

SUSTAINABILITY OF HOMESCHOOLING. THE CASE OF SZEKLER HOMESCHOOLING FAMILIES

Kinga M. MANDEL

Abstract: Due to the pandemic situation and lockdowns, the public gained broader insight into homeschooling. The purpose of this study is to examine whether homeschooling is sustainable for Szekler homeschooling families and under what conditions. The research framework is based on constructivist (Vygotsky, 1986) and stakeholder (Smith, 2000) approaches. I combined secondary data (the Association of Home-Schooling Romania's written and oral materials) and primary qualitative data analyses. The small-scale sample primary research consisted of eleven semi-structured thematic interviews (individual and in pairs) with the homeschooling parents and their children above 18 years. The results show that homeschooling could be a sustainable alternative to mainstream education in certain cases. It proved sustainable in the cases studied in all its aspects: economic, environmental, and social. However, sustainability is dependent on the socio-economic status of the parents, their aims, and the personality of both parents and their children.

Keywords: sustainability; homeschooling; Szekler homeschoolers; economic sustainability; environmental sustainability; social sustainability

1. Introduction

Homeschooling is a worldwide, debated social-educational phenomenon. In its widest sense, it means that parents supervise their children's education at home (Ray, 2017). In a narrower sense that applies to Szekler homeschoolers, homeschooling means that "the student has a formal connection to an educational institution (for example, as a private student) and the instruction and learning happen at home." (Nágel, 2012). The synonyms include homeschooling, home education, and education at home. Unschooling differs from homeschooling is a type of education where families choose and plan the curriculum and activities for their children. Unschooling is a form of education where children follow their interests and learn from their experiences, without any imposed structure or guidance from a parent (Riley, 2020).

Firstly, we encountered homeschooling in North American movies. Since the early 2000s, it has reached Central and Eastern Europe. Homeschooling is not explicitly regulated in Romania, school attendance being compulsory except in cases of disability (where a registered teacher must teach the child) (Law on National Education, Romania, 2011). There is a solution to homeschooling by enrolling the children in a school in a foreign country (we will detail the two standard solutions further on) and teaching them at home. Three pioneering families started homeschooling in 2001, in Szeklerland (1st interview with a homeschooling father, 2019). The Szekler region, also known as Szeklerland or the Székely Land, is a territory in present-day Romania, mainly inhabited by Székelys (Szekler), a Hungarian subgroup. This region is situated in the Eastern part of the Carpathian

Mountains, primarily covering the present-day Harghita, Covasna, and a portion of Mureş counties in Romania. Szeklerland was formerly part of the Hungarian Kingdom and the Principality of Transylvania, enjoying a certain level of autonomy under communist rule until 1968 (Stroschein, 2012).

During the 2019-2020 pandemic lockdowns, all of us experienced some homeschooling, giving actuality and importance to our research. According to the Census Bureau of the USA, in the fall of 2020, the figure was twice the number of homeschooled households at the start of the 2019-2020 school year.(Bureau, 2021; McDonald, 2020) Some even say that homeschooling evolved from subversive to mainstream during this time (Winterhalter, 2021; Gilbert, 2021) .

Sustainability in its broadest approach means “the long-term viability of a community, set of social institutions, or societal practice. Sustainability is maintaining or supporting a process or activity over time without depleting natural resources or harming the environment or society.” (Sustainability | Description, Theories, & Practices | Britannica, 2024).

In education, sustainability applies to the fundamental values, aims, methods, processes, and contexts of teaching and learning.

Sustainable education is based on values and principles of sustainable development, such as human rights, democracy, biodiversity, social justice, cultural diversity, environmental protection, well-being, and sustainable consumption. It aims to teach learners to become active citizens and to make informed and responsible choices for the present and the future. It encourages and enables learners to act differently and contribute to sustainable development. It can assist students in developing the competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, values) critical for a sustainable world. It supposes that education occurs in a way that does not compromise the environment, the economy, or society, neither in the present nor in the future. This education process is relevant and meaningful for learners and responds to their needs and interests. It is interdisciplinary and holistic and draws on multiple sources of knowledge and perspectives. It is transformative and aims to bring about individual and social change towards sustainability. It requires inserting into teaching and learning critical thinking and reflection, problem-solving, systemic thinking and analysis, participatory learning, creative thinking, and collaborative learning. Sustainable education is a pedagogical approach that encompasses various forms of education, including schools, universities, workplaces, and community groups. It can also engage diverse people with a role or interest in education, such as teachers, students, leaders, citizens, or businesses. (Purvis, B., Mao, Y. and Robinson, D. 2019), (UNESCO, 2023), (Cambridge International, 2021).

Homeschooling offers a flexible and personalized learning environment, which allows families to integrate sustainability principles into daily education. This includes nature-based learning, as homeschoolers often engage in outdoor education, which fosters a direct connection with nature and enhances ecological literacy. Contains environmental science integration, as many homeschooling curricula incorporate environmental science as a core subject, encouraging students to explore topics like climate change, biodiversity, and conservation. Contributes to sustainable living practices as homeschooling families frequently adopt eco-friendly habits such as composting, recycling, and gardening, turning the home into a living lab for sustainability.(*Environmental Science in Homeschooling: Promoting Eco-Consciousness and Sustainability*, 2023)

Homeschooling as a type of education is sustainable, as it can foster a more active and diverse form of citizenship that is based on personal responsibility, community involvement, and democratic participation (Page, 2021). Homeschoolers tend to have positive social, emotional, and psychological development, prominent levels of civic engagement, and social tolerance (Arai, 1999).

Homeschooling is sustainable from a macroeconomic aspect because it is cost-saving for the public education system, the tax revenues from homeschooling parents, and the potential earnings of homeschool graduates. Homeschooling generates significant economic benefits for both the public and the private sectors (Pelt, 2015). In 2021-22, roughly 3.1 million homeschooled students represented over 51 billion dollars in savings for taxpayers in the US (Ray, 2023). Homeschooling not only saves money for the taxpayers but sometimes also contributes to entrepreneurship (Pannone, 2017).

Homeschooling is sustainable environmentally because of the reduced transportation emissions, energy consumption, and paper waste (Murphy, 2014).

The social sustainability of homeschooling is because home-schooled children perform well, often better than average, on indicators of social, emotional, and psychological well-being: they interact with peers, have a positive self-image, lead others, bond with their families, serve their communities, and feel confident. Homeschoolers frequently participate in social and educational events with people from outside their immediate family. They often join activities like outings, clubs, campaigns, religious work, sports, and volunteer work. It contributes to academic achievement, civic engagement, and family cohesion (Ray, 2023). Some even state that homeschooling is strengthening political tolerance (Cheng, 2014).

Homeschooling, while offering unique opportunities for sustainable education, also presents several limitations and contested aspects. One is the lack of standardization and oversight. Homeschooling is often criticized for its lack of regulatory oversight, which can lead to inconsistent educational quality and limited accountability. Some scholars argue that without standardized curricula or assessments, it's difficult to ensure that all homeschooled children receive a comprehensive education, including sustainability topics. (Linda A. Renzulli, Regina E. Werum and Anne-Kathrin Kronberg, 2020) Another consideration is the limited exposure to diverse perspectives, meaning that sustainable education emphasizes global citizenship, diversity, and social justice—areas that may be underrepresented in some homeschooling environments. Homeschooled students may have fewer opportunities to engage with peers from different backgrounds, potentially limiting their exposure to diverse worldviews. This can affect the development of critical thinking and civic engagement, both of which are essential for sustainability education. (Neuman, A., Aviram, A., 2015) The third limitation is regarding methodological gaps in research. There is a lack of robust, causal-comparative research on the long-term outcomes of homeschooling, especially about sustainability education. Many studies on homeschooling are descriptive or correlational, making it hard to draw firm conclusions about its effectiveness in promoting sustainable values. Critics highlight the need for more rigorous, longitudinal studies to assess how well homeschooling prepares students for environmental and civic challenges. (Ray, 2013) The fourth limitation is on equity and access issues, as homeschooling can inadvertently reinforce social inequalities. Families with more resources (time, education, income) are better positioned to provide rich, sustainability-focused learning experiences. This raises concerns about equitable access to quality education and the risk of deepening educational divides. (Neuman, A., Aviram, A., 2015)

Our main research questions are whether homeschooling is sustainable in the case of Szekler homeschoolers and under what conditions.

2. Materials and Methods

The study's theoretical framework integrates constructivist perspectives influenced by Vygotsky (1986) and stakeholder viewpoints as proposed by Smith (2000). According to the constructivist paradigm, humans build their understanding and knowledge based on experiences and reflections on them. The stakeholder paradigm, a constituent of the constructivist paradigm, proposes reconstructing reality considering the perception and expertise of stakeholders involved in the phenomenon. Pasquero (1996) proposed that stakeholder theory can be interpreted through a constructivist lens. Firstly, because stakeholders are co-constructors of meaning. In a constructivist paradigm, stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers, community members) are not passive recipients of educational policies or curricula. Instead, they actively participate in shaping educational goals and practices through dialogue and negotiation. Secondly, stakeholders engage in continuous negotiation to define what is valuable or meaningful in each educational setting. This aligns with constructivism's emphasis on contextual and socially constructed knowledge. Thirdly, the stakeholder paradigm acknowledges that values, priorities, and knowledge are not fixed but evolve through interaction. This mirrors the constructivist view that learning is situated and dynamic. Fourthly, constructivist stakeholder theory supports pluralistic engagement, where multiple perspectives are not only acknowledged but are essential to constructing shared understanding, key to both democratic education and sustainability. (Pasquero,

1996) This framework means that we interviewed two stakeholder groups (parents and children) and based our analyses on their construction of the reality regarding homeschooling.

We combined a secondary data analysis with primary data collection and evaluation. For secondary data, we considered all the materials (videos, conference presentations, press materials, documents) published by the Association for Home Schooling Romania (AHSR) and its members, available on the web. As the first homeschooling pioneers in Romania were Szekler families, who, for now, had homeschooled children over 18 years old (with experience in higher education and the workplace), our research focused on them as we were also checking stereotypes about how they are dealing with those challenges (we wrote about those in other publications).

For our primary data collection, we used snowball sampling starting from the AHSR association leader, the pioneer of homeschooling in Romania. We tried to reach all the Szekler homeschooling families that homeschooled children above 18 years. According to the AHSR documents, in 2015, there were approximately 300 homeschooling families in Romania, amongst them around 30 Hungarian (Szász, 2015b) most of them with Szekler origins. Out of those 30, we found and included in this research seven families that had homeschooled children above 18 years. They are members or slightly linked to the Association for Home Schooling Romania (AHSR), and many of them also belong to a reformed religious group, most of them are interconnected, or at least they know about each other. With the members of those seven families, we conducted eleven topic-centered, half-structured interviews, both with parents and their children above 18 years. Another reason to have a minority sample was that we supposed that one of the main reasons for homeschooling in the case of minority families could be to avoid the majority language state exams and the possible failures attached to them. However, this hypothesis proved untrue, as interviewees did not mention it, and when asked, they answered, “It could be.”

The semi-structured interviews lasted 45-90 minutes. 7 were individual, 3 paired, 9 parentals (2 in pairs, one sequential), and 4 youngsters over 18 years (1 paired). In this latest pair, the pair was the fiancé of the interviewee (not homeschooled, thus having an outsider opinion on it, which we thought could be an interesting point of view). The preliminary data collection started in December 2019 and ended in September 2020. Right before the pandemic lockdowns, one preliminary personal interview happened, and the rest occurred online. The participants originated from Szeklerland, Romania. Most interviewees answered from Romania, some from Hungary (Miskolc), Austria (Wien), and one family lived at that time as a Samaritan assistant in an Iraqi refugee camp.

Table 1. Primary data collection

| | Primary data-collection | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|--|
| | Parental interview | Children above 18 interviews |
| 1st family | father (two sessions) | 1 interviewed (out of 3 all above 18) |
| 2nd family | mother | 0 interviewed (4 kids, out of 2 above 18) |
| 3rd family | father | 1 interviewed (2 kids above 18) |
| 4th family | father | 0 interviewed (2 kids above 18) |
| 5th family | mother | 0 interviewed (2 kids above 18) |
| 6th family | paired interview | 1 paired interview (2 kids, 1 above 18 and fiancé) |
| 7th family | paired interview | 0 interviewed (6 kids, 3 above 18) |

Through the interview questions, we covered the main reasons and consequences for homeschooling known from the literature, the costs and benefits of homeschooling from different aspects (for ex. economically, socially), we checked the main stereotypes regarding the homeschooling (school achievement, socialization, inclusion in higher education and labor market, entrepreneurship, civil and political activity), the sustainability of homeschooling and many different other of aspects of homeschooling (for ex time management, curriculum and textbook usage, private classes...).

The study received ethical approval from the university and complied with all ethical research standards under the General Data Protection Requirements (GDPR).

The pandemic situation gave limitations in the research, by making it hard to reach the target group and its members. Instead of the planned face-to-face interviews, we had to switch to online interviews. Still, we developed those interviews and went into the depths of the topic to the best of our abilities.

3. Results

We would present our results based on the main aspects of sustainability: economic, environmental, and social.

3.1. Homeschooling and economic sustainability

The economic sustainability of homeschooling can be seen from two different angles: whether homeschooling is economically sustainable from the family spending point of view, and how families teach their children economic sustainability.

Szekler homeschooler families have more children than the average family in Romania. The 7 families included in this research raised on average 3,57 children in a family (the most being 6, the least being 2 children/family), while the country fertility rate in 2023 was 1,652 (MacroTrends, 2024). In a family with more than three children, the mother must decide whether it is worthwhile to return to work after maternal leave (18 weeks in Romania) and spend one wage on a babysitter, or whether it would be better if she stays at home with the children. Szekler homeschooler families tend to choose the second option.

In most families included in this study, only one parent was working; Thus, the family lives on one wage, or both are working and earning (usually in the religious and social sectors). There are families where one of the parents or both are entrepreneurs and craftsmen, working in a family business. These family income settings require consciousness of spending habits. The pioneer Szekler homeschoolers learned cost-effective practices and shared them further with their homeschooling followers.

Firstly, they were considering the tuition fees when deciding on the enrollment of their children in educational institutions. Families can choose between two enrolment possibilities: the American schools, which, according to some parents' opinions, are more cost-friendly, as the fee is one for a family (no matter how many children are enrolled in it). It also offers freedom to parents to evaluate their children's learning performance.

“The whole family could enrol in an American, non-accredited school for the same amount of money we spent on a trip to Hungary and back” (2nd interview, homeschooling father, 2020)

The other possibility is enrolment in Hungarian education institutions. This second type uses remote or online teaching and learning, with periodic examinations. Private student status is unavailable in Romanian educational institutions. It has also been limited in Hungary since 2019; still, it applies to Hungarians living abroad. The enrolment in Hungary seems more costly than that in the US, as families travel semestral to obligatory examinations in Hungary (700-800 km from Szeklerland, meaning 10-14 hours of travel by car or train).

Many Szekler families opted for a hybrid solution: enrolling their children into American schools for primary and lower secondary (1-8) education, then changing to Hungarian institutions a couple of years (4-8) before the baccalaureate to ensure the possibility of European university entrance.

Secondly, families that enrol their children in Hungary take their children jointly to end-of-semester examinations, sharing cars, accommodation, and other costs. They use library subscriptions. Those enrolled in US institutions bought together, shared, and gave further textbooks and learning materials. The textbooks needed in Hungary are free of charge in the case of extended families (over 3 children). With the spread of ICT tools, textbooks are more and more redundant.

“At a certain point, you don't even need a textbook anymore, because you learn differently, and you already see that the point is not that you learned what is in the textbook, but rather that you acquire the knowledge in a specific area” (2nd interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

The cheapest enrolment option is in unaccredited American schools. This is not a solution if the aim is to follow studies at a competitive higher education institution, where the notes matter. In this case, the compensation is to pass additional entrance tests (detailed later).

“It is much cheaper in the US system at a non-accredited school. It is just that if someone wants to go to a medical school or another place, it is not good for them because they must get a high school equivalency diploma, and that's not enough... If there is a big competition, they ask for notes and all kinds of things” (2nd interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

A private school is more expensive than homeschooling and is rare and difficult to access in Romania.

Thirdly, Szekler homeschooler families were frequenting cost-effective public institutions, like folk art schools, community-, or cultural institutions, pioneer houses, and students' clubs, to learn and practice folk dance, modelling, electronics, handicrafts, arts, needlework, puppetry, acting, gymnastics, and music.

“We went to the so-called Pioneer House, a students' club, where they were enrolled in modelling, electronics, crafts, all kinds of courses. The teachers were surprised; how do girls attend such a radio course? They had not seen a girl in 20 years; how come they went? Well, that was, the girls never go, right away to the first places, the most beautiful bench gave us (5th interview with homeschooling father, 2020).

Similarly, to learn and practice sports, they attended sports schools, clubs, and associations (for ex., swimming and ball sports).

“They went to sports then obviously, badminton, swimming pools every week, which means that the students' club had a project like that perhaps, partly funded by the education department, to teach, to educate the students, so I think all three of them went swimming for 6 or 7 years or so. (5th interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

Homeschooling families were fans of museums, theatres, and concert halls to provide art teaching. They organized excursions and summer camps. In summer camps, older kids supervised and animated smaller kids, and parents organized activities based on their and their guests' competencies.

“One of the mothers was a psychology teacher, then she did such biologically oriented things with them for a week, they looked at a frog in a puddle and tree leaves under a microscope. So, it was a practical science camp, and then there was a father who was a chemical engineer, and then he blew up all kinds of things, mixed and exploded and lit them” (7th interview with homeschooling father, 2020). „There were English, American, and Canadian guest teachers, now It is a week of intensive action” (5th interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

Homeschoolers have a collaborative community: they help each other in many ways (with consultation, ideas, connections, tactics, and materials) when needed.

“So we have helped each other a lot, for trips like this, homeschoolers sharing a car, sharing costs” (8th interview with homeschooling mother, 2020)

This is also a pillar of the sustainability of their homeschooling. Home-educated people also save money due to the lack of peer pressure to buy trendy stuff.

“You must buy this because the other person has one, and then I need it too. And he has a phone, I need one too” (11th interview, homeschooling parents, 2020).

The above-illustrated sparing habits have a philosophical background. Here we cannot only think about the Weberian protestant ethics of saving that are valid for our Szekler homeschoolers, as they belong to a protestant religious group. They also consider that “small is beautiful”, “little is sometimes more”, “small steps take you further”, “we figure it out when we get there”, and “one could learn anything that needs” (parental interviews). Instead of buying the kids' fashionable goods, parents try to spend quality time with them.

“The most we can give them is our attention, our presence, our care our care.” (Szász, 2015b).

Time is money, and it costs when it is not spent efficiently.

“What hurt so much for me was the amount of time we spent agonizing... and when a 7-8-year-old child spends all day coming home from school 4-5-6 hours and agonizing until the evening, studying and the result was not the time invested and progress made was not the time spent at all (8th interview, homeschooling mother, 2020).

Although homeschooling proved to be time-consuming for parents (Shaghayegh & Ming, 2015) and it is time-saving for children as they learn more in less time.

“In 3 hours, you could easily ... the material, you could take it in such a way that you could still know and ask questions, you completed all the exercises, and you were ready” ...” In the first grade, we studied an American math textbook, which was quite thick compared to here. We finished around January. Then we took out a Romanian one and went through it, and around May we reach the end so that he solved every task from every lesson, we went through everything” (7th interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

Szekler homeschoolers' learning is sustainable as they follow an efficient learning strategy. Kids study 3-4 hours daily, but they do it continuously throughout the year, without breaks.

“It is unnecessary to skip the 3 months of summer vacation from that point of view, it is harder to start over, and they start by repeating last year's things anyway. The effective one is only from October to May... there are also lots of breaks, so if you stretch it out little by little, it is much more relaxed, they participate more” (11th interview, homeschooling parents, 2020).

Time management is a key competency to sustainability, and homeschooling is added to this, according to the parents.

“They used to say that time is money, and they talk about it a lot. If we would like to teach our children to use their time more effectively - I am convinced - that homeschooling can provide us with an incredibly good foundation, a very good start-up capital” (7th interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

Homeschooled students have more time for themselves, and it seems they are using it positively.

“They have more free time, which they can use more cleverly, more usefully, more intelligently, for things that are especially...relaxing, things that give them something more and something extra at the same time. (8th interview, homeschooling mother, 2020).

Homeschooling parents are teaching their kids economic sustainability through their examples. They are organizing their lives and household activities jointly. Homeschooling is giving practical competencies, problem-solving, and creative “out of the box” thinking.

“What he learns at school he applies and therefore advantageous, we are very happy that he applies it right away, he not only has theoretical knowledge, but he immediately applies and does it and loves it very much, and it also came out here that he was homeschooled, because he learned to think with this homeschooling in such a way that there is a saying in English "out of the box" (11th interview, homeschooling parents, 2020)

Homeschooling proved sustainable because of its continuity in higher education. All homeschooled Szekler children who aimed for it could enter college. Opting for a highly competitive university in Hungary required an advanced Hungarian baccalaureate in different subjects. Although teachers considered it impossible to prepare by themselves for advanced baccalaureates, some homeschooled students succeeded. It also happened that after a failure in the advanced Hungarian Baccalaureate, one worked for a year, then switched to a technical university in Romania (7th interview with homeschooling father, 2020). The lack of notes or an adequate high school background is compensated with the American College Test (ACT), the Standardized Test, also known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), or the Graduate Assessment Test (GAT) in the case of American university enrolments (D. Curcubet, 2015).

Szekler homeschool parents aim to prepare their kids for a profession, which is more than work; it is a calling, based on self-drive.

“At least that's what we stand for and that's what we promote wherever possible, that is, that there are parents who accuse home educators of not wanting their children to go to university, of cutting them off, of cutting them off from the best universities. That is not true. There may be such a thing, but it is not true. The point is to discover what the child's vocation is. And if the child wants to be a good entrepreneur, provide the conditions for this. Then one should not go to economics because one wants to be a banker, but to study investment, if one wants to be a fine investor, be a good trader. If you want to learn, I don't know, pastry-making, then you should go to a pastry school. There's no need to be ashamed of vocational schools; It is important. We take it seriously, there is preparing children for practical, everyday life” (2nd interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

Homeschooled students were not forced by their parents to follow higher-education studies; it proved to be more important to find their calling or profession.

“The main thing in home education is training for a profession, which would be the point” (2nd interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

Homeschooling proved to be sustainable from the aspect of inclusion in the labour market. Homeschooled students acquire work-related competencies by volunteering and working while studying. Homeschooled students start volunteering at a very early age (13-14 years old). Some also initiate working right after reaching the age limit set by law.

“They worked during vacations when they turned 16, then they already worked with a workbook and from then on, they sold ice cream, and worked in a pizzeria, and different places” (7th interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

Working assists not only in finding a profession but in deciding whether one would like to follow higher education studies.

“He waited for a year, worked in the meantime, learned to drive, cooked pizza and pasta and various things, and then he realized that he didn't want to cook Chinese food for the rest of his life, and then he completed this year and went to university afterward (7th interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

Homeschoolers proved eager to go abroad and learn foreign languages by babysitting or volunteering. Sometimes they work and study in the same. This applies more in countries like Switzerland or Austria, and less to Romania and Hungary.

Children who failed to enter college started practicing their profession (as hairdressers or guitar teachers) or working in a family business (craftsmanship) or farming.

“Home-educated children grow up to be independent much sooner.” (Szász, 2015a).

According to the Anglo-Saxon literature, homeschooling is strengthening entrepreneurial skills (Pannone, 2017). We learned about a homeschooled kid who was catching languages fast and tried to sell everything to anybody.

“The type of person might be given, because we see one in the family who is sure to be (an entrepreneur – ed.) but is only 10 years old. He has been starting new businesses every day for 5 years... Who imitated me when he was 3-4 years old... It rings in foreign Arab houses. (laughter) And he tells them with (language -ed.) knowledge zero, that he wants to sell this because it is good... one day, then he finds something new and he doesn't stop, he doesn't stop. He has an idea, he can implement, he brings people, and then he sets up the whole family, who will control which part, and then (sell it.) it... But he has it in his blood... others it doesn't” (11th interview, homeschooling parents, 2020).

One homeschooled student became a hairdresser and just started her business. Others assisted in family craftsmanship and farming. However, entrepreneurship is more embedded in American society and culture. In Romania, family businesses ceased, and private properties were confiscated during communist times, which still hinders entrepreneurial initiatives. The cultural and institutional environment that supports entrepreneurship is weak and accidental.

“Business comes with responsibility, and it also requires a type of person, plus an environment (11th interview, homeschooling parents, 2020).

Homeschooling strengthens skills that are needed not only in entrepreneurship but also for self-determination and individual critical thinking.

“Homeschooling, I think, is also good in that it teaches you to think and learn on your own because in school you might have more of a group spirit and you're working it out together and ... and that... but as a homeschooler, you're the only one who has to stand up for yourself, who has to figure it out and who has to do it (6th interview, homeschooled young lady, 2020)

The problem of the schools that are “killing” creativity (Ken, 2006) is well-known by Szekler homeschoolers as well:

“Every child has gifts that God has given them, that if you find a place where they can use them, then every child is valuable, but within a system that uniformizes, they cut down those who would excel, they cut down those who would not progress as fast (Szász, 2015b)

Instead of killing, homeschooling is developing it. This skill is much needed in the labour market.

“All of them are very creative, D. paints so much... the other one with wood now that he is there as a camper, he and the carpenters have a lot of practice there too... and he can do everything, now he is very skilled at assembling wood at home, everything... the other one too, so ... for example, he likes to cook and she wants to be a chef” (11 interviews, homeschooling parents, 2020).

Problem-solving competencies are also highly demanded in the labor market. This competency is developed not only through the example of parents, overcoming several official obstacles (authority harassment) on the way to homeschool, but also by developing individual learning and activities.

The story of a homeschooled youngster working for a multinational company in Switzerland, solving IT and managerial-related problems that others cannot, is a good example of the result.

“It has happened to him many times that people ran into obstacles... and we couldn't do this either... and then he says that it is fine, so they gave it to me and it took two weeks to think about it... he thought about how this could be so anyway... and finally managed to figure it out and was very happy to have one (solution -ed)” (11th interview, homeschooling parents, 2020).

3.2. Homeschooling and environmental sustainability

The relationship gets examined from two ends: whether homeschooling is environment-friendly and how homeschoolers teach their children to become environmentally friendly.

Some parents were choosing homeschooling to protect their children from the school environment, its climate, and unwanted phenomena, like mobbing, lack of teachers' attention, motivation, and intention to handle peer-aggressivity and exposure to age-inappropriate content regarding sexuality and addictions (gaming, alcohol, drugs).

“Home education can protect the child from influences for which he or she is not prepared” (7th interview, homeschooling father, 2020)

One would suppose that homeschooling is not adequate for kids with socialization problems. Al reverse.

“I would recommend it to anyone interested in shaping the character of their child, and for those who have difficulties, whether it is learning difficulties, or something physical, for example, or for children who for some reason are not accepted in the community, have difficulty fitting in ... I know it sounds silly if I say they have difficulty fitting into a community and then you teach them at home because everybody would say yes, you must take them into a community, you must take them into a community, you must get them used to being put there, but it is not true. It is not, because It is not all the same that he grows up with you at home, to reinforce him, to encourage him and to make him real ... and he learns at home, he learns who he is, he grows up and when he has a self-image when he can accept in himself what is not perfect or not like the others, he comes out as an adult... he can defend himself much better, he can stand up for himself much better, and once he's accepted himself and he's comfortable with himself, he doesn't want to change for others or conform to others” (8th interview, homeschooling mother, 2020)

By strengthening the personality, homeschooling contributes to independence, self-consciousness, and self-reliance, all traits needed for environmental sustainability. It provides a safe environment for children for a longer period; thus, they can catch up if needed.

“It is not raising a child under a bubble, it is that the seedlings are not yet planted out in the frost” (5th interview, homeschooling father, 2020)

As mentioned, our homeschoolers are cost- and environment-friendly conscious customers. They also save energy as they do not commute daily to their schools.

Homeschooling is environmentally friendly as it ensures an organic and realistic learning climate.

“More practical, they discover this in the home-schooled people, because, for example, we were taught not only to understand the subjects, but also to be able to prepare a lunch, or we did a lot of gardening, cleaning, jam-making (10th interview, homeschooled young girl and her mate, 2020)

Teaching and learning do not happen exclusively at home, but outside, in the world, in museums, theatres, libraries, excursions, nature, and public places, like firefighters' open days, where they can gather real experiences and professions directly from the sources.

“There was such an open day, the Firefighters Open Day. Then we said that today we would not study but see the firefighters' open days. On the night of museums, we would visit each museum in succession, as we are not bound by the (school-ed.) program. Anyway, we were ahead of the material, or we caught up later. If there was a family event, we didn't have to cancel it, because we were tied to the school, we went to a few places, and we had come here because that didn't mean the system had collapsed. (Szász, 2015b)

Based on Christian-conservative gender role models and expectations, homeschoolers teach people differently, preparing them for modern household chores.

Girls learn to cook, iron, sew, and assist children and plants in the garden.

“We were taught not only to understand the subjects, but to say, we girls could make a lunch, or we did a lot of garden work, cleaning, cooking jam... (10th interview with homeschooled young girl and her mate, 2020)”

Boys gather experiences in manly activities, they learn how to repair things in and around the household, how to assist in construction works or farming, and take care of animals (for example, dogs and horses) if there are some in the household.

“Every boy likes to take things apart, and we were threatened by our parents at the time not to take them apart and spoil them. I purposely bought tools for them and if a household appliance broke down among someone I knew, I asked for it and here my sons took it apart in the yard, from the television to the piano to the microwave oven, they took it apart, they looked at what was inside, what it was approximately, and then, as a result, they could use their natural curiosity during the game in such a way they now gained insight into these things more thoroughly than if they had gone to school” (7th interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

3.3. Homeschooling and social sustainability

This relationship gets analyzed from two perspectives: whether homeschooling is socially sustainable and how homeschoolers teach their kids social sustainability.

There is a widespread bias regarding the homeschooler's social inclusion. This negative stereotype crashed into our case. It turned out that homeschooling builds up personality, self-awareness, independence, self-consciousness, and self-reliance.

“They've got a stability that I have seen, wherever they look for people of character, if they're honest and kind and do a good job, and that's what they've been brought up to do with this self-learning. They're not learning for accountability or I don't know... so that's what they've been told from a very young age, they have to take things seriously, and that... well, that what they do they have to do with the best dedication, that was the learning, and then in life, that's how I think it determines their lives,

how they live. . . Wherever they end up, it is a positive thing, they have.... character” (4th interview, homeschooling mother, 2020).

Children learn how to connect safely with others while they build up strong links with their families.

“Child-parent relationships have also changed, so this kind of mother-daughter relationship has been restored” (5th interview, homeschooling father).

By spending more time with parents, homeschooled students follow parents as role models instead of rock stars or influencers.

The child “takes values from you, or that he admires his parents, or that he looks up (to their parents), this is a concept that is unimaginable in today's society” (7th interview, homeschooling father, 2020).

Homeschooling strengthens not only the parent-child relationship but brotherhood too, as they spend more time in each other's company.

“I see with other kids, they fight with their brother because he has a girlfriend and a boyfriend, from school, he's close with that, and here he is close with his brother, very strong, very close. (11th interview, homeschooling parents, 2020)

The studied Szekler homeschoolers proved to be interactive constituents of their religious community and homeschooled companions.

“The home-educated kids are in good (relations- ed.) and so they talk almost every night with each other, somewhere on Skype or WhatsApp or Meet...I thought that if he had gone to high school, he would have had more friends, maybe, but they have friends who are already 20 years old, friends” (7th interview with homeschooling father, 2020)

Szekler homeschooled children had positive feedback from interactions with the regular school environment: the instructor, teachers, and peers.

“When we arrive, we do our best, our children fit in perfectly well immediately, without any problems, in the class community, with teachers and peers, they get along fantastically well and they are full of positive energy and this is passed on to them as well” (8th interview, homeschooling mother, 2020).

Homeschoolers build up working relationships with strangers and succeed in connecting with foreign people.

“Very, very cleverly, they can stand their ground, so that here in Budapest, how they have managed, and in Budapest in the hairdressing salons with totally foreign people and colleagues (4th interview, homeschooling mother, 2020)

They proved to be familiar not only with their peers but with younger and elderly people as well. They acquired intergenerational communicative competencies during the summer camps and voluntary work abroad.

“In a church community, they helped the elderly... they helped the elderly in different ways, they cleaned, they carried, they carried every day, depending on who needed what, and they helped in youth camps in the kitchen, or wherever they were needed.” (8th interview with a homeschooling mother, 2020).

Only one young girl mentioned that homeschooling is not the best choice for introverts, as they could have fewer opportunities to connect.

“Disadvantage of... in my case, they were maybe a bit, that I wasn't in a community because I'm introverted anyway, and so that did not help me. I am not saying that everyone who studies at home is like that, but if a person is introverted, it is not that easy to be in a company. When you are in a big company every day, then eventually she/he gets there to talk to their mates as well. Nevertheless, when you do not have the opportunity to do that, either you must retreat very much, or you are afraid to capture the moments when it is available. I do not know.... I think I lived both, but I can say that by now it has developed enough in me not to wait for tomorrow about it, but now here and then... (10th interview, homeschooled young lady and her mate, 2020)”.

As mentioned, homeschooled students also built-up active citizenship competencies by volunteering and going abroad. In their case, socialization is not exclusively happening in the family, but in secondary socialization places like folk art schools, religious, community-, or cultural institutions, museums, pioneer houses, students' and sports schools, clubs, associations, and summer camps.

Assuming responsibility is a key feature of sustainability. It applies fully to homeschooling. The parents keep the responsibility of the education of their children, instead of transferring it to the educational institutions. They also teach their children to assume responsibility early for their learning, becoming independent in 5-6th grades.

Homeschooled students learn to take responsibility for others at an early age, too, by babysitting or animating their peers in summer camps and voluntary work. They learn to assume responsibility not only for their learning but for work too, by starting to work at 16 years and volunteering at 13.

3.4. Conditions of sustainable homeschooling

We must mention that there are certain conditions for the sustainability of homeschooling (from all its aspects).

First, homeschooling requires discipline of the parents and organization, an organized family life.

“Maybe if someone asks what it takes, the singular starts here: discipline. If you do not have discipline, but if you don't have basic discipline, you can't teach. This is a problem, for example, in the American school system, and slowly the Hungarian one will also drown in it; they don't allow teachers to be disciplined, or they don't want to, they don't take it on, from then on, there is no possibility to learn. Because you cannot learn in chaos” (11th interview, homeschooling parents, 2020).

Homeschooling needs time (and money), commitment, and sacrifices. This is why usually middle-income families can afford it. “It is not easy to make time, but you must learn. You must learn to manage your time well.” (G. Curcubet, 2015).

There should be a certain consensus regarding homeschooling in the family, shared between parents and children. It requires a good relationship among parents. “In a bad marriage, it is not possible to teach well at home.” (1st interview, homeschooling father, 2019).

A positive parent-child relationship, based on openness, understanding, and trust, is the foundation of homeschooling. The parent shall grow up in all aspects, psychologically included, with self-control and discipline. Grit is also a parental virtue much needed in homeschooling. Usually, the first couple of months and the first year are the most difficult. “Homeschoolers, who survive this initial phase usually stick with it in the long run” (3rd interview with homeschooled young men, 2020).

Motivation for homeschooling is another cornerstone. Inadequate motivations include fighting against something (for ex. school norms or authority).

“If someone starts teaching at home out of hatred, loathing, or any other dislike, it is not certain or likely they will be able to focus well on what is the essence of home education.” (G. Curcubet, 2015).

Excessive freedom, the characteristic of unschooling, is counterproductive “when all can be done so much that there is no longer any supervision, there is no longer any authority, almost no one listens to anyone, the child can do what he wants. This is a bad perception... the consequences will be even worse than if the child had attended public education at all” (1st interview, homeschooling father, 2019).

Adequate motivation is when the parents have a meaningful aim that is not achievable through mainstream education, for example, that of “personalized education, spending time with the child, dealing with them, guiding them to things” together with having freedom and flexibility (G. Curcubet, 2015).

“Education is the essence of all of this, so what they will become, what kind of adults they will become, academic knowledge and knowledge is now really, so it can be obtained from anywhere and it doesn't depend on that, the emphasis is not on them staying at home, but on education” (4th interview, homeschooling mother, 2020).

The right motivation is something positive that drives actions and grit.

“It is important to have a positive motivation, something meaningful to drive all of this, not just that, well, there's something wrong at school, I'll take the child out, that will not keep him there. It is just not enough... it can be a starting reason, but you must look for something that makes you meaningfully say, man, I'm putting my life into this, because it is worth it (11th interview, homeschooling parent, 2020).

4. Discussion

Our results comply with the literature regarding the sustainability of homeschooling.

In the specific case and conditions studied, homeschooling is sustainable. According to the literature, the sustainable education process is relevant and meaningful for learners and responds to their needs and interests (UNESCO, 2023). This statement proved to be true for the Szekler homeschoolers.

It is sustainable from economic aspects, as it seems to be more cost-effective for the families than any other possibility, that being the mainstream or private education. It is time-effective from the perspective of the children, but not from that of parents. As the literature mentions (Page, 2021) It is more time-consuming for the parents. Szekler homeschoolers consider their parents as role models. Thus, they are learning patterns on how to allocate scarce financial and time resources. They acquire empirical and practical skills much needed in higher education and labor markets, such as assuming responsibility, independence, intergenerational communication, critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.

In our case, homeschooling proved to be environmentally sustainable not only because of the above-mentioned economic reasons, but those children learned the basic skills needed to protect and allocate resources, to support life in many ways. They acquired survival skills by learning gender-appropriate activities, like cooking, taking care of children, planting, gardening, rebuilding, and repairing household tools in line with nature. The literature mentions reduced transportation, energy consumption, and paper usage (Murphy, 2014), which applies to our case, as the studied Szekler homeschoolers shared cars, accommodation, textbooks, and teaching materials, minimized paper usage, and cut back their spending on books and fashionable stuff. Instead, they borrowed them from the library and their mates and utilized public free facilities.

The literature states that homeschooling develops social skills, an active and diverse form of citizenship, based on personal responsibility, community involvement, and democratic participation (Page, 2021), and high levels of civic engagement and social tolerance (Arai, 1999). A more recent study (Jillene Grover Seiver & Elisa A. Pope, 2022) reinforced this finding, stating that being predominantly homeschooled during the compulsory school years was associated with greater community engagement during the young adult years in the US. Furthermore, a substantial majority—87%—of peer-reviewed studies indicate that homeschooled students outperform their peers in traditional schools in terms of social, emotional, and psychological development, with statistically significant results (Ray, 2017). Our results show that homeschooling is socially sustainable as homeschooled students proved to be social and interactive, having strong ties with their siblings, parents, companions, and the religious community. They successfully manage intergenerational communication with strangers. They acquired foreign language and ICT competencies. Szekler homeschooled students proved to be very active members of their denominational and homeschooling communities, participating in voluntary work and gathering working and social experiences already at an early age.

The results of homeschooling are not immediate; usually, it could take 1-3 years to realize them, a reason why it is working in middle-class families, familiar with long-term thinking and commitments, and delayed rewards.

We could not answer in this study whether the exemplary social competencies are due to homeschooling or the effects of the denominational community. Further, more extended, large-scale studies with a control group could answer this question. In the future, we plan to draft another article

on the language-learning aspects of homeschooling. Homeschoolers' time management and attitudes toward ICT tools and technology could further enrich findings.

We imagine that in the future, as AI replaces the work of many people, we will have adequate time to consider homeschooling a possibility.

Bibliography

- Arai, B. (1999). Homeschooling and the redefinition of citizenship. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 7(27). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v7n27.1999>
- Cambridge International. (2018). *Approaches to teaching and learning*. <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/Images/271333-approaches-to-teaching-and-learning.pdf>
- Cambridge International. (2021). *Implementing the curriculum with Cambridge: A guide for school leaders*. <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/Images/271333-approaches-to-teaching-and-learning.pdf>
- Cheng, A. (2014). Does homeschooling or private schooling promote political intolerance? Evidence from a Christian university. *Journal of School Choice*, 8(1), 49–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2014.875411>
- Curcubet, D. (2015). *Egyetemre? Hogyan?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WW5-VcnAV3c>
- Curcubet, G. (2015). *Akadályok és nehézségek az otthonoktatásban* [Obstacles and difficulties in homeschooling] [Conference presentation]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1ZE4aDHUkw>
- Environmental Science in Homeschooling: Promoting eco-consciousness and sustainability. (2023, July). *Doctor G Science Blog*. <https://blog.doctorgscience.com/2023/07/environmental-science-in-homeschooling.html>
- Gilbert, K. (2021). How homeschooling evolved from subversive to mainstream. *JSTOR Daily*. <https://daily.jstor.org/how-homeschooling-evolved-from-subversive-to-mainstream/>
- Grover Seiver, J., & Pope, E. A. (2022). The kids are alright I: Social engagement in young adulthood as a function of K–12 schooling type. *National Home Education Research Institute*. <https://nheri.org/the-kids-are-alright-i-social-engagement-in-young-adulthood-as-a-function-of-k-12-schooling-type/>
- Ken, R. (2006). Do schools kill creativity? [Video]. *TED Talks*. https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity?language=hu
- Law on National Education, Romania, Pub. L. No. 1/2011. (2011). http://keszei.chem.elte.hu/Bologna/Romania_Law_of_National_Education.pdf
- McDonald, K. (2020). Homeschooling more than doubles during the pandemic. *Foundation for Economic Education*. <https://fee.org/articles/homeschooling-more-than-doubles-during-the-pandemic/>
- Murphy, J. (2014). The social and educational outcomes of homeschooling. *Sociological Spectrum*, 34(3), 244–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2014.895640>

- Nágel, Zs. (2012). Otthonoktatás [Homeschooling]. *Tani-tani Online*. http://www.tani-tani.info/otthonoktatas_1
- Neuman, A., & Aviram, A. (2015). Homeschooling—The choice and the consequences. In *Pedagogy in (E)motion* (pp. 221–239). Springer. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137446855_15
- Page, S. (2021). *The long-term psychological effects of homeschool versus public school: A literature review*. Granite State Home Educators. <https://granitestatehomeeducators.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Homeschooling-Literature-Review.pdf>
- Pannone, S. J. (2017). The influence of homeschooling on entrepreneurial activities: A collective case study. *Education + Training*, 59(7/8), 706–719. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2016-0091>
- Pasquero, J. (1996). Stakeholder theory as a constructivist paradigm. *Proceedings of the International Association for Business and Society*, 7, 1153–1164. <https://doi.org/10.5840/iabsproc19967108>
- Pelt, D. N. V. (2015). *Home schooling in Canada: The current picture—2015 edition*. <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/home-schooling-in-canada-2015.pdf>
- Purvis, B., Mao, Y., & Robinson, D. (2019). Three pillars of sustainability: In search of conceptual origins. *Sustainability Science*, 14(3), 681–695. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0627-5>
- 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.
- Ray, B. D. (2017). A systematic review of the empirical research on selected aspects of homeschooling as a school choice. *Journal of School Choice*, 11(4), 604–621. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2017.1395638>
- Ray, B. D. (2023). *Research facts on homeschooling*. National Home Education Research Institute. <https://www.nheri.org/research-facts-on-homeschooling/>
- Riley, G. (2020). Exploring the growth of homeschooling and unschooling. In *Unschooling: Exploring learning beyond the classroom* (pp. 37–50). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49292-2_4
- Shaghayegh, S., & Ming, L. M. P. (2015). Parents' perspectives on homeschooling: A case study in Southern U.S. *National Home Education Research Institute*. <https://www.nheri.org/home-school-researcher-parents-perspectives-on-homeschooling-a-case-study-in-southern-u-s/>
- Smith, L. W. (2000). Stakeholder analysis: A pivotal practice of successful projects. Paper presented at Project Management Institute Annual Seminars & Symposium, Houston, TX. Project Management Institute.
- Stroschein, S. (2012). *Ethnic struggle, coexistence, and democratization in Eastern Europe*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511793769>
- Szász, A. (2015a). *Jegyzetek az otthonoktatásról* [Notes on homeschooling]. <https://docplayer.hu/5039498-A-a-tanugyi-kaderek-oktathassanak-a-diak-otthonaban-is-mint-magantanarok.html>
- Szász, A. (2015b). *Bevezetés az otthonoktatásba* [Introduction to homeschooling] [Conference presentation]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4auTBUsLgBY>
- UNESCO. (2023). What you need to know about education for sustainable development. <https://www.unesco.org/en/education-sustainable-development/need-know>

Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. MIT Press.

Sustainability. (2024). *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/science/sustainability>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey shows significant increase in homeschooling rates in fall 2020. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>

MacroTrends. (2024). Romania fertility rate 1950–2024. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/ROU/romania/fertility-rate>

Author

Kinga M. Mandel, University of Pannonia, Veszprém (Hungary). E-mail: mandel.kinga.magdolna@htk.uni-pannon.hu.

Acknowledgement

The Bethlen Gábor Fund supported our research. I also thank you for the lecturer's comments and suggestions, which contributed to the quality of this study.