

FUNCTIONS OF PARENTS HOMESCHOOLING THEIR CHILDREN: THE CASE OF LITHUANIA

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Abstract. *The origins of homeschooling can be traced back to the ideas of John Holt, an educational theorist and advocate of school reform in the 1970s, who argued that schools created an oppressive emotional environment and that education at schools aimed to make children's achievements meet the standards required of compliant employees. Homeschooling is understood as an independent way of organising a form of individual learning, when the child is educated in a family and community environment using a variety of learning tools and environments. The number of homeschooled children is growing, and more and more parents are becoming interested in this form of education and in the legal aspects of its regulation. This article analyses the case of Lithuania. The aim of the article is to answer the questions of how homeschooling of children is organised and what functions parents perform in homeschooling. The qualitative research approach was chosen to analyse the experiences of parents homeschooling their children and to identify the functions of parents as educators.*

Keywords: *educational institution, family, functions, homeschooling, learner.*

Homeschooling: concept and research relevance

Literature review

Introduction. The article presents the most illustrative results of a broader empirical study carried out in Lithuania in 2021–2022. The aim is to answer the question of what the functions of parents are and how the child's education is organised in the case of homeschooling. The research data were collected using a semi-structured interview method and were processed using content analysis. The data were analysed under the topic "Functions of parents homeschooling their children". The topic combines the following seven sub-topics: planning and organising the educational process, selecting/developing educational content, designing learning environments, ensuring a safe learning environment, recording learning achievements, assessing learning achievements, and ensuring socialisation. The research involved ten informants (five parents homeschooling their children and five heads of educational institutions) selected by criterion sampling.

Concept and ideology. Homeschooling is defined as the education of the child in a family and community environment rather than at school. Homeschooling is carried out when, at the request of the child and his/her parents (guardians, carers), education within the framework of the general curricula of pre-primary, primary, basic, and secondary education is organised in a home environment. In this case, the parents (guardians) are fully responsible for the education process and its quality. Research articles on homeschooling cite parents' desire to provide their children with values-based education that will prepare them for the future as a key reason for choosing homeschooling. 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 (Apriliana, Icmi, and Suryono, 2019). The ideology and practice of homeschooling is spreading so rapidly because the school often becomes a controlling bureaucratic institution, moving away from the essence of education. Meanwhile, parents want their child to be educated in a value-based way, not just for high academic achievement (Lines, 2000). A key issue with respect to homeschooling is how parents perceive their role in their children's education. Parental involvement in a child's formal education includes parental interest in the child's performance, the child's relationship with the school, the teacher, and the surrounding environment as well as the impact of that relationship on the child's personality development (Hill, 2022). Today's school should consider broader opportunities for parental involvement in the educational process and emphasise the indirect links between parental involvement in education and children's developmental outcomes. More collaborative ways should be sought to find a quality relationship with parents (Williams-Johnson, Gonzalez-DeHass, 2022). Parents are important educators of the child who, from the moment the child is born, choose a particular parenting philosophy and ideology, which may not be in line with the values, educational content, and emotional-social environment of the school. This presupposes a conflict, which is one of the reasons why parents choose to homeschool their children and take over the functions of the school.

In the US and Canada, homeschooling has been implemented since the 1970s. 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 aimed to match children's achievements to the requirements of the labour market rather than individual needs (Knowles, Marlow, Muchmore, 2015).

Comparative studies of academic achievement. Some of the first studies analysing the problems of homeschooling were carried out several decades ago. Rudner (1999) studied the achievements of 20,000 homeschooled children in the US and found that the achievements of homeschooled children were statistically significant, i.e., higher in reading, languages, mathematics, social and natural

sciences, and information technology, when compared to those educated at schools. Ray (2010) conducted a very similar study involving almost 12,000 homeschooled children in the US. The researcher found that homeschooled children had higher levels of achievement in reading, languages, mathematics, social and natural sciences than those educated at school. Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011), a team of independent researchers, studied seventy-four Canadian students from different social backgrounds who were homeschooled and educated at school. To assess students' academic achievement, they used standardised assessment tasks employed by Rudner (1999) and Ray (2010) in their studies. One group of subjects was taught using clearly structured teaching/learning methods. The other group consisted of students who were taught using unstructured teaching/learning methods. The data showed that students who were taught using structured educational methods achieved statistically significantly higher results than those who were taught using unstructured educational methods. The methodology of this study was more robust than that of the studies presented above, but the possibility to make generalisations about the academic achievements of homeschooled children was limited by the very small sample size. Belfield (2005) carried out a comparative analysis of the results of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) taken by homeschoolers and public and private schooled students. The test scores of 330 000 students were analysed, and no statistically significant differences were found between the groups of participants.

Research and issues. In his research report, Carlson (2020) presented the problems of homeschooling and the practice of assessing learning achievement. Renzulli, Werum, and Kronberg (2020) highlighted the legal regulation of homeschooling in relation to legislative and judicial trends. Haq, Asbari, Sukriyah, Novitasari, and Abadiyah (2022) explored the relationship of transformational leadership, motivation, and self-efficacy with the context of homeschooling. A significant number of recent research articles have addressed the issue of homeschooling in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Petts, Carlson, & Pepin, 2021). Researchers have also been interested in the impact of recommended COVID-19 vaccination and routine testing of children in educational institutions on parents' choice to homeschool their children (Mohanty, Joyce, Delamate, Klein et al. 2020).

Similarities, disadvantages and reasons for choice. Kaur (2018) identified the advantages and disadvantages of homeschooling. The author identified the following educational advantages of homeschooling: a curriculum and schedule are planned freely, according to need; the child learns at a pace that suits him/her, and the most appropriate and acceptable teaching/learning methods are chosen for him/her; a safe environment allows the child to express himself/herself more fully; the child gains a wide range of experiences by interacting with a variety of people; family ties are strengthened; there is more

time for interaction within the family, communication is more open; family holidays and outings can be planned more easily; there is a greater opportunity for the child to be exposed to the values that are important to the family; and the child is educated in accordance with the parents' religious and ethical beliefs and philosophy. The following disadvantages of homeschooling were identified by Kaur: usually one of the parents no longer has time to satisfy his/her needs (self-expression, social, cultural); homeschooling is not only time-consuming, but it also requires a lot of financial resources, which can cause financial difficulties for the family; there are situations where the child's socialisation is restricted, and there is a reduction in the amount of shared activities with his/her peers (competitions, school events, etc.); and homeschooling is not well received in society. A study conducted by Kaur in 2018 showed that the reasons behind the decision to homeschool a child can vary widely, from the family's lifestyle, beliefs, and the child's personal qualities to the parents' personal attitudes towards the education system. Some families think that the home environment is more conducive to a child's learning and higher academic achievements in a shorter time. Other parents are concerned about their child's emotional environment and want to provide it; they are frightened by the bullying culture at school. Still other families aim to spend as much time as possible on acquiring the necessary competences, taking into account the child's areas of interest and providing opportunities for more varied and richer learning experiences than at school.

None of the studies presented address the question of the functions of parents in homeschooling. Homeschooling in Lithuania is legally regulated by the Description of Procedure for Implementation of Homeschooling approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania (Ministry of Education, art and sport of Lithuania, 2020). In this article, the researchers **set out** to identify the functions of parents in homeschooling by analysing the case of Lithuania. It should be noted that this study is part of a broader qualitative study carried out in 2021–2022.

Methodology

This article presents part of a qualitative study that aimed to identify the functions of parents homeschooling their children. The research sample consisted of ten participants, i.e., five parents who homeschool their children 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 homeschooled; 2) the parents themselves organise the process of homeschooling. 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 homeschooling 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 homeschooled. 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. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The following questions were formulated for the informants in the target group of parents: *How is the educational process organised in your family? What does your day look like when your children are involved in learning? What are the functions of parents in homeschooling?* The questions phrased for the informants in the target group of the heads of educational institutions were as follows: *What functions does an educational institution perform when parents choose homeschooling? What functions do you think parents perform when they choose to homeschool their children?* All the interviews were conducted remotely using the Teams platform. The informants agreed to be recorded. The interviews lasted a total of 640 minutes and were transcribed into 182 pages of text (landscape page orientation, Times New Roman 12 pt font).

The data provided by the informants are confidential, so codings have been used to summarise and analyse the data. The data of the informants of the target group of parents have been encoded in the following way: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5. Data codes for the target group of heads of educational institutions have been as follows: EI1, EI2, EI3, EI4, EI5. The qualitative research software package MAXQDA 2022 Setup, MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2022 (Release 22.0.1.) was used for data abstraction. Only the plain text capturing the language of the informant was abstracted. The functions in the MAXQDA program, after abstracting the data, construct coding systems for each informant and provide relationship matrices for the coded data (Figure 1). The code systems of the data provided by the heads of the educational institutions made it possible to identify that the greatest attention was paid to issues related to the responsibility, emerging parental functions, and threats in the context of homeschooling. After abstracting the data of the target group of parents, the coding system made it possible to identify that the focus of the interviews was on discussing the parental functions taken over from education. The abstracted data made it possible to identify key sub-topics.

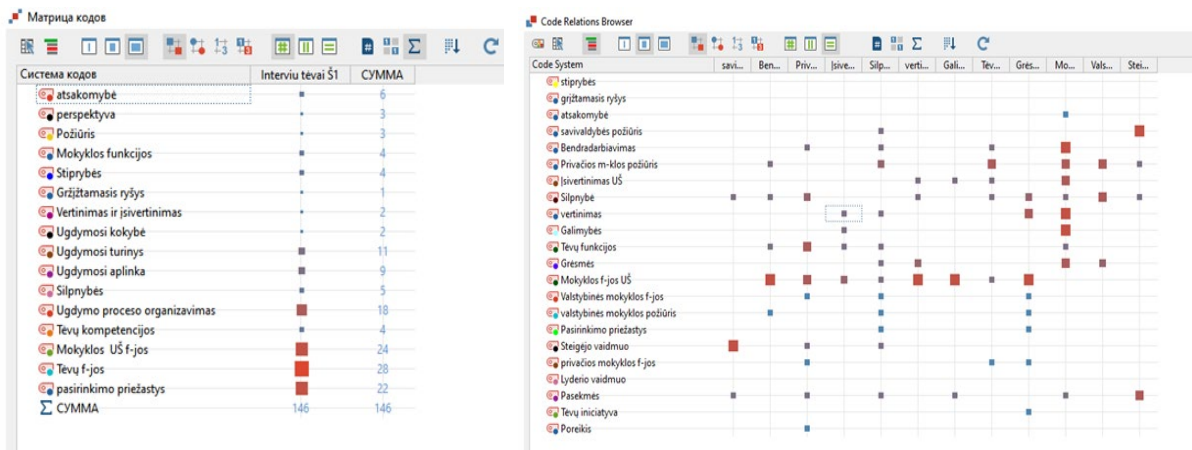


Figure 1 Examples of informant code systems and code relationship matrices (made by authors)

Codes in English (example no 1): Responsibility; Perspective; Approach; School functions; Strengths; Feedback; Assessment and self-assessment; Quality of education; Content of education; Environment of education; Weaknesses; Organisation of educational process; Parental competences; School functions in HSing; Parental functions; Reasons for choice.

Codes in English (example no 2): Strengths; Feedback; Responsibility; Municipal approach; Cooperation; Private school approach; Self-assessment in HSing; Weakness; Assessment; Opportunities; Parental functions; Threats; Functions of EIs in HSing; Public school functions; Public school approach; Reasons for choice; Role of the founder; Private school functions; Role of the leader; Consequences; Parental initiative; Need.

A content conceptual and rational analysis of the data (Parveen, Showkat, 2017) was carried out, focusing on the interpretation of the data, which led to the identification of the most relevant aspects related to the functions of homeschooling.

Research results

This subsection presents only the most illustrative examples selected from a large database of the research data. The **topic** under analysis is the functions of parents homeschooling their children. The topic combines the following **sub-topics**: *planning and organising the educational process, selecting/ creating educational content, designing learning environments, ensuring a safe learning environment, recording learning achievements, assessing learning achievements, and ensuring socialisation.*

Planning and organising the educational process. When homeschooling their children, parents focus mostly on the children’s needs. They involve their children in the organisation of the educational process, thus fostering independence and a sense of responsibility. An informant notes, “I ask the child what we are going to start with, mathematics or Lithuanian, as we still have to do both; it is important because the child feels that he is in charge” (P1); “The other day, he wanted to play the piano, so he sat down and learned

how to play the piano for four hours using the app” (P2). The parents point out that homeschooling also “requires certain competences, self-control, self-discipline” (P4) from the child, but often “the child does not need to be told where to do what as he/she manages everything by himself/herself, and he/she creates, creates, creates...” (P5). It is noted that “the children do a lot of independent work; they do as much as they can; and what they have not done or could not do, we do in the evening after work” (P1). For parents, it is important that the child becomes “sufficiently aware and organised, independent, and able to find information and study independently according to his/her age and abilities” (P3).

In homeschooling, schedules are drawn up on different principle than in the formal education system. “Our days of the week are actually very different: we have a schedule of what we have to do during the week. There is a minimum plan: every day, the children have to do reading, writing, and mathematics; before the music lesson, they have to play; the other lesson, in addition to the three main ones, is, for example, English; it is not like school when you have to get up at eight and have breakfast at eight fifteen. Our days are different: you wake up and see that the weather is nice, so we can go for a bike ride...” (P2). The educational process is not about the number of lessons or a strict schedule, but about the acquisition of new knowledge and the development of skills and competences. When the child decides what, how, and when to learn, he/she takes responsibility for the educational process, while parents become assistants and mentors, and the child’s needs are taken into account when organising the educational process. One of the parents in the study says, “I wake up my children at around 8 o’clock, without much hurry” (P1). Another parent remarks, “It is better if he is in a good mood; I will give him the information in fifteen minutes instead of two hours; we will talk and we will watch a film on the subject. We can organise extracurricular activities in the morning, not necessarily in the evening; it is important that you do not damage the child's immune system every morning” (P2). For parents, it is important “to give their children as much attention as they want and to learn more deeply” (P4); also “that their children are interested and that they are self-motivated to learn” (P5).

The head of the educational institution states that “when a family chooses homeschooling, they study with the child at a certain time, maybe in the evening, or at a different time, when they find the time, or arrange the schedule in a different way” (EI4). It is noted that “children do not learn like they do at school, i.e., for forty-five minutes. They learn at their own pace...maybe they spend two hours on the Lithuanian language, maybe five hours, or maybe they study only the Lithuanian language for a whole week because it is interesting for the child” (EI5).

The educational process is organised in different environments. One parent says that “sometimes we go on an educational trip for a whole day, and on the way back, we go somewhere else” (P2); it is also noted that “there are facilities in the community, and weekly schedules are drawn up depending on subjects that should be taught additionally. The children meet, learn mathematics, English, ceramics, art, etc.” (P1).

Selecting/creating educational content. The child’s education consists of many components, and one of them is the content of the education chosen by the parents, when most often teaching/learning is not from textbooks. The informant states that “children initiate what they are interested in; they want to find out things that are important to them; sometimes you do not even know what will interest them” (P1). Another informant notes that “today we had an art lesson for maybe three hours, we watched knitting lessons on YouTube about yarn and about knitting needles; another child also joined in...the children started to measure the hats, how many hats can fit on the hat, what is the weight of the hats” (P2). Parents emphasise the following aspect that is important to them: “We are trying to nurture those things that we see are working and that might be viable” (P4).

Some parents who homeschool their children do not choose the teaching/learning materials used in educational institutions: “We do not have any textbooks. In terms of learning styles, we are complete ‘anti-schoolers’” (P5). The educational content is individualised and personalised, i.e., tailored to the child’s personal needs, taking into account his/her achievements. Often, families use unstructured learning, where the content is shaped exclusively according to the child’s needs, i.e., considering what is interesting to him/her at the time, delving into everyday situations and learning from them. A key factor in unstructured learning is the child’s motivation: “It is important 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 knows a lot, but not because someone has told him to, but because he is very curious and has found the information himself” (P5). The parents’ opinions on General Education Programmes (GEPs) differ. For some, “the GEPs are like guidelines” (P2), while others state that they have “not even looked at GEPs because I find it totally uninteresting; the content of education is dictated by children’s needs in everyday life” (P5).

The heads of educational institutions raise the relevant question of whether “they will be able to apply special methodologies to a child with, for example, an autism spectrum disorder, to achieve the quality of education” (EI2).

Designing educational environments. When homeschooling their child, parents take over another function from the school: the creation, selection, and

adaptation of educational environments. Parents must provide a suitable environment for education at home, which must include space for the child's learning. The learning environment for homeschoolers is different from that for those in educational institutions because it is easier to adapt it to the needs of one child or more children. Learning environments are very diverse and are chosen according to the content of education and vice versa. One parent points out, "We went to the manor, and that day we had education about mushrooms. On the same day, we participated in education about flax. Then it was open farm day" (P3). It is important that children are given freedom to choose their educational environments and to decide for themselves where they will learn. "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 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" (P4). "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" (P2). The head of the educational institution states that "the parents provide us with a description of the child's place of residence; we have the right to go there before the child is admitted; we have the right to receive and believe the documents sent to us and what they say: about the child's place of work and conditions at home"; then, the head adds, "I know that they went to a farm to make candles, that they go to each other's homes to study together, and that they take the child to the library or somewhere else" (EI1).

Ensuring a safe environment. A safe environment is one of the prerequisites for parents to homeschool their children. This is also noted by the informants: "The most important thing is for the child to be safe. The most important thing is for him/her to be in a safe environment, where there is no alcohol, no violence, no harmful conditions, and where he/she could feel psychologically and physiologically safe" (EI5). Parents must obtain a safe environment certificate from the municipal administration, which cooperates with the police of the Republic of Lithuania and the Children's Rights Protection Service of the Republic of Lithuania. The head of the educational institution, who participated in the study, notes that "the commission established by the school has the right to come to the family's living environment and assess it" (EI1). However, there is no legal obligation for parents to choose the school of their place of residence when choosing to homeschool their children. When the child is homeschooled, parents can choose any school in Lithuania that has the right to sign an agreement with them. The school may be in another municipality, so it would be difficult to come frequently to observe the educational environment.

Recording the learning process and learning achievement. Parents are obliged to keep a record of their child's learning in an electronic diary. The

interviews revealed that none of the electronic diaries installed in Lithuanian schools is adapted to homeschooling. The head of the educational institution observes that “there has been a misunderstanding with the diary: parents are obliged to make records about education every 2 weeks, and they have to follow the curriculum for all subjects. But no one knows how to fill it in. The electronic diary has not been prepared for homeschooling for the second year” (EI1). Parents do not have access to the diary unless the school assigns them the role of the teacher, and they fill in the register as the child’s teachers but not as their parents. One of the school leaders who took part in the study says, “If the Children’s Rights Protection Service issues a certificate confirming that everything is fine with the family and that the children can be homeschooled, why do the parents have to record something in the diary? After all, it is clear that the child is being educated. I do not see any point in doing this” (EI5). The school leader looks empathetically at the situation in which parents find themselves: “When it comes to recording the content of education, I suspect that parents would do it under duress. A copy-paste can be done from the general education programme to show that this week we have taken this or that topic. But is this really happening?” (EI5).

Parents question whether this function assigned to them is really appropriate: “I can fill it all in nicely, but it will not be the truth; I can fill it in as it is, but it will not be the perfect diary, the perfect activities, the perfect learning. Which is better?” (P1). Another informant argues that this is a completely unnecessary function and that they are not required to keep a diary by the school where they have signed an agreement regarding homeschooling: “I do not keep any diaries. I keep notes for myself, but also just because I know I will have to make an annual report” (P5). Some of the parents in the study point out that it can be a great way of self-monitoring: “For me personally, for example, it is not difficult; I sit down for fifteen minutes in a couple of weeks to review everything. It is like self-monitoring of what we have learnt, and, in my case, this self-discipline is even good for me” (P2).

While the recording of educational content is not a complicated process and parents do not object to it, the function of filling in the electronic diary is not parent friendly. The data of the heads of the educational institutions suggest that the electronic diaries do not include a function that allows parents to properly record the content of education; there is no discussion of what a particular school would benefit from seeing: the activities the children have been involved in and the new things they have learnt or discovered, or what they are learning as part of their curriculum. Schools have their own solutions to the situation: some ask parents to send all the necessary data to the responsible school staff member; others create accounts on alternative platforms, where parents upload all the information the school needs.

Assessment of learning achievement. Although there is no provision for parents to assess their children's achievements themselves (this function is performed by educational institutions), the interviews have revealed that parents do use some assessment tools to assess achievements of their homeschooled children. "At the end of the month, we self-assess ourselves; the children have taken the tests without school stress" (P1). Another parent points out that "when I sit next to my child, I can see very well what he knows, what he does not know, where he is stuck or where he is weak...and for me, the tests were a very good indicator; I gave my child forty five minutes, and I said, 'Now you do what you think is right and what you can do'" (P2). Children are also encouraged to self-assess themselves. "At the end of the year, we take the notebook from September and discuss: 'Look, you did not even know how to write any letters; see how you are able to write them now?', or when it comes to mathematics: 'Look, you had difficulty in calculating two multiplied by two; now do you see what numbers you are multiplying?'" (P2). "We take part in all the virtual competitions for students: "Olympis", "King", "Kangaroo", and others... It is also a kind of extra stimulus for us, and we can compare ourselves with others to see if our performance has not gone down" (P4).

Almost all of the informants in the study noted that they use some form of assessment of their child's achievements. The child is always involved in this process, discussing his/her progress and identifying gaps. The (self-)assessment process is organised in a different way than at school, and every effort is made to avoid any tension and stress. This is just a way to measure achievement. It can be assumed that the tools and process used by parents to assess achievement are not only intended to test knowledge, but also for parents to assess their performance as educators.

Ensuring socialisation. One of the most sensitive issues in the context of homeschooling, which is especially raised by the heads of educational institutions, is ensuring the socialisation of the child. The informant's comment that when homeschooling a child, "the biggest problem is to ensure his/her socialisation" (EI2). Another notes, "I always have a problem with the child's social relations and communication. The child is separated from peers; ties are broken; and no new friendships are formed" (EI4). Thus, the school leaders highlight the problem of the full-fledged socialisation of students.

The informants of the target group of parents have a wide range of opinions about socialisation opportunities at school and in the family. "Real interaction with people, especially if the child is more introverted, is not guaranteed at all at school" (P2). According to the parents, being among a lot of people does not in itself constitute a socialisation process and does not guarantee the quality of communication, which is very important for parents. The parents give many examples of how homeschooled children socialise: "Of course, there are other activities, such as therapies and extracurricular

activities, that they take part in” (P3); “These days, as long as the weather is good, you can socialise as much as you want, but I do not have that much time to participate everywhere because I work. Families meet once a week; adults complain to each other and drink tea together; children play together” (P1); “For me, the biggest, the most basic socialisation takes place in the family...there are a lot of situations in life; you need to help someone; you need to fulfil some duties and balance them with pleasure...” (P2). Homeschooled children have their socialisation needs met in extracurricular activities of non-formal education, chosen by children according to their needs. Since parents have the freedom to plan their homeschooled children’s schedule, these children have more opportunities than those who attend school: “For example, my child is taking courses because he is good at all computer programs; he also enjoys drawing very much, and we naturally devote more hours and resources to it” (P3). Importantly, a homeschooled child can take part in a wide range of educational activities without the constraints of school hours. “No matter what kind of events take place, whether festivals, fairs, or educational events, we always go to them” (P4). The issue of socialisation is not a problem for parents because families that homeschool their children also communicate a lot with each other and have various meetings. It is noted that the general attitude of the group of parents-informants is that the child can socialise as much as he/she needs, not under compulsion but through a wide range of activities and relationships with peers. It is also important that children have the opportunity to retreat and return to their safe environment according to their individual needs.

Conclusions and/or discussion

1. Homeschooling is understood as an independent way of organising individual learning, when the child is educated in a family and community environment using a variety of learning tools and allowing the child to develop at his/her own pace according to his/her needs and interests. Research has shown that parents are able to homeschool their children and that children may achieve satisfactory learning outcomes as well as receive a full-fledged education if parents devote sufficient attention, time and financial resources.
2. The results of the empirical study show that when parents choose to homeschool their child, 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. The child is involved in the planning of the educational process; the individual needs of the child are better taken into account, and the child’s autonomy is encouraged. The curriculum and schedule are flexible, based on the child’s acquired

knowledge, competences, and skills rather than on the number of lessons; educational environments are constantly changing and are usually chosen by the child. Parents who participated in the study have identified difficulties in analysing the documents of the education system and the lack of access to the electronic diary. The heads of educational institutions have expressed doubts about the pedagogical preparation of parents to homeschool their children and to ensure purposeful socialisation. In the group of parents-informants, the opposite has been noted: the parents have pointed out that it is possible to ensure successful and purposeful socialisation when homeschooling the child.

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