PEDAGOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF HOMESCHOOLING

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Abstract

In most countries, compulsory schooling is provided for children between the ages of 6 and 16. That said, a collective exists made up of families that, rather than sending their children to school, opt instead to take on the responsibility for their formal and informal (academic, social, cultural, physical and emotional) education themselves. This phenomenon, known as homeschooling, is a new concept in Catalonia (Spain) and is not regulated by educational law.

This article sets out to discover more about the educational practices employed by families that homeschool their children in Spain. A qualitative study has been carried out using data obtained from 14 interviews and the analysis of five family blogs providing details of their day-to-day educational experiences. Despite the uniqueness of each family scenario, certain common traits could be identified. The parents take a great deal of responsibility for the education of their children. They have a comprehensive understanding of their children's learning styles and select the relevant methodologies and curriculums that work best for them. In general, homeschooling families implement a practical and active approach to learning that is focused on the child, providing a style of education that is open to their immediate environment and to society. The results of the study suggest the potential for using homeschooling techniques as a source of inspiration for teachers and other families.

Keywords: *Homeschooling, unschooling, e-learning, personalised education, home education*

INTRODUCTION

The provision of education in a school setting is a relatively recent phenomenon in historical terms. Education was not made available to everyone until well into the last century (Cuesta, 2005) and, as mass education has developed, so the validity of the school system has come under scrutiny (Illich, 1978; Coombs, 1968; Holt, 1977; Gatto, 1992). A small minority of families, known as homeschoolers, make the decision not to send their children to school and opt for an approach whereby they learn together as a family.

The legal position in relation to homeschooling is highly disparate. In general, countries can be grouped into three main categories: those where homeschooling is regulated and families need to be registered and comply with certain controls (France, USA, Finland, Ireland, etc.); those where homeschooling exists in a legal vacuum with an absence of regulations (Spain, Brazil, Japan, etc.); and, finally, those where homeschooling is prohibited by law (Germany, Turkey, etc.).

As such, it is unusual for families to opt for this kind of model in countries, such as Spain, where this area is subject to a legal vacuum: how do they do it, how do they organise themselves, what do their children learn? This article looks at the pedagogical approach followed by homeschoolers.

METHODOLOGIES USED BY HOMESCHOOL FAMILIES

Homeschooling is a learning modality that is enriched through the use of entirely student-centred methodologies (Meighan, 2009). As an individualised learning process, it allows for a high degree of flexibility and curricular adaptation tailored to the child and facilitates the implementation of the principle of personalisation of which John Holt (1977) was such a strong advocate. Students, under the supervision of their parents, are able to advance, backtrack, review, expand on, limit or skip content

depending on their interests, learning speed and specific educational needs. It is, in general terms, a more autonomous style of learning in which parents play a secondary role (Urpí, Sotés, 2012).

The research that has been carried out on the methodologies used by homeschoolers (Moore, 1984; Ballmann, 1995; Clements, 2004; Hanna, 2011; Cabo, 2012; Goiria, 2014; Ferrer, 2015; Shepherd, 2010; Escriu, 2015) suggests a propensity for families to be eclectic and use a wide variety of options. Some families follow a traditional methodological style based on a classic curriculum divided into subjects, with textbooks, timetables similar to those used in schools, dictations, problems, tests, etc., while, at the other end of the spectrum, others opt for a radical unschooling approach featuring prepared environments and ongoing parental support. The vast majority of families fall somewhere between these two curricular extremes, moving up and down the scale on a constant basis, at times erring more towards unschooling and other times adopting a more traditional approach (Clements, 2004; Escriu, 2015).

One notable piece of research on the methodologies used by homeschoolers is that carried out by Hannah (2012), who studied 250 families over a period of ten years, identifying aspects, such as the variability of resources and diverse range of educational materials used, the use of community resources, outings and fieldwork, the employment of specialist tutors, creation of cooperative family networks, among others. The study also highlighted a significant increase in the use of online technologies, materials and courses (Cabo, 2012; NCES, 2017). Another key study by Clements (2004) found that there was a universal trend among families to modify curriculums and methodologies and tailor them to the specific child and set of circumstances. Clements differentiates the two types of curriculum followed by these families as being traditional or non-traditional and relates them to their use of two methodologies; either direct or autonomous learning. Similarly, Ballmann (1995) identifies four different curriculum types: the traditional, based on the use of textbooks; the autonomous curriculum based on the use of workbooks and adapted to the rhythm and interests of the child; that based on didactic units or projects; and a mixed curriculum designed by the parents.

An analysis of the national level research carried out on the subject of homeschooling in Spain, despite the limited number of studies conducted, offer similar results. Goiria (2014) makes a similar classification, grouping families into those that follow the traditional curriculum using textbooks and those that follow a radical unschooling approach that does away with any kind of curriculum or planning. Cabo (2012) carried out a sociological study of 114 Spanish families and discovered that 39% of them opted for a curriculum-free unschooling approach, following a natural, unprogrammed learning process, 29% followed a curriculum that they had devised themselves, 14% followed a curriculum associated with a distance learning school, 5% one of their own design but based on the national curriculum, 4% followed the national curriculum and 9% combined aspects of a variety of curriculums.

A great deal of methodological diversity exists among the homeschooling community. Although classifying the different activities and methodologies used by these families is extremely difficult (Meighan, 2009), the work carried out by Clements (2002), Joye (2005), Ferrer (2015) and Escriu (2015) make it possible to group the methods used by homeschoolers into four categories.

The first involves direct teaching methods. This is an explicit and structured, gradual teaching approach tailored to the needs of the student. It is a guided practice that enables the adult to ask questions in order to check understanding, correct mistakes and reinforce learning. Parents may follow a book, a dossier, set activities and sit with the child while they complete the task. According to Ferrer (2012) and Ray (2004), this is one of the methods most commonly used by families that homeschool.

Secondly, we have reciprocal teaching methods, which focus on student-teacher communication in the form of pedagogical dialogue, with the teacher posing questions to the student to enable them to develop logical relationships between previous learning and newly acquired knowledge (Meighan, 2009).

Another option would be self-instruction or self-study techniques. This is an active learning model whereby the student self-regulates while solving the problem: understanding the task, identifying a

solution, applying the solution and evaluating the result. This approach is generally applied with older, more capable, motivated and organised students and is a useful tactic when there is more than one child in the family unit, as a direct style of teaching becomes problematic when working simultaneously with two or more children at different academic levels (Clements, 2004). The adult may have previously provided instruction with regard to relevant mental steps and strategies required for solving new and difficult problems.

Lastly, we have the unschooling or informal learning method whereby the child is given total freedom by the adult to explore and learn about the world (Ray, 2005). This is the most controversial methodological style in which children acquire knowledge and learn about the world by engaging in everyday life experiences. This is an implicit, unplanned approach, provided in different spaces and at different times. It is the knowledge that you acquire without realising it. Children learn through observation, exploration and questioning in a proactive and informal way (Thomas, 2007). There are a range of associated disadvantages, such as the huge level of commitment required on the part of the parents to help each child locate the relevant resources and information on topics that may interest them (Joye, 2005), as well as the difficulty of determining whether or not the children are being stretched to their full potential (Clements, 2004).

HOMESCHOOLING CURRICULUMS AND ACTIVITIES

As in the case of methodologies, there is no universal homeschooling curriculum that is applied. Each family leans towards one curriculum or another depending on their circumstances and philosophy (Clements, 2004). Choosing the right curriculum for each child can have a positive impact on the student (Ray, 2005). In general terms, there is a distinction between the type of curriculum chosen by families that have elected to take their children out of school and those whose children have never attended school. The educational background of the parents in question is another influential factor in this regard, depending on the type of schooling received (Ferrer, 2015; Rothermel, 2003). In general, parents want their children to learn things they consider to be important for their development and for their future, while also wanting them to be able to obtain some form of qualifications and, as such, they work with one eye on the official curriculum (Ferrer, 2015; Escriu, 2015).

A study conducted by Cabo (2012) on the types of curriculum used by families in Spain shows that the majority of homeschooling parents disregard the curriculum altogether (39%), with 29% following their own self-designed curriculum and 14% applying that set by a distance learning school. A total of 5% of families follow a curriculum based on that set by the Ministry of Education, while 4% follow the official curriculum and a further 4% follow a freestyle curriculum.

The diverse range of curriculums used by homeschool families can be classified into two major groups:

a) Traditional style curriculums based on the use of literature, textbooks and set subjects. The basic learning tools are taught, including grammar, language, dialectics, logic, rhetoric, linguistic expression and creativity (Ray, 2005; Joye, 2005). This style of curriculum enables families to work on the core subjects and gives them more freedom to expand their knowledge of other extracurricular topics through the use of books, workbooks, worksheets and tests. This requires a greater degree of preparation as the tutor needs to have a thorough knowledge of the literature related to each topic and to devise some kind of assessment system. That said, access to lesson plans and a set timetable facilitate the tutor's task. It is an interesting approach as it encourages children to access literature in a more natural way, the literary world is generally richer than the content provided in textbooks (Clements, 2004). Some subjects, such as mathematics and history, can be taught simultaneously by means of project-based work (Ray, 2004). The disadvantage of this type of curriculum is that it can prove challenging for children who have difficulty reading (Joye, 2005).

(b) Freestyle curriculum: the child decides which topics they wish to learn about, which may or may not coincide with the official curriculum. These families generally use internet resources and a variety of computer programs that include reading material, educational videos, tests and auto-correctors that the children are able to view and review as many times as necessary (Joye, 2005). Many students find

this engaging as it is a more interactive approach, with games and videos included as part of the curriculum which make the subject more interesting. The internet provides direct access to more than one million educational links containing resources and curricular support in all languages (Hanna, 2012). Less preparation is required on the part of the parents although they do need to monitor the child's progress in order to be able to offer support. The activities are chosen according to the method and curriculum being followed by each family. A direct, reciprocal and autonomous learning approach is often used in conjunction with a more traditional curriculum in the mornings, switching to unschooling based on a freestyle curriculum for the rest of the day (Escriu, 2015; Ferrer, 2015). Priority is given to lessons learned naturally at any given time as part of everyday life and as part of activities that involve the immediate use of knowledge. The fulfilment of curricular objectives is often sought through everyday experiences: cooking, DIY, electricity, plumbing, carpentry, etc. This turns the child's learning experience into real, living, practical knowledge involving the application of mathematical knowledge, problem-solving skills, creativity, entrepreneurship, etc. Often these families visit children's hospitals, animal shelters and other associations where they volunteer and help those in need (Moore R., 1984). Thus, many families combine real working situations with learning and study (Griffith, 1998; Lewellyn, 2001; Cabo, 2012; Ferrer, 2015; Escriu, 2015). According to Moore (Home Style Teaching: A handbook for parents and teachers, 1984), students with experience of working life achieve higher levels of academic success compared to those who spend all their time studying. Work and community service develops initiative, integrity, organisational skills, reliability and numerous other qualities that cannot be learned from books or in school and constitute vital tools for living in the twenty-first century (Gardiner, 2014; McComas, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

As seen in the previous section, families that homeschool their children draw on a rich variety of methodologies and curriculums. A qualitative research study has been conducted in order to learn more about the educational practices implemented by homeschool families in Catalonia. More specifically, this study aims to find out which methodologies, activities and curriculum styles are used by the families that homeschool.

A qualitative methodology has been used, with in-depth interviews consisting of 57 open questions conducted with 14 families, as well as a complimentary analysis of five relevant blogs through which families describe their individual educational experiences.

The technique of interviewing subjects is one of the most widely used in qualitative research as it enables researchers to gather information on what is important and significant for the interviewees and reveals subjective facts and dimensions about the individuals in question, such as their beliefs, thoughts and values. This information is key in gaining insights regarding their personal view of the world (Buendía, Colás, Hernández, 2010). An in-depth interview model was chosen, with a format based on open-ended questions that enabled the families to answer freely. This instrument was subject to an expert review system during its development (Olson, 2010). Seven experts were invited to review the instrument and thereby evaluate the correlation between the elements and the objectives. Four of these experts were academics with more than 20 years of experience and three were members of homeschooling families that have been actively involved with the homeschool movement for more than ten years.

Once the interview had been reviewed, the help of the Catalan Coordinating Association for the Recognition and Regulation of Homeschooling (CCRRH) was sought to identify and approach homeschool families that may wish to participate in the study. A number of mothers also helped to publicise our search for families on social media channels, such as *Twitter, Facebook* and *Instagram*. A total of 14 families were finally interviewed, all of which live in Catalonia. The families selected corresponded to a range of different profiles, with the following parameters taken into account during the selection process: a) the number of children and age, with children of different ages and spanning different age groups, b) the parents' education level, ensuring that at least one of the parents had completed basic secondary (B), further (F) or higher (H) education (taking the higher level of

qualification of the two as a reference) and c) living in different areas, rural (R) and urban (U). (Table 1)

Table 1. Profile of families interviewed

Criteria	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11	F12	F13	F14
Number of Children		3	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	2	15	2
Age of Children		3-9	15-19	3-7	12	3	7	6-9	5-9	0-8	13-24	12-15	15-45	4-7
Parent Educational Level	H	F	H	H	H	F	F	H	F	F	H	H	F	F
Place of Residence		R	U	U	U	U	U	R	R	R	U	R	R	R

The research project has been complemented by the additional analysis of the regular diary and blog posts written by a number of homeschool families. Netnography is a study technique related to internet investigation that complements ethnography. This qualitative analysis methodology is based on an assumption of ongoing participation on the part of the researcher with regard to the virtual scenarios where the relevant practices being studied take place (Turpo, 2008, p. 82). Blogs tell the life stories of individuals, providing detailed insights about the way these families operate and illustrating their unique temporal and causal narrative. The day-to-day blog entries include events, descriptions and situations. It represents action-based information, which captures the significance of human actions with all its intricacies and nuances (Colás, 2010:280).

The list of homeschool blogs on the official page of the CCRRH association was consulted to identify blog sites for the study. Five of the twenty-seven blogs written by homeschool families were selected according to the typical case purposeful sampling criterion, selecting cases with abundant available information in order to elaborate studies (Patton, 2015, p.266). In this case, the selected sample size corresponds to the number of available sites containing an abundance of information. Some of the blogs included more than 3000 pages. The blogs were selected according to the following criteria: a) written by families in Catalonia, b) active and current blogs, c) the length of time active and d) different educational styles, homeschoolers and unschoolers and with children of different educational ages.

Excel was used to process and analyse the interview data and the *Atlas.ti* qualitative data analysis program was used in the case of the blogs. In both cases, the analysis was carried out by means of an intuitive analytical process (McMillan, Schucmacher, 2012), with the categories and frequency of specific topics or codes, groups derived from the codes and data categories defined by the researchers in question. The main codes were based on objectives, research questions and relevant categories taken from the scientific literature. In order to edit and narrate the analysis, the data groups were selected by segment to illustrate the key categories and facilitate report writing during the process. The confidentiality of participating families has been protected in accordance with the regulations of Organic Law 15/1999 of 13 December on the protection of personal data. The families have signed an informed consent document, which stipulates that all the information obtained has been exclusively used to fulfil the objectives of the study.

RESULTS

The results are grouped into five main points; methodologies followed, curriculums, strategies used to facilitate learning, types of activity undertaken, methods of combining them and evaluation methods for monitoring the children's progress.

Methodologies and curricular approaches used

Homeschoolers do not exclusively follow any single learning methodology or set way of working, drawing instead on a range of different theories and pedagogical approaches that have formed the basis of a variety of methodological models over the course of history.

The families participating in the study frequently change from one methodology to another based on the child's age, developmental period, interests and the subject matter being studied. They are familiar with the Montessori, Waldorf, Decroly, Glenn Doman methods, as well as project work and game methodology, but are not defined by any one specific way of doing things. They also acknowledge the need to adapt the process as they go along; starting out in one way and then changing tack according to the result.

> *"In truth, although I'm familiar with a lot of pedagogical styles and teaching-learning methods, I'm not 100% convinced by any of them. I'm a bit eclectic. There are lots of things that I like and take from a lot of methodologies, but I don't follow any of them to the letter." F1P43*

As well as drawing from these methodologies, they also develop their own ways of working, such as by using workboxes (boxes containing specific material related to an area, with the child selecting a box on a topic they wish to study where they are able to find all the relevant material needed to carry out the activities that their mother has planned), construction-based projects and the creation of educational material. In the latter case, children and parents create the educational materials, games, cards, Cuisenaire rods they will use. Creating the materials forms part of the active learning process itself and provides great flexibility for adapting the materials to the characteristics and interests of each child.

> *"Pretty much each drawer contains a themed box. The top one has his new collection of medicinal herbs and various oils in it (...) His collection of coins and notes are in the fourth drawer. His collection of dissected insects is in the fifth drawer, some of which we've bought and some he has dissected himself and put on its little slide (...) The bottom drawer contains some animals that he has dissected, like a fish and a mouse, as well as other animal dissection-related things. The two skulls he found, cleaned up and made a little plaque for. The shark's mouth was a 'business deal' with a friend. The skins have been collected from various places." D9:61*

> *"They study technology with their father one afternoon a week. We've been studying machines and electrical circuits over the past few weeks and have done some very simple experiments with bits and pieces we had around the house to find out a little bit about how they work." D3:117*

They also make use of resources outside of the family home, such as joining various clubs where families meet up and do activities together: reading, artistic sessions, science activities, etc., or the children learn trades alongside professionals. The families also use community cultural services and go on general educational outings (visiting museums, scientific institutes, libraries, etc.). These trips, organised on an ongoing and regular basis, can be considered a methodology in their own right, with the children learning by immersion in a cultural and professional setting.

> *"Providing materials, for example a toolbox, watching videos, cultural trips, numerous reference books, mini library, questions. We go with their interests. We're very aware of anything that sparks their interest." F2P40*

Strategies used

The principal **strategy** used to facilitate the children's learning is dialogue, or pedagogical conversation as the parents call it. These conversations lead to discussions about a myriad of interesting topics that motivate everyone and act as prompts for starting new projects, organising outings, looking things up or undertaking a more in-depth study of a subject. The activity may take place over the course of a few hours, a day or over an extended period until the cognitive conflict and interest have been fully explored. The acts of listening, talking and discussion are the most popular strategies used by the families.

> *"I watch them, listen to them and try to give them the tools I feel they need to enable them to pursue their interests at any given time. Sometimes, I suggest certain topics or activities that I think they might find interesting or might engage them according to the stage they are at. That's the starting point for a more in-depth investigation or piece of work." F1P40*

The situation becomes more challenging and complex when there is more than one child in a family as it is impossible for parents to focus exclusively on one child. All the parents in this scenario with two or more children stressed the difficulty of providing learning support and being there for each child at the appropriate moment. Most of them manage by dividing their time between their children, sitting round a large table and making sure everyone gets their turn. They try to organise periods where the children are engaged in joint activities, regardless of the age difference and then work autonomously at other times, with a specific timeframe set for each child. The parents of one of the families interviewed had 15 children.

> *"That's the thing I find the hardest. Even though I try to make time for both, the needs of the older ones often take priority over those of the younger ones. I try to find one-to-one time for all of them while one is out at music or drama class. I have an hour and a half of on my own with each of them a couple of times a week." F1P41*

When it comes to directed learning, there is a general reluctance among the parents to direct their children's activities, as if by doing so they would be violating their children's freedom or the activity would be a less meaningful or less effective learning experience. They prefer to use the term 'guide', although directed and guided are didactically different.

> *"Mainly not, occasionally yes, depending on the subject. Sometimes, if they're not directed they don't learn. But then, there are other things they know and I have no idea where they learned it. I mainly took on a guiding role rather than directing them. Mainly it was things that they wanted to learn and we worked on researching them together." F3P42*

Curriculums

The vast majority of families are familiar with the **curriculum** but choose not to follow it. It is used more as a guide that enables them to ensure that they have covered all the relevant areas in case their children wish to continue their education within a school setting.

> *"We always kept an eye on the curriculum in case they made us send the children back to school or we got fed up." F11P34*

> *"We've read and have a copy of the curriculums for primary and secondary school and even though we don't follow the syllabus, we do try to make sure that, in general, the children know the things set out in the curriculum at the end of each stage. Apart from that, we also teach them lots of things about everyday life that they need to exist in society, as well as actual administrative procedures, experience of working and using tools." F12P34*

Some of the parents do not follow or refer to the curriculum, as they feel that providing they have an adequate linguistic and mathematical grounding their children will be able to go on to study anything that interests them in the future.

> *"I haven't read the curriculum; I don't care about what all the leaves are called. As long as you have a good basis in mathematics and language you can do whatever you want." F4P34*

The parents with older, secondary school aged children do seem to adhere more closely to the content of the curriculum and follow the same evaluation criteria in order to prepare their children for final exams or imminent school enrolment.

> *"When they were at primary stage, I never followed any kind of curriculum, other than using the maths and language books, skipping literature. But that all changed when it came to secondary level and they decided they wanted to sit the exams. You have to study. We bought the books they had to follow and did them in our own way, but you have to follow a curriculum because you know that's what they will be tested on." F3P34*

> *"From the last year of primary onwards I bought the books to use as a guide. In case there were gaps in terms of some aspect of the curriculum." F5P34*

As for content, the families tailor the things they study to their children's interests. They adopt an interdisciplinary approach in order to cover as many curricular areas as possible in a way that is contextualised and meaningful for the child. All areas of knowledge are by nature related making it easy, spontaneous and logical to study them globally rather than create specific classes for each different area.

> *"We don't work through them systematically, we don't spend a few hours a week studying each thing, but we use maths as part of everyday life; when we count something, when we weigh out the ingredients to make a cake, when we measure a space to fit a piece of furniture. We also use spoken language constantly and recently have been exchanging letters with other children in Sant Cugat to practice writing as well. Science is also part of our day-to-day life at home. When we cook, we are doing chemistry, we have magnifying glasses and a binocular magnifying glass, which we use to look at different elements. We go to the library and do research. We have a range of chemistry games and Grandpa really likes doing experiments. They're also really interested in technology; they play some logic-style games and have others that give them an introduction to programming language." F1P35*

> *"We've used workboxes, 'educacajas' (educational boxes) and lapbooks, which is a tool that you create yourself on a specific topic that encourages working in an interdisciplinary way. The children make a sort of folder with different flaps that can be opened and closed, and then they do a short summary about each of the main blocks related to the theme as a mini book or drawing that can then be stuck into the folder. Then you have a project based on a specific topic." F3P35*

In general, the families believe that any subject can be addressed as part of the things they do on an everyday basis. That said, when asked about the subjects their children study, there is a consensus that the main focus is on mathematics and language skills. These are considered useful basic tools essential for accessing learning from the other knowledge areas. Science comes in second place, studied through the organisation of nature trips to the countryside, the forest and the allotment. These three areas are prioritised on the basis of individual need and also parental focus. All other subjects studied relate to the unique interests of each child. Being able to follow the interests of each child is beneficial in that it facilitates truly personalised learning, with the child, therefore, the one who chooses the areas of focus that define them and goes on to modify, expand, change or keep them as they develop and grow.

> *"It's down to the children. Aran is into building things, Nuna studies music, she loves it, composes, writes her scores, plays the piano." F2P36*

> *"It depends on each child and what they like doing most. Pol, for example, tended to spend his time doing more technology-based and hands-on activities, as well as pursuing other interests, such as birds. Ona was quite into reading and enjoyed physical activity and Martha is much more focused on music." F11P36*

> *"I believe you can cover all curricular areas as part of everyday life. The only thing we don't study is a foreign language." F14P36*

Activities

The families organise a wide and diverse range of **activities** on an ongoing basis throughout the course of a day, morning, afternoon and evening, and every day of the week, including Saturdays and Sundays. These include a lot of educational outings, symbolic games, board games, strategy games, construction and DIY activities, projects, educational conversations, activities based around exercise workbooks, textbooks, reference books, films, documentaries, internet tutorials, musical activities, theatre, dance, travel. This is just a selection of the many activities implemented by the families, which are as varied as they are themselves. Any routine activity, such as cooking can be made into an activity.

> *"Hands-on activities, building, reading, studying, buying two or three second-hand books of the same level and on the same subject so that they read about the same thing from different perspectives, trips, historical films, lots of books." F3P44*

The activities form a natural part of day-to-day life, chosen according to what the children feel like doing. The families have a large stock of resources at home and on days when there is no specific activity or outing planned, the children do whatever they want, free to move from one activity to another, with a greater or lesser degree of adult support. Some of the families implement some form of structure with regard to weekly activities and timetables but in general there is no definitive plan that dictates the amount of time the children spend on an activity or ensures variety and coverage of the entire curriculum. The child is a fully active subject, choosing the activity, the time spent on it and switching to another as appropriate, at their own discretion.

> *"We try to strike a balance, for example, making sure we always include some kind of physical activity, spend some time in contact with nature, some time socialising as part of a larger group, it might be the scouts, but other groups as well, and encourage them to read as much as possible, which is always useful for finding a bit of personal space." F11P45*

Evaluation

In terms of **evaluation**, some of the families keep a monthly record of their children's progress, setting goals and then reviewing whether they have been met, while others are guided by the workbooks that they have completed. A few set occasional tests to check understanding of a specific piece of knowledge but the vast majority of the families were surprised when questioned about assessment. They have no need to evaluate their children. The parents review the work completed by their children and, through the variety of activities carried out over the course of the weeks and months, observe their progress and whether they are learning or have assimilated the relevant knowledge. The parents are always present and are, therefore, both spectators and actors within the learning process. It is a process akin to a continuous evaluation model but with a greater degree of personalisation.

> *"Unbelievable as it may seem, not everything needs evaluating. We don't evaluate our children the way they do in schools, at least we don't. I guess every family is different, but we spend all day, every day with our children. We see how they are progressing and know what they haven't quite got to grips with or still don't know." F1P46*

> *"As they get older, you do start setting a few tests, just to see if they know what you think they should know. Mainly in case they have to take an exam to enter the academic world, it's a way of learning about pressure." F13P46*

The majority of the families interviewed do not keep records to document their children's learning process, seeing it as unnecessary. That said, some families use the curriculum as a point of reference and check off the relevant evaluation criteria achieved by their children, while others keep track of the activities completed with a photographic record of key pieces of work or a portfolio in which they note down and archive a summary of their weekly activities. Some families also post their thoughts and

notes about their daily activities, achievements, resources and methods as part of an online diary or blog. This, rather than as a form of monitoring their children, is done to cover themselves with regard to any official request from the relevant authorities or to show to their families.

> *"I went through the primary education curriculum and noted down the evaluation criteria for each level and I look back at that from time and tick off the criteria that we've covered. It's something I do more in case someone comes to the door one day wanting to know what we are doing with the boy who doesn't go to school rather than because I think it's important." F1P47*

There is a clear difference of approach depending on the academic stage (pre-primary, primary or secondary) of the children in question. There were no evaluation criteria set by any of the parents of early learners. With the exception of one family that does set certain learning objectives, it was not even a consideration. From secondary age onwards, however, there is a marked different in the approach. The families start to prepare their children to sit final exams, using a variety of textbooks for support, which requires them to set guidelines and objectives and follow the evaluation programme and tests.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite being a very small minority group in Spain, an increasing number of families are now questioning the educational system due to its rigidity and complexity and seeking alternatives to school for their children. A climate of social empowerment permits the current education system to be challenged and even doubted. We find an array of families looking for alternative pedagogical approaches, broader curriculums, etc. The expectations of families have changed and, in general, parents are taking more responsibility for the education of their children (Hays, 1998; Huchschild, 2008). Families are now more aware and sensitive to the specific needs and interests of their children (Abdala, 2019). Despite school attendance being a mandatory requirement in Spain, this parental empowerment generates the potential for civil disobedience, seen as a public, non-violent, conscious and politically unlawful act in order to bring about change in educational policies (Goiria, 2013).

The families in question often challenge, not only education, but also other aspects of society, such as traditional medicine, food, social norms, prevailing ideological currents, such as consumerism, competitiveness, the globalisation of markets and advocate the need to promote respectful parenting. These are ideological families (Galen, 1989; Knowles, 1989; Stevens, 2001; Cabo, 2012; Goiria, 2013).

The results of this study demonstrate a significant degree of diversity and eclecticism in relation to the educational practices implemented by homeschooling families (Ferrer, 2015). Despite that, it was possible to identify a number of common traits that define the collective and also concur with other studies conducted at an international level (Clements, 2004; Joye, 2005; Hanna, 2012; Moore, 1984; Shepherd, 2010). In general terms, it can be said that:

- They promote practical, contextualised, meaningful and inductive learning centred around the child's needs and inspired by daily life.

- They tend towards a style of education focused on the global development of the child or adolescent, in which a child's natural desire to learn is supported, refraining from either shaping or distorting this innate characteristic. It is a respectful style of education.

- Outdoor education is encouraged, whether in the immediate environment, within society or by direct immersion in culture, history, nature and books. Thus, families organise regular cultural outings to museums and libraries.

- Homeschooling is an active style of education that encourages a child's sense of autonomy and initiative. It is the child that learns, not the adult that teaches.

- Families select the methods and materials they use with care. The learning process is the product of active thought and reflection.

- The use of ICT forms a key part of their daily routine, as it provides the families with direct access to knowledge, a wide range of resources and a communication channel with other families.

Having the opportunity to focus exclusively on one child or small group of children facilitates a level of personalised teaching, fostering the academic success and wellbeing of the child, who feels valued and loved (Rothermel, 2002; Briones, 2014).

The identification of the elements of homeschooling suitable for application within schools and society calls for a crucial final reflection on the pedagogical contributions of homeschooling, namely, all those elements with the potential to benefit teaching practices, as well as the educational practices of other families. This group serves a valuable source of inspiration that we cannot afford to overlook, not so much due to the originality of their pedagogical approach, but because it is something they are managing to implement. Their flexibility and individuality enables them to adapt and innovate with ease. Relevant elements that could be promoted and improved in schools include small group sizes, the flexible grouping of students, doing away with timetables, working in a more interdisciplinary way and increasing the focus on educational outings to museums, libraries and scientific institutes. In fact, some schools, particularly primary schools, have already taken steps in that direction. More resources are needed, however, for the successful deployment of these educational methodologies.

The principal constraints of this study included a restricted potential sample size due to the limited number of families that opt to homeschool in Catalonia, as well as an absence of any kind of records or databases to draw from or, indeed, any available data on the academic results of the children in question. Similarly, and for the purpose of gaining further insight into this area of study, it would be interesting to open up new lines of research into the perceptions of the homeschooled children and young people themselves in order to gain a less adult-centric view or carry out a longitudinal study involving a large sample group of children and families to be able to evaluate the homeschooling process and its results.

Homeschooling is a field of educational research. The digital world and the new challenges presented by modern life compel us to seek alternatives and solutions to the problems and shortcomings associated with our current education systems. The state of alarm called in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has presented us with a scenario in which school attendance may not always be feasible and, as such, we need to provide flexible educational options and seek alternatives to enable us to manage future scenarios in which temporary lockdowns are implemented as part of our survival strategies. Access to new technologies and the development of the information society represent the key to bringing about a paradigmatic shift in society.

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