

A Social Contract for Home Education: A Framework for the Homeschooling Debate

Anna Chinazzi*

University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy)

Submitted: July 28, 2022 – Revised version: December 30, 2022

Accepted: February 21, 2023 – Published: April 13, 2023

Un contratto sociale per l'istruzione parentale: un framework per il dibattito sull'homeschooling

Elective home education has become an international trend characterized by considerable public controversy and much legal fragmentation. Issues related to whether it should be permitted and how it should be monitored are currently being debated in many countries. Homeschooling regulation seems to have become a “wicked problem” with no definitive solution. A case has been made for moving beyond the polarization that tends to label it as either intrinsically good or inherently bad. By drawing its foundations from a UNESCO report published in 2021, this conceptual study is meant to be a contribution to the discussion about the social and legal legitimacy of homeschooling through the delineation of a tenable “social contract for home education”. It has been argued that in light of this social contract, homeschooling should neither be banned nor unregulated. Hence, a shift of perspective is being encouraged to include home educators in a pluralistic dialogue on the future of education towards policy decisions that are sensitive to this complexity.

L'istruzione parentale è diventata una tendenza diffusa a livello internazionale, caratterizzata da notevoli controversie nel dibattito pubblico e da una grande frammentazione sul piano legale. Le questioni relative all'opportunità di autorizzarla e alle modalità con cui deve essere monitorata sono attualmente oggetto di discussione in molti Paesi. La regolamentazione dell'homeschooling sembra essere diventata un “wicked problem”, senza una soluzione definitiva. Viene avanzata l'ipotesi di superare la polarizzazione che tende a etichettare il fenomeno come intrinsecamente buono o cattivo. Traendo le basi da un rapporto dell'UNESCO pubblicato nel 2021, questa ricerca concettuale vuole essere un contributo alla discussione sulla legittimità sociale e legale dell'homeschooling attraverso la delineazione di un “contratto sociale” sostenibile per l'istruzione parentale. Si sostiene come, alla luce di questo contratto sociale, l'homeschooling non dovrebbe essere né vietato né lasciato deregolamentato. Pertanto, viene incoraggiato un cambiamento di prospettiva volto a includere coloro che optano per l'istruzione parentale in un dialogo pluralistico sul futuro dell'istruzione, verso decisioni politiche sensibili a questa complessità.

Keywords: Education Policy; Homeschooling; Social Contract; UNESCO; Home Education.

* ✉ anna.chinazzi@unimib.it

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the popularity of elective home education, also called *homeschooling*, has seen exceptional expansion, even internationally. Apart from the home-based remote learning brought about by mandated school closures, the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a turning point for many families who chose to educate their children at home. Though homeschooling has become internationally relevant, especially in Western countries, its legal status remains highly fragmented and unstable. The practice has today been deemed a legal alternative to traditional formal education in many countries, although under different forms of regulation. For instance, homeschooling is permitted in South Africa (Olatunji, 2017), Israel (Neuman & Aviram, 2015; Pearlman-Avni & Grayevsky, 2019), Indonesia (Purwaningsih & Fauziah, 2020), Italy (Chinazzi, 2021; Di Motoli, 2019; Giovanelli & Piromalli, 2021), Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia (Paciorkowski, 2014; Kostecká, 2012).

Nevertheless, in many countries, the legal status of elective home education is still uncertain and evolving. For example, Lithuania has only recently reinstated homeschooling after banning it in 2012 (European Commission, 2018; Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020). Even in the United States, where it has been an established and broadly accepted educational option for quite some time, jurisprudence on the issue has remained chaotic and relatively vague (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). In some countries, it is considered illegal, or it is permitted only under specific circumstances. This is the case, for example, in China (Sheng, 2018), Sweden (Blok & Karsten, 2011; Blok, Merry, & Karsten, 2017), Germany (Spiegler, 2015), Brazil (Barbosa, 2016), Turkey (Korkmaz & Duman, 2014), and Albania (Hagen, 2011). In some other countries, such as France, there has recently been a significant flux of increased legislative regulation (Howard, 2020), while in others, such as Spain, regulation has not been able to keep pace with the latest growth and transformation of this educational choice, resulting in unclear legislation or legal gaps (Blok *et al.*, 2017; Sotés-Elizalde & Urpí, 2015).

Regardless of the fact that homeschooling seems to be growing quickly along with its legitimization, in many countries home educators are struggling to receive acceptance within their sociocultural context. Many researchers have expressed concern about potential shortfalls such as inadequate academic preparation of students, increased risk of child abuse, insufficient social interactions, and lack of opportunities to become responsible and agentic members of society (Apple, 2000; Bartholet, 2020; Lubienski, 2000, 2003; Reich, 2002b). Increasingly complex questions have been tackled by scholars through both empirical research and more theoretical or non-empirical studies, such as whether home-educated students are adequately prepared to become responsible citizens in the broader society (Pearlman-Avni & Grayevsky, 2019); on what rationales should home education be allowed or banned (Bartholet, 2020; Raley, 2017); to what extent should the State be involved and how should homeschooling students be assessed (Carlson, 2020; Hardenbergh, 2015; Reich, 2016).

In countries where homeschooling is a legally valid alternative to conventional schooling, policy-makers are expected to clarify to what extent the practice should be regulated, its process monitored, and its outcomes evaluated. These decisions must take the legal, historical, geographical, and sociocultural specificities of the context into account. No cookie-cutter approach can be deemed adequate for addressing what has been called the “regulation question” (Dwyer & Peters, 2019) surrounding elective home education. On the other hand, it is evident that empirical research on the “shifting landscape of homeschooling” (Jolly & Matthews, 2020) is needed to guide policymakers in these processes. At the same time, scholarly attention to the global discourse on education is also required since national educational policies influence and are influenced by the growing global interconnections in which they are embedded.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the debate on homeschool regulation from a global perspective. To this end, a review of the literature has been hermeneutically interlaced with the pre-existing framework of a “new social contract for education”, outlined in a report by an international commission for UNESCO (2021), wherein researchers, practitioners, and citizens were invited to address the contemporary challenges in the field of education through a dialogue grounded in broadly shared fundamental principles. People around the world were called to forge a “new social contract for education” around two fundamental and universal tenets: the right to quality education throughout life, and education as a public endeavor and a common good. Since these principles are also at the heart of virtually

all scholarly critiques of elective home education, a discussion of the implications of UNESCO's conceptual and axiological framework on this controversial topic appears to be relevant.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following questions: In light of the new social contract for education how should homeschooling be considered socially and politically? In other words, what potential implications are offered for the debate on elective home education by the framework outlined in UNESCO's report? In this endeavor, however, homeschooling is viewed as a controversial topic that needs to be addressed from a *glocal* perspective: one that takes the local, national, and global interrelationships that reach beyond the global-local dichotomy into account. Hence, an alternative frame for the homeschooling debate is being proposed to allow for a move beyond the "communicative impasse" caused by polarized readings of homeschooling as either intrinsically better or worse than conventional schooling (Fensham-Smith, 2021; Pattison, 2015), which tend to undermine meaningful discussions in the scientific and political arenas. These claims tend to be simplistic and aporetic because they overlook the variety of homeschooling experiences (Cheng & Donnelly, 2019; Cheng & Hamlin, 2021; Hirsh, 2019), and educational goals (Neuman & Guterman, 2016) that are made available by elective home education. Conversely, the awareness of the multiple views of what constitutes "good education" (Biesta, 2009, 2020) should not lead to another impasse based on a moral nihilism. That is why a third way is being suggested here, in order that the potential deadlock caused by simplistic partisanship or extreme axiological relativism might be overcome.

2. Theoretical and methodological foundations

2.1. General approach of the study

This is a conceptual study that proposes, through a theory adaptation approach (Jaakkola, 2020), a shift of perspective for the topical debate on homeschooling regulation. This dilemma is discussed in light of the conceptual lens of UNESCO's new social contract of education that would outline a new framework: a new social contract for elective *home* education. More specifically, the analysis is rooted in a hermeneutic review of the literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010, 2014; Smythe & Spence, 2012) on empirical and theoretical studies concerning the targeted problem, interlaced with the new social contract for education outlined by UNESCO (2021).

The hermeneutic approach to the literature review requires the reader to theoretically engage in an interpretation of the literature, as a "dialogical partner to provoke thinking" (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 23). In an iterative and interactive operation, this process requires searching for relevant literature, which might take the form of publications that gradually extend the dialogue among separate texts and between the researcher and the texts. The method applied by this study relies not only on analytical reasoning but also "generative reasoning" which is particularly apropos for engendering novel ideas and new insights in nonempirical studies (McGregor, 2018).

From this perspective, the UNESCO report serves as a conceptual lens that focuses the dialogue between the researcher and the texts (research articles and reviews). Although the report does not discuss homeschooling directly, it can be used as a prompt for the creation of an outline of reflections based on its theoretical principles. The fact that, as an international organization, UNESCO plays an important role in inspiring educational policies around the world confirms the rationale behind the choice made as to how this report is framing this discussion. The new social contract for education should not be interpreted as a predetermined program to be implemented isomorphically, but rather as a call for dialogue about certain broad tenets, which urges a reconsideration of the involvement of stakeholders in the policymaking processes. It should not be perceived as a blueprint, but rather "an invitation to think and imagine" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 5), a framework within which researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and citizens are called to reflect on contemporary challenges in education. Homeschooling can be seen as one of these challenges.

2.2. Homeschooling regulation as a “wicked problem”

An assumption behind the analysis on which this study was based is that homeschooling regulation is here conceptualized as a “wicked problem”, due to the controversial nature reflected in the ongoing debate (Dwyer & Peters, 2019), the pluralistic nature of the interests at stake (Reich, 2002a) and its global diffusion (Cheng & Donnelly, 2019). Drawing from Rittel and Webber (1973), a wicked problem — as opposed to a *tame* problem — is marked by intrinsic complexity and ambiguity and defies easy solutions. Because it is interdependent with other problems or phenomena, its stakeholders maintain different worldviews. In this sense, it is clear that no objective, evidence-based and unbiased literature review can offer a straightforward solution to the debate on the justifiability and regulation of homeschooling.

Understanding this topic as a wicked problem, when attempting to tackle the issue in all of its complexity, supports the need to move beyond the polarization that labels this educational option as either intrinsically good or inherently bad (Dwyer & Peters, 2019). Furthermore, rethinking the issue of regulation as a wicked problem requires a global and holistic approach. This implies the awareness that national policymaking on complex issues will inevitably be influenced by global discourse and the conviction that a worldwide ethos should emphasize “equality and social justice as fundamental goals” (Milana & Tarozzi, 2021, p. 48), without becoming a disguise for neocolonialist practices. However, this study does not claim to offer any clear-cut, top-down, and decontextualized solutions, since no wicked problem should be addressed with such an attitude (Innes & Booher, 2016).

2.3. The UNESCO New Social Contract for Education

UNESCO’s new social contract for education stems from a broader UNESCO initiative called “Future of Education”, which aimed toward catalyzing a global debate on how knowledge, education and learning need to be reimaged in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. In 2021, its main output was published in an official report entitled “Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education”. Prepared by an international commission under the President of Ethiopia Sahle-Work Zewde, it set out a vision informed by a two-year global consultation process that engaged around one million people.

In this report, education was acknowledged as one of the key factors “for making progress towards desirable developmental outcomes” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 10). To enable this potentiality, educational policy, thinking, and practice must be transformed under a “new social contract”. The report lacks a deep theoretical discussion of how this long-standing philosophical notion is to be conceptualized (Klees, 2022; Tarozzi & Milana, 2022), instead, it generally alludes to an “implicit agreement among members of a society to cooperate for shared benefit” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 2). This concept has already been largely employed in the literature of the social sciences and in political discourse as an analytical lens or metaphor used to illustrate a set of expectations around which a societal agreement might be developed. Like any new social contract, the one proposed by UNESCO is grounded on two broad tenets: (1) the right to quality education should be assured throughout life; (2) the belief that education is a public endeavor and a common good should be strengthened. These principles are described as the ‘central threads that stitch together our shared world and interconnected future’ (UNESCO, 2021, p. vii), underpinning a potentially universal vision of the public purposes of education. They are not meant as a model to follow, but as prompts for dialogue and action for renewing key dimensions of education.

The first foundational principle is based on Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the concepts of lifelong and lifewide learning. It also echoes Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. In the UNESCO report, education is depicted as a central aspect of everyone’s life, which is tightly linked to other human rights. Governments are expected to build educational ecosystems to ensure this right through intersectoral efforts and several possible actions, such as limiting or abolishing schooling fees, facilitating transport and textbooks, targeting programs to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged, ensuring safe learning environments, expanding adult education opportunities, etc. The second principle stresses the idea that education should be considered a public endeavor and a common good. The concept of education as a public good has been a

cornerstone of the discourse on international education development since the 1990s, referring to the “definition and preservation of collective interests of society and to the central responsibility for the State in doing so” (Locatelli, 2019, p. 27). In the wording of this foundational principle, the expression “public endeavor” was chosen because it emphasizes the process of participation and society-wide commitment, aimed at fostering a pluralistic, integrated, and humanistic approach to education. The intertwined concept of education as a common good is defined as “a shared well-being that is achieved and chosen together” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 117).

According to the report, in light of the increasing privatization and marketization of the education sector and the growing involvement of non-state actors, the role of the State should be strengthened: “Governments increasingly need to focus on regulation and protecting education from commercialization” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 14). At the same time, the report foregrounds the need to rethink the relations among different stakeholders in light of democratic and collaborative values. The role of the state in education is expected to avoid anachronistic top-down approaches, and to develop alternative systems of governance by “building decision mechanisms with the participation of public authorities, parents, communities, public and private entities, associations and youth movements, as well as teachers and their organizations” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 89).

Although an in-depth critical analysis of the report is not within the scope of this work, it should be noted that the report has come under some criticism. Though the document adopts an inspiring “vocabulary that relates to human dignity, cooperation, inclusion and community” (Elfert & Morris, 2022, p. 38), its political disengagement may doom its key-messages from having much influence (Klees, 2022). An idealistic vision of education, which lacks “a political stance and a critical analysis of power” (Elfert & Morris, 2022, p. 37) and which fails “to confront current realities” (Klees, 2022), is depicted. For its open-ended and idealistic narrative, the analysis of the report’s implications for homeschooling cannot be limited to a simple analytical process, when, more precisely it will require involvement with its interpretation. More specifically, in the report, little consideration is given to the structural constraints placed on its vision of the future of education because it clearly overlooks the authoritarian and neoliberal threats to democratic and equal education, which are crucial political issues in the debate on homeschooling. On the one hand, advocates tend to frame the choice to home educate as a fundamental right within a democratic society. On the other hand, many scholars have stressed that homeschooling has been flourishing in the neoliberal context (e.g. De Oliveira & Barbosa, 2017) as one of the most exclusive forms of private education, although without necessarily implying that it embodies the neoliberal ethos (Aurini & Davies, 2005).

3. A social contract for homeschooling

3.1. A trilogy of interests to consider

As Reich (2002a) put it, the debate on homeschooling should consider the “trilogy of interests”: parents, the State and the child. In harmony with the social contract for education set out by UNESCO, it can be asserted that the State has both duties and responsibilities in education. As Levin (1987) stated, education as a public good stands at the intersection of two legitimate rights. At the same time, there is the right of a democratic society to “assure its reproduction and continuous democratic functioning through providing a common set of values and knowledge” (Levin, 1987, p. 629). Hence, the State should be active to some extent in providing assurance that everyone has access to basic education, if not by supplying instruction directly. In contrast, families have the right to decide how their children will be educated (Sperling, 2015). Similarly, Bhopal and Myers (2018) argued that, if education is meant as a social process producing citizens cognizant and supportive of national political customs and conventions, it requires the process to be regulated and monitored “to give assurance about the type of citizen that is being produced and the continued safety and security of all citizens” (Bhopal & Myers, 2018, p. 1). From the state’s point of view, not all parental perspectives on education can be accepted with an “anything goes” extreme relativism and boundless permissiveness. This is not just a matter of societal interest since children’s interests are also at stake, although their perspective has been seldom explored in the research on homeschooling.

As Dywer and Peters (2019) asserted, we cannot rely on the flawed argument that parents always know what is best for their children: Parents are in a favorable position to know a child's inclinations, strengths, and weaknesses, but they are not omniscient, and they may lack the knowledge and professional expertise required to provide good instruction. This point should be put in a dialogue with the opinion of homeschooling advocates who tend to criticize the assumption that schools are always the ideal context for the personal, academic, and social growth of children due to their individual characteristics. In addition, UNESCO's report, while stating the need to defend schools as an important space-time of human experience for collective teaching and learning, it also acknowledges that the hegemonic "school format" is not the only possible form of education. Today's societies have countless educational opportunities to be valued.

3.2. Ensuring the right to quality education through meaningful assessment processes

The right to quality education, one of the foundational aspects of the new social contract, has interesting resonances with the scholarly debate on homeschooling. Many researchers have devoted their attention to the subject of academic achievement, yet it remains controversial whether there is a potential lack of opportunities for home-educated students to develop academically. This research subfield has been marked by both extrinsic constraints, e.g., financial limitations, and intrinsic constraints, e.g., frequent reluctance of families to be involved in research and the geographical dispersion of the homeschooling population. Some empirical studies seem to support the idea that academic outcomes of home-educated students are equal or even better than those achieved by traditionally schooled students (Snyder, 2013). In addition, some research has suggested that home-educated children do acquire the skills, behavior, patterns, values, and motivations they need to function competently as members of society (Medlin, 2013; Ray, 2013). In contrast, Kunzman and Gaither (2020) and Valiente and colleagues (2022) seem to share the concern that studies on this subtopic are seldom methodologically equipped to draw any valid "generalizations", due to the adoption of non-probability sampling strategies, albeit efforts have been made in recent years to conduct studies in search of so-called "systematic evidence". Furthermore, Kunzman and Gaither (2020) praised scholars who have published comparative studies, involving both homeschooling and public or private schooling samples that are demographically matched (Guterman & Neuman, 2019; Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse, 2011).

Some suggestions have been made for designing more methodologically sound studies (Valiente, Spinrad, Ray, Eisenberg, & Ruof, 2022) 1) by minimizing selection bias through nationally representative samples, 2) then by incorporating the perspectives of home-educating parents with the viewpoints of other adults (such as coaches), children and their peers, and 3) by considering the variety and complexity of the homeschooling population, in terms of socioeconomic status, motivations and goals, parental involvement, approaches, arrangements, etc. Nevertheless, drawing conclusions on whether homeschooling is better or worse in terms of academic or social and citizenship skills than conventional schooling has proven to be a serious epistemological challenge. This research endeavor calls for reflection on the real possibility of generalizing on the impact of elective home education in contrast with conventional schooling in terms of one being intrinsically better or worse, despite the variety of experiences and educational priorities. In addition, these kinds of data — although relevant — are centered on individuals, insofar as they refer to the extent to which students are individually equipped with a set of skills, without considering how homeschooling is different in its primary functioning from traditional school, intended as a social microcosm.

In the absence of any definite proof of the impact of homeschooling, how can the State fulfill its duty to ensure quality education for all? In the case of students out of the school system, the matter shifts from direct control of the provision of schooling to a monitoring and assessment role, according to national curricula or guidelines because "measurement and assessment are important for understanding the effects of education. However, indicators must be appropriate, meaningful, and carefully thought out" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 56). Testing requirements are "one of the continuous issues in homeschooling" (Carlson, 2021, p. 14). As Neuman and Guterman highlighted "the assessment of academic achievement is actually an examination of the degree to which the *goals* of the teaching and learning

process have been achieved” (2016, p. 2; emphasis added). Therefore, talking about assessment should involve reflection on shared educational goals. But within the heterogeneity of homeschooling motivations, approaches, and practices, some families are animated by pedagogical perspectives that they consider inconsistent with conventional instruction in terms of content, goals, and priorities. These parents may be skeptical about the conventionally standardized steps of cognitive development and knowledge acquisition. Some of them even choose *unschooling*, a radical self-directed and student-centered approach in which “parents do not directly teach or provide direct instruction” but try to “provide an environmental context that supports their child or teen’s learning and development” (Riley, 2020, p. 7). These stances would be easily in contrast to any kind of top-down assessment according to an *a priori* evaluation criteria. This kind of assessment may induce a narrow focus on instruction in terms of limited and measurable educational achievements, “diminishing the curriculum necessary to prepare to achieve richer purposes individually and socially” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 56).

In the social contract for elective home education, a homeschooling regulation would probably rule out the idea of using standardized tests, to value differences and diversity. The assessment process should not be focused only on short-term recall of the academic content but should treat students — whether schooled or homeschooled — as complete human beings. Further research on good student assessment practices for homeschooling would prove useful to reach novel insights on this complex issue.

Moreover, the academic achievements of home-educated students are not the main concern expressed by critics. Moving beyond a narrow conception of education as instruction, much attention has been paid to the “socialization question”, which includes the development of social skills as well as broader values formation (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020). Homeschooling is sometimes depicted as a potential risk to the cultivation of shared civic bonds, the development of critical thinking skills and civic engagement, necessary to sustain a pluralistic democracy (Apple, 2000; Bartholet, 2020; Dwyer & Peters, 2019; Lubinski, 2000, 2003; Reich, 2002b). This critique is foregrounded by those who stress the importance of schooling not only for the acquisition of academic content but also as an important space for socialization and citizenship education. These scholars fear that homeschooling may undermine students’ development of crucial skills and attitudes that they will need to become responsible members of a democratic society. In a recent publication, Bartholet (2020) expressed strong skepticism towards the possibility that home educators can fulfill the democratic function of education. “Homeschooling presents both academic and democratic concerns. [...] Even homeschooling parents capable of satisfying the academic function of education are not likely to be capable of satisfying the democratic function” (Bartholet, 2020, p. 4).

Similarly, Reich (2002b) argued that the opportunity to customize education may lead to the isolation of students from exposure to diverse ideas and thereby shield them from the vibrancy of a pluralistic society. Children who are only exposed to their parents’ values and opinions and who only interact with a selected homogeneous group of children are at risk of developing a blinkered attitude towards others. As Kunzman and Gaither commented, much depends also on whether the choice of homeschooling reflects an uncritical acceptance of a single narrative or is “informed by the critical consideration of a range of alternatives” (2020, p. 281). Some parents may choose to homeschool to create a suitable educational context where their children would not be exposed to certain ideas and worldviews that they deem objectionable and incompatible with their moral and religious beliefs (for instance, the theory of evolution).

Recent findings from empirical research do not appear to support the concern that there might be a lack of civic engagement among home-educated students (Pearlman-Avni & Grayevsky, 2019). Moreover, they offer reassurances that homeschooling can be a viable alternative to conventional schooling for enhancing children’s self-control, social competence, persistence (Tweni, Wamocha, & Buhere, 2022), and creative thinking (Unger & BenDavid-Hadar, 2022). The scholarship still must face difficulties in sampling. Many home-educating families remain unregistered (Beck, 2008) and are less likely to be involved as research participants. Some are part of “marginal” groups, such as Gypsies or Travelers, who are seldom recognized as legitimate “home educators” (Bhopal & Myers, 2016). Thus, this research field must creatively face ethical and methodological challenges to set out sustainable empirical studies that will elicit the perspectives of these families that often remain silenced in the scholarly discourse. On the other hand, practitioners are challenged by the intrinsic difficulty of “measuring” homeschool-

ing students' socialization, supporting — once again — the need for non-standardized but meaningful assessment processes.

3.3. Education as a social project shaped by pluralistic dialogue

In the UNESCO report, education is envisaged as a “public societal endeavor and a common good” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 14). Therefore, the perspectives of non-state actors (teachers, community-based groups, non-governmental institutions, social movements, etc.) should be integrated in policies and the decision-making process. As the report puts it, “good governance of educational systems requires the engagement of citizens and other stakeholders in decision-making and dialogue and implies a need for greater transparency and accountability at all levels” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 109). Stressing the need to promote more participatory democratic settings, the document says that everyone — including people from counter movements — should have the right to express themselves freely and play a role in the co-construction of the future of education. “A commitment to education as a public societal endeavor and a common good means that modes of educational governance at local, national, and global levels must be inclusive and participatory.” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 14). In this perspective, all actors should be empowered to be involved in public discourse on education. The same report is meant to “inspire new avenues for policy development and innovative action” by engaging communities in the co-construction of “what these ideas are to mean in practice” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 146).

In other words, in the social contract for education, the claims for different educational approaches and arrangements cannot be silenced. On the contrary, diverse voices and perspectives must be integrated into policies and decision-making processes, addressing the growing demand for voice and transparency in education. Conflicting voices can potentially lead to thought-provoking reflections on the fundamentals of education that could serve as constructive criticism for the school system itself. These opinions could help us to question the reified forms of education that may have been taken for granted. Creating a democratic and participatory space does not coincide with negative liberty and unregulated practices but entails enabling people — including homeschooling advocates — to animate the debate on the future of education. With respect to the homeschooling debate, policymakers should try to achieve a reasonable balance between the potentially conflicting interests at stake through regulation that should be informed by the pluralistic dialogue on the topic.

4. Conclusions and implications

Homeschooling is a challenging but worthwhile research area for social scientists, piquing pedagogical, sociological, and political interests. The tremendous international build up of the movement in the last few years has renewed a reflection on radical questions around compulsory education and the forms of conventional school. It reminds us that educational ecosystems are shaped by the complex interplay among different individual and societal values and interests. In our contemporary societies, educational policies are called on to address the challenge of creating a pluralistic vision of education. Then, scholarly perspectives on homeschooling run the gamut from those who think it should be banned to those who explicitly advocate it. Though, empirical evidence regarding educational, social, and civic outcomes from elective home education has provided some insight, many questions remain unanswered due to epistemological and practical constraints. Further research is required to better understand this changing educational and social phenomenon. Children's perspectives should also be explored to a greater extent.

Most of the available literature seems to corroborate that home-educating families are not a homogeneous group, even within the same country. They tend to differ in demographic characteristics, motivations, educational goals, and approaches. Because of this diversity, it is not possible to say whether homeschooling is intrinsically beneficial or undesirable for children and societal development. A research-informed and culturally situated assessment of homeschooling is suggested, which should encourage local research efforts. At the same time, we — as members of a complex interconnected world — are being called on to engage in global debates by exchanging knowledge and opinions across borders.

Although homeschooling is not the ideal arrangement to serve the social function of education, home educators' claims should be legitimated and heard. However, due to the diversity of interests at stake, the practice should not be left unregulated but subjected to state regulations such as (meaningful) assessment processes. This would entail considering home educators as part of a wider dialogue for the future of education and embracing their claims as prompts for a change, perhaps even *within* the traditional educational systems. Beyond the intrinsic relevance of homeschooling as a sociopolitical matter, it urges us to rethink the role and the expectations of families in education from a broader outlook. Despite the specific motives that led them to their decision, home educators — along with other families — generally complain of a gap between the school system and their perceived needs. The growth of this educational choice can also be seen as a result of the “crisis of relevance” of school. As acknowledged in the UNESCO report, far too often, formal learning does not meet the needs and aspirations of children and youth and their community.

From this perspective, home educators should not be seen as performers of a deviant practice to be silenced under a reified “traditional” culture of education. Rather, they could be metaphorically seen as Socratic “gadflies” that stir up a debate on education and its fundamentals. The growth of homeschooling is leading us to question the purposes of education and the aims of the educational system. By adopting this outlook, we might just enable the possibility of a shared vision, or even a new social contract for education.

By distancing itself from the polarization of homeschooling advocates and critics, this study suggests that a change of lens might very well advance the scholarly debate on the “wicked problem” of homeschooling regulation. As key stakeholders in education, parents — including home educators — should be entitled to a voice in the new social contract for education. Acknowledging the multiplicity of perspectives in the policy-making processes would thus enable new possibilities for transforming education into a public endeavor. This perspective would encourage researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to move from simplistic and conjectural representations of homeschooling toward decisions based on the complexity and sensitivity called for when considering the education of our children.

References

- Aurini, J., & Davies, S. (2005). Choice without markets: homeschooling in the context of private education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26(4), 461–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690500199834>
- Apple, M. (2000). Away with all teachers: The cultural politics of home schooling. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 10(1), 61–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210000200049>
- Barbosa, L. M. R. (2016). An overview of the homeschooling in Brazil: Analysis of its principles and attempts of legalization. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 4, 203–211. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2016.44029>
- Bartholet, E. (2020). Homeschooling: Parent rights absolutism vs. child rights to education & protection. *Arizona Law Review*, 62(1), 1–80.
- Beck, C. W. (2008). Home education and social integration. *Critical Social Studies*, 10(2), 59–69. <https://doi.org/10.7146/ocps.v10i2.1973>
- Bhopal, K., & Myers, M. (2016). Marginal groups in marginal times: Gypsy and Traveller parents and home education in England, UK. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(1), 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3198>
- Bhopal, K., & Myers, M. (2018). *Home schooling and home education: Race, class and inequality*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315624846>
- Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* (formerly: *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*), 21(1), 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9>
- Biesta, G. (2020). What constitutes the good of education? Reflections on the possibility of educational critique. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(10), 1023–1027. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1723468>
- Blok, H., & Karsten, S. (2011). Inspection of home education in European countries. *European Journal of Education*, 46(1), 138–152. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2010.01464.x>
- Blok, H., Merry, M. S., & Karsten, S. (2017). The legal situation of home education in Europe. In M. Gaither (Ed.), *The Wiley handbook of home education* (pp. 395–421). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118926895.ch16>
- Boell, S. K., & Cecez-Kecmanovic, D. (2010). Literature reviews and the hermeneutic circle. *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, 41(2), 129–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2010.10721450>
- Boell, S. K., & Cecez-Kecmanovic, D. (2014). A hermeneutic approach for conducting literature reviews and literature searches. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 34(1), 257–286. <https://doi.org/10.17705/1cais.03412>
- Carlson, J. F. (2020). Context and regulation of homeschooling: Issues, evidence, and assessment practices. *School Psychology*, 35(1), 10–19. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000335>
- Cheng, A., & Donnelly, M. (2019). New frontiers in research and practice on homeschooling. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94(3), 259–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956x.2019.1617576>
- Cheng, A., & Hamlin, D. (2021). *Contemporary Homeschooling Arrangements: An Analysis of Three Waves of Nationally Representative Data*. Fayetteville, AR: Education Reform Faculty and Graduate Students Publications.

- Chinazzi, A. (2021). Home education: Reshaping teachers and parents' responsibilities in the era of intensive parenting. *The European Conference on Education 2021: Official Conference Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2188-1162.2021.14%20>
- Di Motoli, P. (2019). Homeschoolers in Italy. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(2), 395–410. <https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-ijse-2019-2-19>
- De Oliveira, R. L. P., & Barbosa, L. M. R. (2017). O neoliberalismo como um dos fundamentos da educação domiciliar. [Neoliberalism as one of the foundations of homeschooling]. *Pro-Posições*, 28(2), 193–212. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2016-0097>
- Dwyer, J. G., & Peters, S. F. (2019). *Homeschooling: The history and philosophy of a controversial practice*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226627397.001.0001>
- European Commission (2018). *Home Education Policies in Europe: Primary and Lower Secondary Education. Eurydice Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Fensham-Smith, A. (2021). Invisible pedagogies in home education: Freedom, power and control. *Journal of Pedagogy*, 12(1), 5–27. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jped-2021-0001>
- Giovanelli, G., & Piromalli, L. (2021). Practising “istruzione parentale”: Becoming a homeschooling parent in Italy. In R. English (Ed.), *Global Perspectives on Home Education in the 21st Century* (pp. 159–177). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-6681-7.ch012>
- Government of the Republic of Lithuania (2020, May 20). Dėl Ugdymosi Šeimoje Įgyvendinimo Tvarkos Aprašo Patvirtinimo. 2020 m. gegužės 20 d. Nr. 504. *Teisės aktų registras*. Retrieved January 11, 2023 from <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/en/legalAct/ddd218f09b6411ea9515f752ff221ec9>
- Guterman, O., & Neuman, A. (2019). Reading at home: Comparison of reading ability among home-schooled and traditionally schooled children. *Reading Psychology*, 40(2), 169–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2019.1614123>
- Hagen, T. (2011). Free to learn: The rationale for legalizing homeschooling in Albania. *Central European Journal of Public Policy*, 5(2), 50–85.
- Hána, D., & Kostelecká, Y. (2020). A comparison of home education legislation in Europe from the perspective of geography of education. *Research Papers in Education*, 37(5), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2020.1864762>
- Hardenbergh, N. (2015). Validity of high stakes standardized test requirements for homeschoolers: A psychometric analysis. In P. Rothermel (Ed.), *International Perspectives on Home Education* (pp. 111–135). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137446855_9
- Hirsh, A. (2019). *The Changing Landscape of Homeschooling in the United States*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education.
- Howard, H. (2020, November 20). French parents are to be BANNED from home-schooling their kids as part of Emmanuel Macron's fight back against Islamic extremism. *Daily Mail*. Retrieved January 11, 2023 from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8964325/Home-schooling-BANNED-France-Macrons-fight-against-Islamic-extremism.html>
- Innes, J. E., & Booher, D. E. (2016). Collaborative rationality as a strategy for working with wicked problems. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 154, 8–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2016.03.016>
- Jaakkola, E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: four approaches. *AMS review*, 10(1), 18–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-020-00161-0>

- Jolly, J. L., & Matthews, M. S. (2020). The shifting landscape of the homeschooling continuum. *Educational Review*, 72(3), 269–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2018.1552661>
- Klees, S. J. (2022). *What is missing? UNESCO Futures of Education Ideas LAB*. Retrieved January 11, 2023 from <https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/ideas-lab/klees-what-missing>
- Korkmaz, H., & Duman, G. (2014). Public understanding about homeschooling: A preliminary study. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 116, 3891–3897. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.861>
- Kostelecká, Y. (2012). The legal status of home education in post-communist countries of Central Europe. *International review of education*, 58(4), 445–463.
- Kunzman, R., & Gaither, M. (2013). Homeschooling: A comprehensive survey of the research. *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 2, 4–59.
- Kunzman, R., & Gaither, M. (2020). Homeschooling: An updated comprehensive survey of the research. *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 9(1), 253–336.
- Levin, H. M. (1987). Education as a public and private good. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 6(4), 628–641. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3323518>
- Locatelli, R. (2019). *Education as a Public and Common Good: Enhancing Democratic Governance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lubienski, C. (2000). Whither the common good? A critique of home schooling. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 75(1-2), 207–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2000.9681942>
- Lubienski, C. (2003). A critical view of home education. *Evaluation & Research in Education*, 17(2-3), 167–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500790308668300>
- Martin-Chang, S., Gould, O. N., & Meuse, R. E. (2011). The impact of schooling on academic achievement: Evidence from homeschooled and traditionally schooled students. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue Canadienne des Sciences du Comportement*, 43(3), 195–202. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022697>
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2018). *Understanding and Evaluating Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781071802656>
- Medlin, R. G. (2013). Homeschooling and the question of socialization revisited. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 88(3), 284–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2013.796825>
- Milana, M., & Tarozzi, M. (2021). Rethinking adult learning and education as global and further research. *International Journal of Development Education and Global*, 13(1), 46–60. <https://doi.org/10.14324/ijdegl.13.1.04>
- Neuman, A., & Aviram, A. (2015). Homeschooling: The Choice and the Consequences. In P. Rothermel (Ed.), *International perspectives on home education* (pp. 211–222). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137446855_15
- Neuman, A., & Guterman, O. (2016). Academic achievements and homeschooling: It all depends on the goals. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 51, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2016.08.005>
- Olatunji, M. O. (2017). Contemporary homeschooling and the issue of racism: The case of South Africa. In M. Gaither (Ed.), *The Wiley handbook of home education* (pp. 494–515). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118926895.ch20>
- Paciorkowski, S. (2014). Homeschooling in Poland? Legal status and arguments used in polish debate over home education. *Social Transformations in Contemporary Society*, 2, 153–162.

- Pattison, H. (2015). How to desire differently: Home education as a heterotopia. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 49(4), 619–637. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12130>
- Pearlman-Avniot, S., & Grayevsky, M. (2019). Homeschooling, civics, and socialization: The case of Israel. *Education and Urban Society*, 51(7), 970–988. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124517747973>
- Purwaningsih, N., & Fauziah, P. Y. (2020). Homeschooling: An alternative education based on potential of children. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Educational Research and Innovation (ICERI 2019)*, 401, 191–196. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200204.035>
- Raley, B. G. (2017). Safe at home: Establishing a fundamental right to homeschooling. *Brigham Young University Education and Law Journal*, 1(3), 59–98.
- Ray, B. D. (2013). Homeschooling associated with beneficial learner and societal outcomes but educators do not promote it. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 88(3), 324–341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2013.798508>
- Reich, R. (2002a). Testing the boundaries of parental authority over education: The case of homeschooling. *NOMOS: American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy*, 43, 275–313.
- Reich, R. (2002b). The civic perils of homeschooling. *Educational Leadership*, 59(7), 56–59.
- Reich, R. (2016). Why homeschooling should be regulated. In B. Cooper (Ed.), *Homeschooling in New View* (pp. 133–143). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Riley, G. (2020). *Unschooling. Exploring Learning Beyond the Classroom*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49292-2>
- Rittel, H. W., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy sciences*, 4(2), 155–169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01405730>
- Sheng, X. (2018). Home education and law in China. *Education and Urban Society*, 50(6), 575–592. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124517713606>
- Smythe, E., & Spence, D. (2012). Re-viewing literature in hermeneutic research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(1), 12–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100102>
- Snyder, M. (2017). Homeschoolers and higher education. In M. Gaither (Ed.), *The Wiley Handbook of Home Education* (pp. 157–185). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118926895.ch7>
- Sotés-Elizalde, M.Á., & Urpí, C. (2015). Family involvement, autonomy, and social competency in homeschooling. *US-China Education Review*, 5(11), 714–723. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2161-6248/2015.11.003>
- Sperling, J. (2015). Home education and the European Convention on Human Rights. In P. Rothermel (Ed.), *International Perspectives on Home Education* (pp. 179–188). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137446855_13
- Spiegler, T. (2015). Home education versus compulsory schooling in Germany: The contribution of Robert K. Merton's typology of adaptation to an understanding of the movement and the debate about its legitimacy. In P. Rothermel (Ed.), *International Perspectives on Home Education* (pp. 151–165). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137446855_11
- Tarozzi, M., & Milana, M. (2022). Reimagining our futures together: Riparare le ingiustizie passate per ricostruire la scuola del future [Reimagining our futures together: Repairing past injustices to rebuild the school of the future]. *Quaderni di pedagogia della scuola*, 2, 7–16.

- Twini, F. M., Wamocha, L., & Buhere, P. (2022). The Socialization Conundrum: Comparing social learning outcomes of homeschooled and traditionally schooled children in Kenya. *Journal of Advances in Education and Philosophy*, 6(4), 247–253. <https://doi.org/10.36348/jaep.2022.vo6io4.007>
- UNESCO (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved January 2023, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707>
- Unger Madar, M., & BenDavid-Hadar, I. (2022). Does home schooling improve creative thinking and social competencies among children? Home schooling in Israel. *Journal of School Choice*, 16(1), 136–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2021.1977584>
- Valiente, C., Spinrad, T. L., Ray, B. D., Eisenberg, N., & Ruof, A. (2022). Homeschooling: What do we know and what do we need to learn?. *Child Development Perspectives*, 16(1), 48–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12441>

Anna Chinazzi – University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy)

✉ anna.chinazzi@unimib.it

Anna Chinazzi, cultural anthropologist, is a doctoral researcher in Education in the Contemporary Society at the University of Milano-Bicocca, “Riccardo Massa” Department of Human Sciences for Education. She is interested in sociocultural perspectives on education, childhood, and parenting.