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A Qualitative Exploration of Parents' Experiences of Homeschooling in the United Arab Emirates: Motivations and Challenges

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Abstract. Homeschooling in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is an understudied phenomenon despite the growing numbers of homeschoolers. Controversies about homeschooling and its impact on children's well-being create a social stigma around families that choose to homeschool their children for various reasons. This study explored the experiences of homeschoolers in the UAE, specifically, the motivations for homeschooling and the challenges homeschooling families face during the experience. The study followed a qualitative exploratory approach using a semi-structured interview. The sample consisted of 16 parents of different nationalities living in the UAE. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. The findings revealed that parents in the UAE homeschool their children for various reasons including their desire to provide a child-centered education. The findings also showed that the main concern homeschoolers have is the absence of a legal framework for homeschooling in the UAE. The study suggested creating an open dialogue where homeschoolers in the UAE can share their experiences with policymakers for a better understanding and a possible amendment to the current educational laws and policies that don't officially recognize homeschooling. Although this study fills the gap in the literature concerning homeschooling in the UAE, more research is needed to understand the phenomenon and provide practical recommendations.

Keywords: Homeschooling; alternative schooling; alternative education; educational policy; parents' experiences

1. Introduction

Globally, homeschooling has steadily grown over the past 20 years (Banks, 2023). This trend has also been seen in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when interest in homeschooling among parents increased dramatically (Abdulla, 2025; Nandkeolyar, 2021). However,

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homeschooling remains one of the more controversial topics in education because it challenges governments' mainstream compulsory schooling (Myers, 2023). Advocates of homeschooling argue that this approach allows for a more customized education that caters to the specific needs of their children, unlike traditional schooling. Opponents, on the other hand, argue that there are many worrying issues associated with it, such as lack of quality control (West, 2009), lack of socialization (Medlin, 2013), and concerns over child safety (Dwyer, 2022).

Homeschooling has also been criticized because many parents choose to educate their children based on certain religious and ideological foundations which contradict the secular nature of public schooling (Moreira, 2022). Currently, there is no global consensus on whether homeschooling is even legal. For example, the practice is legal and widespread in some countries, such as the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia; rare in some countries, such as Turkey, Italy, and Chile; and banned in other countries, such as China, Germany, and Brazil (Green-Hennessy & Mariotti, 2023).

Homeschooling in the UAE is an understudied phenomenon. A literature search on the topic yields only three studies published between 2022 and 2024. This is probably because homeschooling is a relatively new practice in the UAE and is also not officially recognized by the UAE's government (Farhat, 2024). In recent years, however, the number of homeschoolers in the UAE has seen a steady growth, especially among expatriate communities (Farhat, 2024). Yet despite this growth, only limited knowledge exists about the different facets of this phenomenon. For example, what factors affect parents' decision to homeschool, the homeschooling approaches they follow, and the challenges they face throughout the process are yet to be investigated.

Understanding homeschoolers' experiences in the UAE is important for several reasons. First, it lays the foundation for a contextual understanding of why and how homeschooling happens. This is particularly important in a culturally diverse country like the UAE, where expatriates make up about 88% of the total population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2025). The experiences of Emirati families could be different from those of other nationalities which makes exploring both perspectives paramount. This study focuses on parents' experiences as they are considered the main decision-makers when it comes to children's education. Second, it highlights the importance of providing equal and inclusive educational opportunities for all children.

Several studies have shown that one of the main reasons for homeschooling is providing customized education for children, particularly those who are disabled, gifted, or have certain medical or emotional needs (Chinazzi, 2021; Green-Hennessy & Mariotti, 2023; Hartman & Huttunen, 2020; Purwaningsih & Fauziah, 2020; Tan, 2019; Thomas, 2016). Third, it provides knowledge for educational regulators and policymakers in the UAE for future action. Understanding the different aspects of homeschooling in the UAE could inform future policy and ensure quality education is provided for all children involved. Equally important is providing support for families that opt for homeschooling for different reasons.

As such, the study's research questions are:

1. What are parents' motivations to homeschool their children in the UAE?
2. What are the main challenges faced by homeschooling parents in the UAE?

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Understanding homeschooling

Parents educating their children at home was the norm before the introduction of compulsory education laws in the 19th century (Khakim, 2021). Homeschooling can be defined as a "parent-led education" (Valiente et al., 2022, p. 48) that takes place primarily in the home. This means that parents are the primary, but not necessarily the only, educators of their homeschooled children. Homeschooling evolved from an act of fundamentalism in the mid-20th century to a more accepted form of alternative education today (AlDhaheri, 2024). The modern homeschooling movement began in the 1960s and 1970s, as parents grew dissatisfied with the American public school system and began to demand alternative education options (Cochran, 1999).

John Holt, a former American schoolteacher, was the first to coin the term "unschooling" in the 1970s (Chase & Marrison, 2018). Holt was a critic of the formal schooling system and an advocate of a child-directed form of learning based on children's interests and experiences (Khakim, 2021). He believed that the bureaucratic and inept nature of public schools prevented this type of learning (Khakim, 2021). He also advocated for giving parents autonomy over their children's education (AlDhaheri, 2024).

Homeschooling gained momentum in the 1980s, when many conservative Christian families withdrew their children from the formal schooling system to provide them with religious education and protect them from an education system they believed was "too secularized" (Moran, 2011). Today, parents choose homeschooling for various reasons, including dissatisfaction with the quality of the education offered in the public schools, the desire to provide a child-centered education, concerns over school environment, and financial constraints, among others (Green-Hennessy & Mariotti, 2023, Kunzman & Gaither, 2020).

Homeschooling can take various forms, as there is no single model followed by homeschoolers globally. Some parents follow the traditional homeschooling model, in which they provide instruction directly to their children, but using formal programs or school curricula (Cheng & Hamlin, 2023). Others follow a cooperative homeschooling model, in which homeschooling families share resources, teaching responsibilities, and collaborate to provide diverse activities and support (Cheng & Hamlin, 2023; Shofwan et al., 2021).

Online homeschooling is another model, in which parents utilize online programs and curricula to facilitate their children's education in collaboration with online instructors (Mann, 2021). Other parents prefer the "unschooling" model: a child-led approach in which the children's interests guide learning through experiential learning experiences that allows them to explore the topics that fascinate them

(Rochovská et al., 2019). These models, among others, have been the focus of many studies that have investigated the experiences of homeschooling parents.

2.2 Homeschooling in the Arab World

In all Arab countries, except Somalia, education is compulsory in both the primary and lower secondary grades (Liu et al., 2021). Knowledge is limited, however, of homeschooling in the Arab World, and there are no official data and no official records of homeschooled children. In many Arab countries, such as Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco and Jordan, homeschooling is illegal. In Lebanon, for example, homeschooling is not officially recognized, although some Lebanese families nevertheless choose to homeschool their children (Nazar & Nasrallah, 2024). In other Arab countries, the homeschooling regulations for citizens and non-citizens are different.

The education system in Qatar, for example, allows homeschooling for Qataris only if they obtain a waiver from the Supreme Education Council (SEC). The waiver is given if the child has extenuating circumstances related to their health, if they have special needs that prevent them from attending school, or if the child is older than the compulsory education age (Qatar Legal Portal, n.d.). Expatriates, on the other hand, can homeschool their children although there are no specific laws or regulations governing them (HSLDA, 2019). In Oman, the situation is similar: the School Education Law of 2023 allows homeschooling for Omanis but only in extenuating circumstances (Decree, 2023) and there are no laws or regulations governing homeschool by expatriates. In Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, homeschooling is allowed for expatriates, but is not officially recognized by the government (Krohn, 2021).

2.3 Homeschooling in the UAE

When the UAE was established as a country in 1971, there was no educational infrastructure, and the majority of locals were illiterate (Burden-Leahy, 2009). The Ministry of Education (MoE) was also established in 1971 to supervise the country's educational system (Federal Geographic Information Center, 2022). The ministry was challenged to accommodate the large number of children who were outside the formal education system because of the limited number of schools (Davidson, 2008). By the end of the 1970s, the number of schools increased dramatically: from 129 in 1972 to 383 (Davidson, 2008).

Primary education became compulsory for all citizen children in 1972, in accordance with Federal Law No. 11 of 1972 (UAE Government, 2024b). The law also made education free in all stages for all citizens. In line with international standards, a new law in 2012 extended the compulsory education period for citizens to Grade 12 or to age 18, whichever comes first (UAE Government, 2024b). Under the Federal Law N. 39 of 2022, education for non-citizens is compulsory until the end of primary school (UAE Legislations, 2022). Although public education in the UAE is free for all citizens, non-citizens, however, must pay tuition fees to attend public schools (UAE Government, 2025). Consequently, for most non-citizens, private schools are the only other option. Private schools in the

UAE provide 17 different curricula, reflecting the country's diverse and multicultural population (UAE Government, 2024a).

Homeschooling in the UAE has grown measurably in recent years, especially among expatriate families (Abdulla, 2025). Although there are no official statistics, the number of homeschooling families in the UAE is estimated in the thousands (AlDhaheri, 2024). Homeschooling, however, is neither officially recognized nor explicitly banned by the government, and there are no clear regulations of homeschooling in the UAE (Farhat, 2024).

The Ministry of Education (MoE) recognizes homeschooling only for grades 7 to 12 and only for students who are considered older than the normal age for these grades (UAE Government, 2021). For example, to be enrolled in the homeschool stream in grade 7, a student should be aged 14 or older. Such students are expected to study at home using learning materials provided by the ministry; however, this option is available only for those who follow the MoE curriculum (UAE Government, 2021).

The Emirate of Dubai is the only local government that regulates homeschooling at all grade levels, but only if the student is registered with a local private school. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), the private schooling regulator for the Emirate of Dubai, introduced the Al Rahhal program in 2018 (Knowledge and Human Development Authority, 2025). Children registered with Al Rahhal (which means "traveler" in Arabic), are associated with one of the partnering private schools in the Emirate that offers the homeschooling stream (AlDhaheri, 2024).

Parents and the school agree on how much their child will be homeschooled and, at the end of the school year, they receive a certificate indicating that they have completed the specific grade level. Nonetheless, many expatriate parents homeschool their children without being regulated or supervised by the MoE. Because expatriate parents usually send their children to pursue higher education abroad, they follow the homeschooling rules and regulations of either their home countries or the countries to which they plan to send their children after they graduate (Salim & Abdulla, 2024).

2.4 Theoretical framework

Parental choice explains parents' authority to choose between the schooling options available for their children based on their preferences, interests and values. Two main theories, the rational choice theory (RCT) and the choice theory (CT) (Glasser, 1999), have been offered to explain parental choice in education. Both theories belong to behavioral psychology and provide a framework for analyzing human behavior.

RCT has been the more widely used theory to explain parents' school-choice process (Wilson, 2016). A market-based theory, based on the premise that people make logical choices by comparing options to maximize benefit (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016), RCT assumes that parents have all the resources needed to

make a rational and informed educational decision. RCT also assumes that parents will choose the academic option that maximizes their children's educational outcomes (Bosetti, 2004). The UAE's educational landscape is diverse and offers a wide range of curricular options (Loyd et al., 2023). The educational regularity bodies also provide services that assist parents in choosing schools such as school fees regulation, rankings and inspection reports (Tabrez, 2021). According to RCT, parents in the UAE can, therefore, effectively base their choices on academic, financial and other benefits based on the information they receive from the educational regularity bodies. RCT, however, has been criticized for its inability to explain the complexity of parents' school choices (Bowe, 1994). For example, RCT cannot explain choices that are affected by factors other than academics, such as class size and social environment (Curry, 2018).

This study, therefore, explores parents' motivations to choose homeschooling for their children through the lens of William Glasser's Choice Theory, which was selected because it better explains the psychological motivations of parental school choices. According to Glasser, people make informed decisions to satisfy five genetic needs: (1) survival, (2) love and belonging, (3) power, (4) freedom, and (5) fun (Lečei et al., 2014). According to CT, exercising choice enhances relationships, satisfaction, and self-efficacy (Curry, 2018). Glasser posits that "all behavior is purposeful: to act on the world, to get what we want, which satisfies one or more of our basic needs" (Robey, 2011). According to this philosophy, CT is a suitable framework to understand parents' schooling choices in the context of UAE as it offers a psychological perspective that allows for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, especially given that homeschooling is still not officially recognized (Farhat, 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study followed an exploratory qualitative research design. Exploring a certain phenomenon about which little is known is one of the main reasons for conducting qualitative exploratory studies (Creswell, 2009). Because little has been written about homeschooling in the UAE, an exploratory approach was considered the most appropriate. The study used semi-structured interviews to facilitate in-depth understanding, while also allowing for flexibility to ask follow-up questions (Ruslin et al., 2022). The interview questions (Appendix 1) were based on the literature review conducted as part of this study. Most of the questions were organized around the themes of motivations and challenges of homeschooling. Other questions to understand the approaches and strategies parents use to homeschool were also included.

3.2 Sampling

The study used purposive sampling to recruit 16 participants. The criteria used to choose the participants were that they should be parents: (1) living in the UAE, (2) of any nationality, and (3) have been homeschooling one or more of their children for at least one academic year. Most of the participants were found online through UAE-based Facebook homeschooling groups while a few participants were recruited by contacting several online homeschooling academies that operate

globally but also provide services for UAE citizens. some of these academies also agreed to send the study's invitation to their UAE customer list.

3.3 Data collection

All interviews were conducted online using Zoom and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Before the interview, participants were asked to sign the informed consent form approved by Zayed University's Research Ethics Committee. Participants were assured that their participation was confidential, that their identities would remain anonymous, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All interviews were conducted over a period of three weeks.

3.4 Data analysis

To gain an in-depth understanding of homeschooling parents' experiences in the UAE, an inductive thematic data analysis approach was chosen, both for its flexibility and for its suitability for identifying and analyzing patterns and themes within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). After analysis, the themes were found to be in-line with the international literature on the motivations and challenges of homeschooling.

The thematic analysis followed the stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): data familiarization, initial code generation, synthesizing and searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and report writing. Coding was conducted by the author. Coding was done manually, but data were also analyzed using NVivo software to help create and maintain a codebook and to better organize the data visually.

Once tentative codes were developed, related codes were categorized into the most reflective themes. The analysis resulted in seven themes, characterizing separate but connected aspects of homeschooling in the UAE. Respondents were given a pseudonym and assigned a unique code, e.g., P1, to ensure anonymity. In qualitative interview studies, saturation is usually achieved after 9 to 17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In the present study data saturation was reached after conducting 16 interviews when no new data or themes emerged.

4. Findings

4.1 Participants' characteristics

The 16 participants in this study were from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, which reflects the diversity of the UAE's population. In most traditional homeschooling families, mothers are responsible for homeschooling children. Therefore, most of the participants in this study were mothers (n=14). Table 1 displays participants' demographic information.

Table 1: Participants' demographics

#	Mother/Father	Nationality	Educational Level	Number of Homeschooled Children	Curriculum/Approach used for Homeschooling
P1	Mother	American	Bachelor's degree	3	Online academy
P2	Mother	South African	Bachelor's degree	2	Online academy
P3	Mother	Canadian	Bachelor's degree	2	Eclectic
P4	Mother	American	Vocational/technical degree	1	Eclectic
P5	Mother	Ghanian	Bachelor's degree	1	Eclectic
P6	Mother	Pakistani	Vocational/technical degree	1	Unschooling
P7	Mother	Russian	Bachelor's degree	3	Eclectic
P8	Mother	British	High school diploma	3	British Curriculum
P9	Mother	Indian	Bachelor's degree	1	Charlotte Mason Method
P10	Father	Pakistani	Bachelor's degree	1	Eclectic
P11	Mother	Pakistani	Bachelor's degree	2	Eclectic
P12	Mother	Filipina	High school diploma	1	Philippines Curriculum
P13	Father	American	Bachelor's degree	2	Eclectic
P14	Mother	Pakistani	High school diploma	1	American Islamic Curriculum (online)
P15	Mother	Pakistani	Bachelor's degree	2	UAE Curriculum
P16	Mother	Canadian	Vocational/technical degree	2	Eclectic

4.2 Motivations for homeschooling in the UAE

Parents' decision to homeschool their children was a complex one and usually involved several factors and experiences. The findings of this study showed an interplay among the different factors that parents consider when choosing to homeschool their children. The main themes produced by the analysis as motivations for homeschooling in the UAE were: providing child-centered education, focus on extracurricular activities, cultural and religious reasons, flexibility, concerns over school environment, family bonding, and financial reasons. Table 2 summarizes the motivations and challenges of homeschoolers in the UAE.

Table 2: Motivations and Challenges of homeschooling in the UAE

Motivations to homeschool	Providing child-centered education
	Focus on extracurricular activities
	Cultural and religious reasons
	Flexibility
	Concerns over school environment
	Family bonding
	Financial reasons
Challenges of homeschooling	The dual role of parent-teacher
	Admission to regular schools and higher education institutions

4.2.1 Providing child-centered education

The biggest motivation of homeschooling, according to the participants in this study, was the desire to provide an education that was centered on their children and tailored to their unique needs. Participants emphasized their children's needs for an education that was tailored to their abilities. A recurrent theme was the desire to allow children to learn at their own pace. For example, one parent (P1) explained:

"I think they have been able to learn at their own pace; so, if they struggle with something we have a time to understand this. And also, because it's not 20 or 30 students in a classroom with one teacher; when they have a problem with something we can pick it up much more quickly in think, especially depending on their personality."

Other than pacing the teaching and learning based on the children, participants also highlighted the importance of attending to the unique needs of their children, such as having interest or weakness in certain subjects, being gifted or having learning difficulties. These responses revealed a reactive approach to homeschooling where some parents didn't necessarily reject mainstream education but rather thought that it does not differentiate instruction to meet their children's needs. They also showed a sense of power and freedom of choice as stipulated by the choice theory. Participants realized that the standardized nature of traditional schooling makes it difficult to attend to each child's needs, thus saw the need to exercise freedom as parents to choose what they believe best suits their children. For instance, P8, P14 and P13, respectively, stated:

"I would say it's his unique learning needs because he started reading at a very early age, at the age of two. But they were not differentiating the lesson to suit his needs."

"I chose homeschooling for my children so that I can address specific academic and social needs for them and for better and deeper understanding of a few subjects."

"We should not be fixed [on] one specific subject for our children. They should be free to choose whatever they are interested in."

Providing customized educational experiences was one of the main motivators for parents who have children with special needs, mentioning the lack of inclusive education practices in regular schools. As a reactive action, those parents prefer to pull their children out of the mainstream schooling system. For example, participant (P4), who has an autistic child, explained how this affected their choice to homeschool him:

"My older son, he is very bright. He's autistic, and he was struggling ... grade wise he was great. He was in the gifted program when needed and he was moving on. But actually socially, it was very difficult for him. And he was having a very hard time. And when we were going to move to the UAE, right that year before he kept begging me, please, can I just stay home and do school?"

In general, participants' responses showed that they wanted to have control over their children's learning pace, direction and depth to maximize the benefits they gained from education.

4.2.2 Focus on extracurricular activities

Although the analysis showed that parents' decisions to homeschool can sometimes be reactive, several parents' responses also showed an active approach toward their children's learning experiences. This was revealed when they mentioned the importance of extracurricular activities they incorporated into their children's learning schedules. Most participants agreed that traditional schooling usually focuses on developing students' academic skills at the expense of developing their personalities and their life skills. Homeschooling is, therefore, seen as a strategic solution to ensure their children receive training to develop the life and soft skills which are much needed for their future as successful adults. The following are examples of participants' quotes:

"For example, mornings are for study like math, science, then, uh, after that there are the extracurriculars, which are important." P7

"I try to teach my kids different physical activities in which I can teach like I prefer to do sports, I prefer to go outdoor with my kids, so they get the actual and the practical impact of the things they are learning. Similarly, I try to add some extracurricular activities like I try to give them art class." P16

"First of all, I teach them communication skills which are very important for the successful career in the future. And apart from that I teach them some problem-solving techniques, and I tend to teach them critical thinking, time management and about financial literacy as well." P15

Several participants mentioned that homeschooling gives them freedom to travel, which also provides rich real-life experiences for their children. This was articulated by P5 as follows:

"When we travel, he gets to socialize with all the people he meets ... From different ages ... from very elderly to very small. From different cultures (and) from different socio-economical classes." P5

Engaging children in extracurricular activities and exposing them to real-life experiences impacted their learning skills in ways that participants considered important for their children's holistic development. The analysis revealed that participants value their role as parents in guiding their children and developing them as competent individuals. The analysis also revealed their viewpoint that learning cannot be divided and that the homeschooling environment ensures an integrated learning experience where learning is not segmented based on subjects and/or skills. For example, one participant stated:

"So, everything when you're homeschooling is a learning experience ... there's lots of things that homeschooling kids do that are taught that children that go to regular school don't always get taught at home because their parents go, oh, why should we teach those types of things when they get taught at school?" P2

The analysis suggested that homeschooling served as an experiential, real-life stimulated environment where parents are able to inject all the skills they see essential for their children's growth. The flexibility that homeschooling gives them in terms of time, length, depth and location of learning experiences allows them to achieve this objective.

4.2.3 Cultural and religious reasons

The UAE is a culturally diverse country and homeschoolers desire to have agency over what their children are exposed to in relation to culture and religion shows them adopting a cautious and protective strategy. Although, for some this could be seen as religious fundamentalism or isolation, several parents in this study confirmed that this was a strategy to conserve their unique identities. They wanted to ensure that their children stay connected to their roots while also trying to adapt to their current multi-cultural environment. For example, P2 stated:

"So, I don't want teachers telling them about their own personal thoughts on situations because it could sway them in the wrong direction as to how us as a family have our moral status. And I'm a Christian. I lived in a Muslim country for 17 years, so obviously I don't have a problem with the Muslim culture. But I feel like as little as the fact that my kids spent one weekend with mainstream kids and they told them there was no Santa. My kids believe in Santa Claus. It was like such a little thing. I was like, oh, I want them to believe in."

Other parents, however, showed what some might interpret as being overprotective. Their responses suggest that they prefer to closely supervise the

construction of their children's cultural and religious foundations, especially at younger ages. In their view, regular schools have standardized curricula that are not only incapable of providing relevant cultural and religious education but might also conflict with what they want their children to learn in this respect. For example, participant P10 and P6, -respectively, mentioned:

"We appreciate being able to teach them our religious morals as the foundation for what we believe and what we learn and study. Those are the main reasons."

"In UAE, there are a lot of different people from different countries living here. So, culture barriers are one of the biggest problems, I think, for my kid. So, I am more comfortable and think he's more comfortable right now to give him a homeschool education."

These participants were concerned that their children were losing contact with their original cultures and religions, which for them is an important aspect of learning and growing. For these parents, having their children are exposed to competing or conflicting cultural and religious authorities was seen as a threat. Thus, choosing homeschooling was a strategy to ensure the foundations are properly laid out until perhaps their children can form advanced critical capabilities.

4.2.4 Flexibility

Participants in this study were attracted to the flexibility that homeschooling provided. Some appreciated that it allowed them to have flexible daily schedules that they can design based on their and their children's needs. For example, P7 stated:

"So, we also have a very flexible schedule. For example ... mornings are for study like math, science, then, uh, after that there are the extracurricular activities, which are important."

Others mentioned that homeschooling allowed them to do activities they otherwise would not be able to do with regular schooling, such as travelling whenever they wanted or needed to. Several participants mentioned the freedom to travel at any time, including P10 who stated:

"But we're flexible to travel. We don't need to wait for vacation to travel, and we don't pay extra money to get tickets on the base of vacation."

These responses highlighted the need for some families to adapt to certain lifestyles, such as having an employed parent who is required to travel as part of their job responsibilities. For others, it was the desire to travel as a tourist and for enjoyment with no restrictions. Regardless, whether the decision was reactive or proactive, homeschooling was seen as a viable choice to allow for this type of freedom and flexibility. Choosing homeschooling as an educational option in such cases, however, shows that the decision was not always directly related to the children's needs. The need for flexibility can sometimes be a family-level need or

a parent-level need that cannot be fulfilled if children were to attend regular schools.

4.2.5 Concerns over safety and bullying

Unsafe school environment emerged as a major concern for several participants in this study. Parents homeschooled their children as a necessary act to protect them from bullying and other unpleasant psychological experiences, which aligns with the sense of survival in the choice theory. They believed that one of their primary responsibilities was to preserve their children's psychological and emotional well-being. Although this seems a normal act of protection, it could also imply overprotection where homeschooling acts as a thick shield that could limit those children's psychological and emotional development. These mixed thoughts were expressed by P2 who mentioned that protecting her children "sounds terrible." Several participants, P2, P3 and P7, respectively, expressed their concern about safety and bullying in schools:

"[It is] social media and bullying and peer pressure and things like that ... It sounds terrible but I can almost shield them from that." P2

"I would say that at this age, when there are bullying and all sorts of things, um, it's better for the kids homeschooling." P3

"The environment was not so good, like some children were name calling him. The teacher was also applying some strange approach to teach them things. So, we decided, let us do it ourselves. Yeah. If he's better, probably we'll do it at home." P7

The analysis also showed that, for some parents, the decision was reactive, driven by the bullying incidents their children have already experienced. For others it was a proactive move.

4.2.6 Family bonding

Several parents in this study believed that homeschooling was the reason for better family bonding and closeness. While this did not seem as an initial motivator, participants in this study highlighted it as a factor that encouraged them to continue homeschooling their children. Family bonding was a natural result of children spending more time with their parents, doing more things together besides studying and extracurricular activities. The participants in this study believed that the deeper connections built with their homeschooled children would not have been possible with regular schooling.

Some parents emphasized the importance of spending more time with their children at younger ages as they believed this was paramount to their development. They expressed their need to be present during important development stages of their children. This revealed a viewpoint among these parents that regular schooling does necessarily contribute positively to early childhood development. The importance of homeschooling for family bonding was expressed by P1 and P11, respectively, as follows:

"We get to spend a lot of time together as a family. So, [we] have breakfast together, we have a time to go for early morning walk when the children are awake ... so our life is very family oriented, we spend a lot of time together." P1

"For our family, it's, I would say, spending more time with the kids while they're still kids ... I don't know where they will live as adults, maybe we'll all live together, maybe we won't, maybe we'll be in different parts of the world. So, I'd like to grow with them." P11

It is evident that participants valued spending time with their children, especially during the early years of their lives, which showed a sense of belonging as explained by the choice theory. The time spent in regular schools, in their view, prevented them from spending more time with their children and building stronger family bonds.

4.2.7 Financial reasons

Although school fees in the UAE vary considerably, depending on economic status, even the lowest school fees can be overwhelming for many expatriate families. One participant, P2, explained this issue by stating:

"Schools here in Dubai are very, very expensive. Unless your company offers you school fees [allowance] to pay ... if you're paying it independently, it is almost unfeasible. You cannot do that."

Homeschoolers are not obliged to spend specific amounts of money, given that they are able to tailor the homeschooling experience based on their needs and available resources. Many save money by enrolling their children in affordable online homeschooling academies, teaching them on their own, and using open educational resources (OER) available on the internet.

4.3 Challenges of homeschooling in the UAE

The findings of this study revealed two main themes related to participants' challenges related to homeschooling. Only three participants reported facing no challenges while homeschooling their children. The majority of participants agreed that the main challenges were the complexity of the parent-teacher role, and admission to regular schools and higher education institutions.

4.3.1 The dual role of parent-teacher

Almost all the participants in this study said they were confident about their teaching abilities, either because they had a suitable educational background (such as psychology), had previous teaching experiences, or had gained the necessary knowledge through reading or online resources. Several participants, however, discussed the challenge and the complexity of being a parent and a teacher at the same time. They also mentioned that the time commitment needed to homeschool required them to give up their careers and become stay-at-home mothers to fulfil the role of the teacher/facilitator. Participants' responses revealed that, although they opted for homeschooling for its perceived benefits, they still clearly acknowledged that it does not come without sacrifice on their part. This was expressed by two parents as follows:

"I've always been teacher and mom, and it's meshed together and there isn't a distinction for my kids or for me." P12

"It's not easy. But I let them do whatever they wanted first. This is the first step. And then I also give some rewards if they do accomplish a thing or a task." P15

The complexity of the parent-teacher role indicates the need to differentiate between those two roles in a systematic manner as it puts strain on the parent educator, as expressed by two participants:

"It takes work. My wife is the main teacher and it's basically her full-time job. And I do extra work when I get home. So, it's not time to relax, I might have some lessons or something to guide my children through." P10

"It's like a job. If children are small, the parent needs a lot of energy and discipline to do it." P7

4.3.2 Admission to regular schools and higher education institutions

Participants mentioned the lack of a clear legal framework for homeschooling in the UAE as the greatest challenge they faced. This uncertainty around whether homeschooling was legal created ambiguities for parents trying to make schooling choices for their children. Some parents expressed frustration, while others expressed fear of breaking laws and regulations, even though those laws and regulations do not exist.

Participants' biggest concern was the difficulty of getting their children back into regular schooling at any point, as well as gaining admission to colleges and universities in the UAE. This external challenge highlights the tension between parents' educational choices and the country's regularity framework for education. It also emphasizes parents' need for validation and inclusion into the wider educational system. Indirectly, participants in this study wanted to exercise what they believe is their right as parents without being penalized or marginalized. As P1 and P4, respectively, put it:

"I think if the government recognized it officially and made it an actual option, because right now ... it's not an accepted form of education I think for what I have read ... so, if the government made it an acknowledged type of education, I think that would be wonderful." P1

"We had to be very careful to make sure that we were following under all of the correct laws, because we want to make sure and follow all of the right things here in the UAE and not do anything that would be disrespectful to the country in just thwarting their laws and what they do." P4

Regarding going back to regular schooling, participants mentioned that their choices are limited because of the lack of recognition for homeschooling in the

country. This means that if for any reason they decide that regular schooling is the best educational option for their children, this choice might not be feasible and their agency over their children's education will be limited. For instance, P3 stated:

"I feel that this is the only, like the biggest challenge of homeschooling in UAE. The fact that if you're out of the system, you are not able to get back into the system."

Participants also mentioned that because homeschooling is not recognized, their children cannot be admitted to UAE-based universities and colleges. Most participants, however, mentioned that the admission issue can be solved by sending their children back to their home countries where homeschooling is legal and where high school certificates earned through homeschooling academies are accepted for admission to institutions of higher education.

5. Discussion

Although homeschooling in the UAE has seen a steady increase in recent years, very few studies have explored the multifaceted perspectives of this phenomenon, and these in only a limited way. Although the sample in this study, unlike others, was not homogenous, its findings are still similar to studies of more homogeneous samples. It was also interesting to see that the findings of this study are consistent although the cultural and regularity context of the UAE is different. Providing educational experiences that cater to the specific needs of their children has been one of the most cited motivations in many previous studies (Chinazzi, 2021; Hartman & Huttunen, 2020; Purwaningsih & Fauziah, 2020; Tan, 2019; Thomas, 2016). The desire to provide children with specific cultural, religious or moral instruction has also been one of the important factors in previous studies (Collom, 2005; Eldeeb, 2024; McCabe, 2021; McFall, 2020).

Many studies have also concluded that homeschooling has become a better option for parents who want to protect their children from bullying and unsafe school environments (Batts, 2024; Dills, 2022), especially among minorities or underserved populations (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Mazama & Lundy, 2014). Similarly, studies have reported that one of the motivations to opt for homeschooling is the desire to strengthen family bonding (Boschee & Boschee, 2011; Fatima et al., 2023; McFall, 2020). Many studies have also reported that the flexibility homeschooling provides for family activities such as travel is one of the important deciding factors (McFall, 2020; Sotomayor, 2022).

Challenges participants faced in this study also echoed other studies. This included the time commitment and the need to manage the dual roles that homeschooling requires from one or both parents (Farhat, 2024; Lois, 2006) and complications faced when wanting to go back to regular schooling and/or higher education (Cooper, 2007; Farhat, 2024; Lyubitskaya, 2022). These findings are consistent with those of other studies on the motivations and challenges of homeschooling families.

According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), approximately 90% of the teachers felt they could adapt their teaching to the cultural diversity of students; ensure that national and non-national work together. Teachers also reported their abilities to raise awareness of cultural differences amongst and ethnic stereotyping among students (Loyd et al., 2023). The findings of this study showed that the decision to homeschool is not necessarily reactive or against regular schooling. In most cases, the decision was made because parents believed it was the best educational option for their children.

According to the choice theory, parents exercised their right to choose the educational option they believed was best for their children from multiple perspectives. In many cases the decision of participants in this study was not linear and included multifaceted factors such as children's well-being, financial reasons and family commitments. Most of the parents in this study held vocational and bachelor's degree, which indicates that they probably made informed decisions about a very important aspect of their children's lives: their education. Parents from around the world find making the decision to homeschool their children challenging (Kunzman & Gaither, 2024).

But it is even more challenging to make such a decision in the context of the UAE's educational ecosystem, where regulations on homeschooling are yet to be developed and official support for homeschoolers is very limited. The UAE's cultural diversity, which is strongly reflected inside schools, also adds to the complexity of such a decision, particularly for parents who consider preserving their cultural identities a priority and find that doing so in regular schools is a challenge.

6. Implications for policy and practice

The findings from this study demonstrated that, although homeschooling in the UAE has grown steadily in the past five years, legislation that aligns with this growth is still needed. There is no national registry of homeschooled children in the country, which makes it difficult to monitor and regulate this type of schooling. It is therefore important to provide a national registry for homeschooling families and children to enable the government to track their performance and progress.

The MoE and other educational regulatory bodies in the country should consider making homeschooling a legal alternative schooling option. To achieve this goal, educational policymakers and researchers are encouraged to listen to the stories of homeschooling parents. Their voices, perspectives and experiences can serve as a foundation for future policies and regulations. Of equal importance is clearing up the existing misconceptions about the motivations of homeschoolers and removing the educational and social stigma around homeschooling by raising community awareness of its benefits.

Policymakers are also encouraged to address the concerns that prevent some countries from legalizing homeschooling, including the claims of unreported

domestic abuse, isolating, and indoctrinating homeschooled children. This can be achieved by thoroughly understanding and studying parents' motivations for homeschooling. Parents need a support system that allows them to embark on the homeschooling journey without sacrificing their children's future opportunities. Providing homeschoolers with a safe and legal platform will ensure that they carry out homeschooling under the supervision of the government and ensure they are properly integrated into the country's educational landscape.

Educational regulatory bodies in the UAE could consider accrediting online homeschooling curriculum providers as a foundational step toward formally recognizing homeschooling within the country. This approach is particularly viable for expatriate families, as it would allow them to select curricula aligned with their home country's standards. Accrediting these providers would also ensure a smooth transition back into traditional schools should students or parents choose to do so.

Furthermore, since many online academies are already accredited in other countries, this recognition could facilitate seamless transitions into higher education, both within the UAE and abroad. Concerning Emirati families, current regulations permit homeschooling only for grades 7 through 12 and for students older than the typical age for these grades. New policies should consider allowing Emirati families wishing to follow the Ministry of Education (MoE) curriculum to homeschool from Grade 1, provided this is accompanied by close supervision from the MoE.

7. Limitations

This study was limited in several ways. The first limitation is the small number of participants, which prevents generalization of its findings. Second, the majority of participants were mothers. Future studies could focus on recruiting a balanced number of mothers and fathers or interviewing both parents. Third, the voices of homeschooled children are missing. More studies that explore the experiences of homeschooled children are needed to provide a more holistic perspective. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews. Future studies could employ additional data collection methods such as observations. In addition, future research could focus on exploring the experiences of Emirati families, rather than expatriates, with homeschooling as this study's sample consisted of a majority of expatriates.

8. Conclusion

This study has explored the experiences of homeschooling parents in the UAE, particularly their motivations to homeschool their children and the challenges they faced throughout the process. The findings contribute to the validity of the choice theory. The physiological needs survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun clearly explained homeschoolers' motivations and challenges in the UAE. The study contributes to the scarce literature on homeschooling in the UAE. Allowing parents to homeschool their children in a tightly regulated environment ensures that homeschooling practices in the country satisfy the standards. However, the lack of understanding of homeschooling in the UAE

hinders the development of effective policies and regulations. Understanding factors that motivate or challenge homeschoolers in the UAE can provide a foundation for educational policymakers to allow for a more diverse and inclusive educational landscape in the county. According to choice theory, homeschoolers in the UAE are driven by the need to satisfy their and their children's psychological needs. Understanding this principle will allow parents to fully and safely exercise their rights to choose the best educational option for their children.

The fact that parents in this study expressed their dissatisfaction with the absence of regulations that allow their children to go back to mainstream schooling when they want, or to be admitted to local higher education institutions, raises concerns over the well-being of these children. With the growing number of homeschoolers in the UAE, providing governmental guidance and support is, therefore, paramount.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

What would you say are your biggest motivations to homeschool your child/ren?
Which homeschooling curriculum do you follow? Why did you choose this curriculum?

What do you teach your child/ren besides the official curriculum that you follow for homeschooling?

Have you taken any courses to learn how to teach your child/ren?

Take me through a typical homeschool day.

Do you feel that your child/ren misses opportunities to socialize with children of the same age? Why or why not?

How does homeschooling benefit your child/ren?

How does homeschooling benefit your family?

What would you say are some of the challenges for homeschooling in the UAE?

What support do you think the UAE government (Ministry of Education and other educational authorities) should provide to homeschooling parents/children?

Does your child (children) have the choice to attend a regular school if they want to?

What college choices do your child (children) have after graduating from high school? Do you have any concerns about this issue?