Morgan, 2015).

According to Morgan (2015) and Sorenson (2012), the parents of virtual students also experience challenges. As students are learning using the virtual platforms, parents play a vital role in guiding and monitoring their children's learning progress, as well as directing them to follow the learning schedules and meeting assignment deadlines (Sorenson, 2012). In addition, students may encounter technical issues, where the parents have to jump in and address the technological challenges (Morgan, 2015; Sorenson, 2012).

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study purports to capture parents' attitudes towards an alternative educational option through virtual classrooms. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What are the reasons behind parents' decision of homeschooling?
2. What criteria do parents consider when selecting homeschooling curriculum or program?
3. What are the benefits and expected outcomes of virtual classrooms over homeschooling as reported by parents?
4. What are the concerns of virtual classrooms over homeschooling as reported by parents?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research used a qualitative case study approach to capture the views of five home school family's perspectives towards using a virtual classroom to attend public school. Yin (2014) stated that a case study research design is suitable to provide an in-depth analysis of a focus group of home-school parents. An interview design was chosen in which the researchers asked questions from the interview guide to the focus group. The focus groups provided interactions between the individuals in the focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

2.2. Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select the research participants that were involved in this study. It is a non-probability sampling method where the researcher is interested in researching participants who fulfill

a certain criterion (i.e., parents who are currently homeschooling their children). The participants had to fulfill the following criteria: a) be a parent whose children are currently being home-schooled, and b) have an understanding of the virtual classroom learning process. The research used purposive sampling from a home school cooperative to find a sample. Once the initial participants were identified, snowball sampling based on referrals from initial subjects was then utilized to generate additional subjects.

All participants were parents with homeschooled children. The sample was evenly distributed across the study area, and the children grade level varied from one parent to the other. The participants' age ranged from 25 to 54 years old. Out of the ten participants, eight identified themselves as white Americans. The gender split was even. In terms of academic qualification, four participants obtained their master's degree, four participants received their bachelor's degree, one received a high school diploma or equivalent degree, and one did not receive any degree. In terms of income and current employment status, six participants' household income fell under "\$100, 000 and above" category, one fell under a "\$50, 000 to \$100, 000" category, while one fell under a "\$21, 000 to \$50, 000" category; six participants secured full-time employment, one had part-time employment, while the remaining three considered themselves home-maker. All ten participants were married.

2.3.Data Collection

To collect the demographic information of the study participants, an online survey using Qualtrics was used. The survey included 14 questions, including demographics related

questions, questions about eligibility and their homeschooling preference, as well as their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. All ten survey participants agreed to join the follow-up data collection.

For the interviews, the researchers organized dates with the respondents for the interview processes. Interviews were conducted either through in-person visits (N=7) or Skype (N=3). Data collection for the interviews was through the use of a recorder, which was later transcribed for data analysis. The average interview lasted thirty minutes using skype and the in-person interview lasted an average of forty minutes. The researchers also used the focus group method to collect data from research participants in a group format where discussions were encouraged to get a deeper understanding of the issues. The data collection was completed during the summer of 2019. The survey items and interview transcripts can be found in the Master's thesis of the first author (Norman, 2019).

2.4.Data Analysis

Data analysis is defined as the process that researchers use to bring about order, structure, and meaning to the information that they have managed to collect in research. Amongst items in the online survey, one question was specifically crafted to answer research question one regarding the reasons behind parents' decision of homeschooling, and one question was asked to answer research question two regarding the criteria parents consider when selecting homeschooling curriculum or program. Both survey questions contain pre-designed multiple answers for participants to choose from, resulting in a total count being more than ten. The survey instrument was

designed from scratch as no existing survey instruments were found in the extant literature. The pre-designed answers were inspired and adapted based on reasons of parents choosing home-based education found in the literature (Fernandez et al., 2016; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007). Research questions three and four were answered by qualitative interviews.

When conducting the interview, the researchers ensured the participant's trustworthiness using the following criteria, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba clearing up the aspects and issues to consider when conducting qualitative research methods to create a thorough study design. After completing the interviews. The researchers used four criteria to determine when to end the collecting and analyzing of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The coding and categorizing mechanisms serve to organize the material, privilege important information, and discard what is not relevant. This procedure helps to fully understand the meaning of the data and their possible relationships with each other. To encrypt, it was first necessary to develop categories where the data are grouped together and then to specify comparisons or linkages between the proposed categories. Coding involves assigning a word, phrase, number, or symbol to each coding category. Researchers went through all textual data (interview transcripts, direct notes, field observations, etc.) in a systematic way. The ideas, concepts, and themes were coded to fit the categories. A software program Atlas.ti was used to help researchers a means to seek associate pattern codes or (Paulus & Lester, 2016). All the information gathered in the investigation

is integrated with the coding. Although the Atlas.ti software performs well in organizing transcript data in preparation for analysis, it does not analyze the data.

3. Results

3.1. Reasons behind parents' choices to homeschool

Participants were asked to reflect on their reasons behind homeschooling in both the online survey and the interviews. According to the survey results, religious-related factors (23.53%) were the most influential reasons for homeschooling. Nevertheless, a significant number of the respondents (17.63%) argued that they believed they could order better education at home most likely because of the customizable curriculum to suit their children academic needs. The study revealed there were several criteria used by parents to assess the effectiveness of a homeschooling curriculum that would best suit and address their children's academic needs. Table 1 lists parents' primary reasons for homeschooling.

3.2. Criteria when selecting homeschool curriculum or program

The participants reported that they learned about the homeschool programs and curriculum from the internet, homeschooling curriculum fairs and word of mouth. When determining whether to choose a homeschooling curriculum or program, they considered a wide variety of criteria, including cost, the incorporation of biblical content, their children's interest, visual appeal, among others. Having biblical content is the most frequently considered criteria amongst the ten participants. Cost and literature-based are the next two frequently considered parameters for

Table 1 Primary Reason for Homeschooling

Reasons	Percentage	Count
Religious Reasons	23.53%	8
Can provide better education at home	17.63%	6
Struggling student	0.00%	0
Advanced student	2.94%	1
Desire for more time with children	11.76%	4
Problems in the school	11.76%	4
Socializing issues in public schools	17.65%	6
More affordable private school option	5.88%	2
My child's needs were not met in school	5.88%	2
Student Athlete	0.00%	0
Student Professional	0.00%	0
Living Overseas	0.00%	0
Military Family	2.94%	1
Missionary Family	0.00%	0
Seeking International Diploma	0.00%	0
Total	100%	34

Table 2 Main criteria used when evaluating homeschooling curriculum or program

Criteria	Percentage	Count
Cost	16.67%	6
Biblical content	25.00%	9
No Biblical content	0.00%	0
Interests my child	8.33%	3
Visually pleasing	5.56%	2
Hands on activities	11.11%	4
Literature-based	16.67%	6
Already developed methods of evaluation	8.33%	3
Minimal lesson planning	8.33%	3
Other	0.00%	0
Total	100%	36

parents. Table 2 shows the main criteria used when evaluating homeschooling curriculum or program.

For the parents who took their time comparing their choices, they were concerned whether the virtual schools did a fulfilling job problem solving, teaching basic skills and providing safety. The factors considered when choosing the homeschooling system were atmosphere, discipline, teaching approach, and style. They all tended to believe in the same guiding factor that education is all about excellent academic performance and good test scores.

3.3 Benefits of Virtual Classroom

The vast majority of participants (N=8) stated that they would enroll their children in online virtual classroom. Participants felt the primary reasons for choosing homeschool was that they can ensure a safe learning environment for their children. Some also do homeschooling for religious reasons. Other participants were simply disappointed with the traditional school system due to safety concerns.

3.3.1. Safety

Out of ten participants in this study, all reported safety being a benefit. Participants voiced the top features that the virtual classroom offers are a safe environment and a controlled educational process. As Participant C stated, "The big benefit I see is the safe learning environment the virtual classroom provides. My kids can learn in the safety of my home not be exposed to bullying and drugs that is a major issue in the public school system." Participant D further explained that

"drugs and violence is a major concern of mine with public schools. A virtual classroom would provide an engaging way for my child to study in the safety of our home." Similarly, participant E commented, "we feel that homeschooling provides us more control over our children's educations and provides a safer learning environment. With all the things we see in the news of shootings, bullying, drugs, political correctness, the virtual classroom could resolve those issues."

3.3.2. Control over curriculum

Out of ten in this study, seven reported having control over the curriculum that is taught to their children is a benefit of a virtual classroom. When asked what were the specific issues that participants would like to have control over, participants wanted to be able to monitor classroom work and view homework assignments in a virtual classroom. Participant D specifically stated that she would prefer the option to choose their child's curriculum. As she commented, "My big question is will I get to meet the teachers that are facilitating the virtual classroom and will I be able to choose the classes my child will attend." I would also like to review any curriculum prior to my child enrolling into a class. Participants liked the idea of being able to observe online learning and review the curriculum.

3.3.3. Cost savings

Out of ten in this study, five reported cost-saving being a benefit of the virtual classroom. As Participant J stated, "A virtual classroom would make schooling more affordable for parents who home school. Home schooling has many associated costs that increase as children grow older." Participant G also stated

that fees and books are not cheap but if the virtual classroom provided electronic books and materials that would cost saving.

3.3.4 Expected Learning Outcomes

Out of ten participants in this study, ten expected improved grades as a learning outcome of the virtual classroom. Participant D gave the reasons for the massive growth of homeschooling stated that they provided students with specific instructions to provide their specific needs, which improves learning outcomes. The most cited benefit of virtual schooling by the researchers was that their course design and delivery varied. The nature of virtual schooling programs would provide a framework for a variety of learning activities that the mortar and brick schools cannot match. Parents mentioned that the motive behind homeschooling their children were to avoid environments of bullying, sexual influences, and drugs.

Out of ten in this study, five participants wanted a positive learning experience for their children. Homeschooling provided parents with quality family time traveling time to and from regular schools. Participant C thought test scores were important but also wanted a positive learning experience for their child. Participant G could see how this could help students and teachers improve the learning experience in schools. Being able to tutor your children during online classes could improve the learning experience of children with special needs Participant F expected instant feedback to students thus creating a positive learning experience.

3.4. Concerns of a virtual classroom

While participants were aware of the

benefits of attending the virtual schools which they mentioned, they also had concerns. A few of the participants (N=3) were concerned with the amount of time required of their children to be in front of a computer with a virtual classroom and potentially losing the social interaction with others. Participant G stated, “my concern would be the lack of my child socializing with other children. Virtual classroom environment may work better for children who are introverts or have physical disabilities. But may be an issue for parents who want their kids to pursue sports.”

Some were concerned about navigating the technology platform and being on their own without teacher intervention during the process. As Participant E stated, “One concern I do have is that homeschooling provides a teacher that provides instruction, I feel that some kids may have a hard time adapting to a virtual environment with no teacher at the front of the classroom. The virtual classroom may not be for all students.” While some students would be comfortable using the technology, some would be left out; those that would need additional support to get started. All participants overall felt the positive features of a virtual classroom outweighed the challenges of attending school online.

4. Discussions

4.1. Synthesis of Findings

Despite the advantages of homeschooling, parents are facing a variety of challenges as they try to provide their children with the best form of education (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Reading reviews and making comparisons of the most appropriate curriculum tailoring to

their childrens' needs is not an easy task. This study was aimed to explore parents' attitudes towards an alternative home-based educational option through virtual classrooms. The findings of this study emphasize the primary reasons why parents choose homeschooling, criteria to select homeschooling curriculum, and perceptions of virtual classrooms to bridge homeschooling and public-school programs.

Some of the primary reasons for choosing homeschooling expressed by the parents in our study are religious reasons, socializing issues and other problems in public schools, better learning opportunities from learning at home, and a desire to spend more time with the children. These findings are in line with existing literature, confirming that homeschooling parents' belief in providing a better education at home and addressing concerns of a less-ideal learning environment at schools that may adversely influence their children's behavior and learning achievement (Cooper & Sureau, 2007; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Isenberg, 2007; Munawar, 2011; Nihan ER, 2013; Ray 2000).

As far as the top criteria for considering and evaluating homeschooling program, suitable content that fit the families' belief (e.g., the incorporation of biblical content) is parents' first priority, followed by cost effectiveness, literature-based content, and hands-on activities entailing problem-solving. These findings also confirm the existing literature. For example, parents with financial issues may have decided to choose homeschooling (Munawar, 2011). Parents also tend to be concerned about the type of learning tasks, as they should be purposefully designed to provide students with the suitable level of challenge that scaffolds their problem-

solving skills (Nihan ER, 2013).

As previously discussed in the literature review, virtual classrooms allow students from different locations to access a teacher or tutor in another area without necessarily having to travel at all. Besides, both teachers and students in virtual classrooms use a variety of digital tools to facilitate their learning process, communication and improve the collaboration between teachers and students in ways that are not considered typical in a conventional classroom (Fabri & Gerhard, 2018). Parents in our study believe that home-based education through virtual classrooms also provides a safe learning environment for students, resonating with Waters et al. (2014). This additionally displays an agreement with Hoffman (2010) and Khan (2012); students attending virtual classrooms may not have to face peer pressures and influences that may negatively affect their mental health and learning achievement. Additionally, virtual instruction promotes independence for the students, and this has the potential of making the learning process to be more exciting than in a conventional classroom (Nihan ER, 2013). These findings display the similarity of the virtual classrooms' and homeschooling's advantages; homeschooling is perceived beneficial, especially in addressing the student's academic needs (Romanowski, 2006; Ray, 2017), as it is flexible and can be tailored accordingly (Waters et al., 2014). This notion indicates a potential of virtual classrooms serving as the bridge between homeschooling educators and students, and the public-school systems. Furthermore, parents in our study would opt in virtual classrooms to improve learning outcomes by preventing social issues such as bullying, peer pressure and influences,

which resonates with Toppin and Toppin (2016).

However, our findings also suggest that parents worry as more advanced technology is utilized and the students would spend more time on the screen. The home-schooled students may have difficulties in socializing and their communication, and social skills are usually limited due to lack of exposure to different or rather a broader spectrum of varying cultures, individuals, and behaviors. From the existing research findings, a majority of the parents preferred to enroll the children to a virtual learning system from grade five to six (33.3 %) and 9-12 (55.56 %), respectively. There were higher chances for parents to enroll older children to an online virtual classroom system as compared to the younger ones. This is because older children or students are less likely to be supervised as compared to the young ones. Also, older students were found to be more mature and responsible individuals who were capable of working optimally in an independent environment (Gutierrez, 2011). Similarly, children with cognitive development are highly dependent on exposure. When home-schooled children are not exposed to other life variables, it often becomes difficult for them to develop other aspects of learning such as collaboration, teamwork, and discussions. Thus, there is a great need for home-schooled children, especially those in the lower grades to interact with other students. This resonates with Waters et al. (2016) that, beyond the student characteristics, the social factors of virtual schools should be recognized as well.

4.2.Implications to Educational Practitioners

Based on the research findings, data

showed that ten out of ten participants provided positive feedback and were more likely to recommend a virtual learning classroom for their children to attend public school. These results are an indication that the education system is continuously evolving and thus researchers, as well as academic practitioners, need to further their knowledge in operation, management, and integration of the virtual learning systems to both the traditional school setting system and home-based system.

Consequently, further research needs to be carried out to help as well as facilitate the academic performance and ease of operation to the newly enrolled students. Parents and education providers have a huge role to play in the training and successful implementation of the integrated virtual learning methods for their children. There is a considerable room for improvements in student performances in fully online schools. Developments of learning models have always coincided with developments in technology. Learners develop their reality and interpret their experiences and points of view based on their prior experiences and individual knowledge. Studies have shown that some additional areas could provide a better understanding of student performance in online schools and enhance accountability in strengthening practices in these schools (Toppin & Toppin, 2016; Waters et al., 2014). Common characteristics of students who attend and enroll in online schools need to be assessed and the factors that drive the high turnover rates, and those which contribute to school dropouts investigated.

In order to keep up with changes that we are experiencing in the school system, there have to be changes in how often the National Education Technology Plan is updated.

Educational practitioners are encouraged by the fact that most classrooms have access to virtual reality, yet in communities where the impact could be greatest, there is a lack in the use of these technologies. Everyone seems to be proud of the growing number of learners who are able to use digital tools in school, yet fail to realize that some low-income students and those living in rural areas lack access to the internet and the use of powerful digital tools to create, communicate and solve various problems. Most teachers are in need of receiving immense training on the use of technology than the one they are receiving currently (Barbour, 2012). It is evident from the participants feedback that the virtual classroom is to be the tool of learning over the alternative homeschooling system. Educators need to embrace the responsibility of reflective and thoughtful innovators, who will work hand in hand with each other to explore new methods of learning and new digital learning environments (Choi, Dailey-Hebert & Estes, 2016).

When fully and carefully designed in schools, technology can expand and accelerate the impacts of effective practices in teaching. This will require educators to be transformative and possess high skills and knowledge to create technology-rich learning environments but keeping the technology affordable for parents. The roles of parents, classroom teachers, and learners will need to shift as virtual schooling ensures new learning experiences and formats. For these changes in learning to occur, educators will create a shared vision and develop a plan on how they can translate the visions into actions. When evidence of learning processes is communicated to families, parents may become more informed and understand

about the the expectations of participating in virtual schooling (Morgan, 2015; Nihan ER, 2013). A comprehensive learning scheme will require extensive digital learning content and implementation of other resources as well as professional development for educational leaders and educators. Many schools are not yet using or having access to the ways in which technology can improve learning on a daily basis, underscoring a need for further research to build and adopt effective ways and approaches.

In the event of students using technology to support their learning, schools have been faced with a need for protection of privacy of students while at the same time, allowing them to use data appropriately for the sake of personalized learning, advanced research and create a well-designed vision for learners and families and their teachers (Choi, Dailey-Hebert & Estes, 2016). To remain competitive in a global economy, learners of all ages will have to be given opportunities for prosperity and personal growth.

4.3. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study sample was relatively too small to reach a generalized conclusion that is representative of the school district used for the study. Besides, the phenomenon being investigated was relatively new to the sample population. Although purposive sample is appropriate for this study, including a wider scope of the sample or considering a different population that has a more diverse socioeconomic background will be highly recommended for further research.

Secondly, the interpretation of the data and the studied phenomenon was highly

influenced by the researchers' interpretative perspective including cultural biases, level of education and beliefs. That is, although the researchers ensured that all research guidelines followed and remained impartial in the data collection, personal biases in sample selection and interpretation of the data is likely to be an essential limitation of the study. Cultural beliefs, religion, education level, and social exposure all have an influence on how the researchers interpret of the collected data.

The data collection that was used in this study was through the interview process, and although it was found to be effective in terms of deriving both detailed and comprehensive information from the selected research participants. However, having multiple data collection techniques could offer much more detail and diverse information to the researchers. This way, the researchers could have varying perceptions and arguments of the same phenomenon. The study was also limited to time. A more extensive time would also have provided a wider range of data for analysis and thus a much stronger conclusion.

We recommends further investigation of different aspects within the social and academic environment that influence the choice and mode of learning system for specific needs such as gifted children, children with social and medical special needs. Although it has been determined that the integration of a virtual learning system to that of the home-based curriculum is highly effective for students with different learning abilities, the research has not in detail discussed the implications or limitations to this integration. Additionally, with the ever-evolving technological advancements, the

research recommends carrying out further research on the best practices, technical devices, as well as information channels that could be used by parents as sources of curriculum evaluation, comparison, and possibly be used as criteria for making informed decisions on the most appropriate virtual learning system for their children. Lastly, the researchers recommend further studies of the cost-effectiveness and academic performance for students who have integrated virtual learning with home-based learning systems.

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