
Kinga Magdolna MANDEL

The homeschoolers inclusion in Higher Education. Szekler case study

Introduction

In its broadest sense, Homeschooling is an education at home with parental supervision (Ray, 2017). Narrowly, it is a mode of education in which the student is linked formally to an educational institution (for example, with a private student status); however, the teaching and learning are performed at home (Nágel, 2012). According to one of our Szekler homeschooling parents, "...all the parents are homeschooling; only some of them even send their children to school" (Szász, 2015). Years ago, we encountered this phenomenon only in American movies; however, since the beginning of the 2000s, it has also spread through Central- and Eastern Europe. In Romania, the first three families started to homeschool in the Szekler region in 2001 (Curcubet G. interview, 2019). The phenomenon became more popular in Romania in 2016 autumn due to a television show that aimed to question or portray it as a negative social phenomenon. However, this contributed to its fame (Curcubet G. interview, 2019). The pandemic offered an opportunity to study Homeschooling when pupils and families experienced some homeschooling worldwide because of the lockdowns. In the US, even the number of homeschooled doubled during the pandemic (McDonald, 2020).

Problem of Research

Our research developed in 2020 on Szekler homeschoolers aimed to analyze the causes and consequences of Homeschooling, the inclusion (social, educational, and labor market) being a considerable part of it. Previously, we published four open-access papers related to the subject: on homeschooling in the Szekler region (Mandel, 2020); on the reasons for homeschooling in Szekler region (Mandel, 2021); on the challenges and solutions of the Szekler homeschooling community (Mandel, 2022) and on the causes and consequences of Szekler homeschooling (Mandel, 2022). In this paper, we will focus on and detail only one aspect not discussed earlier: the inclusion of Szekler homeschoolers in higher education.

Research Focus

There is more research on the reasons (Taylor-Hugh, 2010; Carlson, 2009; Eggendorfer, 2016; Ray, 2019; Hanna et al., 2011; Kuzman & Gaither, 2013; Heuer & Donovan, 2017) and consequences (Ray, 2003, 2017, 2021; Heuer & Donovan, 2017; Cheng, 2014; Cooper & Sureau, 2007; Carlson, 2009; Eggendorfer, 2019; Medlin, 2000) of Homeschooling and less on the higher education inclusion of homeschoolers. Inclusion "is the action, practice, or policy of including any person in an activity, system, organization or process, irrespective of race, gender, religion, age, ability, etc." (Oxford et al.). We can understand the inclusion of homeschoolers in higher education as an action, practice, or policy that makes it possible for them to access and successfully enter into the higher education system, participate and succeed in its activities and processes during their studies, and carry it out successfully irrespective of their learning background.

Research on higher education inclusion of homeschoolers could be grouped into thematic subgroups. Some talk about the homeschooler's inclusion in higher education (Murphy, 2014; Cogan, 2010). Some focus on access generally (Sorey & Duggan, 2008; Lips & Feinberg, 2008; Ray, 2004; Snyder, 2017) or into elite higher education institutions (Basham et al., 2007; Gaither, 2008; Marean et al., 2005). There are studies on the test results of homeschooled in ACT and SAT entrance tests (Cogan, 2010; Ray & Weller, 2003) and homeschoolers skills needed by the higher education (Galloway & Sutton, 1995; Oliviera et al., 1994). Other studies analyze the performance (Ray, 2009, 2015; Gray, 1998; Galloway & Sutton, 1995; Oliviera et al., 1994) and success (Sutton & Galloway, 2000; Ray, 2017) of the homeschooled during their higher education studies. We also encounter studies about homeschoolers' successful graduation (Weller, 2018).

A concern with the research on Homeschooling, in general, is that many of those studies were developed a long time ago. Hence, they need to be updated in different countries and socioeconomic contexts, which makes them difficult to compare. Usually, they are small-scale, small-sample, and non-representative studies challenging to generalize and even to repeat with the same results. Till our research, there were no studies on Szekler homeschoolers, and we could find information on the web page of the Association for Homeschooling Romania (AHSR) with couple of videos on conference proceedings (Szász, 2004; Curcubet G., 2015; Curcubet D., 2015; Szász, 2015) and some papers (Szász, 2004; Curcubet G., 2015; Curcubet et al., 2020) sharing the theories and homeschooling experiences.

Methodology of Research

General Background of Research

The study framework combines constructivist (Vygotsky, 1986) and stakeholder (Smith et al., 2000) approaches. The constructivist paradigm states that people construct their understanding and knowledge through experiencing and reflecting on those. As part of the constructivist approach, the stakeholder paradigm suggests that we can construct the reality based on the understanding and knowledge of stakeholders who experienced the phenomenon and their reflections.

Sample of Research

The research sample included Szekler families with homeschooled children above 18 years (with experience in higher education and the labor market). According to the head of the AHSR in Romania, approximately 300 families were homeschooling, most of which were Hungarian homeschooler families, most of whom live or originate from the Szekler region (Curcubet G., 2015). the traditional Szekler counties of Harghita, Covasna, and Mureş situated in the eastern-central part of the country among mountains (Bottoni, 2008). In 2019, the Association of Homeschooling Romania AHSR president estimated that approximately 15 Hungarian Szekler families have a homeschooled child above 18 years with possible higher education experience (Curcubet G. interview, 2019). Out of those, we could reach seven families. Most of them were significant, as they were raising 25 children, an average of 3,57 children/family, double that of the 1.63 births per woman fertility rate of the average families in Romania in 2020 (Romania Fertility Rate 1950-2023). Besides, we made secondary data analyses of the Association of Homeschooling Romania (AHSR) data (interviews, articles, and presentations available on their web page, community portal, and internet).

Instrument and Procedures

Our research used snowball sampling from the head of the association AHSR. In total, 13 thematic semi-structured interviews were taken with parents and youngsters above 18. The sample comprises ten semi-structured 45-90 minutes centered interviews out of those seven individuals and three paired ones, 9 with homeschooling parents (2 pairs, one sequential), and 4 with youngsters above 18 years (1 pair). The data collection happened in 2020 August and September. One single interview took place personally. Because of the pandemic, all the others through ICT tools and platforms (Skype, Zoom, Meet, and Phone). Some interviewees answered from Szeklerland, some from Romanian, some from Hungarian (Miskolc), and some from Austrian (Wien) places. During our interview, One family lived and worked in an Iraqi refugee camp.

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The limitations of the research were given by the difficulties of the pandemic situation in reaching the target group and its persons.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the quantitative data using an Excel table in ordering and structuring the data and in searching for patterns and specificities.

Results of Research***School enrollment decisions in the phase of compulsory education***

Although most homeschoolers learn at home, they officially belong or are tied to an educational institution (Nagel, 2012). The same is true for the Szekler homeschooled. As the private status in the Romanian school system is reserved for disabled people, formally, the Szekler homeschooled were linked or officially enrolled in Hungarian or American educational institutions.

The children included in this study sometimes switched their enrollment from American to Hungarian schools and backward to pioneer a new option because of the rigidity of one or another system as some of the schools closed down or legislative changes happened (the legal status of Homeschooling altered over time in Romania and Hungary as well); because the first homeschooling pioneers were searching for the best education solutions and due to the higher education goals, language, and cost considerations.

American Homeschooling enjoys a more significant history; thus, enrollment in American education institutions offers more trust and freedom. The parents have more options in choosing the teaching materials and are entitled to evaluate their children's performance. Hungarian enrollment means regular online classes developed through Skype or other ICT tools (Digi-school) and one or two weeks of examination periods developed by the school's teachers every half of the year.

The American system is preparing for the Anglo-Saxon type of higher education entrance examinations, preparing for the different national/international tests and probes like SAT and ACT.

In Hungary, the Education Law changed in 2011, offering less opportunity for Homeschooling, as obtaining the "private student" status became more difficult. However, for Hungarian families living abroad, the possibility still exists. The Hungarian school enrollment prepares for a European higher education career by pathing the way for the end of high-school baccalaureate exams.

The families have to decide which path they would like to choose for their children as early as possible because it strictly determines the high school followed and college/university enrolment possibilities. Later switches are more challenging; sometimes, they require an extra year to prepare for another type of higher education system and its entrance examination requirements.

The most common option we encountered was to have the children enrolled in American institutes for kindergarten and primary school. Mainly, it happened because of the flexibility in choosing the teaching materials and tailoring them to the specific needs of the children and the possibility of parental evaluation. Some families continued in the American education institutions until the end of general school (8th grade), then switched to Hungarian enrollment for the high school to have their children enrolled in Hungarian or Romanian universities. These switches were sometimes difficult for the children. They needed help to adapt and get familiar with the teachers, the teaching methods, requirements, and administrative systems to catch up with materials they had only studied then. We encountered a case where the homeschooled children switching from the American to the Hungarian system failed the high school entrance exam and had to prepare one more year for it. It also happened that the homeschooled children who followed studies in the American system had to invest one additional year to prepare for an advanced level of graduation exam (baccalaureate) in exact sciences in Hungary. Another pupil who learned in the Hungarian system had to make the extra effort to fulfill the different requirements of the American higher education institutions. In an additional year, the youngster learned how to write English essays and prepared for the SAT (the Scholastic Assessment Test, a standardized test requested widely for college admissions in the United States) and ACTs (the American College Testing Test, which assesses college readiness).

Access – entrance to higher education

Choosing a higher education career is demanding. Some American middle-class youngsters take a so-called gap year to travel, work, or volunteer worldwide to get experience and decide upon it (<https://www.gooverseas.com/gap-year/europe>). In Europe, there are a lot of different methods (like education fairs, career- counseling, and school career days) used by schools to assist youngsters in their decisions (CEDEFOP, 2021). Some of the homeschooled included in our sample proved to be very conscious in taking this decision: "I knew that I liked biology and that I would be interested in some kind of health care, but I judged that being a doctor would be too much in terms of responsibility, so if I thought that if I wanted a family, for example, it was not the case ...nursing, or something else, I considered it too little, or I would not have had the stomach for it, and then I actually found this intermediate state, which is the major I am studying (medical diagnostics - author), but specifically, when I decided like this, January 15 was probably the submission time and I was in a small amount of agony from the 10th to the 15th that something had to be written then, but how... I was not 100% sure that it was whether this thing would be good or what, but this was the only major for which I could not say out of the blue that it was out of the question. And so it happened... but I think I made the right choice because I love and enjoy this major" (Simon H., interview, 2020). Probably this is a family characteristic as her little sister was similar in this respect: "she has purposeful plan, that she wants to teach children to swim, and then it would have been possible for her to simply go to physical training college, but that does not give her a university, it would have been just such a small training, and then she chose another way for this for purpose (that of physical-therapist university – the author)" (Simon H., interview, 2020).

We found that most Szekler homeschooling children who graduated high school opted to follow their higher education studies. The transition from being homeschooled to college proved to be smooth in most of our cases.

One "pioneer" family in Homeschooling had its oldest youngster enrolled in international political studies (BA) in an American college operating in Asia. He came back to Europe and did his master's studies in international security (MA) in Paris, London, and Wien, working for an American bank as an intern and studying at the same time (Curcubet G. interview, 2019, Curcubet D. interview, 2020). His educational career is among the most interesting, as he has double experience. At the same time, he has been enrolled in the American system during compulsory education, and he was also trying out Hungarian to acquire experiences and pave the path for other Szekler homeschoolers. He was the only one among the Szekler homeschooled who had already reached the MA level with his studies in 2020. His younger sister did not pursue studies in tertiary education; however, she acquired a specialization in high school, got married, and gave birth to her first children (Curcubet G. interview, 2019, 2020).

Other Szekler families that joined the homeschooling movement in the first couple of years enrolled both youngsters in mechanical technical universities, the smallest in Hungary and the oldest in English language university in Romania. A minor youngster, against all the negative expectations of the teachers, who shared the opinion that it is impossible to enter a state-owned technical university in Hungary by studying at home, succeeded. He was absolved from the higher level of Hungarian state baccalaureate in two sciences, physics, and mathematics, and thus passed into the patinated technical university of Budapest. The oldest youngster spent one year after the baccalaureate searching for his vocation, working, and getting a driver's license until he could decide what to do further (Szász, 2020).

The oldest youngster girls of two homeschooling Szekler families get enrolled in the graphic design BA studies of a Hungarian language university in Romania. One of the girls applied first to a University in Hungary, the MOME (Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest). However, she failed at the second turn, so she had to wait one year, and then she enrolled in a Hungarian language design college in Romania (Király interview, 2020; Blaga parents interview, 2020; Blaga Youngsters interview, 2020).

The two oldest youngsters of another Szekler homeschooling family were choosing the health sector by studying medical diagnostics and physical therapy at the same university in Hungary (Simon interview, 2020).

One significant number family with Szekler roots, volunteering in a refugee camp in Iraq, has its oldest children in Switzerland working and studying in IT and business, the second oldest children above 18 years enrolled in online theological (biblical) studies that are provided by Israel (Gergely parents interview, 2020).

Only one family out of seven did not send their oldest homeschooled pupil into higher education. She acquired work experience in babysitting and doing household and camp work. Her little siblings, who are still in compulsory school age, are not aiming to have a higher education career either; one of them is specializing in becoming a hairdresser, the other is teaching guitars parallel with her studies, and the fourth is likely to become an artist in the field of graphics or digital graphics. In those cases, we could see an intention to find a vocation or the call for a specific profession and acquire at least a high school professional degree. Their children also find their way: "They stand their ground very, very skillfully, so the way she prospered in Budapest hairdressing salons with strangers and colleagues is very good, I say that here in character, so that if she also has an attitude, even mentally, knows what to do in life, what to expect in the world... they also visited America independently, two of them had the opportunity to travel, at two different times, and there they were absolutely... right" (Kovács interview, 2020).

Inclusion during the higher education studies

According to one of the youngsters, he never experienced differences between his background, preparedness, and that of others during his studies. It could also be due to the international and diverse environment and composition of his mates (Curcubet D. interview, 2020).

The differences between the behaviors and manners of a homeschooled are not visible at first; however, in the long run, it could turn out that it is more dressed up with practical competencies than others from the same age cohort, according to one of our interviewees.

"I would say that at first glance, I think, if you sit down and talk to someone, you can't tell that they were homeschooled. But if they became acquaintances for a long time, you see and know, then it might be more practical, they discover this in homeschooled people, because, for example, we were taught not only to understand the subjects, but ...we girls know how to prepare a lunch, or we did a lot of garden work, cleaning, jam canning..." (Blaga youngsters interview, 2020).

Those homeschooled youngsters at college proved to be social; some built up new friendships with similarly hardworking students. According to a parent, "They fit in, now they have not always become the leading individuals of the local rock club or the clubs of such-and-such fraternities, but they have quite a few friends with whom they maintain a closer relationship. This mainly comes from those students who also study more purposefully at university" (Szász A. interview, 2020).

Discussion

Romania has a social consensus regarding the high importance of higher education studies from a prosperous career perspective. A finished college or university degree is the school path to follow, and most middle-class families aim for their children and motivate or even push them in this direction. However, homeschooler families are teaching their children to find their vocation or call without considering or giving too much importance to the social pressure to enter college. To follow the vocation also means investing time and energy in learning a profession (like hairdresser, confectioner, and farmer) that does not require higher education.

There is a difference in how the European and American higher education institutions approach homeschooling. While it is still quite a new phenomenon in Europe that is looked at with some reservation and doubt, homeschoolers are warmly received in America. They even provide separate admission quotas for homeschoolers as they consider homeschooled to be independent learners, or at least this is the image shared by the homeschooled parents.

"Among the American universities, there are obviously those who directly prefer homeschooled students and because they know that they are used to independent work and there they ask for a lot of such work" (Curcubet G. interview, 2019). According to some Szekler homeschooling parents,

American universities prefer homeschooled because they are independent in thinking, learning, and working, more conscientious and reliable than their peers.

"In America, there are special places reserved for homeschooled children in universities, which surprised me, because they say that they are more conscient and more reliable...they know more and are independent thinkers, they don't follow the crowd they have their own opinion" (Király interview, 2019). They learned to think out of the box (Gergely interview, 2020).

However, in our sample, just one of the youngsters attended an American university operating in Asia, and he had to fulfill the exact entrance requirements as his mates. Like in Europe, where homeschooled have no privilege.

We did not find any integration challenges during the higher education studies; the only peculiarity that gets accentuated is that those Szekler homeschooled youngsters follow the *similis simili gaudet* rule by getting together and making friendships with similarly responsible, purposeful, and hardworking students. We found them motivated and dedicated to their studies with above-average, good academic results. One reason for this is that according to the literature and our research, homeschooled learn to think critically and individually at an early age (until they reach the 6th or 7th grade). Furthermore, through international volunteer work (for example, babysitting, animation in summer camps, or assisting older people), they acquire practical skills and intergenerational communication competencies that are also handy in higher education.

Based on our research, they all found the study paths that offered enough challenge and rewards (Pink, 2009) with which they were satisfied. Six out of seven youngsters enrolled in higher education. Three out of seven followed an English language university in Wien/Paris/London, Switzerland, and Romania), and the other three enrolled in Hungarian language colleges (in Hungary or Romania). None of them was studying the Romanian language, which is understandable if we consider that those families belong to the Hungarian minority living in Romania. After finishing their studies at the BA level, one of Szekler's homeschools continued his studies at the MA level.

The challenges faced by the Szekler homeschoolers at the time of our research were similar to those of every higher education student; they all faced the consequences of the pandemic, closedowns, and the sudden turn to online learning. However, homeschooled could face those challenges better, as they have already acquired significant experience in remote and online teaching and learning methods and techniques. At the same time, those were new and out of the blue for their peers.

In this study, we did not enter in-depth into the language of teaching and learning, minority language policies, and challenges, which is a reason behind choosing the educational and work career path. A separate study would be dedicated to how the homeschooled are dealing with the other generations. Another study would talk about the financial reasons and consequences of Homeschooling, analyzing its role in choosing the educational and career way as well. Additional studies could also be dedicated to seeing how the homeschooled are performing in the labor market and whether Homeschooling is sustainable in the long run.

Conclusions

Our research aimed to analyze the higher education inclusion experiences of Szekler homeschooled. Our main finding is that against all the inclusion concerns enlisted in the literature and common sense regarding their inclusion into higher education, the Szekler homeschooled entered higher education without significant problems. So far, they were performing well during their studies.

One extra year of dedication was needed in some cases when they were uncertain, or in the cases in which they changed the system after high school graduation, from Anglo-Saxon to continental or all reverse.

During their studies, they faced the same challenges and dealt with those similarly, in some cases even better, than their peers, like in the case of the lockdown and pandemic situation. It could be because

of the skill set that Homeschooling is developing, like self-awareness, self-reliance, independent learning and thinking, critical thinking, project work-, foreign language competencies, and voluntary and other practical experiences. Because this first homeschooled generation just entered higher education, further and repeated studies would be needed to see how the homeschooled are performing later, whether they graduate successfully, do they continue their studies in the master's degrees and doctoral programs as well, and see how they are dealing in the labor market.

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