Gergana Sakarski

Overview of the Home-schooling Phenomenon in Bulgaria

Abstract

The theory and the practice of home-schooling has adherents and opponents, but the research data shows that this phenomenon has increased significantly over the past years in many countries and in different regions around the world. A growing interest from families willing to home-school their children is also observed in Bulgaria. This paper aims to explore the home-schooling landscape in Bulgaria, including the legal framework and most common practices, and to analyze some of the results of home-schooling for selected Bulgarian families, who have made this choice. There is little scholarly research and official data on elective home education in Bulgaria and this paper provides an overview of this alternative education practice through a study of the available literature, legislation texts and analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with home-schoolers aged over 16 years. Despite the fact that home education generally meets a certain level of reluctance, the legislation in Bulgaria has evolved in the past years and allows families to home-school their children through an independent form of education, under the oversight of the government. Home-schooling in Bulgaria is a quite recent phenomenon. A small number of individuals have now finished their home education and have either joined a higher education institution or the job market directly. Evidence from the conducted interviews shows that these Bulgarian home-schoolers thrive and perform well, not only in their respective studies and/or jobs, but also in the society in general.

Keywords: home-schooling, elective home education, alternative education, Bulgaria

Introduction

Home-schooling is paradoxically an old and a new phenomenon in education, depending on the meaning of this term. If we look back in the educational traditions in the past centuries, mandatory public schooling is a relatively recent practice in education, as prior to the existing of public and private schools, the education process used to occur within the family (Porumbachanov, 2018). Home-schooling could most commonly be defined as the education of school-aged children led by the parents outside of schools. The understanding of home-schooling varies widely and, in some cases, home-schooling can be likened to private schooling. In other cases, for some families, it is argued to be an alternative education practice, which parents take up in order to provide high quality education to their children, not provided by formal schooling practices. For other families, home-schooling remains the only available option to face some psycho-social issues, or to meet the ideological requirements that the parents have for their children.

This paper focuses on the actual practice used by parents in Bulgaria, who home-school their children and provides a picture of the current home-schooling landscape in Bulgaria through analysis based on available research, legislative acts and in-depth interviews conducted with home-schoolers. The combined insights gained from the available research, interviews and newspaper articles provide a

rough estimate of how many children in Bulgaria are home-schooled. This is also an attempt to draw attention to the results of Bulgarian elective home education, as at present research on this topic is limited. However, interest is increasing from both defenders and disputers of this practice and it remains a controversial issue raising many questions requiring answers.

Legislative landscape for home-schooling in Bulgaria

School education in Bulgaria is mandatory between ages 7 and 16, according to the *Pre-school and School Education Act of 2015* (Ministry of Education and Science, 2015), which regulates the educational standards in the system of pre-school and school education. Despite the fact that home education is not mentioned in the *Pre-school and School Education Act*, the law does not prohibit the home-schooling practice.

Before 2015 home-schooling in Bulgaria was considered illegal. However, opposition from the home-schooling community resulted in a fight for their constitutional rights, to choose the education format that they considered the best for their children. The legislation has evolved in the past years to adapt to the requests of parents, willing to home-school their children under certain conditions and supervision from the governmental institutions in charge – the education inspectorates. The Ministry of Education and Science (2015) *Pre-school and School Education Act* allows parents and children the option to choose between a certain number of these. The education "at home" was allowed under the independent form of education. This format is subject to oversight by the educational system controlling bodies and the students have to be enrolled in a formal school, which allows this format.

The government does not provide financial support for those families, but ensures a certain level of control through the regional education authorities and requires knowledge validation, based on the curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education. Although the state authorities allow the independent education, there are families who find ideological or religious lacks in this format and prefer enrolling their children in international home-school programs, in most of the cases provided by schools based in countries with long traditions in home-based education. Defendants of the home-schooling practice, who do not choose the independent education form argument that according to the Human Rights Convention and other legislative supranational texts, the parents have the fundamental right to determine the education of their children. Brian Brown, President of the World Congress of Families said in an interview during the GHEC 2018 in Moscow, that "any country that moves in the direction of limiting that is (…) undermining human rights" (Brown, 2018, video).

In many countries, with long traditions in the home-schooling practice, but also in Bulgaria, there are different forms of home-schooling which parents adopt. In Bulgaria several practices may be observed: an independent form of education, through enrollment in a public school; home-schooling using different remote schools, based abroad; home-schooling cooperatives; hybrid home-schooling using a natural learning approach (in some cases known as unschooling); learning with private teachers, learning centers and other institutions.

Home-schooling in Bulgaria: reasons to exist and to grow

The information provided in some newspaper articles about the number of families engaged in home-based education, although unofficial, shows a vast increase from 70 to 100 families in 2014 to more than 1000 families in 2020. "Non-formal education and self-study do not fall within the scope of the education system according to the used definitions of ISCED 2011" as per the NSI's report *Education in the Republic of Bulgaria* (NSI, 2021, p. 8). This explains the lack of official data on the number of children engaged in home-based education in Bulgaria. Although there is no official statistical data on the number of home-schooled individuals, as home-schooling can be organized in different formats, the current estimates suggest that the number of students educated at home in compulsory schooling age is approximately 15000 students in 2020, registered within the scope of the independent form of education, according to the data provided on the National Network for Children (2018), and approx. 1000 students enrolled in other home-schooling programs. This accounts for roughly 2% of the number of the students of school age. In this paper, I focus on the families who have deliberately chosen to home-school their children and aim to provide insights and to share findings on the results.

Different reasons exist for families who take the decision to home-school their children. They are complex and, very often, combined, but generally related to the dissatisfaction with standard schools. In some cases, it comes from the inability of local schools (public or private) to address children's special educational needs or to provide a safe, violence-free environment for the pupils. Other parents take up on home-schooling in order to provide education which fosters the religious or moral position of the family. Another common motivation for parents to home-school their children appears to be pedagogical dissatisfaction or higher knowledge and competencies development expectations, that these families assume cannot be met at school. Some parents' argument is related to the quality of the education at schools is focused on selective learning to pass a grade and not to develop specific skills, to acquire knowledge or to solve a specific problem. "It is distressing to see that the constant pressures on children, teachers and schools to succeed, are having a detrimental effect on learning and on the happiness of some of our children" (Hilton, 2020, p. 92).

Motivations and concerns about the home-schooling practices in Bulgaria

The motivations can be classified in pedagogical, ideological and socio-psychological reasons (Garkova, 2015). There seems to be a common belief amongst researchers that one of the primary motivations for families to home-school is religious, when parents consider their children cannot acquire theological knowledge or some ideological values in the formal schools (Olsen, 2008). However, the findings of Garkova's research rank first the pedagogical motivation for the parents. This statement is also confirmed in the self-reflective texts provided by the contributors to the book *Home-schooling in Bulgaria* (Porumbachanov, 2018).

Garkova observes that the defenders of the home-schooling practice are more likely to showcase the opportunities offered by home-based education, rather than the limits of this phenomenon (Garkova, 2018). On the other hand, the challengers would tend to focus on the negative aspects and outcomes of the home-schooling. In order to acquire a scientifically valid and productive overview of certain phenomenon there is a clear need to explore the alternatives and confront the facts.

Positive outcomes of the home-schooling practices

Some of the advantages of the home-schooling practice, summarized by Garkova are "individual approach to the student; individual training according to the child's abilities; achievement of better academic results; flexibility in the methods and materials used whether; training with materials and through activities applicable in real life…" (Garkova, 2013, p. 184). In addition, the interviewed home-schoolers identify other success factors, such as learning through problem solving of real-life situations and acquisition of transferable skills applicable in one's career and real life. Natural curiosity and interests could have more place to be explored and developed than in a school and children seem to be more involved in the study process as active stakeholders.

The results of the interviews conducted with the home-schoolers in the framework of this research confirm that the home education allowed them to gain time, as they skip the "waiting time" in class and could then focus on activities or subjects which not only they attended to or studied with interest, but also allowed them to gain transferrable skills, which are highly valued in the post home-schooling life namely, entrepreneurship, responsibility, high level of autonomy, self-awareness and sense of initiative.

Time management is one of the controversial skills which some of the interviewees considered as a positive outcome, but others suggested this could be an issue for the home-schoolers in life, as this skill seem to be highly impacted by the family dynamics, but also highly needed in "real life".

Concerns about home-schooling practices

One of the most commonly raised issues regards the social skills development of the home-schooled individuals. Probably one of the most frequent questions about the home-schooling is "What about home-schoolers' socialization?" and it comes with the assumption that home-schoolers do not know how to interact with other people. Investigations of social competencies show that home-educated children not only have no issues with socialization, but possibly socialize and adapt better to real life and citizenship than their counterparts in public schools (Carlson, 2020). Other alerts explored in the research is the quality of the education delivered "at home" when the parents are not professional teachers or pedagogy professionals. "Children are at serious risk of losing out on opportunities to learn things that are essential for employment and for exercising meaningful choices in their future lives" (Bertholet, 2020, p. 3). Another problem, which is not highly considered in the research studies, but could still have an important impact on the development and the results of the home-schoolers is the possible pressure on pioneer children, without any declared special needs and families, to perform and achieve high academic, extracurricular

and/or professional results. The fact that home-schooling is not well seen in Bulgaria in general, leads the home-schooling families to demand more from their children, in order to refute the common myths about the negative outcomes of home-schooling. According to some of the interviewees, a common issue that could arise in some situations is the perception of the child and later of the individual that the opinion of their parents is the only valid one, as there is no other validating institution. This could lead to vulnerability of some children to exposure to extreme religious beliefs and radicalization in some countries (Bongrand & Glasman, 2018), but there are no scientifically proven links according to the authors.

Research

In a recent study, conducted by Yale Child Study Center, published in the *Journal of Learning and Instruction*, the findings show that nearly 75% of the students' self-reported feelings related to school were negative (Moeller et al., 2020). This rate is significant and raises a question about the common practices and the reasons for the lack of enthusiasm, formal schools' students report.

Six in-depth interviews were conducted with selected members of home-schooling families in order to provide an overview of the home education phenomenon in Bulgaria. For the interviewed home-schoolers, who have switched from formal school to elective home education in their early school years, this seems to be true, because of the rhythm imposed and the strictly determined curriculum, which "students cannot escape, even if they are not interested in the matter", says one of the interviewees. "The closer students get to graduating from high school and entering the world of work, the less enthusiastic they feel about school" (Calderon & Yu, 2017). The home-schooled interviewees who answered the question, how they felt about their home-schooling years, responded in an exactly opposite way. Five out of six interviewees acknowledged that the more they advanced in the schooling years, the more they realized home-schooling had a positive impact on their development and enthusiasm about this educational practice and learning in general. One of them had always felt "happy and grateful" since the very start of the school years. For three of them, the earliest years were the most difficult, before they could actually become autonomous and manage themselves and the learning process without hands-on support from their parents. Students who started their education in a formal school needed more time to adapt to the rhythm of home-based learning than students who were home-schooled from the beginning. Four of the interviewed individuals envisage that they would like to educate their own children at home, although none of them is a parent yet. The other two respondents would either prefer to enroll their children in a private school, or potentially create a school or cooperative themselves, which could be a hybrid version between home-schooling and regular schools.

The analysis of the conducted interviews shows that individuals who went through home-based education socialize well and have no issue to interact not only with people of their age, but also with individuals of different ages and social status. This also allows most of them to acquire a maturity which is not measurable, but still very noticeable in the interviews. Each of the interviewed individuals is currently in one of the following situations: either enrolled in a higher education institution in Bulgaria or abroad, or have a job, or both. Five of the six interviewees

have not felt isolated during the home-schooling years, as the socialization with other individuals occurred very naturally through family and friends, neighbors, people met while doing external activities such as sports and/or art practice, private lessons, other home-schooling families and cooperative educational activities. Each of them has currently either a part-time or a full-time job, which allows them to contribute to their families' budget or to earn their living independently, whether they are currently studying or not. For most of them, having a part-time job was part of the education process which allowed them to develop professional competencies, social skills and a network of contacts. All of the students, who work, said that their employers are very satisfied and these statements confirm the forementioned research findings about the social abilities of the young interviewees.

Recommendations and conclusion

Overall, the number of home-educated children is rising in many countries, including in Bulgaria, which is only partially due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as an increasing number of parents are concerned about the online classes' delivery and the long exposure to screens, which research has proven to have negative effects on the child's brain development and wellbeing. Although there are different motivations and a wide variety in the education practices that the home-schooling families adopt, these practices are mostly perceived as an alternative to public education. Most of the parents, who take up elective home schooling, think they are able to provide a better education or a safer environment for their children at home. As home-schooling is a growing trend, which in some countries is not seen as alternative, but more and more mainstream (Carlson, 2020), attention should be brought to this expanding phenomenon.

One recommendation that can be made for the education authorities in Bulgaria, is to explore the feasibility of creation of bonds between schools and home-schooling families in order to allow home-schoolers to access elective courses or have access to specialized school and/or infrastructures (science labs and classrooms, gyms, music rooms etc.). This would not only be a way to enhance the quality of education home-educated children receive, but also allow the local authorities to get insight about the development of home-schoolers through the contacts with school teachers and other professionals, as one of the main concerns today remains the lack of school socialization of the children, who study at home.

However, as most of the interviewed home-schoolers say, home-schooling should not be regarded as an "ideal" educational practice and "is not for everyone". Each family should evaluate its dynamics before such a step is undertaken, as this is, surely, a premise for a greater freedom of choice, but also comes with a huge responsibility which should not be underestimated.

References

Bertholet, E. (2020): Homeschooling: Parent Rights Absolutism vs. Child Rights to Education & Protection. *Arizona Law Review*, 62(1). https://arizonalawreview.org/homeschooling-parent-rights-absolutism-vs-child-rights-to-education-protection/ (Accessed 07.01.2022).

Bongrand, P. & Glasman, D. (2018): Instruction(s) en famille. Explorations sociologiques d'un phénomène emergent. *Revue française de pédagogie*. http://journals.openedition.org/rfp/8581 (Accessed 10.11.2021).

Brown, B. (2018): Moscow GHEC 2018 Video Interview. http://homeschoolingbg.com/index.php?id=349#.YfrxSvg682w (Accessed 06.01.2022).

Calderon, V. J. & Yu, D. (2017): Student Enthusiasm Falls as High School Graduation Nears. *Gallup Inc*. https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/211631/student-enthusiasm-falls-high-school-graduation-nears.aspx (Accessed 04.01.2022).

Carlson, J. F. (2020): Context and regulation of homeschooling: Issues, evidence, and assessment practices. *School Psychology*, 35(1), 10-19.

Garkova, B. (2013): Homeschooling: A Substitute for Public Schools or Simply an Attempt to Avoid Public Education's Problems. *Yearbook of Sofia University*, Faculty of Pedagogy, Book Pedagogy, Volume 106, 179-198.

Garkova, B. (2015): The Choice of Home-schooling – from the reasons to the needs. *Collection Contemporary Challenges for Pedagogical Science*. Sofia: University St. Kliment Ohridski Publishing House, 799-807.

Garkova, B. (2018): Possibilities and Limitations in Structuring the Exact Content of Home-based Education (from pedagogic specialists' point of view). *Collection 130 years of University Pedagogy*. Sofia: University St. Kliment Ohridski Publishing House, 216-226.

Hilton, G. L. S. (2020): Elective Home Schooling in England: A Policy in Need of Reform? *BCES Conference Books*, Volume 18, 87-94. Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society.

Ministry of Education and Science (2015): *Pre-school and School Education Act of 2015*, adopted on August 1, 2016. https://www.mon.bg/bg/57 (Accessed 11.11.2021).

Moeller, J., Brackett, M., Ivcevic, Z. & White, A. E. (2020): High school students' feelings: Discoveries from a large national survey and an experience sampling study. *Learning and Instruction*, 66, 101-301.

NSI (2021): *Education in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021*. Sofia: NSI.

Olsen, N. (2008): Understanding Parental Motivation to Home School: A Qualitative Case Study. *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations & Professional Papers*. 1147. https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1147 (Accessed 06.02.2022).

Porumbachanov, P. (2018): *Home-schooling in Bulgaria.* Sofia: Nov Chovek. [in Bulgarian]

Gergana Sakarski, PhD Student, Sofia University, Bulgaria