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EDUCATION IN THE FAMILY (HOMESCHOOLING) - THE REASONS FOR THE CHOICE OF PARENTS

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Abstract

With the growing unrest in the world, educational institutions are facing more and more challenges. The pandemic situation, which lasted for two years, forced everyone, both young and old, to stay at home. Children no longer had the opportunity to go to schools, parents were obliged to quickly adapt and become mentors for their children, playing the role of teachers, and teachers had to learn how to work in a virtual school. The reluctance of children to go to school was only exacerbated when they saw that there were opportunities for homeschooling and that they parents supported it. Many recent scientific papers have focused on the problem of homeschooling in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when even without choosing this form of education, families were forced to teach children at home [14], [18]. Scientists have been interested in what effect the choice to educate children at home had on the recommended vaccination of children against COVID-19 and constant testing in educational institutions [16]. In scientific articles devoted to the analysis of the topics of education in the family, the fundamental reason why parents choose education in the family is highlighted: parents seek value-based teaching for their children that will prepare them for the future [2]. Parents express the view that formal educational institutions focus on the achievements of the learner and consider the preparation of the learner to pass the exams as an essential task [1]. Kaur [5] conducted a study to find out the main reasons that determine the family's decision to educate the child not in an educational institution but in the family, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of such a form of education. The reasons for such a decision can range from the family's lifestyle and beliefs as well as the child's personal qualities to a personal approach to the educational system [12]. Some families think that the home environment is more conducive to the child's learning and that he/she can not only learn a lot more in a shorter period of time but also achieve higher academic results; active learning means that the child will not need to spend so much time sitting at a desk and listening [11]. It should be noted that parents take care of the emotional environment of their child and want to provide it; they are frightened by the culture of bullying that is common at school [4], [9]. Another reason is that families seek to devote as much time as possible to developing the necessary competences in their child, taking greater account of the child's areas of interest and providing opportunities for more varied and enriched learning experiences than at school [17]. In summary, the studies reviewed do not prove that education in the family is superior to education at school in terms of academic achievement and/or socialisation and vice versa. The summarised results of the presented research show that parents who are determined to educate their children in the family and have chosen this form of teaching and learning, i.e., homeschooling, are able to create excellent conditions and ensure that their children achieve high academic results. It should be noted that it is important to provide for and clearly regulate in law the safeguards protecting the interests of the learners, when the process of education in the family is adjusted and, if necessary, the learners are returned to the educational institution.

Keywords: homeschooling, challenges, school, parents.

1 INTRODUCTION

Around the world, the form of education in the family or otherwise known as "homeschooling" is a widespread form of education that originated in the United States of America and has been in practice since the mid-20th century [6]. In Europe, there has been little research on homeschooling, as homeschooling itself has only recently been implemented. More such studies have been conducted across the Atlantic, i.e., in the US and Canada, where this form of education has been in use since the 1970s, when educational theorist and school reformer John Holt began to argue that the official focus of schools on learning created an oppressive emotional environment and that education was designed to make children compliant employees [8], [13]. During this period, a great deal of research has been carried out in these countries, ranging from comparisons of the achievements of students educated in the family with those of students educated in a traditional school to research on emotional-social skills

and psychology, which aims to show the pros and cons of this form of education and the impact it can have on young people's future life.

The main focus of research has been placed on comparing academic performance. Rudner [10] sought to find out how homeschooling affects children's academic knowledge and achievements. Ray [3], Martin-Chang, Gould and Meuse [15] carried out a comparative analysis of the results of the "SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) 11" exam of students educated in families, public and private institutions. The studies of these researchers were very similar and revealed no statistically significant differences in academic results between school-educated and home-educated children.

A significant number of recent research articles have addressed the issue of education in the family/at home in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when families were forced to educate their children at home even if they did not choose this form of education [14]. Researchers have also looked at the impact of COVID-19 vaccination and routine testing in educational institutions on the choice to educate children in the family [16].

Another particularly important aspect of homeschooling is the reasons why parents choose this type of education for their child. It is not up to the child to choose to be educated in a different way than at school. In most cases, the request for homeschooling comes from parents, or a written parental consent is required. In most countries, homeschooling is subject to different legal regulation, with unique, country-specific practices to help implement and improve the process of education in the family. By deciding to educate their child in the family, parents take responsibility for their child's education and socialisation: they become the child's teachers, while the educational institution assumes a controlling role. The roles of the educational institution and parents in the context of a child's education change fundamentally. The reasons for choosing to educate a child in the family vary widely, and not all European countries have legalised this type of education. In many European countries, homeschooling is prescribed in case of health problems, but even so, teachers and social workers visit the child while he/she is learning at home.

2   METHODOLOGY

To achieve the aim of the research, a semi-structured interview method was used, and the data were processed by means of qualitative content analysis. The research sample consisted of ten participants, i.e., five parents who educate their children at home and five heads of educational institutions. The following criteria were applied in selecting the target group of parents: 1) the parents have signed an agreement regarding homeschooling with the educational institution and at least one child is educated in the family; 2) the parents themselves organise the educational process in the family. Selection criteria for heads of educational institutions were as follows: 1) the statutes of the educational institution provide for the right to organise the process of education in the family and to enter into agreements with parents; 2) the educational institution has signed at least one agreement regarding homeschooling with parents and its lists include students who are educated in the family. In the course of empirical study, the ethical principles of respect for personal privacy, confidentiality and anonymity, benevolence and non-maleficence, and justice were observed (auth.). Each target group has a different relationship to the problem being analysed, and the data obtained provides a broader and more detailed picture of the problem under analysis. The research was carried out in September 2021–April 2022.

The data obtained during the interviews were transcribed and then abstracted using the qualitative research software package MAXQDA 2022 Setup, which allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis and the presentation of the results of the analysis in a variety of ways. Using the MAXQDA software program, not only a code system (Fig. 1) was created for each informant, but also a matrix of relationships between the coded data, which made it possible to identify the relationships between the individual codes. This is particularly important as it reveals possible causal links (Fig. 2).

A few examples are given below.

Figure 1. Code system for data provided by the informant

(Codes in English: Leadership; Role of the head; Learning outcomes; Education quality; Responsibility; Reasons; Private schools; Parental functions; Cooperation; Functions of EIs in Hsing; Weaknesses; Education policy; Threats; Funding for Hsing; Legal regulation of Hsing; Functions of Eis; Functions of municipality).
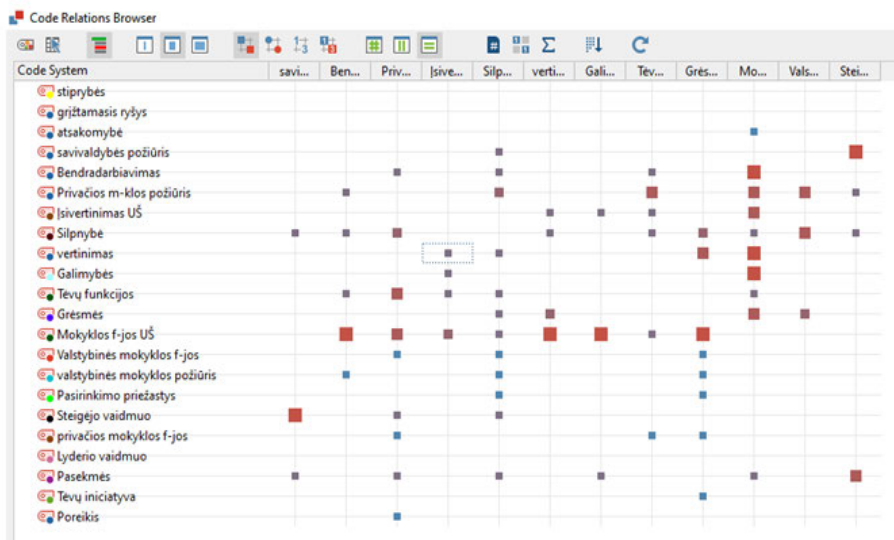

Figure 2. Relationship matrix of the informant's coded (abstracted) data

(Codes in English: Strengths; Feedback; Responsibility; Municipal approach; Cooperation; Private school approach; Self-assessment of Hsing; Weakness; Assessment; Opportunities; Parental functions; Threats; School functions in Hsing; State school functions; Reasons for choice; Role of the founder; Private school functions; Role of the leader; Consequences; Parental initiative; Need).

After abstracting the data of the target group of parents, the code system made it possible to identify topics and subtopics, which explain aspects of the problem under analysis. The topics and sub-topics are discussed below.

3 RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

3.1 Reasons given by parents for their decision to have their child educated in the family

Poor emotional environment. When talking about the reasons for choosing alternative education, all the parents who took part in the research pointed to a poor emotional atmosphere at schools: <and that huge

negativity if a child is not so good at something>; <from that comment of my child, I understood that she felt like she was in prison at school>; <those bad experiences when children are forcibly questioned during lessons or that feeling of loneliness during breaks>; <parents suffer no less than children, and they want to feel "human">; <my child has spent a lot of years feeling bad all the time, and those bad memories are still very vivid>; <in my opinion, educational institutions have the talent to make children feel inadequate from an early age. And not only the children, but also the parents of the children>.

Lack of personalised teaching. All the parents who took part in the research noted that they felt their child lacked the teacher's personal attention, access, and the selection of specific, appropriate learning methods: <what does the school process look like? Well, now we all have to sit down; now we all have to write; now we all have to do what the teacher says. And now we are all going to write a test, and now we are going to grade you all on the same grading system>; <the teacher is obliged to act according to certain guidelines, according to certain programmes. This is probably because the teacher is also under strict control, he/she has to meet certain standards>; <my child needs more freedom in the learning process and more playfulness>; <at school, they put everyone in one space and tell them to do everything in the same way, where one person cannot sit still because he/she might be an athlete, and another cannot stop talking because he might be an orator in future. Well, how can this be?>.

Views of educational philosophy. Some of the informants particularly highlighted the difference between how they perceive the philosophy of education and how the educational institution perceives it. In most cases, the fundamental views on the educational process itself and its purpose differ: <the school should help to discard all unnecessary information and keep only what is most important, what responds to the person's inner needs, and what helps to find some solutions. You should feel that what is happening at school is acceptable and right>; <and the state itself, it is very much in the business of shaping what a person should be. And what is the state to me and all those orders from a minister – for me, it is nothing. For me it is absolutely nothing; it is just someone else's point of view, and I have my own perception of how I live, and it comes from within me.

Impact of COVID-19. During the research, interviews with the informants revealed that if it were not for the pandemic that has hit the world, they might not have chosen homeschooling. However, distance education, when parents tried their role as educators, gave them courage and realisation that things are not as complicated as they seem to be. Some informants also disagreed with the policies and measures in place to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led them to choose to educate their children at home: <why we have left that school is purely because of this situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, when this policy of fear, this policy of instilling fear started>; <that environment became very toxic, and to protect our child and ourselves, we just decided not to come back after the quarantines, and we left school because our understanding and all those requirements at school were very different>; <and for the child himself, when the school restricted the possibility of children's movement, communication and the like, our child no longer liked it there. What he liked at school was forbidden and could no longer be done. What used to make him feel fun and make him want to go to school every day disappeared, and he started repeating that he did not want to go to school anymore>.

Education is not about results. One of the main reasons for this choice is that parents want to raise a child who enjoys learning; they see enhancing motivation to learn rather than achieving high academic results as the main goal: <of course, it is the attitude of the school, whether you want to make a genius out of the child, whether it is only the rankings that matter to you, or whether what is important to you is the fact that the child is being educated in general, that he/she is making progress, that he/she is learning, and that he/she is interested in something>; <our school will probably do this kind of preventive check after half a year, but they will not do it because they want to check something, but because they want to give peace of mind to parents, so they could check themselves>; <we are trying to nurture those things that we see are working and that might be viable>; <if you look at learning and education styles, then homeschooling has nine of them, it seems; then, we are complete "anti-schoolers". I want to bring the child back to the basics and to develop what all of us have failed to develop. After all, most people cannot understand what life is, what we are doing here and the meaning of it all>.

The attitude of the educational institution. In the empirical research, the interviews highlighted the lack of cooperation and communication between educational institutions and parents. Most parents felt unheard and misunderstood; they emphasised the guilt that was always coming from the school: <you know, it seems like they do not say anything to you directly, they do not say anything bad, but it is just that feeling that you do not really fit in here, and the question that is just hanging in the air of how you are going to manage to fit in the shelves that we have made for you if you do not fit in the shelf from this side here and you do not fit in the shelf from that side here>.

Choosing the content of education according to the needs of the child. The school is not yet able to meet individual needs of each child taking into account his/her strengths. The content of education is static and standardised. If the teacher is not creative, this becomes a problem when it comes to personalising the educational content. In contrast, when children are educated in the family, parents have the opportunity not only to personalise or adapt the content, but also to tailor it to their child's specific needs: <we do not learn from textbooks>; <she is very gifted. We are trying to find all sorts of additional things for her>; <for example, we woke up today and my little one insisted we should do something during the weekend: "Mummy, you told me that you would teach me how to knit", so today we did this art lesson for maybe three hours; we were knitting and we were watching knitting lessons on YouTube to find out about how to knit, about the yarn and the knitting needles; my eldest son joined in, and they started measuring hats to see how many hats could fit on the hats and what the weight of the hats was>; <maybe let us start with that, maybe make it easier, maybe make it harder>; <not to force him to do things that are not his cup of tea, but to let him himself be interested and delve into things that really interests him. Yes, the basic things – reading, writing and numeracy – are important. He reads a lot. Especially encyclopaedias. He can immerse himself in these books. He knows a lot, but not because someone has told him to, but because he is very curious and has found the information himself>.

Child involvement in the organisation of the educational process. When educating the child in the family, parents have the opportunity to involve the child in the organisation of the educational process and to allow the child to feel responsible for his/her own performance: <together with the child, we have chosen the textbooks and the workbooks that we have found to be most suitable, and we have simply been studying according to the topics included there, according to that programme>.

Diversity of educational environments. The data provided by the informants clearly show that it is difficult for the school to ensure the diversity of educational environments that parents can provide. Children themselves can choose where they want to learn: <if my eldest daughter goes to the swimming pool two times a week for health reasons>; <I ask them where they would like to learn, whether in their room or at the table in the kitchen where I will be doing something. They choose the space where they will sit>; <we have deliberately set aside one day (we study four days a week) for educational activities and meetings; almost all day long we are among people>; <we have basically given the child the opportunity to choose where he will study because he is already old enough to be able to evaluate his own experiences related to how he feels, how he feels in certain places, and what he would like most of all, and we give him the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process>.

3.2 Reasons given by the heads of the educational institutions that may influence parents' decision to educate their child in the family

Lack of cooperation with parents. During the interviews, school leaders revealed that although they try to communicate with parents in various ways, there is still a lack of communication: <first of all, it is a matter of talking, because when there are problems, it is always very important to talk. Although, of course, when there are 1,000 children at school, all this communication... but anyway, there are class teachers, there are social pedagogues, and there are educational support specialists. They should all talk>; <it is very important not to leave parents with unresolved issues; the school has resources, and all specialists should help to solve the issues that have arisen>.

Lack of added value creation in the institution. It is no longer enough for today's school to perform its basic functions; however, in order to keep students in the educational institution, the educational institution itself must think about creating a different, added value: <every school should think about the added value it has created>; <whatever studies we take at EU level, we are usually 4th from the bottom. But we usually react in this way: instead of taking some decisions based on the findings of the studies, we tend to criticise the studies that have been carried out, saying that the questions were not asked in the right way, the sample was inappropriate, etc. We continue to be pleased with ourselves, imitate the implementation of various descriptions and continue to live in exactly the same way. I dare to say so, because it is obvious that our results are not good. What value do we create?>.

Competence of school leaders and teachers. While it may seem that teachers working in educational institutions meet the qualification requirements for a teaching position, school leaders themselves point out that teachers sometimes lack competences. Another major problem is that teachers no longer have time to perform their duties to a high standard because of the extremely high volume of tasks they have to perform: <according to all theories, a successful and good school leader is at least 70% of the school's success. In today's school, leaders really have freedom to act, and everything depends very much on the person himself/herself>; <the teacher should also go to work as if it were a holiday, not as a person

who wakes up in the morning and feels sick at the thought of going to work. He/she should be happy to see the mischievous 5th or 10th graders>; <sometimes there is an imitation of child support in institutions>; <but at the same time, there are examples of bad experiences from educational institutions: we have seen bad cases where educational institutions do not deal with a child's behaviour and throw him/her out not only from their own, but also from all educational institutions in the district>; <another problem in the education system is that we comply with all the legislation, but only on paper, and we imitate a lot. We fill everything in on time, send everything on time, and we imagine that we have performed high-quality work>; <if you talk to municipal schools, they will tell you that they do something; for example, they give lessons, but they will not tell you what methods they use; the head usually will not tell you how clear his/her philosophy is and what strategy he/she follows. They speak, as the saying goes, using fireworks of words. They will talk in clichés: maybe it comes from the concept of a good school, which strives for humanity, wants values to be developed, etc. But how do you develop those values; what does your path look like in that institution; what strategies do you use? I think that after talking to school leaders, it would become clear that there are few leaders in municipal schools who know about it and few who really understand it and go into it>; <you know, I think that maybe sometimes teachers do not even know how to measure the level of children's abilities and how to assess their competences. I mean, I do not even know how we are going to learn now: the updated general curriculum, with most subjects based on competences, and the fact is that the teacher does not understand the concept of competence>.

Different approaches to value-based education. With the integration of various other programmes in education such as social-emotional education, sexuality education, and the new requirements for school meals for children according to which meals should be prepared following recommendations of dieticians, there has been another wave of discontent and a kind of conflict between parents and the school: <parents may not agree with certain values of the curriculum and therefore opt for education at home>; <healthy food... it was so strange to me when schools started to care about healthy eating and offer children healthy meals, and the reaction from parents was: "What is this nonsense; it does not taste good". The institution wants your child to eat healthy meals, but parents say the child does not eat because he/she does not like it... that is bad, and we need to do something about the fact that he/she does not eat healthy food>.

Unsafe environment. During the interviews, school leaders noted that parents see school as an unsafe space for their children: <Parents are worried that peers may have a negative impact on their child's value development and psycho-emotional well-being>.

Quality of education. School leaders are aware of their responsibilities, but they also talk about the overwhelming number of indirect responsibilities that leave them with no time to carry out their direct duties, to the detriment of the quality of education. The lack of quality of education is one of the reasons why parents are looking for alternative ways to educate their children: <today's school is not able to provide quality education>; <I have travelled to other countries and have seen that the number of staff allocated to administration, to the assurance of the quality of education, and to all those educational functions of the school is much higher than in our country. Thus, it is not really possible to perform all the functions well>; <and in fact, today the teacher has to be everything at school: a mum, a dad, a doctor, a teacher, a psychologist, and a social worker. There is an infinite number of functions; they have been expanded and are still being expanded>; <the person is gone from the school, but the function remains. This must be done by those who work. What we want from the municipalities is more attention and care for the economic areas, which should actually be checked by the municipality, so that teachers can work calmly and efficiently, and concentrate on the quality of teaching. Then you can feel that you work at school and not in an administrative institution>.

Impact of COVID-19. The large number of additional functions and various restrictions during the pandemic added additional tasks for heads and teachers of educational institutions, which further distanced them from their direct responsibilities and the child: <a as a head, I organise all the procedures related to COVID-19. I have to observe lessons and students' adaptation; I cross out everything I have written... then I have to connect to Zoom or to provide some data as soon as possible – I cannot carry out my direct functions>; <but we did not educate children during this period. We reached a point where those secondary functions, which are not direct but affect the learning environment itself, became more important; <I have very little education in my life; I am afraid of losing my main mission as a teacher>.

4 CONCLUSIONS

When parents choose to educate their child in the family, they essentially take over the main function of educational institutions to educate the child and become responsible for the entire organisation of the educational process. Parents who participated in the research indicated that the main reason for their decision to educate their child in the family is the inability of educational institutions to personalise and adapt educational content and environment to the needs of children. The vastly expanded and undefined roles of teachers and school leaders mean that teachers do not have enough time to carry out their direct responsibilities and to ensure the quality of education as well as to understand each child's situation in depth. The situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, when children were forced to learn at home remotely, provided an opportunity for parents to try out the role of the educator and encouraged them to choose homeschooling as an alternative method of education. The provisions of sexuality education and other programmes of education integrated at school are at odds with some parents' educational vision and perceived philosophy of education. The organisation of the educational process in the family differs from the one in educational institutions in that it involves the learner, takes into account the child's individual needs, and promotes the child's independence. Homeschooling offers a more flexible schedule and a more targeted approach to motivating learners. Educational environments are constantly changing and are usually chosen by the child.

As observed by the school leaders who took part in the research, parents' choice to educate their child at home is determined by the lack of tangible added value of education at school, which is mostly ensured by good teacher-student relationship and parent-school cooperation. An important reason for the choice of homeschooling is the clash between values of parents and the school, and sometimes an unsafe school environment.

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