

CHAPTER FOUR

SELF-DIRECTED EDUCATION (SDE) NATIONAL SURVEY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BONNIE BENJAMIN-PHARISS

Introduction

Mosaic creates an ecosystem of learning and growth that is designed to meet the individual needs of each learner. It is a network of resources, opportunities, and experiences that are tailored to fit the unique learning style and interests of each person. The goal of Mosaic is to foster an environment of exploration and discovery that encourages learners to reach their full potential. Mosaic creates an ecosystem of learning and growth that is designed to meet the individual needs of each learner. It is a network of resources, opportunities, and experiences that are tailored to fit the unique learning style and interests of each person. The goal of Mosaic is to foster an environment of exploration and discovery that encourages learners to reach their full potential.

This chapter describes a national research endeavor to assess what US families want in their children's learning environment. Mosaic, an organization comprised of a network of motivated learners, families & communities wanted to know what families desired from their child's education experiences, whether they would be interested in self-direct education (SDE) and what they would need to know in order to consider SDE. Mosaic commissioned Hemispheres Insights, an applied research firm based in Seattle, and the results were analyzed by a prestigious interdisciplinary research team, William Vesneski, PhD, School of Social Work University of Washington and Alan Breen, MSc in Psychology, The University of Derby.. The following is a summation of this research undertaking that was published in the International Journal of Progressive Education (October, 2022). The chapter addendum provides the Survey Methodology

State of Education in the US

The world around us is changing. Mainstream education, however, has failed to keep pace with the realities and demands of twenty-first century life. In addition to this, the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have had a lasting impact on education and on families with children in the traditional school system. Not only were parents suddenly given an unprecedented front row seat to their child's education—to what and how they learn— but the pandemic also made painfully clear the pervasive inequity in our traditional education system.

Though in-person school is back in session throughout the country, enrollment in public schools is plunging. America's public schools have lost more than one million students since 2020 and some cities are considering laying off teachers or shutting down schools entirely.

We are clearly at a tipping point

Groundbreaking Research: An Alternative Approach to Education

There is vast research about education practices in general, there is a significant gap in knowledge when it comes to an assessment of what US families want in their children's learning environment in a post-quarantine world. *Mosaic: We Are Born to Learn* sought to fill this knowledge gap. It commissioned Hemispheres Insights, a research company based in Seattle, to field a survey of families and then worked with a Seattle-based academic to interpret the survey's findings.

Hemispheres conducted a national survey in the Summer of 2021 – during the COVID-19 pandemic and following vaccine rollouts – to rigorously and comprehensively ask families about their goals for their children's education. A key purpose of this research was to explore families' attitudes and beliefs around their children's current educational experience and to investigate whether families were looking for alternative learning experiences for their children.

To our knowledge, this is the first large national survey to thoughtfully examine parents' and caregivers' views toward self-directed education (SDE). SDE is an alternative approach to education where young people direct their own learning, at their own pace, without the rigid structures of our traditional education system. Instead of following a specific curriculum, young people are given supportive settings that foster their natural curiosity and interests.

Key Findings

This nationally representative survey of US families with children makes several things clear:

1. Families want a holistic educational experience for their children that goes beyond rote learning, and instead allows them to acquire a broad range of life skills.
2. Many families are interested in educational alternatives where children lead decisions about what, when, and how they learn– a learning pathway where they follow their unique interests.
3. Parent's lowest priorities for their children's education are:
 - Meeting or exceeding grade level academic standards (17%)
 - Performing well on standardized tests (12%)

Overall, families want an educational experience that fosters their child's unique personhood by attending to social and life skills and enabling them to follow their passions.

Educational Goals

Our survey asked respondents about their key goals for their children's education. Specifically, the survey asked, "Which education goals are most important for your children to meet?"

Parents' top responses are:

- Having the social skills to successfully participate in society (30% of all respondents)
- Being able to financially support themselves (29%)
- Finding a job doing something they loved (27%)
- Attending further education (25%)
- Graduating high school (24%)
- Getting a good job (24%)

Importantly, parents placed as much importance on daily life skills as they did on getting a good job. This suggests that, although parents are still invested in traditional goals such as professional success and educational attainment, they are similarly interested in social and daily life skills.

Our analysis also disaggregated the data by race. One of the strongest findings to emerge from this specific analysis was that most families are unified in what they do not see as a priority goal: achievement on standardized tests. Most families also place a low priority on grade level achievement. This is a relatively clear finding.

On the other hand, families vary in their top goals for their children's education. Specifically:

- African American families' top goal is for their children is to "graduate from high school"
- White and East Asian families' top goal is for their children to "have social skills to participate in society"
- Latinx families' top goal is for their children to "attend college/technical school"
- Multiracial families' top goal is for their children to be "employed in doing something they love"

Table 1 provides more details about this aspect of the survey.

Table 1: Ratings for Educational Goals						
Educational Goal	Total n=1009	White n=800	African American n=90	Latinx n=87	East Asian n=34	Multi/ Biral n=102
Have social skills to participate in society	30%	31%	28%	20%	32%	28%
Financially Support Themselves	29%	29%	20%	34%	29%	29%
Employed Doing Something They love	27%	28%	19%	23%	24%	37%
Attend College/Technical School	25%	24%	27%	37%	26%	29%
Graduate From A High School	24%	24%	39%	20%	15%	25%
Get A Good Job	24%	23%	32%	31%	26%	23%
Have Daily-life Skills	24%	26%	17%	18%	21%	24%
Be A Lifelong Learner	22%	23%	13%	23%	15%	20%
Study Topics of Interest	19%	19%	22%	21%	15%	21%
Have Emotional Skills	19%	19%	14%	17%	15%	20%
Meet or Exceed Grade Level on Academic Standards	17%	18%	16%	10%	24%	17%
Meet/Exceed Grade Level On standardized Tests	12%	12%	18%	10%	18%	10%
Other	<1%	<1%	-	-	-	-

Parents' Interest in Self-Directed Education

Another striking finding is that most families are interested in self-directed education. Overall, 74% of the sample indicated they were interested in SDE, while 19% indicated they were unsure about it and only 7% of the sample selected the option of being uninterested in SDE. As table 2 indicates, initial interest in SDE is strong, with a large majority of respondents signaling interest.

Table 2: Interest in SDE Among All Respondents	
Interest in SDE	Total (n=1009)
Interested	74%
Not Sure	19%
Not Interested	7%

After being given more detailed information about how SDE works, family interest remains solid with most respondents indicating they are likely to consider pursuing it. However, there is some variation among families by race, as shown by Table 3. Importantly, while they may be interested in SDE, African American families are also the least likely to consider pursuing it according to our research.

Table 3: Likelihood of Considering SDE Among All Respondents						
Likelihood of Considering SDE	Total (n=1009)	White (n=800)	African American (n=90)	Latinx (n=87)	East Asian (n=34)	Multi/Biracial (n=102)
Likely To Consider	45%	48%	30%	39%	35%	45%
Unlikely To Consider	29%	27%	34%	33%	44%	30%
Need More Information	14%	14%	11%	11%	24%	12%

Barriers to Uptake of SDE

The survey also asked parents about concerns they had about SDE. The data indicate why some families may be hesitant to pursue it - despite clearly being interested in it.. In particular, our research shows that parents need more information about SDE before more firmly pursuing this educational approach.

Indeed, over half the sample identified the need for more information as a concern. Table 4 presents these results.

Other important concerns included:

- The need for checks and balances to ensure good outcomes (31%)
- Misgivings about whether SDE would prepare their children for the future (27%)
- Worries that children would miss out on important childhood experiences (26%)

Table 4: Parents' Concerns about SDE

Parents' Concerns about SDE	Total (n=1009)
I Need More Information	51%
Checks And Balances Are Needed To Ensure A Good Outcome	31%
This Alternative Won't Prepare My Children For Their Future	27%
My Children Will Miss Out On Important Childhood Experiences	26%
Children Are Not Equipped To Determine What They Need To Learn	25%
This Alternative Doesn't Seem Like A Good Fit For My Children	23%
There Is Not Enough Social Interaction For My Children	19%
I'm Uncomfortable With Other Adults Educating My Children	14%
Other	3%

Benefits of Self-Directed Education

Parents perceived a range of benefits of SDE. The top cited benefits of SDE were:

- Children could learn academics while pursuing their interests (36%)
- SDE offers an opportunity to learn social, emotional, and life skills (36%)

- Children learning in an SDE environment could engage and take the lead in their own education (34%)

The data are presented in full in table 5 below.

Table 5. Benefits of SDE	
Benefit	Total (n=1009)
Children Learn Academics While Pursuing Their Interests	36%
Children Have The Opportunity To Learn Social/Emotional/Life Skill	36%
Children Are Engaged And Take The Lead In Their Own Education	34%
Support For Children's Individual Needs	34%
Program Flexibility	33%
Expose Children To Alternative Perspectives/Expectations	31%
Flexibility To Engage With Other Students And/Or Adults	28%
Support For Children From Knowledgeable, Caring Adults	24%
Connection With Like-Minded Families	23%
Support From Families On A Similar Path	21%
Get Away From Mistreatment	19%
Support For My Family's Cultural Values	19%
Support For My Family's Racial Identity	14%
Other	<1%
None/Don't Know	3%

Conclusion

This landmark research has uncovered many key details about what parents want from their children's education. Firstly, it sheds light on the kind of learning experience families are looking for. Families have made it clear that they want their children to gain important social and daily life skills, access further education opportunities, and ultimately, find financial security doing

something they love. Families want their children to emerge from their education as well-rounded individuals capable of participating and succeeding in a changing world. Additionally, grades and standardized tests—a tremendous focus of our current traditional education system—were among the lowest ranked priorities for parents and caregivers.

Secondly, our research shows that the vast majority of families are interested in educational alternatives for their children. They see self-directed education as a viable alternative that will allow their children to focus on their unique interests, acquire the social, emotional and life skills they value, and take the lead in their own learning all while receiving support for their individual needs.

While families need more information about this educational approach before committing to it, they clearly are interested in ways to broaden and enrich their children's education. Our research also demonstrates that parents need assurances about educational outcomes associated with SDE and want to be confident that it can prepare their children for the future.

Reference

Vesneski, W., Breen, A., Hansen, U., Reisman, F. & Anselm, H. (2022). American Families' Attitudes to Unschooling: A National Survey. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 18(5), 193-208. doi: 10.29329/ijpe.2022.467.12

Mosaic: We Are Born to Learn (www.weareborntolearn.org): An ecosystem of learning and growth designed to meet the individual needs of each learner. It is a network of resources, opportunities, and experiences that are tailored to fit the unique learning style and interests of each person. The goal of Mosaic is to foster an environment of exploration and discovery that encourages learning to reach their full potential.

Addendum

Survey Methodology

Overview

The market research company aimed for a sample size of 1000, which gave a margin of error of 3%. Respondents were recruited from a global, online market research company called Dynata. Dynata is the world's largest first-party data customer insights platform, with access to data from more than 67 million consumers and business professionals. Consumers sign up to Dynata and voluntarily complete surveys for a small reward. Participants provide a range of demographic information as well as some information about their interests and lifestyle.

Dynata was asked to create a research sample of 1000 people that was nationally representative of US families with children by age and gender. Dynata invited consumers who met the criteria provided to complete the survey. The market research company also sought to over-sample certain groups. Details of this over-sampling can be found below.

Elimination of Potential Respondents

A total of 4154 participants visited the survey link, 820 of whom only partially completed the survey and were eliminated. Potential respondents were also eliminated from the sample, as follows:

- 396 participants were eliminated for submitting low quality data. This may mean, for example, that they completed the survey too quickly, didn't correctly follow instructions or didn't answer the question asked in a meaningful way.
- Participants were also eliminated for not meeting the inclusion criteria. This included 132 respondents who were under the age of eighteen, 1406 respondents who had no children at home, 168 who had children outside of the age range 4-18 years old, 31 who had little to no input into their child(ren)'s education.
- 113 respondents were eliminated because the researchers had already reached their quota.
- A total of 75 respondents were eliminated because they demonstrated insufficient interest in a richer educational experience for their children. To be considered insufficiently interested in a richer educational experience for their children, respondents had to select specific responses to two questions:
 - 1) When asked "*Excluding money, transportation, and scheduling concerns, how interested are you in having your child in an education alternative where your child leads the decisions to determine what, when, or how they learn; a learning pathway where they follow their unique interests?*" they needed to respond with either "*probably not interested*" or "*definitely not interested*"
 - And*
 - 2) When asked "*What are the reasons you might consider pursuing an education alternative for your children?*" they had to choose: "*I would not consider an education alternative for my children*"

This left a sample of 1013 respondents.

Once data was collected, and data quality reviewed, 4 participants were removed for submitting low quality responses. This left a final sample of 1009 respondents. Respondents were based all over the US and were from a range of socio-economic and racial backgrounds.

Oversampling Details

The survey aimed to over-sample families who were previously under-represented in non-traditional education settings. To do this, the researchers created the category “under-resourced.” To be designated as “under-resourced,” respondents had to meet two of the following three criteria: (1) have a household income under \$50,000; (2) have a high school diploma or less education; and, (3) have at least one household member who is not white. Altogether, 200 “under-resourced” respondents were included in the survey sample.