

PhD Thesis Summary

Phd Candidate: Dumitru-Alin SAVU

Homeschooling in Bucharest. An Anthropological Perspective

Throughout time, education has been considered by authors in diverse disciplines as an essential process for humankind and society. For Plato, education was the way to access virtue from which ‘spring out fortunes and all other human goods, for the individual or for the entire society’¹. For Rousseau, education is the instrument through which the natural man is de-natured and integrated within society, passing from their absolute state of existence to a relative one, in relation to the others, as part of a whole.² From Kant’s perspective, education is a humanising process that brings man in line with the others, socialising him/her: ‘man cannot become man but by education. He is only what it makes him. Man cannot receive this education but from other humans that have received it too.’³ John Dewey considered that education, beyond learning, acquisition of skills, values, beliefs, has to follow a purpose that is well-defined from the inside, by the one who learns, and not imposed from the outside, otherwise education and its results are poor.⁴

For some personalities, education has represented the way towards freedom and independence: ‘Education is the passport to the future, because tomorrow belongs to those who prepare it from today.’⁵ For others, it represents the way towards solving humankind’s major problems: ‘without educating girls and humans in general we cannot have world peace, we cannot reduce child marriages, we cannot reduce child mortality, we cannot reduce mothers’ mortality at birth.’⁶ In some discourses, education is seen as an investment in the future of the nation⁷, an important element in the good progress of states, in economy, in

¹ PLATO, „Apărarea lui Socrate” în *Dialoguri*, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, București, 1968, pp20-21.

² Jean-Jacques ROUSSEAU, *Emil sau despre educație*, EDP, București, 1960, pp13-14.

³ Immanuel KANT, *Tratat de pedagogie*, Editura Agora, Iași, 1992, p10

⁴ John DEWEY, *Democrație și educație. O introducere în filosofia educației*, EDP, București, 1972, pp87-96.

⁵ Malcolm LITTLE (a.k.a. Malcolm X) despre importanța educației, disponibil la:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RHsk9dkrMs&ab_channel=SeeBlackSeePower, accesat la: 24.5.2018

⁶ Shameem AKHTAR, *To Learn is to be Free*, noiembrie, 2017, disponibil la:

https://www.ted.com/talks/shameem_akhtar_to_learn_is_to_be_free?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_content=taik&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare&utm_term=global-social%20issues, accesat la 24.5.2018

⁷ Eric A. HANUSHEK, „Education and the Nation's Future”, în *Blueprint for America*, George P. SHULTZ (coord) Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2016

children's experience⁸, but also a mirror of society as Nelson Mandela would state: 'there is no deeper revelation into the soul of a society that the way it treats its children'⁹

This diversity regarding the perspectives on education is completed by the etymology of the word 'to educate' which leads to two interdependent meanings: *educare* (to bring up, rear) and *educere* (to lead forth, to bring out)¹⁰. Thus, it is about an integrative process of the physical, spiritual and intellectual through which the child is lead towards their maximum human potential. The two interweaving meanings of the word underline the fact that in this process the mind and body are equally involved in human whole. Judging according to this multitude of perspectives on education, it can constitute what Marcel Mauss theorised as a total social fact, because:

*'In these 'total' social phenomena, as we propose calling them, all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time—religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise economic ones, which suppose special forms of production and consumption, or rather, of performing total services and of distribution.'*¹¹

However, when it becomes an attribute and exclusive responsibility of the state through compulsory schooling, education becomes a limited and limiting process by the nature of the institutions through which it is implemented. Mass schooling brings about standardisation and formalisation of education as a state policy rather than a personal choice regarding personal development. In other words, if education 'makes the human be human' as Kant pointed out, and the state manages and gives direction to the process of education, it follows that the state defines what and how a human being is supposed to be and, implicitly, the social environment they are part of. Still, this dominant position of the state does not seem compatible with the current neoliberal ideals that stress out the goal of the individual, through their own choices, be responsible for their own happiness and personal development.¹² This incompatibility gives rise to the need to redefine the provisions of the social contract between the state and their citizens – if the individual is responsible for themselves it follows that they should have

⁸ Yoka BRANDT, *Education: the most powerful investment in our future*, 22.01.2015, disponibil la: <https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/education-the-most-powerful-investment-in-our-future/>, accesat la 24.5.2018.

⁹ Nelson MANDELA despre educație, disponibil la: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/12/05/nelson-mandelas-famous-quote-on-education/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.adb83739cce3, accesat la 24.5.2018

¹⁰ Dicționar etimologic online, disponibil la: <http://www.etymonline.com/word/educate>, accesat la: 24.5.2018

¹¹ Marcel MAUSS, *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002, pp3-4.

¹² Elena TRIFAN, *Instituții și practici de dezvoltare personală. O perspectivă antropologică*, Teză de doctorat, SNSPA, București, 2016.

the right and power to decide the way they want to develop themselves, implicitly through education.

Adding to this, in the Romanian context, the educational system has been marked for the past three decades by incoherence and reform without a clear plan or infrastructure to support it.¹³ Consequently, the results are showing depreciation and seem to be connected to very frequent changes in the leadership of the Education Ministry, the innumerable modifications brought to the educational law, the lack of qualified personnel in schools or of the primary safety conditions for children.¹⁴ Moreover, recent international studies show that 73% of the Romanian children feel alone at school.¹⁵ More to the point, the family-school relationship seems to be degrading by day, this process being fuelled by the social and political discourse which discourages the parent-teacher partnership¹⁶.

Last but not least, technology advances ease the access to information, but more than this, it provides innumerable educational purposed instruments and connects people, institutions, and resources. This aspect opens up a vast palette of possibilities in what regards education – in short, any family with a minimal education in using an internet connected computer has access to vast educational possibilities. At the same time, these technological advances lay pressure on the classical model of schools and their rhythm of evolution which cannot keep up with the novelties that children (and not only them) incorporate into their daily life.

In this context, some families in Bucharest (and other parts of Romania) choose to avoid or totally give up school, be it public or private, and to educate their children on their own, even though they take up this responsibility in a vague legal context. This practice is generally called homeschooling, home-based education or home-education and it is a form of alternative education based on free choice that allows situated learning¹⁷, through community practice, it is based on family, on home – parents assume the responsibility of educating their

¹³ Bogdan FLORIAN și Sebastian ȚOC, „What Happens to Policies When Assuming Institutions? A Short Story About Romania’s Never-Ending Educational Reform”, *European Education*, 50:4, 2017, pp 320-335.

¹⁴ Detaliez aceste aspecte în capitolul al treilea al tezei.

¹⁵ *Pisa 2012 Results Overview*, p20, disponibil la: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf>, accesat la 24.05.2018

¹⁶ *Elevi interziși la Evaluarea Națională. Părinții denunță abuzurile din școli. Mărturie pentru Știrile TVR*, disponibil la http://stiri.tvr.ro/elevi-interzi-i-la-evaluarea-na-ionala--parin--ii-denun--a-abuzurile-din---coli--marturie-pentru---tirile-tvr_831352.html#view, accesat la 24.05.2018

¹⁷ Etienne și Beverly WENGER-TRAYNER, *Introduction to Communities of Practice. A Brief Overview of the Concept and its Uses*, 2015, p5, disponibil la: <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>, accesat la 24.05.2018.

children¹⁸ – but it includes any other place or situation that children can be provided with in order to learn.¹⁹

The main objective of this thesis is to explore the phenomenon of homeschooling as it unfolds in Bucharest, Romania. To reach this objective, I follow a series of research questions that define a track starting from the global history of the phenomenon and leading to its local impact, at the level of personal experience of practicing home-education in Bucharest. Thus, these are the central questions this research follows, with their inherent ramifications, and which will constitute the backbone of this thesis:

- What is homeschooling?
 - How and where did it appear as an idea and as practice?
 - How does it reach Romania?
- How is homeschooling practiced in Bucharest?
 - Who practices homeschooling?
 - How can children's experience of homeschooling be understood?
 - How can parents' experience of homeschooling be understood?
- What aspects does the phenomenon of homeschooling in Bucharest raise debate about?
 - What is the legal context of this practice?
 - How is the relationship between the family and the state (redefined) on the count of this form of education?
 - Is there a new community of practice building up around homeschooling?
 - How can the practice of homeschooling be understood by comparison to other practices of personalised education?

This research is built upon the design of an ethnographic endeavour focused on exploring the phenomenon of homeschooling in Bucharest as a family practice and as childhood experience. Taking into consideration the novelty of this phenomenon in Romania, the differences pertaining to the cultural, social and political context compared to other states where this type of education has been already researched, I decided not to predefine the theoretical framework of interpreting this phenomenon, but rather to follow this phenomenon as it unfolds and,

¹⁸ Brian RAY, *Worldwide Guide to Homeschooling: Facts and Stats on the Benefits of Homeschool*, Michigan, Broadman & Holman, 2005, p155.

¹⁹ John HOLT, Pat FARENGA, *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book Of Homeschooling*, Da Capo Press, 2009, p1.

subsequently, to propose various theories. This research is designed as a qualitative enterprise, following an in-depth trajectory regarding the experience of families that practice homeschooling.

The phenomenon of homeschooling in Romania is relatively new – it counts only two decades – but more important, there is little to no research in the Romanian academia regarding this topic, with the exception of a few BA theses that mainly propose a theoretical approach rather than empirical research.²⁰ Accordingly, this paper brings about a first perspective on the phenomenon of homeschooling in Bucharest, Romania, based on an ethnographic account and empirical research. To put this image into context, I often compare it to the situation of homeschooling as it has been studied in other countries such as the USA, the UK, France or Germany. Moreover, I also make comparisons within the studied group, taking into consideration the fact that homeschooling, being based on free individual choice, stimulates diversity of experience among the research participants.

Approaching the phenomenon of home education as a total social fact, this research inherently addresses several other domains related to education and implicitly crosses through several sites of the fieldwork: the virtual domain, the homes of the studied families, public institutions, formal and informal meetings of the community.

Moreover, it being about education, family and childhood, among others, this research involves minors as participants, departing from the idea that they are the most fit to talk about their own experience. While interacting with children, data was collected also using creative methods²¹ like the weekly journal or photography. More to the point, children were reflexively involved in the process of research²² by being asked to interpret the materials they themselves produced. This way, the researchers' view point was closest to the participants' experience.

Taking into consideration the involvement of children as full participants in this research, in the second chapter of this thesis, concerning the methodology, the description and motivation

²⁰ Andreea Bertha SĂLĂGEAN, *Necesitatea implementării sistemului homeschool în România*, lucrare de licență, UBB Cluj-Napoca, 2011.

Berta Melinda ENIKÓ, *Homeschooling (educația acasă/ educația la domiciliu) posibilă alternativă la educația formală?*, lucrare de licență, Universitatea de Vest, Timișoara, 2014.

²¹ Angela VEALE, *Creative Methodologies in Participatory Research with Children*, in Sheila Greene and Diane Hogan, *Researching Children's Experience. Approaches and Methods*, London, Sage, 2005, pp 253-273

²² Ruth EMOND, *Ethnographic Research Methods with Children and Young People*, in Sheila Greene and Diane Hogan, *Researching Children's Experience. Approaches and Methods*, London, Sage, 2005, pp 127-130

of the research methods and instruments used, I emphasize and often detail on the particularities of involving children in social research.

The third chapter starts from a general understanding of the idea of homeschooling as a type of alternative education based on free choice, to go on and detail on more perspectives regarding the particularities of home education and shortly illustrate the varieties stemming from the same idea of education based on free choice: homeschooling, unschooling, roadschooling. In light of their differences and common points, I argue that the generic name that would be used across this thesis is that of home education, as it can reference all the other variants, and when need be, I will punctually differentiate using the notions of homeschooling or unschooling. In the next session of this chapter, I make an incursion into the history of the home education phenomenon departing from a global/international level and gradually getting closer to the Romanian context. I follow two international contexts – USA and UK – where home education has evolved concomitantly, but relatively differently and bearing different names. Later, I talk about the Romanian setting where home education appears, discussing about aspects concerning the quality of mass education in the last decades, about the emergence of the family-state relationship debate in the public and political discourse, but also about the deteriorating relationship between family and the school. I conclude this chapter remarking that parents are pushed into searching alternatives to the classical school model by the long term instability and incoherence image of the Romanian national education system and the way in which the politic deepens the divide between family and school.

The fourth chapter's first section is aimed at delineating a social profile of the families who practice home education in Bucharest. I follow a series of crucial aspects: income, housing, profession, occupation, education, possessions, religion, age, and family of origin. Corroborating the common and distinct points regarding these variables, I observe that a general profile of the homeschooling family cannot be clearly delimited on the count of the diversity of the cases encountered and observed. However, stratification can be observed as a function of income or religion. I conclude this section remarking that the participants to this research mirror to a great measure the diversity of the social environment they are part of.

The second part of the fourth chapter portrays the motives, justifications, explanations, plans and ideals expressed by the parents during the interviews. I complete this portrait with details from online discussions and debates touching upon the subject of choosing this type of education. This palette of motives and justifications is thematically structured on school and

the quality of teaching-learning; personalisation of education and the natural individual rhythm; children's acquiring of a 'spirit of critique' based on clear moral principles; assuming the responsibility of being a parent; family's time together, and the health of the children. I detail on these themes with variations and particularities from the data collected from the parents and then I compare this picture with the ones from USA and UK. I observe that, although some points are common to all three cases – discontent with the schooling system, rights and freedoms of children and parents, moral education – in what regards the religious reasons for choosing home education, the situation in Romania seems rather similar to the UK, where religion is a less poignant factor in this decision, although spirituality and moral values are prized as essential to this type of education. I conclude this chapter by pointing out that although these families' social profile suggests diversity, the discourse related to motives, justifications and ideals for choosing home education is relatively unitary, denoting a basic element for starting a grass-roots community.

The fifth chapter opens the ethnographic exploration in the field of practicing home education in Bucharest. In the first section (5.1.), I describe, ethnographically illustrate and discuss the key moments that have facilitated the development of this research: approaching the informants, integrating within the community, unanticipated events, unanticipated limits of the fieldwork, but also the researcher's position on the various sites of the field and the various personal aspects that have limited or opened up the possibilities of research. This chapter is structured as an introduction for the ethnographic section of this thesis.

In the second ethnographic section (5.2.), I start off by studying in detail the legal framework that regulates home education in Romania, observing the terms' lack of clarity and the mismatch between the Constitution and the organic law referring to education. In short, home education in Romania works in a relative legal void – it is neither regulated, nor explicitly prohibited by law. The umbrella schools are the loophole some of the families approach to solve this conundrum. Later, I tackle the interaction between the state, family and children on the subject of education from two perspectives: a historical one, following the beginnings of school as a state institution for children's education and through which the state manages to insure its legitimate intervention in the family regarding children. The other perspective is ethnographic and interprets the state-family relation regarding education in the theoretical key of the field coined by Pierre Bourdieu. I argue that home education rises as a field²³ for

²³ Pierre BOURDIEU, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 1993.

disputing the rights and responsibilities of the family and the state related to children, but also children's rights in this context. I also discuss about particular situations encountered during the ethnographic fieldwork research that illustrate the practical shortcomings of the actual legal situation of home education, the solutions parents choose and how families relate to these experiences. I conclude by arguing that this dispute on the field of home education underlines a process of redefining the social contract (at least symbolically) between family and state, the former assuming more and more of the responsibilities pertaining to children that otherwise are delegated to the state.

The third section (5.3.) is opened by a first section referring to children's statute in society, the value of childhood experience and the way it has been approached by researchers, be they anthropologists, sociologists, historians or psychologists. I aim to illustrate the main coordinates presently defining the experience of childhood in order to more clearly isolate the implications of the home education phenomenon on the experience of childhood. Thus, the second part of this section is constituted as an ethnographic exploration of children's experience that practice home education. This is founded on interview excerpts, children's journals, photos they took, ethnographic notes and observations. I follow aspects that I considered essential for illustrating children's experience, but which are also partly mystified in the public discourse and are not enough well-documented. Accordingly, I tackle the subject of children's daily life, the process of learning, of socialisation, of their relation to the city and their home, consumption and material culture as well as how children relate to home education and schooling. I conclude that in all followed aspects of children's experience, there are some defining elements constantly coming to surface: freedom of choice, flexibility and responsibility. Home remains a central reference point in children's experience as a place of care, freedom and, by definition, of childhood. Withdrawal from school in the cases of some of the participant children means redefining their life style as a whole and, at the same time, severing some relations with other children. However, the verdict is unanimous both among homeschoolers and unschoolers: 'There's nothing better than home education' (Petru, 9 years old, homeschooler).

The third part of this section focuses on the experience of parents who home educate their children and it is based on interviews, participant observation and a part of the materials collected from children – journals and photos. I follow the impact the choice of home

education has had on parents' experience: how their life is changed when they start home education, how household responsibilities are distributed, how the parent-children relationship transforms, as well as the relation with the extended family, how home education costs are managed, and how the house is arranged for home education. I remark how choosing home education brings about major changes in parents' routine and experience. For some, change comes as a relief, for others as a burden, depending on the type of home education chosen – homeschooling is more structured, unschooling less structured. Although there is a tendency that one of the parents – most of the times, the mother – to stay at home and care for children's education, the varieties of distributing effort around the household are numerous, also depending on the parents' type of job. The costs of home education seem to be smaller than those implied by schooling which hides considerable expenses behind the constitutional warranty that the state ensures free schooling. In what regards the relation with children, it seems that the attachment period is prolonged, but at the same time, there is a parity rapport regarding learning, the parents being involved rather as partners and less as teachers in this process. The relation with the extended family can sometimes be governed by tension, especially in cases where members of it are or have been teachers or academics. The home is seen as a place of intimacy and at the same time, an educational instrument essential to the practice of home education. I conclude that home education – be it homeschooling, unschooling or roadschooling – comes to life at once with the families adopting a new life style, because it is a total social phenomenon linked to primary daily practices of a family, household or society, but also to ideas and values related to liberty, intimacy, identity, rights and responsibilities that are central in a person's philosophy of life.

The fourth ethnographic section (5.4.) tackles the subject of the community of practice built up by the Bucharest families that home educate their children. For this purpose, the ethnographic field diversifies and includes the virtual site of the Facebook group Homeschooling in Romania, but also the offline interactions of the families taking part in the study. I look at how this community of practice coagulates around the online group and how their actions transfer into offline. I argue that these families create a community of practice making use of three essential elements in this sense, according to Wenger-Trayner: they have a common domain of interest that generates an identity of the community and a commitment from the members; their interaction is grounded in a community that implies common activities of the member, mutual help and information exchange; in accord with the common interest, by virtue of the created relationships and on the foundation of the sustained

interaction, these families gradually build a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, narratives, tools, solutions to common problems – in short a common practice.²⁴ I track and compare the type of online and offline interactions, underlining the role of Facebook in the dynamics of this community of practice, but also the importance and diversity of offline interactions such as thematic camps, mutual support groups, learning groups, events and meetings with old and new members of the community. An important element I approach is related to the points of divergence that occur in this community and which are caused mainly by the vague legal context, and the personal options of every family regarding the implementation of home education.

I conclude this chapter pointing out that there is a constant process of mutual fuelling and support between the online and offline environments that frame this community of practice. What parents do, by creating this community of practice, is in fact a process of situated learning²⁵ on the subject of home education. This process of learning that involves the adults is reflected into the daily practice of home educated children. The interaction of the families that home educate in the form of a community of practice is constituted as social environment ideal for an education based on free choice, because the community members build up a repertoire, a common practice that allows freedom of personal choice.

The last ethnographic section of this chapter (5.5.) explores the interdependence of children's education with some Bucharest families' ideals of middle classness – on the one hand families that practice home education and, on the other hand, families that intensively enrol their children in extracurricular activities. The main argument is that both forms of alternative education put the child at the centre of interest but from two different perspectives: in the case of home education, the child is in the centre of the family, the emphasis is on comfort and happiness (well-being); in the case of extracurricular activities, the child is in the centre of market competition, in the process of positioning within the social hierarchy. Moreover, children's education is seen by both categories of parents as the best solution for defining a favourable social status by accumulating cultural capital – both in what regards children and their future, and the present social position of the parents. The essential differences and common points between the two types of educational practices occur in relation to the type of

²⁴ Etienne și Beverly WENGER-TRAYNER, Idem, 2015, pp1-3.

²⁵ Etienne și Beverly WENGER-TRAYNER, Idem, 2015, p5.

cultural capital that is aimed (incorporated, officially sanctioned or unsanctioned²⁶) and, implicitly, to the purpose for which this capital is accumulated. Thus, this comparison illustrates one's constant effort of positioning themselves within the Romanian social hierarchy, and the way in which different types of family investment and involvement in education are constituted as corner stones in affirming, maintaining, producing and reproducing class in Romania's capital.

The final aim of this research enterprise and its results is to reach the community of families that practice, have practiced or are preparing to practice home education in Bucharest, Romania. Although the project has got clear academic objectives, during the research process involving the people who have agreed to participate in this study, I realised that the answers I would discover would be of great utility to the very people who made the offer to answer my questions, in their search for a road fit to each other's needs. Of course, an academic study regarding a burgeoning phenomenon is welcome anytime, especially when it touches upon general interest subjects like family, education, the individual or the state. However, I consider that it is as beneficial to come up with research that offers to the studied community a mirror built upon their own narratives, judgements, arguments and a theoretical deconstruction of the socio-cultural mechanisms involved in the studied phenomenon.

This way, I aim at bringing scientific research closer to the people outside the academic milieu, so as to make information reach as many readers as possible in the friendliest and clearest way possible. I firmly believe that this is the purpose of education, of science – to uncover new, valuable information and offer it back to the citizens, in order for them to choose, using this information to form an opinion based on clear evidence and arguments. Information is crucial for the process of choice. Without it, the options one has have not meaning.²⁷

²⁶ Pierre BOURDIEU, „The Forms of Capital”, în John RICHARDSON, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986, pp. 241–58.

²⁷ James MILL, *Liberty of Press*, The Online Library of Liberty, 1825, disponibil la: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/mill-boll-64-james-mill-liberty-of-the-press-1825>, accesat la 23.5.2018.