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Homeschooling: Between Croatian aspirations and Slovenian reality

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Abstract

In this study we describe a short history of homeschooling in Europe, with particular emphasis on Slovenia and Croatia. We describe the legal frameworks of both countries, with a focus mostly on Slovenia where homeschooling is legal, whilst in Croatia it is not legal. To find out how parents think about homeschooling and especially their thoughts about legislation on homeschooling, we conducted interviews with five Slovenian families who are already homeschooling their children and five Croatian families who aspire to do so, with the intention to gain clearer insight into the concrete reality of homeschooling in both countries. We address both the legislation and human experiences in order to examine to what extent the Slovenian example could form a basis for the creation of an authentic Croatian homeschooling model.

Keywords: Homeschooling, children, parents, education, pedagogical pluralism.



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Introduction

Homeschooling as we know it today in the democratic countries of the Republic of Slovenia and the Republic of Croatia is a relatively recent phenomenon. Even though in the past there were laws that permitted home-based education, homeschooling so far has been a poorly researched subject in both countries. Croatia and Slovenia both belonged to the Habsburg dominions, ruled by the House of Habsburg, and were later joined as Yugoslavia. Therefore, for the most part of the last 250 years, the two countries have shared the same government and legislation. Yet, homeschooling is legal in Slovenia whilst illegal in Croatia. For about 50 years, in former Yugoslavia just as in other countries of Southeast Europe, there existed uniformity regarding pedagogy and schooling. At the same time, whilst many Western European countries saw pedagogical pluralism on the increase and home education practiced to a limited degree in certain countries, Yugoslavia saw only “state” pedagogy, with pedagogic pluralism regarded as distinctly undesirable. During almost half a century, there was no reformist pedagogy concept present in either in Yugoslavia or across most of the former Eastern Bloc countries that could provide an alternative to the monolithic, uniform schooling and pedagogy. After Yugoslavia broke apart and democracy was established in the newly formed nation states, there was a growing interest in alternative pedagogical concepts and their practical application. During the economic and sociopolitical transition processes both Slovenia and Croatia went through, many changes were introduced. Today, homeschooling is gaining legitimacy due to the increasingly pluralistic nature of educational politics. In Slovenia, it is legal for parents to homeschool their children and the interest in homeschooling among Slovenian parents has been steadily growing. However, whilst homeschooling in Croatia has still not been legalized, there have been efforts to legalize it, albeit that would entail a serious revision to the existing laws.

As there are parents in Croatia wishing to educate their children at home, one goal of this article is to introduce homeschooling to the Croatian scientific pedagogical community, a topic of study totally neglected in Croatia. We will describe the situation of homeschooling in Slovenia, with interviews conducted that clearly indicate a level of parental interest in homeschooling in Croatia. If we would succeed in convincing a few pedagogues to tackle this topic, the longer-term result might influence Croatian educational policy and thereby create a more positive media environment.

First, we will provide a brief overview of the history of homeschooling in Europe, and then we will describe its development within both Slovenia and Croatia.

To elucidate the situation of homeschooling in Slovenia, we have tried to provide answers to the following questions: “When was homeschooling legalized in Slovenia, and why?” “How many children are being homeschooled in Slovenia?” and “What are the experiences of Slovenian parents with homeschooling their children?”

To elucidate the situation of homeschooling in Croatia, we have tried to provide answers to the following questions: “Why is homeschooling in Croatia illegal?” “Who wants to legalize homeschooling in Croatia?” “How could Slovenia be used as a constructive example of homeschooling?” and “How can Slovenian experiences help with a future authentic Croatian homeschooling model?”

Short History of Homeschooling in Europe

In modern times we send our children to school without questioning this universal practice. However, the all-pervasiveness of this practice conceals the fact that compulsory schooling was implemented only approximately 250 years ago (Fischer, 2006, p. 11), with the concept that education takes place only within formal institutions (i.e., schools) under the patronage of the state, as is the case in both Slovenia and Croatia, being even younger. However, children were not always educated in schools. Historically, children were educated within their home environment, and Fischer (2006) wrote that home education was actually an original form of education that took place throughout all periods of history and in many different forms. In some places and social classes, it was still common practice until the 20th century.

In the early 18th and 19th century the bourgeoisie was eager to copy the lifestyle of the aristocracy, therefore they started to educate their children at home, and for this purpose they hired home tutors (Fischer, 2006, p. 19). However, in the course of the 19th century, parallel to its emancipation, the bourgeoisie distanced itself from this feudal habit of teaching children at home with the help of a home tutor and started instead to send them to school (Fischer, 2006). Home education remained fairly common amongst the aristocracy until the early 20th century, after which it slowly disappeared (Fischer, 2006), whilst at the same time the public (state) school system was becoming more and more consolidated.

Compulsory Schooling in of Slovenia and Croatia

In Slovenia it is generally assumed that compulsory schooling was implemented in the 18th century. Gabrič (2009, p. 15) wrote that compulsory schooling was implemented in 1774, when Maria Theresa, then sovereign of the Habsburg territories, among which were also the territories of modern-day Slovenia and Croatia, signed the General School Ordinance. However, it seems that this ordinance did not implement compulsory schooling, but demanded that children must either go to school or must be educated at home, stating; "Therefore we order, that all the parents or caretakers must send their children, who are of school age, to school or they must educate them at home" (Allgemeine schulordnung [General School Ordinance], 1774, Article 13). As previously mentioned, the General School Ordinance did not implement compulsory schooling, but that education was compulsory (Unterrichtspflicht), yet could also take place outside of the formal school environment.

It seems that Austrian school legislation (Österreichischer Schulpflichtgesetz [Austrian Education Act], 1985) was therefore also created on the basis of this notion of compulsory education, with homeschooling in Austria legalized. In the Slovene language, however, no distinction is made between "compulsory education" or "unterrichtspflicht" in German, and "compulsory schooling" or "schulpflicht," with only one expression in Slovenian meaning compulsory schooling. This might have given rise to a historical ambiguity in Slovenia regarding the explanation of Article 13, which may have helped form the generally non-positive sentiment regarding homeschooling in Slovenia; with it regarded as a curious phenomenon, that is perceived as strange and not applicable. The most visible Slovenian experts in the field of education and psychology are also not in favor of homeschooling. However, as result of the democratization process that took place during the 1990s, the Ministry of Science and Education in Slovenia endorses homeschooling.

Home education was legal within the Habsburg Monarchy and was also practiced after 1774. In 1867, the Habsburg Monarchy was divided into two: the Austrian Empire, which included the territory of modern-day Slovenia, and the Hungarian Kingdom, which included the territory of modern-day Croatia. Both states had their own parliament and government, yet only common affairs were governed by the joint ministries of finance, the military, and foreign affairs. They each had separate schooling legislation, but their contents were actually very similar. In 1869, a new Education Act for the Austrian Empire was issued. Article 20 of the Act states that, "Parents and caretakers of their own children, or those children entrusted into their care, must not leave them without the education prescribed for public folk school" (Original name of Act [Austrian Education Act], 1869), whilst Article 23 states the following:

The exceptions from the obligation to attend school are: boys who attend a higher school, children who are, because of mental or physical defects, incapable of reaching the learning goals and finally, children who are being educated at home or through some other private arrangement. (Original name of Act [Austrian Education Act], 1869)

Homeschooling thus remained legal, and many Slovenian writers earned a living by serving as home tutors of children from wealthy families.

In 1874 in the Hungarian Kingdom, which included the territory of modern-day Croatia, an Education Act was issued that also permitted home education. Article 50 of that Act states that, "Parents or their substitutes can freely decide to educate their children at home, or to enroll them either in a private or public institution or in one of the existing folk schools" And its 51st article demands that, "Children who are being educated at home have to take the exams at one of the existing public schools" (Original name of Act [Hungarian Kingdom Education Act], 1874, as cited by Čuvaj, 1911).

It is evident, however, that both of these important Education Acts from 1774 and 1869 issued within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which implemented compulsory education, also permitted home education as one arrangement that parents could opt for to educate their children. However, Schmidt (1988) wrote that Maria Theresa, then sovereign of the Habsburg territories, allowed home education only as a concession to the aristocracy, so that their children were not required to sit in the same room as those from the lower classes.

In Slovenia, as well as in Croatia, strict compulsory schooling was only implemented in 1929, with the formation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and children were obliged to attend school for a period of 8 years, as stated in the following Act;

Schooling in national schools is universal and compulsory throughout the whole Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Based on the provisions of this law, every child whose parents reside in the territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia must be educated according to their capabilities, whether in a regular national school or in a special state institution. The state's government will force parents or caretakers who neglect to provide education for their children, or for those children entrusted to their care, to attend to their duties. The state also has the right to remove children from parents or caretakers who are (because of different reasons, illness or negligence) deemed incapable of attending to their obligations and will place those children with other families or in state institutions. (Zakon o ljudskih šolah [Folk School Act], 1929, Article 2)

After the Second World War, the Communist Party took power in Yugoslavia and the former Kingdom was abolished. From 1945, the new political elite tried to subjugate the school system to its own ideological and political interests. In 1953, the Federal Assembly formed a Commission for School Reform (Gabrič, 2006), and a new General Education Act was issued in 1958, wherein universal compulsory schooling was prescribed. Article 6 of that Act states that, "All the citizens, aged 7 to 15 have to attend school. Compulsory schooling lasts for 8 years" (Splošen šolski zakon [General School Act], 1958).

In socialist countries, thus also in Yugoslavia, the state played a decisive role in the upbringing and education of its children. This tendency to control education was of course also present in the time of the Monarchy; however, during the period of socialism in Yugoslavia, the state was regarded as the main driving force of socialistic progress and development. At the same time, the state was also seen as the main driving force of the development of the individual (Schmidt, 1982). As a reflection of this mindset, state pedagogy was created, and in order to enforce socialistic socioeconomic relations, state pedagogy sought to raise and educate children as socialistic citizens. The monopoly in the field of education that state pedagogy held made any criticism of its educational approach or goals impossible. The educational goal of Yugoslavian state pedagogy was to educate children as socialistic citizens, who would then willingly subjugate their personal interests for the interests of the state (Schmidt, 1982).

The socialistic state was not in favor of the bourgeois nucleus family. Two ideologies formed the state pedagogy at that time. The first claimed that the upbringing and education of children within the modern family was the remnant of bourgeois education and was as such incompatible with socialist principles and had to be replaced by education within state institutions as soon as possible. This idea, however, was not widely accepted in Yugoslavia (Schmidt, 1982). The second idea within state pedagogy with respect to the family structure was less fundamental. For those who supported it, the upbringing and education of children within the family unit was deemed valid, since in their view the family played a crucial role in a child's development into a healthy and content member of society. This was, after all, considered as an integral part of one's personality – and ultimately the goal of a socialist upbringing and education. But it is important to note here that the upbringing within the family had to be administered in accordance with socialistic educational goals. In other words, the upbringing of a child within the family unit had to happen as a *de facto* extension to the state pedagogy. This second idea regarding the role of the nucleus family in the upbringing of a child was adopted within Yugoslavia (Schmidt, 1982). In view of the educational goals of socialist pedagogy, the role of the state in education and the attitude of the authorities towards the family and its role in the educational process, we can conclude that it is perfectly understandable that home education in its free form was not permitted in Yugoslavia.

Homeschooling in Slovenia

In 1996, homeschooling was added to Slovenian school legislation as a parental right, whereby they became free to choose the method of education for their children. Article 5 of the Elementary School Act states that, "The parents have the right to choose elementary education for their children. They can either send them to a public or to a private school or they can educate them at home" (Zakon o osnovni šoli [Elementary School Act], 2006). According to Slavko Gaber, who was the Minister of Education and Sport at that time, the

government of Slovenia believed that Slovenian parents should be given the choice of how to educate their children and thus increase their decision-making power about their family's own way of life. At the same time, the government wanted to ensure that children who would be educated at home would acquire the same basic standards of academic knowledge, and that the parents could prove that under their guidance their children would be capable of acquiring the basic standards of academic knowledge, that they would otherwise acquire in schools (S. Gaber, personal communication, month nn, year). This step taken by the Slovenian government could be seen as one of the results of the transitional process from socialism to capitalism, as in the process of democratization of society after the collapse of Yugoslavia.

When we speak about the transitional process, we usually refer to changes of an economic or political nature. However, there were also changes within the less tangible dimensions of life, such as those relating to human psychological nature in the attitudes held towards educational and social life. The Slovenian psychologist Janez Svetina wrote about this topic in relation to schools and teaching, just after the collapse of Yugoslavia. Svetina (1992) wrote that after changing the political system from a totalitarian regime to democracy, schools and teachers should no longer indoctrinate children, neither with Marxist ideology nor in fact with any other ideology. Within these new conditions, schools had to help children to become accustomed to the democratic way of thinking and acting, that is, to teach them how to live and act as harmoniously as possible within society, wherein many ways of thinking and desiring, many different views, orientations and practices exist, and to teach them to live with and accept these differences (Svetina, 1992). The diversity of different views, orientations and practices, which are required as fundamental to a democratic, also include different pedagogical approaches, methods of teaching used in different schools, and whether schools are private or under the state patronage. This diversity of different educational approaches also includes homeschooling.

School Legislation in Slovenia

As previously mentioned, Article 5 of the Elementary School Act (Zakon o osnovni šoli, 2006) defined homeschooling as a parental right. However, the law obliges parents who decide to educate their children at home to enroll their children in either a public or private school. At the end of each school year, homeschooled children are required to sit exams at the school at which they are formally enrolled in order for qualified teachers to check if the homeschooled child has acquired the basic standards of knowledge, as prescribed for each grade of elementary schooling. In this way, the examination commission evaluates the performance of all children, homeschooled included (Pravilnik o šolskem koledarju za osnovne šole [Rules on verification and assessment of knowledge and promotion of pupils in elementary school], 2008, Article 6).

If a child does not pass the exam, it may be retaken once more before the next new academic school year begins (Zakon o osnovni šoli [Elementary School Act], 2006, Article 90; Pravilnik o šolskem koledarju za osnovne šole [Rules on verification and assessment of knowledge and promotion of pupils in elementary school], 2008, Article 20). If a child does not pass the exam at the second attempt, they must attend public or private school during the forthcoming academic school year, rather than continue to be homeschooled (Zakon o osnovni šoli [Elementary School Act], 2006, Article 90; Pravilnik o šolskem koledarju za osnovne šole [Rules on verification and assessment of knowledge and promotion of pupils in

elementary school], 2008, Article 20). At the end of the school year the school issues a school certificate (Zakon o osnovni šoli [Elementary School Act], 2006, Article 92).

Children with special needs also have the right to be homeschooled (Pravilnik o osnovnoškolskem izobraževanju učencev s posebnimi potrebami na domu [The Act on the direction of children with special needs], 2012, Article 21). The commission, responsible for evaluating the circumstances of children with special needs may, at the behest of the child's parents, determine if it is in the child's best interest to be educated at home. However, this decision has to be based on grounded reasoning. Furthermore, certain requirements as determined by the "Rules on Primary Home Education for Students with Special Needs", must be met (Pravilnik o osnovnoškolskem izobraževanju učencev s posebnimi potrebami na domu [The Act on the direction of children with special needs], 2012, Article 21).

Despite a relatively early inclusion of homeschooling in Slovenian school legislation, the first homeschoolers did not appear until almost a decade later. In the 2004-2005 academic school year, four children were homeschooled, and by 2008-2009 this had still only risen to 25 children being homeschooled throughout Slovenia. However, this number has steadily grown, and during the 2016-2017 academic school year there were 279 homeschooled children in Slovenia. This indicates that the interest for homeschooling among Slovenian parents is growing. However, comparatively, the total number of all primary school pupils enrolled in the regular school program for the 2016-2017 academic school year in Slovenia was 177,000 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia), meaning that the number of homeschooled children in Slovenia is therefore still very low, representing only 0.2% of all primary school pupils. In fact, the percentage of homeschoolers in the true sense is lower still, as the officially registered number of homeschooling children also includes children who attend one of the alternative private schools, whose program is not accredited by the state, and are therefore also counted among those being "homeschooled", as they do not attend a state school or an accredited private school. As children attending non-accredited schools are officially registered as homeschoolers, they are also required to sit the in-school exam at the end of each school year at their official school of enrolment. However, the number of these children is unknown as the Ministry of Science and Education does not collect this information.

Homeschooling in Croatia

Croatia, together with the Republic of North Macedonia, is the only country in the former Yugoslavian region where homeschooling is illegal, even though in the past homeschooling was legal until its abolition in 1929.

Within Croatian pedagogical science, the subject of homeschooling is seen as a new phenomenon, and therefore Croatian scientific literature on this topic of study has been very limited. As such, only two articles have been published in Croatia on homeschooling (Bjelan, 2011; Dadić, 2012), which both expressed a dismissive attitude towards homeschooling. In particular, they addressed the parents' role as teachers. The author of the first article suggested that parents who take up the role of teacher for their own children should meet the pedagogical standards of the ISSA (International Step-by-Step Association). It is thus argued that homeschooling parents should possess certain levels of teaching skills and knowledge (Bjelan, 2011). The second article focused on the analysis of the initiative to legalize homeschooling, which the Croatian Christian Coalition submitted to the Ministry of

Science and Education with their goal being to amend and supplement the Primary and Secondary Education Act. The analysis presented in the second article pointed to three important elements; (1) Croatia should have its own authentic model of homeschooling, (2) parents should first provide proof of their teaching skills, and (3) the acquired knowledge of homeschooled children should be appropriately tested (Dadić, 2012). The limitation with both of these two articles is that they do not explore homeschooling itself, yet suggest its regulation without seeking in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon.

It is important to note that Croatian media are not generally interested in the topic of homeschooling about which only a few articles have been authored. However, the activities of the three civil initiatives – the Croatian Christian Coalition, an association called “Education in Another Way” and another called “In the Name of the Family” – within the Croatian public domain clearly indicate that there are advocates of pedagogical pluralism in Croatia. Pedagogical pluralism should have been developed, along with the development of political pluralism, during the process of democratization after the fall of socialist Yugoslavia. This means that, not only the state should be allowed to establish and finance schools, but individual citizens, civil and teachers’ associations, religious associations and other legal entities should be in a position to do the same (Matijević, 2009, 2011). Therefore, homeschooling should certainly form a part of the pedagogical pluralism in modern-day Croatia.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. For its purpose we conducted interviews with homeschooling parents – five from Slovenia and five from Croatia. Through the interviews, we examined the motivations of Slovenian parents to homeschool their children and why the Croatian parents interviewed expressed their desire to homeschool their children. Furthermore, we wanted to gain insight into the parents’ thoughts on both the advantages and challenges of homeschooling, and in what way current Slovenian law determines how homeschooling is put into practice. As previously mentioned, we choose the method of standardized interviews and included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questions themselves and their set order were predetermined, therefore all of the interviewees were asked the same questions and in the same order. This enabled an accurate comparison to be established between the Slovenian and Croatian families according to the answers given during their interviews. At the beginning of each interview, we explained the interview’s purpose and how we would both record and subsequently process their answers. Whilst analyzing the answers, we focused on four themes, each of which is addressed separately within the subsequent Results section of this paper.

Interviews were conducted with five Slovenian and five Croatian parents in a parallel manner. We met the Slovenian as well as Croatian parents via referral, social media, or through personal acquaintance. None of the Croatian interviewees were members of any existing Croatian association advocating homeschooling; similarly, none of the Slovenian parents were members of any association relating to the practice of homeschooling, since no such association currently exists.

Results

From the interviews conducted with the parents in Slovenia and Croatia, we drew the following insights based on four themes. Excerpts drawn from the interviewees responses to our questions are included. In order to maintain the participants' anonymity, the participants' responses are code-referenced, with "S" denoting a Slovenian parent, and "R" denoting a Croatian parent.

Parental Motivation for Homeschooling

The answers of the Slovenian parents interviewed for the purposes of our research in general showed three primary motivations in why they elected to homeschool their children. Most cited the freedom it afforded them with regards to the teaching and learning process, and the freedom regarding family life that such a form of education can certainly offer (S2, S4, S5). Interviewee S2 said that "The most important reason for homeschooling was the freedom to travel during the year and to broaden the horizons of thinking," whilst S5 said that "Homeschooling makes it possible that we can be together as a family. And at the same time my child can learn wherever we are, at any time, and in any way."

These two motivations were followed by the wish to transmit values deemed as important to the parents (S1, S5), and to maintain better contact with their child (S1, S3). Regarding this, S1 described their reasoning as follows:

The idea that a child spends most of their time outside the home and is practically raised by other adults during this time, who at the same time have to raise an entire class of other children, made me feel uncomfortable. It seemed so unnatural to me. When I delved into this topic a little bit deeper, I realized that many studies on the subject that I read confirmed my own feelings. The second reason was the school system as it is now. The values that children acquire in schools are not the values that I perceive as being constructive (competitiveness, emphasis on grades etc.). Furthermore, schools should encourage the development of a child's skills, but in my opinion, that does not happen well enough.

The third-placed reason given by the parents was to be better able to transmit their own knowledge to their child, about which S1 stated:

I really do not want to miss the most part of my child's life by sending them to school, I want to be with them, lead them and transmit to them my experience and knowledge...for me it would be regrettable to let someone else do this, someone whom I do not even know very well, someone who perhaps has a different perception of the world than me or those close to me.

Two of the Croatian parents (R1, R2) stated that they would homeschool their children if they were able to do so, and that this was due to their dissatisfaction with the existing schooling system. One parent (R3) said that she considers homeschooling to be the best form of education for her child. Another parent (R4) stated that they would like to see the implementation of "flexi-schools," meaning that the child could attend school for one or two days per week, and the remainder would be spent learning from home. One other parent (R5) stated that they would choose homeschooling because they wanted to transmit their religious values that they held to their own child.

Advantages of Homeschooling

We also asked the Slovenian parents about the perception of the advantages of homeschooling. Most of the parents (S1, S3, S4) mentioned that improved child socialization was one of the benefits of homeschooling, with S1 saying that:

The child has the time and space to bond with the family members in a healthy way. In my opinion, socialization in the true sense of the word takes place when parents and other adults of different ages and peers of different ages are involved in a child's socialization process. The child then does not spend most of their energy adapting to the requirements of the system (school curriculum) and to the opinions of their peers.

S4 stated that, "Homeschooling enables us to bring up and educate our children in such a way that they will become aware of the need to positively and actively contribute to the improvement of their environment, to society, and to their country." Similarly, S3 believes that home-based education enables the child to avoid the many negative influences they would be subjected to when attending school.

Two of the parents (S1, S2) mentioned that the greatest advantage of homeschooling as a type of education is an individualized approach to learning and teaching. S1 said that, "The biggest advantage in my opinion is that the child has time and space for individual development. They have time for the activities that they like and are interested in, and for their creativity." Participant S2 was of a similar opinion:

The great advantage of home education is that schooling can easily be adapted to the child's and the family's needs, and that the child can learn through experience as much as possible. My children now have the time to further develop their talents, which they did not have when they were attending school.

The answers of the Slovenian parents indicate that some of them decided to homeschool their children precisely because of what they deem to be its advantages. On this, S3 stated that she decided to homeschool her child because it enabled her to bond with her child more deeply, and at the same time better bonding is for her also one of the distinct advantages of homeschooling.

We also asked the Croatian parents the same question. Their answers were not as elaborate as those of the Slovenian parents, which can be attributed to the fact that they have no practical experience with homeschooling. However, all of the Croatian parents answered that they believed one of the advantages of homeschooling would be a better opportunity to really bond with their child.

Challenges of Homeschooling

When asked about the challenges of home-based education, most of the Slovenian parents (S1, S2, S3, S4) responded in that the challenge of homeschooling is in motivating their child to learn. Lack of a child's motivation to learn could be related to Slovenian homeschooled children being required to precisely follow the national school curriculum, rather than just following their interests, in order to achieve the required standards of knowledge and thereby pass the end of school year exam. Participant parent S1, for example, mentioned that "It is difficult to follow the curriculum. Any lack in a child's motivation to learn makes things even more difficult." Similarly, S2 stated that "The challenge is to encourage the child to sufficiently motivated to learn on their own,

independently, as well as increasing their enthusiasm for learning.” Participant S4 answered similarly, saying that “The required learning material with which children must work, and the manner in which they have to learn is seen boring to them. However, because of school legislation, we have to follow the set curriculum.”

The second-most common challenge mentioned by the homeschooling parents was the combination and coordination of family and work responsibilities. This challenge was mentioned by three parents (S1, S3, S5), with S5 stating that, “It is certainly challenging to coordinate all of the obligations that a homeschooling parent may have.” Another challenge mentioned by two of the parents was that homeschooled children only sit exams at the end of the academic school year (S2, S4). On this, S2 mentioned the following: “We should have the possibility for our children to take exams throughout the school year.” Furthermore, S4 believes that being allowed to take exams only at the end of the school year may be too stressful, both for the homeschooled children and for their parents as their teachers.

One parent (S3) mentioned the following challenge:

To prepare your child for the specific type of task and for the expectations of teachers they will encounter during the end of school year exam in order to be able to pass. For example, there are often more ways to arrive at the correct answer in math; at school, children usually learn one method to tackle a certain math question, whilst homeschooled children are expected to follow that same method, so their own curiosity and initiative to seek alternative ways can be curtailed, and to seek out clever alternatives to the standard way of solving a problem is not allowed or encouraged.

All of the parents who participated in our research were asked if their homeschooled children – when they had been tested in the end of school year exams – reached the required standard and learning objectives; with all of the parents responding that their child’s exam results had been positive.

Again, the answers of the Croatian parents were less elaborate to those of the Slovenian parents. However, all the Croatian parents answered that they perceived their biggest challenge with homeschooling would probably be the organization of the child’s learning process, as well as creation of an appropriate learning environment.

Parents Thoughts about Regulation of Homeschooling in Slovenia

First, we asked the Slovenian participating parents what they liked about the regulation of home education, with all of the parents responding that they liked that homeschooling in Slovenia was permitted under law. Additionally, two of the parents (S1, S2), also pointed to another positive aspect about the regulation of homeschooling in Slovenia. S1 stated that: “I like the fact that the child does not have to take a test for all the subjects taught in school,” whilst S2 said that: “I like that the test of most subjects in the last three grades is done in the form of an oral exam. In an oral exam the child has more space to really show off his or her knowledge.”

We then asked the parents what did they not like about the regulation of homeschooling. All of the parents reported that they did not like the limited timeframe given to the end of school year examination period, when the schools check if homeschooled children have reached the required levels. S1 believed that the examination period was too short, saying that, “It is very stressful for a child to take several exams within a month and a

half,” and S2 was of a similar opinion, saying that the “Exams are too close together. If they are not willing to allow the exams to be taken during the entire school year, then the examination period should at least be prolonged.” Similarly, S5 stated that:

When the child attends the first three grades, there are only two exams. Then it is not that stressful to take the exams at the end of the school year. However, in the higher grades, the number of subjects which are being tested is much greater, and it is not easy for the child to take nine exams within a short period of one and a half months.

S1 mentioned another perceived negative aspects regarding the regulation of homeschooling in Slovenia. She was not satisfied with the child’s knowledge being evaluated at the end of each school year, and would rather see the child’s knowledge being evaluated after every three grades, that is at the end of the third, sixth, and ninth grades. Additionally, S3 mentioned two more negative aspects of the homeschooling regulations. These were that the law does not stipulate that schools should or should not permit homeschooled children to attend various school-organized activities, with decisions about this left arbitrarily to each school. Second, that the law does not stipulate that parents who homeschool their children should receive any state financial assistance, whereas it should be noted that the school to where the child is officially registered receives some level of state funding, even though they are homeschooled.

Finally, we asked the parents how they would suggest changing the legal regulations for homeschooling in Slovenia. As expected, the parents wanted to see changes to the regulations determining the evaluation of homeschooled children’s knowledge. However, their suggestions varied somewhat. Both S1 and S3 wished that knowledge evaluation could be conducted throughout the entire year. S2 was of the same opinion, but said that where this was not possible, it should at least be possible that the exams in the last three elementary school grades be spread over the full second semester. Parent S4 stated that “The school should offer the possibility of regular evaluation of the child’s progress during the entire year or at the end of the school year, if the parents requested it.” On this, S5 would change the knowledge evaluation system; stating: “I would implement greater flexibility in determining the timeframe for the examination period in the last six grades.”

S4 added the following: “In my opinion, the assessment should be based on tests that other children [attending school] were applied during the school year. The tests for homeschooled children should not be more extensive or more difficult.”

Didactic-methodical Aspects of Homeschooling – A Hypothetical “Croatian model”

Croatia’s educational system is currently undergoing a major reform that includes early childhood, primary and secondary education. The foundation of this reform can be traced to an umbrella document entitled “Strategy of Education, Science, and Technology” (2014), which also announced the so-called “Curricular Reform”. Among other things, the Curricular Reform presented 52 new curricular documents that brought in a new paradigm of learning and teaching to Croatia. In these documents, it is stressed that students should be placed at the center of the teaching process, and take an active role in the learning process. In this way, it is aimed that students will acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will help make them functional and valuable 21st century citizens.

However, despite the changes that the Curricular Reform (which is notably the most comprehensive reform in the history of education in Croatia) brought to Croatia's educational processes, none of the documents mention or emphasize the need for legal regulations for homeschooling. Since homeschooling is legally regulated in most countries in the European Union and across the region (Koons, 2010; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013), it is clear that there are different models of implementation in play for this type of education.

Without disputing the efficiency of different models and ways of implementing homeschooling, we find it important to highlight the aim of this paper – to compare Croatia with the Slovenian model of homeschooling, based on which we will attempt to build a foundation for the development of homeschooling in the Republic of Croatia. We will start with what we think are the three most important elements of successful homeschooling – an educated parent-teacher, adequate methods of teaching/learning, and a successful process for homeschooling academic evaluation. One of the primary preconditions of homeschooling implementation is the need for an adequately educated parent-teacher, because the Croatian model of homeschooling should, above all, offer ways and conditions to achieve this status. One way to accomplish this is through online education that could be conducted with the help of a well-designed online platform. Such a platform would be accessible to parents who want to educate their children at home, with the primary goal of the platform being the acquisition of competencies by prospective parent-teachers as necessary for homeschooling. Online education via the platform should be guided by experienced mentors holding a degree in educational sciences, pedagogy, or educational theory, with relevant literature on educational sciences made available to prospective parent-teachers. Also, this platform would offer an opportunity for prospective parent-teachers to exchange views, materials, and experiences in the future. Online education for parent-teachers should be implemented over the longer term, and should aim to provide direction and training as follows:

- (1) Defining homeschooling curricula in accordance with the vision, values, and principles of education in Croatia;
- (2) How to recognize the opportunities and abilities of their children;
- (3) Selecting and applying appropriate strategies and methods of teaching that would lead to the homeschooled child achieving a given set of outcomes and goals;
- (4) Choosing and utilizing different mediums as instruments of teaching content;
- (5) Learning how to evaluate the teaching and learning process.

It would also be beneficial to develop an additional support system for parent-teachers through consultative meetings held with their mentors. This type of face-to-face communication could be used to resolve any potential barriers or obstacles that may arise with homeschooling practices, especially those concerning the teaching and learning process. Despite not knowing what strategies, methods, and procedures are the most effective (because there are many different factors that can affect learning and therefore teaching), if we consider various contemporary theories and studies, we can claim with some certainty that certain ways of teaching are more effective than others. Methods for which the goal is to encourage students to become active participants in the learning process – so that they can independently ask questions, explore, think critically, draw their own conclusions and be creative – are the most desirable methods. Given all of this, we can conclude that the preferred ways of teaching and learning in homeschooling should include:

- Problem tasks;
- Research questions;
- Projects tasks;
- Associating with real-life experiences;
- Challenging situations;
- Different creative tasks;
- Gamification in learning.

Each of the above ways of teaching and learning has distinct advantages and disadvantages, and with the method selected by parent-teachers dependent on set goals and outcomes, as well as the child's abilities and situational circumstance etc. Just as other teaching and learning methods undergo a process of evaluation, it would also be necessary to examine the results of homeschooling through the application of some type of external evaluation in order to determine both its positive and negative aspects, as well as to detect to what extent the goals and outcomes prescribed by the national curriculum are being achieved in each homeschooling occurrence. This evaluation task could be performed by the National Center for External Evaluation of Education, which is currently responsible for the preparation, organization, and implementation of the "State's final", a national exam applied as the exit to secondary education.

Conclusion

Both for Slovenia and Croatia, it could be said that having educational pluralism is not a foregone conclusion, which can be attributed to the political history of the second half of the last century. Although the democratization process in Slovenia has led to a few private school initiatives since the 1990s and the legalization of homeschooling, for Croatia it must be concluded that, after 50 years of school and pedagogical uniformity, it is difficult to suddenly develop and apply pedagogical and school pluralism (Matijević, 2009). The situation in Croatia, as it is currently, certainly does not readily facilitate the development of school and pedagogical pluralism.

In this study, we wanted to make a comparison of the homeschooling situation in both Slovenia and Croatia, in the hope that it could provide answers as to how best to create an authentic homeschooling model for Croatia. The legalization of homeschooling in Croatia would certainly be an important step in the further development of pedagogical pluralism and pedagogical individualism, and would more closely align to the standards of European school democracies which imply the possibility for parents to choose a pedagogical concept or pedagogy according to how they wish their children to be educated, including the right to choose not to enroll their children to a public or private school, but to raise and educate their children themselves according to a private arrangement. Indeed, the answers we received during our interviews with Croatian parents aspiring to homeschool their children certainly indicates a level of dissatisfaction with the existing school system.

We believe that the experiences of Slovenian homeschooling parents could be helpful in creating an authentic Croatian model for homeschooling. First, Croatian people can see, based on the Slovene example, that homeschooling can indeed work; that it can be trusted as a genuine form of education, since Slovenian homeschooled children have been proven to be successful at reaching the required learning goals. One of the reasons for this is that homeschooling offers a more individualized, tailor-made approach to learning.

However, the answers from Slovenian parents also indicate that the homeschooling regulation has an aspect which causes stress and diminishes motivation to learn. Therefore, we should note, that any law regulating homeschooling should be aimed towards supporting the child's development into a healthy and mature 21st century citizen. Effective learning can make a significant contribution to that process. The child should, therefore, be at the center of the learning process rather than the learning goals as stated in the curriculum.

The answers of the Slovenian parents we interviewed showed that strictly following the curriculum instead of the child's interest can impair the child's motivation to learn in the homeschool environment. Also, the development of certain skills at fixed moments in time can be unconstructive, because children develop at different tempos. Another significant challenge for both homeschooled children and their parents is the stress that can be experienced due to the school-imposed exams held at the end of each school year. It is correct that the state must ensure the quality of homeschooled education, because it is every child's right to receive a decent and proper education, and we therefore understand that testing is important for the state; especially for a state with a socialistic past where the state was regarded as the main driving force behind the development of the individual. However, testing need not necessarily work to its current child-unfriendly form. Flexibility in scheduling exams or demonstrating progress in the form of annual presentations of a student's portfolio might be two alternative ways to tackle this issue in the future in Slovenia, and at the same time could then be applied as a suggested model for Croatian homeschooling.

These suggestions could therefore be put forward to a Croatian team of experts in charge of educational reform when homeschooling hopefully gains a legal place in the Croatian educational landscape.

Notes

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