Pedagogika, 2024, 74(4), 357–378
http://pages.pedf.cuni.cz/pedagogika/

RESEARCH PAPER

Homeschooling in Czech Families: The diversity of approaches between the school-based structure and unschooling[1]

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Abstract: *The article focuses on homeschooling in the Czech Republic and describes the homeschooling process, methods, and challenges faced by parents practising this mode of education. The aim of the article is to provide an in-depth look at how parents organise homeschooling, the role of family members, and the autonomy of children in their education, and to discuss this mode of learning in relation to the school-based system and structure of learning. The research involved a qualitative analysis of the diary entries of 20 Czech families that practise homeschooling. The diaries were maintained from October 2021 to December 2022. The results of the research reveal the existence of a variety of approaches to planning the instruction of a child and the use of different learning methods and activities, and show the different models of homeschooling practised, ranging from school-based (reproducing the structure of the school in the home) at one end through to unschooling at the opposite end. The research shows that it would be simplistic to see homeschooling in the Czech context as outside the school-based system of education.*

Keywords: *autonomous learning, Czech Republic, homeschooling, qualitative research, motivation to learn, socialisation, learning methods*

INTRODUCTION

"Mass education is a striking feature of the modern world" (Boli, Ramirez, & Meyer, 1985, p. 145). It is thought to have a wide range of effects on individuals and society as a whole (Riddell, 2005). The benefits of education to individuals are primarily economic, such as higher earnings, lower unemployment rates, and greater job satisfaction, but can also include non-market benefits like health and longevity (ibid.). Conversely, there is a strong belief that the benefits of education can also have a significant social impact on societies

[1] This article was prepared with the financial support of the Czech Science Foundation, no. 21-21743S – *The Advantages and Disadvantages of Homeschooling: What Does the Czech Experience Tell Us?*

DOI: 10.14712/23362189.2025.4869

as a whole. Education can enhance economic development, social mobility, civic engagement, human rights, levels of democracy, and political stability and can reduce crime (McMahon, 2002; Riddell, 2005). Not surprisingly, governments invest heavily in public support for education and retain control over its content and delivery.

The introduction of compulsory mass education (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020) was the first step towards the state control of education and a key moment that had a significant impact on the formation of modern societies. Education, which for centuries had been considered a private family matter, was brought into the public sphere (Benavot, Corrales, & Resnik, 2006). Schools gradually managed to "monopolise the education system" and provide expertise in the field of education (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020). This move was strongly supported by historians of education who saw public schools as engines of democracy and "the balance of the social machinery" (Kaestle & Vinovskis, 1980, p. 9).

Despite the mostly positive effects attributed to the development of a formalised and centralised education system, the system has been criticised since its inception. Dewey (2023), for example, criticised their excessive uniformity, which left no room for respecting individuality. Others linked the construction of mass education to the desire of the dominant group to use it for its own purposes (Boli et al., 1985). Freire (1970), for example, saw traditional schooling as a tool for maintaining power and dominance, reproducing inequalities in society and stifling critical thinking, leading students to passivity. Similarly, Illich (1970) described the school system as harmful to both the individual and society, because he saw it as an instrument of social control, reinforcing the position of existing social hierarchies and reproducing inequality in society. For these reasons, he called for the de-schooling of society, i.e. the removal of formal educational institutions and their replacement with more flexible forms of education.

As Bartlett and Schugurensky (2020) mention, Illich's theoretical ideas are very close to Holt's unschooling. Holt (1982) urged parents to take their children out of school and engage them in a self-directed form of education in which learning and living are seen as inseparable parts of the transmission of knowledge (learning-through-living) (Schonfeld-Karan, 2022). Holt's appeal to parents was heeded, and homeschooling has been growing significantly in many countries around the world, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the school population, and this trend is expected to continue (Bosswell, 2021). Millions of children around the world are now being homeschooled (Apple, 2020). However, homeschooling is an evolving concept that has changed significantly over time. Homeschooling today is shaped by the high heterogeneity of the homeschool-

ing population (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020) and the use of flexible forms of education (Wearne, 2019). These practices are facilitated by technological advances (Hamlin & Peterson, 2022) and high levels of parental autonomy, which lead to innovative partnerships with potential educators, including schools (Hirsh, 2019). This behaviour is in some cases encouraged by legislation such as the "Tim Tebow" laws passed in various US states (Hoffman, 2023; Jolly & Matthews, 2020). As Gaither (2008) predicted, "antagonism between home and school that characterised the early days of the homeschooling movement will be replaced over time by a 'hybridisation of home and school'" (p. xii). Indeed, homeschooling today can no longer be considered an exclusively out-of-school form of education, as it is increasingly intertwined with "more formal learning contexts, whether they be online experiences, neighbourhood subs, cooperatives, or joint ventures with public and private schools" (Hamlin & Peterson, 2022, p. 24). What has traditionally been characterised as out-of-school learning can be seen as "parent-directed education" (Valiente et al., 2022, p. 48).

Homeschooling in the Czech context

Let us briefly describe the specific features of homeschooling in the Czech educational context. The legal status of homeschooling in Czechia is very specific. Homeschooling has been possible since the 1998/1999 school year, but only as part of a pilot project to experimentally evaluate the functionality of homeschooling in the Czech educational context. It was not until much later, in 2004, that homeschooling was enshrined in law as an "a different way" of fulfilling compulsory schooling (Kostelecká, 2017, p. 426). The law refers to homeschooling as an individual form of education and does not give parents the legal right to homeschool. They can only apply to the headmaster of the school for permission to homeschool. If the headmaster accepts the parents' request, the school takes responsibility for monitoring the child's educational progress through a twice-yearly assessment. If the school is not satisfied with the child's results, homeschooling can be terminated. Homeschooling is therefore very closely linked to the school, which both approves and monitors it. The state also retains control over the content of homeschooling. Parents do not have the right to choose their own curriculum, as homeschooled children have to follow the curriculum set by the state. This is very restrictive, especially for parents who wish to practise unschooling, as they cannot guarantee compliance with the state curriculum. So although the law does not explicitly prohibit unschooling, in practice it can be very problematic (Kostelecká et al., 2021).

The question is whether homeschooling in the Czech context is a step in the direction of Holt's proposed un-

schooling or rather a step towards the global trend of the hybridisation of home and school. The answer is sought through the analysis of qualitative data collected from the personal pedagogical diaries that homeschooling families kept over a period of one year. In these, families identified their children's main educators, the course of their homeschooling, the teaching methods they used, the ways in which they motivated their children to learn, their compliance/non-compliance with the state-prescribed curriculum, and other challenges and problems they encountered over time.

The Research Design

Given the objectives of our research and our research question, we chose a qualitative research design based on Strauss and Corbin (1990), which allows us to analyse the research subject in all its entirety and complexity, and that includes identifying interconnections. Participants were selected on the basis of predefined criteria (Robinson, 2014): the participant had to be the educator of at least one child (regardless of the child's age) who at the time of the research was completing their compulsory education through homeschooling, regardless of whether or not the child had prior experience of school-based education. Because families who practise homeschooling are generally a hard-to-reach group, it was very difficult to find participants who matched our specified criteria. An advertisement posted repeatedly on social media, placed on the websites of the researchers' institution, and distributed by students was used to invite participants to take part in the research. The size of the research sample was established gradually so as to achieve theoretical saturation of the problem (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The final purposive research sample was made up of 20 participants, all of whom were women (19 mothers and 1 grandmother), as no men volunteered for the research. Most of the women in the sample had a university degree (15), which may be owing to Czech legislation requiring that parents who homeschool their children have at least a secondary school education in the case of children at the primary education level or an undergraduate level of university education in the case of children at the lower secondary education level. See Table 1 for more details on the final sample.

As part of the data collection, participants were asked to keep a diary.[2] The main purpose of the diary

[2] Other data collection also took place as part of the research project. In this paper, however, we present only the results of the analysis of the data collected from the diaries.

was to record how the child's education was actually progressing. Participants completed the diaries regularly once a month from October 2021 to December 2022 (for one school year and part of the next school year). We created a special online site in which the participants could complete their diaries, to which the participants had individual password-protected access. Only the researchers could view the diary entries on an ongoing basis. To make the process easier, we provided each family with a template outlining the main themes for them to fill in each month, which were Education, Educational Assessment, and Socialisation. Participants also had the option to freely write about things outside this thematic structure. Participants' participation in the study was on a voluntary basis and with their informed consent. Participants' motivation to take part in the research was supported by asking them to sign an agreement and paying them a fee for participating.

The data were analysed in a hybrid inductive/deductive thematic analysis, the validity of which has been demonstrated by a number of studies (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Proudfoot, 2022), and which was found to be the most appropriate method of analysis for our research. We chose this approach in order to capture new patterns emerging out of the data and to test existing theoretical assumptions reflected in the structure of the diaries.

In the first phase, we applied an inductive thematic analysis, which involves identifying themes directly in the data, without drawing on any pre-defined theories or categories. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations, this analysis was performed in six phases: (1) transcribing the data and rereading it with notes, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) drafting the report. This process was key to identifying unexpected patterns and themes that were not theoretically defined in advance.

We then conducted the deductive thematic analysis, which used a predefined theoretical framework based on the given structure of the teaching diaries. This approach made it possible to systematically examine the extent to which the patterns we identified corresponded to theoretical categories and concepts relating to homeschooling. The deductive analysis started with general theoretical categories and proceeded to specific data, which made it possible to compare the newly identified patterns with existing theoretical assumptions.

The combination of the two approaches allowed us both to capture new aspects of homeschooling and to test the extent to which the findings fit existing theoretical concepts. This approach provided more comprehensive and deeper insight into the subject of our research.

Table 1: Research sample – key characteristics

Partici-pant	SEN	The child in homes-chooling	Child's grade in 2021/22	Child has experience with school-based education	Attendance at a commu-nity school	Education of the mother/ father	Residential category according to the size of the com-munity of residence	Region of community of residence
Alena	No	Adéla	1.	Yes	Yes	Secondary/ Tertiary	1	Olomouc Region
Barbora	Gifted	Berta	2.	Yes	No	Secondary/ Tertiary	1	Pardubice Region
Cecílie	Gifted	Celesta	1.	Yes	No	Tertiary/Ter-tiary	5	City of Prague
Daniela	No	David	1.	Yes	No	Tertiary/Ter-tiary	2	South Moravian Region
Eva	No	Edgar	2.	No	An agreement between 3 mothers	Tertiary/Sec-ondary	2	South Bohemian Region
Františka	No	Fiona	5.	No	Yes	Secondary/ Secondary	1	Moravian-Silesian Region
Gabriela	No	Gustav	9.	No	No	Tertiary/Sec-ondary	0	South Moravian Region
Hana	No	Helena	7.	No	Yes	Tertiary/Sec-ondary	0	Central Bohemia Region
Ivana	No	Iveta	1.	No	No	Tertiary/Ter-tiary	4	South Moravian Region
Jana	No	Jan	1.	No	No	Tertiary/Sec-ondary	1	Karlovy Vary Region

Kateřina*	No	Klára	9.	Yes	No	Secondary/ Secondary	2	South Moravian Region
Lena	No	Lucie	3.	No	Yes	Tertiary/Tertiary	2	Plzeň Region
Martina	No	Marie	5.	Yes	No	Tertiary/Tertiary	5	City of Prague
Natálie	No	Nikolas	7.	No	No	Tertiary/Tertiary	3	Vysočina Region
Olina	Gifted	Olivie	1.	No	No	Tertiary/Tertiary	2	Zlín Region
Petra	Gifted	Patricie	1.	Yes	Not clear	Secondary/ Vocational	1	Plzeň Region
Romana	Gifted	Renáta	5.	Yes	No	Tertiary/Tertiary	1	Ústí had Labem Region
Stanislava	Gifted	Simona	2.	Yes	Yes	Tertiary/Tertiary	1	Central Bohemia Region
Tereza	ADHD, ASD, gifted	Tomáš	3.	Yes	Yes	Tertiary/Tertiary	5	City of Prague
Veronika	Gifted	Vanda	3.	Yes	Yes	Tertiary/Tertiary	5	City of Prague

Notes: SEN (special education needs), DV (homeschooling), ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), PAS (autism spectrum disorder), VŠ (tertiary education), SŠ (secondary education). Where it reads "gifted child", this is according to the words of the parents or the fact that the child already knew how to read before starting school, and in cases even to count and write, but it does not necessary refer to a diagnosed special education need. *Kateřina was the child's grandmother. **Categories of place of residence according to community size: 0 (fewer than 500 inhabitants), 1 (500–2 000 inhabitants), 2 (2 000–10 000 inhabitants), 3 (10 000–100 000 inhabitants), 4 (100 000–500 000 inhabitants), 5 (more than 500 000 inhabitants). Kateřina and Petra were ultimately removed from the analysis because of incomplete records in their diaries. The names of the participants and their children have been changed.

The Results of the Data Analysis

The results of the data analysis revealed six key super-themes that consistently recurred in the parents' teaching diaries: (1) educators in homeschooling; (2) state-led curriculum vs. child-led curriculum; (3) educational resources – textbooks vs. learning-through-living; (4) structured vs. unstructured learning; (5) parent-led assessment; and (6) school-led assessment.

Educators in homeschooling

In the majority of families there was more than one educator involved in teaching the homeschooled child. In every case one of them was the mother (the participant in our research), while the other one or ones were either fathers, grandparents, or other relatives. Table 1 shows that a relatively large number of participants reported that their children attended a community school, and this is significant for our research questions as this is a factor that influences the extent to which the homeschooled child's education is structured and connected to the official curriculum.

The data analysis also revealed that parents' perception and definition of an educator determined to a considerable degree how they organised their homeschooling. We are able to identify essentially two distinct approaches. Parents who practise a more structured form of homeschooling tend to have a clear definition of what an educator is and of the educator's role in the education process. They see teachers, tutors, and coaches as experts responsible for a specific area of education, such as teaching English or mathematics. This interpretation of educators views them as the individuals who ensure that children are instructed in the state-mandated educational curriculum or other educational areas relating to their individual learning needs:

"Me as the mother, my family, others around me, my friends, my environment ... twice a week at the community school, English lessons once a fortnight, dance class once a week, one organised meeting with homeschoolers." (Stanislava)

Stanislava's statement indicates that a broad but clearly defined range of traditional and unusual actors can be involved in the education process. As well as family members and a person's natural social circles, institutionalised forms of education, such as a community school, English classes with a tutor, or organised meetings with other homeschoolers, also have a role to play.

Conversely, parents who are inclined to adopt less structured forms of education, which are more like self-directed learning and learning-through-living, generally consider everyone they meet to be educators, believing that every contact and interaction contribute to a child's development, life experiences, and learning. They view education holistically. They do not just focus on the child's instruction in the prescribed

curriculum but are instead interested in the child's broader personal growth:

"Marie's education is influenced by everyone my daughter has met this month. By this we mean: any visitor, a shop assistant, the tradesman repairing the roof, a friend, the mother, father, sister, uncle, grandmother ... My daughter attends three after-school clubs a week – so she meets the after-school clubs' teachers and other children there." (Martina)

Martina emphasises natural learning through interactions with people in everyday life. This represents a combination of institutional and non-institutional actors.

Despite some differences, both statements above show that the children acquire learning from different social environments, where homeschooling extends well beyond the confines of the traditional school, but also beyond the home and the household.

State-led curriculum versus child-led curriculum

In terms of the content of the education provided, some families in our sample followed the teaching framework provided by the anchor school,[3] which is the school's educational curriculum.[4] These families were guided by the learning objectives set out in the school's educational curriculum and monitored their child's results in reference to the learning objectives and content of the curriculum – for example, whether the child was progressing at a slower or faster pace in relation to the plan:

"We continued to educate according to the school curriculum of the anchor school. In key subjects – the Czech language and maths – we were progressing at a faster pace – for example, practising writing out letters corresponds to where the plan is around February/March." (Jana)

If the child was also attending a community school (e.g., several times a week) as part of their homeschooling, participants also mentioned the influence of the community school in determining learning objectives and content.

"The anchor school puts together monthly topic plans for each subject, which we follow so that we don't overlook any topics, study areas, or skills. At the start of the month, I study the topic plans for each subject and determine what we need to be sure to include, what we should be trying to achieve, what we need to get in order to fulfil the plans (e.g., items from nature to collect and press, purchasing ink). Then, over the month, we work to fulfil the objectives (and more) in accordance with the child's circumstances and interests at a particular time." (Cecílie)

[3] In the Czech educational environment, the "anchor" school is the school through which the child fulfils compulsory school attendance.

[4] In the Czech education system, the content of educational programmes is determined at two levels. The state draws up the "General Educational Programmes", which set out the basic framework of the educational programmes of individual grades and individual types of school. This forms the basis for the creation of the school education programmes, in which schools define the specific learning objectives of the programme, taking into account the specific aspects and needs of their students and the local community.

Cecilia's and Jana's statements show a strong orientation towards the educational programme of the anchor/community school, a programme that is based on the state-mandated curriculum. These two mothers both followed the programme not just to determine learning objectives but also to monitor the pace of instruction. Cecilia actively planned her child's education according to the monthly topic plans, while Jana referred to specific seasonal milestones defined in the school curriculum. In both cases, the school curriculum thus functions not only as a source of inspiration but also as a crucial guideline for organising homeschooling.

Another group of families emphasised in their diaries that they not follow any fixed learning objectives or educational content when homeschooling their child and are guided solely by their child's interests or needs at a given time or by their current situation, holidays, or traditions associated with the given time of year.

"It is always the child who decides the learning topics. We only base things on what the child wants to do, what he wants to talk about, etc. (...) I used to have some 'teaching fits' where I wanted to decide what he should learn, but then I realised this was a total unnecessary 'assault' on the child." (Alena)

Alena's phrase "teaching fits" referred to a situation where she tried to steer her child's education from her position as an adult. In hindsight, however, she saw this aim as an "assault" on the child's needs and she sought to withdraw from her role in leading the teaching process to give the child more autonomy. A similar situation could be observed, however, in other families:

"In the vast majority of cases, the topic or focus of the teaching in our family is guided by the current needs of the child or the current situation in real life. So we focus on what our daughter asks about, what she is interested in, or what comes up in a given situation (e.g., when we see an architecturally interesting building in the centre of Prague)." (Martina)

Martina's approach rejects not just predetermined educational content but also the time plan the school curriculum follows. Her approach to education is situational and flexible and is about responding to the child's spontaneous questions and to real-life situations. This approach breaks with the linear and predetermined curriculum of the school, which does not allow for spontaneous reactions to immediate stimuli.

Educational Resources: Textbooks vs Learning-Through-Living

Parents also differed by the educational resources they used. We identified two basic approaches. The largest group in terms of numbers are the parents who follow the school curriculum and supplement it with additional activities, such as activities in the home, outdoor activities, play, experimenta-

tion, and observation. These parents use textbooks, workbooks, readers, books, online resources, and other materials commonly used in the classroom, which they then combine with hands-on experiences and leisure activities such as trips, exhibitions, and excursions:

"Berta's studies followed her General Studies for Grade 2 textbook, which covers the basics of nature. She also took advantage of a visit to the library and borrowed various books about nature, an animal atlas, a plant atlas. In our library at home she found more books about birds. We went on a lot of walks in the woods with our dog to observe nature, the colours of the leaves. We cleaned up litter in green areas. My daughter also made her own posters in which she highlighted why it is important to look after the environment and care for nature, which she then put up on local notice boards in the village. She watched various nature series and movies. With her older brother, she made birdhouses for the birds in winter." (Barbora)

"We teach the basic subjects mainly from the textbooks (mathematics, a spelling book, a reader, a first book of numbers, a book of provuka/general studies lessons). We try to read every day. David reads simpler texts. I read the book Ikabog to him so that he understands the text. At school they discussed winter as a topic. So we go outside a lot, pointing out to each other trees, hidden ladybugs, a hibernating hedgehog. He and my older son have a bunker in the woods where they have watched deer." (Daniela)

Barbora's statement indicates a respect for the traditional approach used in schools, where children learn from a general studies textbook, and the textbook is the standard teaching resource. They then build on this foundation through the possibilities offered to them by homeschooling – the child does not just study theory but ties this learning to actual experiences – for example, observing nature on walks or actively participating in environmental activities. Daniela likewise affirms the importance of textbooks as the main learning resource in core subjects, which indicates that the structure of learning maintained in the school is preserved to a degree at home as well.

The second group comprises parents who are not guided by the school curriculum and educate their children through everyday situations in life. In their approach, the education process is not separate from leisure time but, on the contrary, is ongoing and continuously occurring, responding to various stimuli in the surrounding world. The child is free to engage in any activities and pursuits at home and in nature. Educational activities are not parent-directed. According to this approach, any activity is educational for children.

"We try not to divide our lives into 'educational activities' and 'free time'. We just live. The way we see it is that there is some learning/development going on in (almost) every activity. When my daughter reads a book, she is educating herself; when she writes a letter to a friend, she is

educating herself; when she cooks with me, she is educating herself..." (Martina)

While the school-based approach works with clearly defined learning activities and learning materials, Martina rejects this division and sees education as a continuous process that occurs through everyday activities. Martina's statement is thus based on the idea that every activity has educational potential as long as the child is an active participant in the learning process.

Structured vs unstructured learning

We also identified slight differences in the approaches used to organise learning. Most of the families in our sample followed a fixed structure of learning, in terms of either time or content:

"Most school days involve some form of writing and working with numbers." (Cecílie)

Use of the term "school days" suggests that homeschooling in some cases retains a certain regular and organised structure that is similar to the school regimen. However, it was evident from the interviews that many families are very flexible in their approach to how much to adhere to a particular school structure:

"Instruction is flexibly and individually adapted to the available time on a given day and the desire for a particular subject. We do, of course, ensure that all subjects are covered in a given week, but there are days when we focus entirely just on the Czech language or on mathematics, and as a diversion we include art, music, general studies, physical education, etc." (Ivana)

Ivana emphasises a flexible approach to the learning schedule, where lessons are adapted to the time and interests of the child, but there is still a rule that all subjects must be covered in the course of the week. Despite the absence of a fixed schedule, there is still an effort to pursue a systematic form of learning that has some organisation and structure to it. Similarly, Natalia's statement suggests that although her son has a considerable degree of autonomy in deciding what and when he learns, there is a rough schedule, and it includes days that do follow a timetable. While the child has the freedom to choose the time and content of his lessons, this is done in consultation with his parents, which shows homeschooling to be combining flexibility and organisation:

"There is a time plan for some things Nikolas does (and there are also days on which he follows a schedule), but for the most part he decides himself what he's going to do on a given day, and when and for how long. He, of course, consults with his parents to see if it suits them as well." (Natálie)

The majority of participants stressed that they have no problem deviating from the given structure when necessary – for example, in response to a momentary interest on the part of the child or to external influences in a certain situa-

tion. There is thus a degree of organisation present in the learning process, but with ample room to individually adapt to the needs of the child, the situation in the family at a particular moment, the nature of the subject being taught, and the age of the child. While a greater degree of structure is usually required in core subjects, such as mathematics and English, a more relaxed approach is possible in other areas. A freer learning structure also tends to be adopt more as a child grows older. Some families allow the children to set the pace and focus in untraditional subjects, such as the type of artistic activities or the choice of books:

"The biggest influence that Renata has on her own education is in English, where I do not interfere at all in her self-study. She chooses her own texts, films, and songs. She looked up information about the universe on her own and wrote it down. She also worked on her own development to the accompaniment of songs she likes, looking by herself for different options." (Romana)

"Iveta has a say in the pace of the lessons, decides what book we will read, what subject (except for reading and math) she wants to do. What we will create, etc." (Ivana)

A smaller group of families, by contrast, do not adhere to any structure. These participants emphasised that the child could do anything at any time, regardless of the child's age or individual differences. This approach is grounded in their beliefs about what education should be like. They view the act of controlling the learning process as putting constraints on the child's autonomy and as unnaturally interfering with the child's personality:

"We don't distinguish between education and play, or formal and informal education ... The way we see it is that our child is learning at every moment of life, whatever she is doing and whomever she is with … She doesn't have an activity pan, she's free to do whatever she wants. I just try to limit her cell phone use ... she has no schedule, she just does what she wants … Adéla makes her own decisions about almost everything educationally. I just try to limit the TV and cell phone, but they're educational tools as well." (Alena)

Alena's statement shows that in her view learning is not an activity that is separate from everyday life and her child is allowed to freely choose her activities without any plan or schedule. Parents in families of this kind only minimally intervene in the learning process, but their role is to provide a stimulating environment and create opportunities to learn. They provide the child with access to various educational resources, such as books, online materials, and documentary films, and they support the child in their independent projects and engage in discussions on topics of interest. Although there is no formal organisation to the learning process, parents strive to ensure the child has enough stimuli to develop and learn through everyday situations in life. The question remains whether even the

parents who lean towards unstructured learning are actually working towards certain learning objectives by providing their child with targeted motivation. As a key aspect of learning in this context, motivation is often overlooked, but it can play a fundamental role in the way children receive and process new knowledge.

Parent-led assessment

Most of the participants agreed that they do not specifically assess their children in the course of learning and do not use grades. They said that they consider it important to talk to their children, and to praise them or to guide them in a self-assessment:

"I assess Berta verbally. I also tried self-assessment, where Berta checked problems one by one on the calculator herself and checked her own dictation." (Barbora)

Barbora prioritises verbal assessment, which she supplements with self-assessment performed by the child. Similarly, Cecilia uses verbal feedback to provide assessment and encourages the child to self-reflect. She explicitly rejects comparisons with other children as irrelevant at this stage of learning:

"I use praise. If he doesn't cooperate, I make it clear I think that's unfortunate. I don't find comparisons with other children valuable at this stage. I sometimes ask her whether she thinks the approach she took to doing an assignment was the right one." (Cecílie)

"We praise David verbally during a lesson. We praise his progress. If he is not doing well we tell him that it needs time and practice. He is subject to no other assessment. The anchor school requires that a portfolio of the child's work is regularly compiled, and it is only checked and assessed at half term. Our older son (age 11) attends a traditional school and we have a comparison. With him we're working to address demotivation, a fear of tests and grades, and unfairness in grading. With my younger son we don't experience this. The learning is smooth, based on communication with the child." (Daniela)

In addition to the practices she describes above, Daniela also mentions the compulsory portfolio assignment required by the anchor school, but otherwise her assessment focuses on supporting and acknowledging the child's progress. She also highlights the negative effects of assigning grades, which she opposes. Lena tries to eliminate grading altogether in order to promote the child's internal motivation:

"We try not to evaluate Lucie. I would prefer her to work on things out of an internal motivation. We talk about the things she's done well and the things she needs to improve on. We don't really want to compare her to other children, but this happens when our daughter sees for herself what her peers are doing. She usually meets homeschooled children, but at her English group, for example, she has the opportunity to meet schoolchildren who have progressed at a much faster pace in completing the textbook assignments." (Lena)

School-led Assessment

The state and the traditional system of education maintain their influence over homeschooling through mandatory school-based examination. School-based examination is held twice a year, at the end of the first term and at the end of the school year, but their implementation varies considerably from school to school. Schools have considerable autonomy over this and can choose their own approach to the evaluation of homeschooled students. While some schools evaluate homeschooled children by giving them assignments continuously throughout the term, most of them only do an assessment at the end of the term.

In general, there are two main approaches used to perform mandatory school-based examination. The first is to verify that the child is learning, and this approach usually works with an assessment of the student's portfolio of work. This involves parents providing the anchor school with materials documenting the child's learning progress, which allows the school to assess what areas of learning have been covered, whether they correspond to the requirements of the compulsory curriculum, and what progress the child has made during the assessed period. This approach mainly focuses on the process of learning rather than on directly checking what knowledge and skills the child has learned. No testing or oral examinations are usually carried out unless there are questions about whether the child is learning enough:

"This month we visited the anchor school that Berta is enrolled in for homeschooling for a school-based examination. The examination took the form of samples from the portfolio, the so-called learning log, and a review of the notebooks. The re-evaluation was a friendly meeting, where Berta and I described all the things she had been doing over the last few months. She got straight A's." (Barbora)

Barbora's statement shows that the examination may be done exclusively on the basis of the portfolio and learning log, in which case the school does not assess the child's knowledge but only verifies that learning is genuinely taking place.

The second approach involves not only examining the learning process but also verifying the level of knowledge learned. In these cases, schools use written tests or oral examinations, which can pose a problem for children educated entirely through the unstructured approach of self-directed learning, as gaps in the knowledge required by the school curriculum may became apparent during the examination. Although most families in our research sample had no difficulties with the examination, one family had the experience of their child failing the end-of-year examination and the school suggesting the child take the school-based examination again. The family disagreed with the school's assessment and procedure. The situation was eventually resolved by

the child transferring to another school, where she repeated the year:

"We went to the examination and she failed there. She did all the counting questions, she was also reading quite well given that we brought a book from home with a difficult text for a first-grader - she just can't remember three letters that she always asks about, but then she puts the words together nicely. She answered all the 'stupid stuff' the teacher asked her about, like relationships, body parts, etc. She wrote a sentence for her in print letters, but she hasn't started cursive writing because she doesn't need it yet, doesn't enjoy it, and doesn't push herself in anything, so she didn't feel the need to learn it... We showed pictures of where we were, what she was making, short videos – of her doing flips and skating. The young ambitious teacher, who had never heard of self-directed learning in her life, wasn't very interested and was only interested in the fact that we didn't bring in any notebooks, because we just hadn't done any school stuff, and that she didn't know how to write in cursive. So she was due to take the examination again in August, which, after consideration, we declined. The little one was screaming at me that it didn't make sense to her and that she didn't want to write in cursive. I called the principal to say that we weren't going to do it then and that we were resigned to putting the child back in first grade in a newly forming school and when could we come to collect her report card." (Alena)

Alena's statement reveals the evident remoteness she feels from the traditional school and its requirements. The mother openly admits that she does not follow the school curriculum in her child's education: she does not teach her child to write in cursive, she does not work with the school notebooks, and she does not follow the standard curriculum for learning. Although the child demonstrated proficiency in areas she considers important, the school did not recognise this as sufficient. The family decided to reject the school's suggestion that the child retake the school-based examination and decided instead to have the child repeat the first grade at another school, which they believed would be more accommodating towards the family's educational philosophy.

Every child who is homeschooled in the Czech Republic receives a report card at the end of the term. This report card is issued by the school, but in some cases parents need to provide supporting materials to prepare it, especially where verbal assessments and not grades are used for assessment. School-based examination thus acts as a link between homeschooling and the formal education system, despite the different approaches of individual schools:

"This month marked the end of the first term of this year. I was writing my daughter's verbal assessment for her anchor primary school. Usually we give the assessment to our daughter to read and we create a home report card, but we didn't do that this time. My daughter didn't feel the need to. She is well aware that she is

learning through life – the natural way – and that there is no need to evaluate or even grade this life. When we do attempt to do some assessment, it's usually a bit forced, unnatural. The best thing is to give our daughter feedback right in a given situation and not to wait until the end of the terms..." (Martina)

Martina's statement shows that in homeschooling the assessment of a child is often done in response to the formal requirements of the anchor school rather than out of a genuine need on the part of the family. In this case, the parent may write a verbal assessment for the school, but at the same time may believe that this form of assessment is of little significance for the child. Martina also emphasises that the most effective feedback occurs immediately during the learning process, rather than being summarised at the end of the term.

Discussion

Our analysis of the diary entries of homeschooling families in the Czech Republic revealed a wide range of approaches to the organisation of teaching, methods, and educational strategies. The results show that the boundaries between school-based education and homeschooling are not firmly fixed but are rather intertwined. The international literature also confirms the existence of different approaches in homeschooling, which range from highly structured to completely unstructured forms of education (Neuman & Guterman, 2016). Structured homeschooling is in many ways closer to the traditional school-based model, as it focuses on learning that proceeds according to a planned curriculum, uses structured learning materials, and devotes dedicated blocks of time to learning. This approach is thus more like the school-based education system, even though it does not necessarily pursue the same goals as institutional schooling. In contrast to this is unschooling, which is characterised by the absence of a fixed curriculum, by spontaneous learning, and by the integration of learning into everyday life.

While school-based education works with a planned curriculum and prescribed methods, some home schooling approaches, especially that of unschooling, are characterised by the rejection of structured instruction and give the child maximum freedom to decide what, when, and how to learn (Holt, 1982). This autonomy, however, is in conflict with a state-regulated system that requires the continuous assessment of the child and adherence to the school curriculum (Kostelecká et al., 2021).

Studies also suggest that differences in how the learning process is structured have an impact on children's academic performance. Research results show that structured homeschooling produces better results than unschooling in academic subjects and may even be more effective than traditional schooling.

Conversely, children educated through unschooling may struggle to achieve similar levels of academic achievement as their school-based peers because they are not exposed to systematic instruction in certain content that is covered in standardised tests. However, research also indicates that children who learn through self-directed learning may acquire other types of knowledge and skills that are not routinely tested and are not part of the standard school curriculum (Neuman & Guterman, 2016).

Similarly, Czech homeschooling lies on the scale between the acceptance and the rejection of school structures. Studies on the relationship between the family and the school show that between these two institutions there are significant differences in the functions and expectations. Traditionally, the family is associated with particularistic values and an individualised approach to the child, while the school is built on universal standards and formal rules (Kaščák et al., 2022). This difference can create tensions between the demands of the state education system and the individual preferences of parents who seek greater autonomy in their children's education.

The results show that most homeschooling families benefit to varying degrees from school-based support, whether in the form of learning materials, school curricula, or community schools networks. Some families adapt to the requirements of the school curriculum and work with traditional textbooks, while other families try to break away from the formal school structure as much as possible and teach their children through everyday experiences and free play.

Learning assessment is another area of conflict between school-based education and homeschooling. While schools usually work with the traditional grade-based system of assessment, homeschooling often favour verbal assessment, self-assessment, or the complete absence of any formal assessment (Daniela, Cecílie). Although re-examination by schools is not a problem for every family, it has in some cases led to disagreements between parents and the school over educational standards and methods.

On the whole, homeschooling in Czech society is not a straightforward step in the direction of unschooling. It is rather a hybrid model that combines some elements of homeschooling and some elements of school-based education. Although some families seek as much autonomy as possible, they remain under the oversight of the school structure, which limits the possibilities for a fully free education. Different approaches to homeschooling have both benefits and drawbacks: while structured homeschooling has been found to be effective in terms of academic results, less structured approaches may provide other valuable skills that are not captured by school standards (Neuman & Guterman, 2016).

Conclusion

This study examined homeschooling in the Czech Republic and its relationship to the school system. As stated in the introduction, education was historically viewed as the domain of the family, but over time it became part of the public sphere and subject to state regulation (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2020). The development of homeschooling in the Czech Republic shows that, despite legislative constraints, there is considerable variety in approaches to home education.

The results of our analysis of the diary entries of homeschooling parents showed that homeschooling is not a homogeneous phenomenon but encompasses a broad spectrum of approaches that range from school-based methods to alternative, autonomous forms of learning. The research confirmed that homeschooling in the Czech context cannot be viewed as completely separate from the school system, as it remains intertwined with it through mandatory school-based examination, the use of the school curriculum, and cooperation with community schools.

On the key question of whether Czech homeschooling is closer to what Illich called unschooling or "parent-led education" (Valiente et al., 2022, p. 48), our analysis suggests that Czech homeschool more closely resembles the latter. Although elements of self-directed learning and learning-through-living are emerging among homeschooling approaches (Schonfeld-Karan, 2022), homeschooling in the Czech Republic remains fundamentally connected to the school structure, whether through mandatory testing, a state-mandated curriculum, or frequent collaboration with community schools. The possibility of total unschooling in the Czech environment is limited by these regulatory mechanisms.

On the whole, homeschooling in the Czech Republic can be described as being hybrid in nature. Although some families seek as much autonomy as possible, they are restricted by the state requirements of mandatory school-based examinations and curriculum compliance. This suggests that rather than a radical departure from the formal education system and full-fledged implementation of Illich's vision of deschooling, we are seeing various forms of adaptation of the formal school system within the parent-led education model.

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KLAPÁLKOVÁ, V., KOMÁRKOVÁ, T., KOSTELECKÁ, Y., KAŠČÁK, O. Domácí vzdělávání v českých rodinách: Diverzita přístupů mezi školní strukturou a unschoolingem

Článek se zaměřuje na fenomén domácího vzdělávání v České republice a popisuje průběh, metody a výzvy, se kterými se rodiny praktikující tento způsob vzdělávání potýkají. Cílem studie je přinést hloubkový pohled na způsob organizace domácí výuky, roli rodinných příslušníků a autonomii dítěte při vzdělávání a diskutovat tuto výukovou modalitu ve vztahu k běžnému školnímu vzdělávání a jeho struktuře. Výzkum byl proveden na základě kvalitativní analýzy deníkových záznamů 20 českých rodin, které praktikují domácí vzdělávání. Záznamy byly vedeny od října 2021 do prosince 2022. Výsledky ukazují na diverzitu v přístupu k plánování výuky, využívání vzdělávacích metod a aktivit a dokladují různé modality domácího vzdělavaní, od těch „poškolněných" (škola doma) až po ty „odškolněné". Ukazuje se, že vnímat domácí vzdělávání v českém kontextu mimo oblast školního vzdělávání je velmi zkratkovité.

Klíčová slova: *autonomní učení, Česká republika, domácí vzdělávání, kvalitativní výzkum, motivace ke vzdělávání, socializace, vzdělávací metody*