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Privatisation in the form of homeschooling in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic

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Abstract

This study ties in with the debate that exists between the representatives of critical theory in education (Apple, Lubienski, Brewer) and sociologists of education (Aurini, Davies) about the place and significance of homeschooling within the framework of the neoliberal governance of education. While the first group sees homeschooling as a direct tool of neoliberal governance, the second group finds the position of homeschooling within the framework of neoliberal governance unconvincing. Both types of arguments are examined in relation to the situation, forms and reasons for homeschooling in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, where interviews were conducted with groups of homeschooling parents. The arguments about the development of homeschooling as a privatised but not necessarily neoliberalised form of education are particularly valid in the context of the Czech Republic. They are also valid in the case of a significant segment of homeschoolers in the Slovak Republic, where, however, the arguments of critical theorists of education are also valid, but for a different segment of parents – parents who adopt a religious privatist stance demonstrate a degree of affinity with the neoliberal educational ethos.

Keywords: homeschooling, neoliberalism, privatisation, Czechia, Slovakia

1 Introduction – The Controversy

The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated a new phase of privatisation in the field of education. This is evidenced by data from the USA (Hoffman, 2023) and Australia (English, 2021), which demonstrate a notable shift in the student population from public to private educational institutions, including homeschooling. In comparison to the preceding years of privatisation in the field of education, the practice of homeschooling is currently in a more favourable position than before. Indeed, it has become the fastest growing segment of private education in the United States, for example. This fact gives rise to new questions as the practice of homeschooling expands not only in terms of the countries in which it is legalised, but also in terms of the demographic profile of those who choose to engage in it.

The spread of homeschooling has led to a re-emergence of the controversy that has accompanied it since the 2000s. At that time, proponents of critical theory in education began to highlight it as part of neoliberal policies of late capitalism that undermined the public interest and the public function of education, promoting elitism and social inequality in the education system.

In this light, homeschooling may very well be the closest embodiment of neoliberalism as it likely represents the closest form of education that relies on self-regulation, decentralization, and elevation of the individual/private over the collective/public. (Brewer & Lubienski, 2017, p. 33)

Conversely, there are those who argue that linking homeschooling with neoliberal policies and their consequences is not an adequate approach. They contend that homeschooling is a form of privatism that has no impact on education market competition, other forms of education or students.

It is therefore misleading to reason that since homeschooling is growing in a neoliberal context, it must therefore embody a neoliberal ethos. Instead, beyond a legitimating role, neoliberal politics and economic pressures are only loosely coupled to this educational trend. (Aurini & Davies, 2005, p. 468)

It is crucial to address this question, as the motives and behaviours of parents who opt for homeschooling can have a significant impact on the educational market, influencing its position and social effects. If homeschooling were to truly operate in accordance with a neoliberal ethos, as critical pedagogy representatives have argued for the US, it would directly or indirectly pose a threat to education as a public service. This is particularly pertinent in a context where the status of homeschooling is being reinforced.

This is also the case in countries where homeschooling is a relatively recent phenomenon. In these countries, the debate that has been ongoing in the USA for approximately 25 years can inform the development of education policies in question. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are two countries where the history of homeschooling is less than 15 years old. We were interested in learning whether the parental discourse on reasons for homeschooling fit more with the neoliberal ethos, or whether other reasons for choosing homeschooling emerge in this discourse and what they are. The objective of this research was to verify the validity of the arguments presented in the aforementioned controversy within the current context of homeschooling in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The principal research question is as follows:

Do the reasons for opting for homeschooling correspond with the neoliberal ethos?

The partial research questions elaborate on the main research question by examining the components of the neoliberal ethos, specifically:

What form of privatisation and privatism is present in parents' discourse?

Is homeschooling thematized as a consequence of responsabilisation?

How do parents perceive the educational market and how do they thematize their behaviour within it?

Can elements of competition, economisation and effectivisation be identified in the homeschooling parents' discourse?

Is some form of anti-institutionalism present in parents' discourse?

To address these questions, we must first decompose the concept of neoliberal governance and ethos into its constituent parts and then undertake a theoretical and empirical analysis of these in relation to the national realities of homeschooling.

2 Neoliberal governance and ethos in education

In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of neoliberal governance and ethos, it is essential to examine it at three distinct levels. The initial level comprises the mechanisms that underpin it. These may be defined as privatisation and marketisation (Verger et al., 2016; Rizvi, 2016). The second level comprises the basic rationalities that underpin neoliberal governance. These are economisation, effectivisation, consumerisation and competition (Peters, 2017; Clarke, 2012). The third level is constituted by the inherent attitudes that underpin neoliberal governance. These are the responsabilisation and anti-institutionalism (Peters, 2017; Baltodano, 2012).

Neoliberal governmentality is a pragmatic, evolving form of post-welfare state politics in which the state systematically downscales its responsibilities, outsourcing 'well-being' and 'social security' to its citizen-subjects in the market, at the same time emphasising the concept of 'choice'. The subject, according to neoliberalism, is theorised as a rational, autonomous individual in all its behaviour – *Homo economicus* ('economic man') – that is expected to 'look after herself' modelled on assumptions of individuality, rationality, and self-interest. (Peters, 2017, p. 140–141)

In addition to the marketisation aspect, which represents a mechanism of neoliberal governance, Peters' definition also encompasses the underlying rationality of marketisation. This is an economised rationality that privileges individuality, individual responsibility and choice. This rationality not only serves as the foundation for the mechanisms of neoliberal governance; it also gives rise to a distinct set of values, an ethos, or even moral imperatives that are inextricably linked to that rationality. The mechanism and imperatives are both based on the concept of responsabilisation.

Responsibilisation refers to modern forms of self-government that require individuals to make choices about lifestyles, their bodies, their education, and their health at critical points in the life cycle, such as giving birth, starting school, going to university, taking a first job, getting married, and retiring. 'Choice' assumes a much wider role under neoliberalism: it is not simply 'consumer sovereignty' but, rather, a moralisation and responsabilisation, a regulated transfer of choice-making responsibility from the state to the individual in the social market. (Peters, 2017, p. 142)

This leads us to the issue of privatisation as a key aspect of neoliberal governance. It can be defined as 'a process through which private organizations and individuals participate increasingly and actively in a range of education activities and responsibilities that traditionally have been the remit of the state' (Verger et al., 2016, p. 7). Homeschooling can thus be considered a privatised form of education. Privatisation processes under neoliberal governance can take several forms – delegation, divestment and displacement. Homeschooling represents the most radical form – displacement, 'where the people themselves decide to move away from their reliance on government services' (Rizvi, 2016, p. 6).

Nevertheless, in the context of the home as a space of education, the concept of privatisation must be considered in conjunction with two other interrelated phenomena: privacy and privatism.

Whereas privacy refers to immunity from surveillance, and privatism refers to increasing social exclusivity and withdrawal from collective life, privatisation refers simply to change of ownership relations. The growth of privatisation thus entails a shift in the rights of use, benefit, control and disposal from a collectivity (normally the state) to the individual. (Saunders & Williams, 1988, p. 90).

In the next two sections we will consider the arguments about whether homeschooling is part of neoliberal governmentality.

3 Homeschooling and privatisation

Representatives of critical pedagogy, such as Apple (2000, p. 66), have situated homeschooling within the context of wider social-privatisation changes:

Home schooling mirrors the growth of privatized consciousness in other areas of society. It is an extension of the 'suburbanization' of everyday life that is so evident all around us. In essence, it is the equivalent of gated communities and of the privatization of neighbourhoods, recreation, parks, and so many other things. It provides a 'security zone' both physically and ideologically.

Homeschooling mirrors the atomising, individualising, and personalising tendencies of contemporary society through the individualised nature of this mode of education, but it also works with the logic of a risk or threat being associated with shared public spaces. It is thus a way of closing oneself off within the safe space of the private sphere. Apple (2000, p. 67) refers to this phenomenon as 'cocooning', which creates 'a world free of conflict, uncertainty, the voice and culture of the Other'.

Lubienski and Brewer (2015, p. 144) state that privatised education in the form of homeschooling 'is inherently structured to reproduce the family in terms of ideologies, class positions, world views and so forth'. As a specific form of educational 'cocooning' it is thus self-referential. Brewer and Lubienski (2017, p. 33) argue that the closed environment in which the family is self-reproduced leads to 'elevating the individual over the collective good'. The privatisation of education through homeschooling is therefore not just an alternative form of education without further social consequences. As the 'direct rejection of engagement in public education' (Lubienski & Brewer, 2015, p. 136), they argue that it powerfully undermines the public mission and authority of schools. This mission, however, is, in their view, vital to ensuring social cohesion and the productive management of social diversity. Homeschooling, by contrast, is characterised by 'limiting a child's exposure to both diversity and diverse ways of living and thinking' (Lubienski & Brewer, 2015, p. 143). The two authors link the fate of pluralist democracies to the fulfilment of the public school mission and are therefore highly critical of homeschooling.

As an extreme form of privatizing the purpose of education, home schooling denies democratic accountability and disenfranchises the community from its legitimate interest in education. This denial of the public interest does not only affect the education of home schoolers, but it also erodes the ability of the community to express its interest in the education of those remaining in the public schools as well. (Lubienski, 2000, p. 229)

Homeschooling is supposedly responsible for a significant portion of student departures from public schools, which means that it takes social resources for student learning away from public schools. Lubienski (2000) therefore argues that homeschooling is not a response to the quality of public education, as is often argued, but is instead a significant factor contributing to the decreasing quality and decline of public schools. In his view, it is therefore a unique form of privatisation of education.

By focusing only on the benefits for one's own children, home schooling represents a very radical form of privatization of a public good. Home schooling is both a more benign and more destructive form of privatization: benign because it does not put a claim on public resources (as do for-profit charter schools, for instance), and destructive in that it is a more fundamental form of privatization. It privatizes the means, control, and purpose of education and fragments the production of the common good not simply to the level of a locality or ethnic group, but to the atomized level of the nuclear family. (Lubienski, 2000, p. 215)

According to him, privatisation processes are associated with anti-institutionalism: 'There is an anti-institutional element to the home-education movement, where parents believe that institutions can be destructive, or think that they can do a better job than an impersonal bureaucracy' (Lubienski, 2003, p. 176). This privatisation logic can result in a rejection of solidarity with the public school system – something that can be observed, for example, in the United States in the context of the so-called anti-tax movement (Apple, 1996). Apple (2000, p. 68) has therefore noted that 'it is not possible to understand the growth of homeschooling unless we connect it to the history of the attack on the public sphere in general and on the government (the state) in particular'. In this outlook, public education, and public schools in particular, are presented as failing, as posing a risk to, or even as harmful to some children. This attitude is then presented as the reason for parents switching to homeschooling.

4 Homeschooling and marketisation

The marketising elements of homeschooling are seen in connection to 'global phenomenon of withdrawing from common enterprises, commodifying public goods and consumerising citizens' (Lubienski, 2003, p. 168). Brewer and Lubienski argue that homeschooling is part of a broader pedagogical movement for freedom of school choice, built on an educational market that is based on individual client demands and thereby supports competition and generates pressure to improve all the elements in that market: '... it could be argued that the threat of losing students to homeschooling represents an incentive for public schools to improve – it does embody the market ideology...' (Brewer & Lubienski, 2017, p. 33).

... it is accepted that the choice of a school or, in the case of home educators to educate outside of the country's schooling system, is undertaken in a market for education. A market for education is understood to operate as a neo-liberal choice making exercise. Under these conditions, no choice is 'neutral', and all have a value in the market... As such, all schools, regardless of their affiliation, are competing in a market for students where the decision of a student (or that student's family) to attend a particular school is a zero-sum game, in that the money that student attracts is taken out of one school and taken to a different school, or not taken to any school as is the case with the home education cohort. (English, 2021, p. 80)

Aurini and Davies (2005) take the opposite view, though they begin their study by showing how a new market for homeschooling materials has formed and grown, accelerated by the spread of this form of education into the mainstream population. This new market mainly serves the needs of 'tailor-made pedagogy' (p. 464). In this sense then homeschooling currently operates according to the logic of consumerism. The authors do not in principle dispute that homeschooling today functions according to the general neoliberal rationality of free choice and that it thus has an affinity with market theories. They argue, however, that this does not mean that by choosing homeschooling, parents are following a neoliberal rationality or that they identify with a neoliberal ethos. The key argument is that the proponents of homeschooling reject the economic rationalism behind market principles in education – the rationalism that the market will result in the maximisation of competition and in the efficiency of different forms of education with the aim of improving the performance of children and their greater employability or competitiveness in the labour market.

The authors argue that we will not find most parents who homeschool approaching their children's education from the perspective of an economic calculation or in terms of a competitive advantage, and we will not find the values of competition, accountability, or pressure to perform as their motives. The concept of human capital that forms the basis of the neoliberal ideology is, in their view, not a concept that is observed among those who practise homeschooling. On the contrary, 'rather than seek instrumental advantages, many of its practitioners aim to remove children from market (and bureaucratic) settings, reasoning that they are too precious to be entrusted to the care of others' (Aurini & Davies, 2005, p. 469). Privatisation in the form of homeschooling, they argue, is mainly a reflection of protection from vulnerability. It is a means of fulfilling individual (sometimes special) needs, away from the pressure of competition and the impersonal environment of the school.

Homeschooling thus represents a choice without markets. Homeschoolers strongly assert their right to choose yet do not espouse a market ideology, since for many both bureaucracies and markets can potentially threaten the sanctity of their families. Rather than championing educational competition and rigor, many desire a kinder and gentler form of schooling that allows them to evade anonymous bureaucracies or consumer markets. They strongly voice the language of choice without adopting other components of neo-liberal doctrines... (Aurini & Davies, 2005, p. 471–472)

5 Homeschooling in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic

In both countries, the term ‘homeschooling’ is the common colloquial term in use, but the legislation refers to ‘individual education’. Students are for the majority of the time taught in the home environment and their primary educators are their own parents or persons appointed by them (so-called educators). The conditions that govern the authorisation and the course and discontinuation of individual education at the primary and lower secondary levels of education, including the assessment of homeschooled students, are set out in Section 41 of the *Education Act* in the Czech Republic and in Section 24 of the *Education Act* in Slovakia.

The approaches applied in Slovakia and the Czech Republic differ in terms of the level of education required of home educators. In Slovakia, home educators must have the MA level qualifications required of a teacher who teaches at the particular grade of primary school the child is in. This means that a university degree is required, together with a teaching qualification. In the Czech Republic, a minimum of secondary-school education with the school-leaving exam is required, and if the student is in the second stage of primary school (lower secondary education), the educator must have university education. In the Czech Republic, therefore, the level of education of the educator to teach at the primary level is two levels lower than in Slovakia, and no teaching qualification is required at any level of education.

Individual education at the primary and lower secondary levels can be facilitated by any school based on the decision of the school director in response to an application by a legal guardian. In Slovak legislation, the school with which a child is registered for home education is referred to as an ‘anchor’ school. In both Slovakia and the Czech Republic, each homeschooled student takes examinations each term in the relevant curriculum, and these exams are taken at the school at which the child was admitted for the purpose of fulfilling compulsory school attendance. In accordance with the *Czech Education Act*, these are regular examinations administered by the director of the school or teacher of the relevant subject at the school, while the *Slovak Education Act* requires that the examinations always be administered by an exam board.

Students in home education in both countries must fulfil the learning objectives set out in the official national curriculum for the given level of education the student is studying. This means that in both countries the state remains in control of the outcomes of home education, which is not defined as the sole responsibility of parents. For example, the anchor school is responsible for providing parents with methodological and organisational assistance in the education process. The director of the school also has the right to revoke permission for homeschooling if the necessary educational conditions are not met, most notably material conditions and educator qualifications and conditions relating to the student’s health. The *Slovak Education Act* even explicitly states that the child’s legal representative is if necessary obliged to allow an authorised school inspector and an authorised employee of the anchor school to enter and carry out an inspection of the homeschooling environment.

The Czech and Slovak homeschooling frameworks are terminologically and systematically very similar, with some small differences relating the required qualifications of educators and the monitoring of homeschooling progress by the school. In the light of these slight differences, the Slovak homeschooling framework emerges as stricter and more prescriptive.

In 2024/2025, the share of home-schooled pupils in Slovakia was only 0.3% of the total number of primary school pupils (DŠ, 2024), in Czechia it was 0.66% for the 2023/2024 school year (ČSÚ, 2024).

6 Sample and methodology

Given the focus of the research, purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that the data collected was rich and directly relevant to the objectives of the study. The main criterion for inclusion in the research was that the participant was a (grand)parent of at least one child who was receiving compulsory education in the form of individual education (homeschooling), regardless of the age of the participant, the age of the child, the characteristics of the family, the characteristics of the child, and regardless of whether or not the child had previous experience of schooling. As homeschooling families are generally considered to be a very hard-to-reach group, finding participants was a challenge. Participants were recruited through a series of advertisements on social media, the departmental websites, personal networks and through university students. Interviews were conducted between November 2021 and November 2023. The size of the research sample was determined in stages to achieve theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The final purposive research sample consisted of a total 21 participants from the Czech Republic, all of them women (20 mothers and 1 grandmother), and 16 participants from the Slovak Republic, again almost all of them women, with one interview attended by both parents. In the Czech sample, 16 of the mothers had a university education, and in the Slovak sample 14 mothers did. As in other educational contexts (English, 2021), in the Czech and Slovak educational environment, education is seen as predominantly a women's issue – that is, a mother's issue. Only women responded to our call for participants.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform or in person. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participant. Each interview was then transcribed and then deleted for privacy reasons. The guided semi-structured interview included an initial identification section, designed to obtain basic information about the family and the child, and a core content section that covered three thematic areas: (1) the parents' motivations for choosing home education, (2) the period in which the decision to homeschool was reached, and (3) the advantages and disadvantages of this mode of education in the eyes of the parents. Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), which is based on reading the data to identify and analyse certain patterns and recurring themes. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis was carried out in six stages: (1) transcribing and re-reading the data with annotations; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing a report. The themes

that emerged from the data analysis process were then structured into super-themes. The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the investigators of both research projects (VEGA and GAČR) of which the present study is an output.

7 Research results

Criticism of schools and state-centrism in education appeared as a super-theme in our thematic analysis, as it emerged not just in reference to education. Sub-themes connected to criticism of traditional schooling can be divided into internalised and externalised topics. The internalised ones relate to negative personal experiences with school (personal frustration, negative emotions, bullying), while the externalised ones have more to do with critical views of systemic characteristics of school (evaluation, competitiveness, collectivisation, authority).

A second super-theme was the specific value set of a family as representing a specific community with its own culture and as a life space. A common feature was the belief that education is a private family matter. Although one sub-theme in this case is Christian-conservative values (especially among Slovak families), another (more common) sub-theme consists of secular value frameworks (living together, living in harmony with nature, etc.).

7.1 Criticism of schools and state-centrism

As noted above, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia the state has not withdrawn from regulating homeschooling, and the regulation is stricter in Slovakia. This state regulation, expressed in legislation, is one of the major aspects of homeschooling that parents criticise. Choosing and communicating with a potential anchor school are where the first clash occurs with the state:

*The first [anchor school] took it as a personal insult that I wasn't placing my child in the school and was educating him at home. They then made up more conditions than the law requires. For example, they wanted a special guarantor for religion and English. We got out of there. (SVK B)*¹

Another aspect is control over the content of learning, learning outcomes, and reporting to the anchor school:

I can't understand why the state is constantly dictating what we are to pass on to our children and how, whatever it is. We are tested, monitored, and burdened with paperwork and an overall lack of support for us – the homeschooling families (SVK C)

¹ We use two identifying characteristics for the interview transcriptions: 1. an abbreviation for the country in which the homeschooling took place (SVK- Slovak Republic, CZ – Czech Republic); 2. a letter that was assigned to each interview in each country. The letters were assigned in alphabetical order without using any other identifying criteria.

To participating parents the homeschooling framework seems to attest to the state's distrust of families and to an unnecessary state paternalism:

I see the legislative framework as an expression of distrust towards parents being the primary persons responsible for their children's education. This distrust can be felt in the need for a guarantor as well as in the financing of this type of education. (SVK CH)

This statement contains an element that is typical of the argumentation used by homeschooling parents; a rejection of the state's responsibility for education and a perception that parents are the ones who are solely responsible not only for raising their child but also for their child's education. It reveals a perception that the state and family have separate responsibilities as social entities. This means that even if parents feel sole responsibility, they do not feel responsabilised by the state/ministry. On the contrary, they thematise tensions and contestation over competences and reveal a situation incompatible with neoliberal governance. From the perspective of the state, however, homeschooling represents a means of responsabilisation and neoliberal governance – it systemically expands the possibilities of shifting responsibility for education to families. At the same time (in the Czech Republic and Slovakia) it maintains continuity in the goals and content of education. This turns out to be something that many homeschooling parents disagree with and they call for complete freedom and privatisation of education. The expectations of a significant number of parents are thus more towards unschooling, a more radical form of educational privatisation (Morrison, 2007).

However, it is not just indirectly through the legislative conditions governing homeschooling that the state is attacked.

On the whole I see problems in the system, and I am becoming less and less willing to send my children into it. (CZ S)

In the case of the mother cited just above, the main purpose of compulsory education is 'to tame the population, put people off whatever possible, teach obedience, learn to sit for hours at a stretch'. Criticism is directed at the overall normative nature of the state that is embodied in the public school system. As one Slovak mother said:

Well, I guess the basic goal of compulsory education is to learn the essential skills that the state or someone has determined are essential, so that's the basic goal of compulsory [education]. That is an education that we did not come up with. (SVK F)

The strongest criticism, however, is directed at public schools and at the idea that homeschooling parents have and share about public schools. Parents point to the elements of public schools that they see as problematic and that they believe homeschooling overcomes. This sub-theme is thus related to the *externalised reasons for school criticism*.

Uhm, it really helps me to have that freedom, the freedom of not being stressed out that your child is going to come home from school with a bad grade. There's no frustration. At school it's a gamble as to what you're going to get. At school ... well, um, it's just stressful. I mean, you have no control over what you learn at school ... like in fact ... yeah, they're always forcing parents at a normal school to do something – like do your homework, this and that page, exercises, learn this and that for a paper, and exactly according to the textbooks – even though a lot of things aren't up to date. (SVK D)

The participants' statements mostly criticise the characteristics of the public school system as a social organisation for mass education. An opening statement in one interview revealed one major theme within this super-theme: the normative nature and coerciveness of school assessments.

Because I fundamentally disagree with the Czech education system the way it is set up, and especially with the way children are assessed over the course of their education at school. I think that the main reason is the way children are assessed at regular schools, which I find altogether unacceptable. (CZ G)

According to parents, assessment is based on finding mistakes and it therefore fails to have a formative effect.

It seems to me that traditional schools are very much focused on errors and correcting what I don't know. (CZ H)

According to parents, formal assessments and the assigning of marks give rise to competitiveness, which they reject as an immanent value of public schools.

... it's like the competing, collecting good marks without remembering or being able to grasp the learning material. (CZ G)

There it's always so much about who comes top and who's basically the best. (CZ B)

Public schools are deemed to be a performance-oriented social organisation and their mission, according to homeschooling parents, is reductive.

And they're still, like, really into performance, you know. Where, again, it might seem great from the outside that these kids are getting, like, good results, they're getting into good schools, they're getting into the secondary grammar schools, but it's at the expense of, like... at the expense of the kids' relationships with each other, you know. (CZ L)

Pressure for results as a means of effectivisation and economizing education that maximizes social returns and benefits is not paramount for parents; on the contrary, they criticize it. Thus, they do not implicitly perceive the child as a form of human capital or 'homo-economicus'. Rejection of the competitive atmosphere and of the pressure to perform that public education promotes through marks and grading is a prominent theme in the discourse of homeschooling parents. While they commonly reject the neoliberal ethos, that does not mean that parents do not emphasise the privatised aspect of the decision to homeschool.

... so my kids don't encounter that, how to put it, that school pathology, let's say. The bullying, but also other unpleasant things at schools, being compared to others, the competition and all that. (CZ M)

In this statement we find together in one place a rejection of the principle of competition combined with an example of what Apple (2000) called 'cocooning', which is it say, a form of protective privatism aimed at avoiding external dangers, which in the case of education means the 'school pathology'.

An emphasis is placed not just on the isolated and sheltered nature of the homeschooling environment, but also on the difference in the physical and social environment of homeschooling. This forms the basis for criticism of the normative nature of the public space of the school.

Children need to grow up in nature, not on a school bench. They should receive their values from their parents, not from adult strangers and immature children. (SVK C)

Negatively tuned labels such as “stranger” or “immature” represent a demarcation against external, disturbing factors and danger.

There was a personal element to the parents’ criticism of public schools, an element of their own personal memories, which we referred to as *the internalised reasons for criticising public schools*. These reasons for criticism are often linked to the phenomena mentioned above – marking, testing – but at the same time they have a connection to strong personal experiences.

I remember this enormous frustration, and I also remember that when I learned everything, I got A and B grades, but I don’t remember anything else from that school. And it dawned on me that I don’t want that for my children. (CZ H)

Consequently, for some parents, the decision to homeschool was not solely based on rational considerations. The decision was informed by a combination of emotional factors and personal experiences with the school system.

So, because I had experience with in-class education from my childhood and the entire time I realised that it isn’t good, because I can’t remember any of it ... it struck me that this is very ineffective and at the same time I remember how much fear I experienced during examinations. (SVK F)

7.2 Private value frameworks

The privatisation of education in the form of homeschooling was built either on a strong value framework that the family consciously operated with or on the belief that education should be a private affair that better enables children to develop their individual potential and holds the family community together. Often it was a combination of both.

So that family life can be organised according to the needs of the family’s members, not according to when the school bell rings. This is an undeniable advantage. Also, because we are actually accompanying our children through the education process, both my husband and I are widening our own horizons, and we enjoy it. It’s actually a real bonding activity. (CZ C)

According to our participants, the intention behind homeschooling and its effect are to build and maintain close relationships within the family. Universalist values are not usually part of the homeschoolers’ discourse. This sub-theme is concerned with the promotion of *secular family values* as a close(d) community.

Also, the family functions because we are really together a lot. So the family definitely functions better. The relationships between child and parent are certainly better. I definitely think that the bond between the siblings is becoming stronger and more relaxed. (CZ B)

Homeschooling is presented as an additional resource for fostering emotional bonds and social relationships in a close-knit, 'cocooned' community.

Mainly in the sense that we're together a lot, we're together more, we can build our relationships, and that's probably primarily what we were interested in with this. We wanted to spend the best quality time with our children. (CZ N)

Parents again tend to construct the need for privatised and individualised education by establishing a contrast with public schools.

And I don't really know anything about a large part of their lives, I'm not a part of it, and that bothered me so much here about that school, that I had no idea what was going on there. (CZ Q)

Furthermore, this statement illustrates the necessity for a more substantial degree of private control and involvement.

This aspect is observed to be even more pronounced in the case of parents who espouse a specific, usually religious, value system, which, by choosing homeschooling, they seek to maintain (often in defiance of the state). This sub-theme elucidates the role of *religious value frameworks* as a determinant of homeschooling practices. We did not find such cases in the Czech environment, where the value frameworks behind deciding to homeschool usually involved the values of togetherness or seeing the family as a unique community. In Slovakia, however, these sub-themes were present, and homeschooling was used as a means to maintain parental control over the ideological focus of education – for example, in the case of homeschooling parents who follow the 'traditional Catholic education system' (SVK CH):

We had several reasons: ... Homeschooling allows us to retain an influence over our children and build a stronger relationship with them. We have control over what our children learn. (SVK CH)

For another family with this value system, the aim of homeschooling was:

...to get enough opportunities to guide our children towards the values that we consider important for their lives, to draw them naturally into our experience of life, to give them the opportunity to see the world and meet people we value, to give them a solid anchor in life. (SVK A)

The statement 'solid anchor in life' means a strong foundation in the values that align with the family's traditions. In the case of the families cited above, these are the conservative values that form the basis of a traditional family. As they say, this means the kind of education that 'reinforces ... the natural roles of father, mother, brother, sister' (SVK A) and thus works with the concept of tradition and what is deemed 'natural behaviour'.

This does not, however, mean that these types of families are mainly focused on imparting a worldview to their children and do not have educational goals. On the contrary, what they call a 'classical Catholic education' is an elite, highly cognitively oriented form of education that is concerned with a child's intellectual performance. One mother (SVK CH) referred to her key educational resource as a book titled *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*. This is a book providing a guide to academically rigorous, comprehensive education based on the classical model of education – the trivium. Another mother (SVK A) mentioned the importance that she ascribed in the home

education she provided to independence, to the opportunity to 'go in depth' and 'to study more than what is in the textbook'. What we have here then is a fundamentally different, demanding, and performance-based approach to homeschooling. This discourse posits that homeschooling represents both a competitive advantage and a conscious investment in a child's future.

We also recorded one case in Slovakia where homeschooling was used as a way to ensure protection against the 'official' or majority version of the Christian faith. It therefore served as a means of privatising a marginalised value and religious framework espoused by a particular family:

A pandering to violence in textbooks, one-sided views such as in the third-grade social science textbook and even the fourth-grade one. The story of Fatima and Omar, it's so badly written, it's also so denigrating towards the Turks, the Turkish nation, and many others. And religion should not be mixed with education. But what basically bothers me is that we live in an officially Christian country and the textbooks are written explicitly along those lines, and children from families of other religions and beliefs, countries, and traditions are forgotten. For example, my husband ... is from another country [Palestine] and the textbooks explicitly teach Christian holidays. But our family is of a different religion, and we don't want our children to learn these things. (SVK E)

In this case we can see strong criticism being directed towards official educational policies and the existing state curriculum in Slovakia. However, once again we do not find that this criticism leads to the children's instruction in an alternative religious and value framework at the expense of their education. On the contrary, we observe rather that the parents benchmark their children's progress against performance criteria abroad and work intensively, for example, on developing their children's foreign language skills.

The only examples of homeschooling for religious ideological reasons we encountered were in the Slovak Republic. In these cases, the homeschooling typically involved a focus on religious conservatism combined with a demanding and performance-oriented form of education. The criticisms in these discourses made no mention of school assessment, comparisons, grading, or competition. It can therefore be concluded that religious conservatism, as a rationale for the privatisation of values through homeschooling, is more aligned with the neoliberal ethos.

8 Discussion

The primary research question pertained to the alignment between parents' perspectives and the neoliberal ethos. Subsequent refinement of this research question was achieved through the formulation of the following specific subquestions. What form of privatisation and privatism is present in parents' discourse?

Homeschooling in the Czech Republic and Slovakia serves as a privatisation mechanism, but it is one that is under some control by the state, which can also in individual homeschooling cases abolish the individual education. In the context of homeschooling in the United States, the privatisation is manifested as 'displacement' (Rizvi, 2016). Such a change does not occur in the context of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, primarily due to

the influence of state control and the legislative framework governing homeschooling. This is also a topic explored in interviews with parents who do not feel they have complete ownership of their children's education. Rather, the state or school has the authority to regulate the market. Parents' attitudes are not towards privatisation but towards what Saunders and Williams (1988) refer to as privacy and privatism. This can be defined as the desire to avoid control, to withdraw into privacy, and to disengage from collective life. This type of privatism in the Czech-Slovak case also resembles what Apple (2000) refers to as 'cocooning'. The data demonstrate two distinct forms of privatism. One group of parents exhibits an emotionally or experientially tinged form of privatism, which is characterised by secular motives and is frequently associated with perceptions of risk and the necessity to protect the child. A second group of parents exhibits a form of privatism rooted in the religious enclosure of the community. This variant is characterised by an emphasis on the acceleration of individual learning and the construction of educational added value.

Is homeschooling thematized as a consequence of responsabilisation? According to Peters (2017, p. 142), the concept of responsabilisation originates from "modern forms of self-government", which foster a sense of individual responsibility among citizens. This responsibility is being emphasized by the homeschooling parents. These parents feel solely responsible not only for raising their children but also for their education and they criticise any external control. The reason for this is the claim that they know their child best and they want to be with their child during critical moments of childhood. They portray their child's childhood as the most essential and precious time, and they do not want to miss out by being absent. They stress the unity of the family as a unique social group. However, there is no extensive "transfer of choice-making responsibility from the state to the individual in the social market" (Peters, 2017, p. 142). In the case of homeschooling, parents do not feel responsabilised enough, describe this transfer as incomplete, interfering with their choices and limiting their options.

This also relates to another specific subquestion: How do parents perceive the educational market and how do they thematize their behaviour within it? Parents are not explicitly guided by a market logic that would lead them to compete with public services or other home schools. As initial analyses in the critical theory of education have shown, this logic of competition can instead be seen in the position that is sometimes taken by public schools. This is illustrated by one Slovak example, where some public schools refuse to be 'anchor' schools for homeschoolers or they erect obstacles to homeschooling or apply restrictions.

However, we did observe differences in competitiveness as an individual value. It was part of the sub-question: Can elements of competition, economisation and effectivisation be identified in the homeschooling parents' discourse?

In the event of parents adopting a secular privatist perspective, comparison and competition among children are criticised as relics of the public school system. This situation is similar with the rationality of economisation and effectivisation. Measures aimed at economisation and effectivisation are criticised and held up as features typical of public schools, such as massification, the absence of individuality, and the assigning of marks and grades. The free approach to learning timeframes and to the organisation of time

in homeschooling along with the expense of it and its time-demanding nature set this practice at odds with the principles of economisation and effectivisation. In the event of parents adopting a religious privatist perspective, the conventional structure of schooling and the competitiveness of grading were not subject to criticism. Instead, these elements were characterised as not competitive enough or insufficiently challenging.

Anti-institutionalism (referring to the subquestion “Is some form of anti-institutionalism present in parents’ discourse?”) is probably the strongest and common element in the discourse of Czech-Slovak homeschoolers. The majority of objections raised pertain to the institutionalisation of home education by the state, whereby it is integrated into the official school structures and the national curriculum, thereby rendering it dependent on these external systems.

To this point we could agree with Aurini and Davies (2005) and say that the Czech-Slovak example also shows that homeschooling is a ‘choice without markets’ with a dominant privatism logic, a very limited market logic, and lacking certain elements of the specific neoliberal ethos such as economisation, effectivisation, and competition. This would actually be our answer to the main research question.

The fact that complicates Aurini and Davies’s statement is the representation of families that have strong ideological reasons for homeschooling, which primarily derive from the family’s religiosity and its religious culture. This point brings us to Apple (2000) stating that the strong privatism, separatism, and anti-institutionalism of these families is tied to the protection and reproduction of family values. These often go hand in hand with traditional (perceived by critics as stereotypical) values that reject the declared progressivism at public schools. Apple (2000, p. 63) argues that such families are part of ‘a new hegemonic bloc’ that is made up of neoliberals, neo-conservatives, and authoritarian populists. This bloc, although heterogeneous, is growing stronger today (Brown, 2006; Brown, 2021). When we observe the wave of rising anti-institutionalism, nationalism, conservatism, and populism globally and in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, it is impossible to ignore that, in such a climate, support for homeschooling will, for the reasons outlined above, not diminish. However, we cannot claim that homeschooling in Czechia and Slovakia is having a significant impact on the school system, as it has had in the USA, where ‘homeschoolers operate in a robust civil infrastructure that parallels the public school system’ (Brown, 2021, p. 1).

Our research shows that religious-conservative homeschooling parents have a different ideological perspective than other groups of homeschoolers, including a different perspective on education. They express this in an explicitly elitist way through intensive cognitive development that contains elements of competitiveness and through the traditional structuring of educational content (that also forms the basis of education in public schools). What is important for them, however, is the intensity and the depth of the education. They thus correspond more to the neoliberal ethos than other groups of homeschoolers do.

9 Conclusion

While Aurini and Davies (2005) observed around the turn of the millennium a change in the atmosphere surrounding homeschooling, and the pandemic created new conditions for widespread participation in homeschooling (English, 2021), we cannot wholly confirm that homeschooling has broken out of the context of neoliberal governance. Traditional homeschooling themes emerged in our research sample.

Also, our research shows that homeschooling still consists of two primary groups of parents. Van Galen (1988) referred to one as Ideologues (in our case, parents employing religious privatism) and the other as Pedagogues (parents employing secular privatism). But Van Galen's interpretation is that the Ideologues focus mainly on the ideological rather than the educational link, and therefore, for example, simply reproduce the culture of the traditional school in the home environment. Rather, our data show that 'ideologues' are more grounded in a competitive view on education, focusing on educational efficiency and attainment, and thus correlating intensively with the neoliberal ethos. Their reasons are therefore not only ideological but also pedagogical. They do everything they can to give their child a competitive advantage through home education. It turns out that there is a strong convergence between neoliberal governance and conservatism precisely in the homeschooling sector (Oliveira & Barbosa, 2017) and that it is religious reasons that lead respective parents to use the resources of neoliberal educational governance (Hanson Thiem, 2007). Such cases have been particularly prevalent in Slovakia. The statements of Aurini and Davies about reduced neoliberalization of homeschooling are therefore essentially valid in the case of Czech homeschooling, but they are only partially valid in the case of Slovak homeschooling and are related to the current diversification of the sector.

Another specific feature is the stricter state regulation of the Slovak homeschooling sector. To some degrees this amplifies the anti-institutionalist stance of homeschooling parents there. Something similar was observed by Proboeuf (2022) in France, where strict regulation of homeschooling led parents to adopt more extreme attitudes towards the state and public education. Although anti-institutionalism is present in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and it thus forms a standard part of the critical rhetoric of homeschoolers (Neuman 2019), the privatism is more extreme in the case of Slovakia.

It is important to acknowledge that the findings of this study should be interpreted in light of the inherent limitations of the research design employed. It is important to note that this is an exploratory qualitative study based on the opinions of volunteers who were willing to participate in the research and share their stories. However, it does not include the opinions of parents who, for various reasons, were either unwilling or unable to participate in the research. Consequently, it is not sufficient to assert that there are no homeschoolers in the Czech context who are grounded in conservative religious beliefs or reasons.

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