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**DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS IN THE PROCESS OF
HOMESCHOOLING:
INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDY**

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

Homeschooling, often regarded as a modern and innovative educational practice, has deeper historical roots, predating the formal schooling systems that are familiar today. In its contemporary form, homeschooling emerged in the United States during the 1970s. Also referred to as home education, family education, or simply home schooling, this phenomenon has gained increasing popularity across various countries, drawing attention from the public, policymakers, and the academic community. The decision to pursue homeschooling has been influenced by a range of complex factors, including family values, parental dissatisfaction with traditional schooling, and the desire or need for a more personalised educational approach (Boulter, 2017). Like any alternative educational practice, homeschooling has often been met with diverse perspectives in academic literature and has varied in terms of regulatory frameworks across different countries and their respective regions. Despite ongoing debates, recent years have witnessed a notable rise in the number of families opting for homeschooling, both internationally and within Bulgaria.

This dissertation is both conceptual and empirical in nature, aiming to advance theoretical understanding and contribute to the body of research on existing alternative educational approaches. Specifically, it seeks to enrich the existing theories in educational research and establish a foundation for future studies and comparisons regarding the phenomenon of homeschooling, which has attracted increasing attention across the globe.

Justification of the problem

Research on homeschooling in Bulgaria has been limited, with few available sources addressing this subject. Existing studies, particularly in countries with well-established homeschooling traditions, have tended to focus primarily on the academic performance of home-educated students. A growing body of work has also examined the development of social skills among these students. This dissertation addresses the gap in comparative research on homeschooling, which has continued to rise in popularity worldwide. It has also been driven by the need for a deeper understanding of the development of soft skills in homeschoolers. By comparing the experiences of homeschooled individuals in Bulgaria and other countries, this study aims to clarify key issues and lay the groundwork for further scholarly discourse.

Homeschooling as an alternative to institutional education has increasingly attracted interest in many countries. This phenomenon has been described as the most dynamic educational movement, generating increasing social, scientific, and public interest.

Significance of the study

Drawing conclusions about best practices can support the educational process and provide opportunities to address challenges arising in public or private schools with a view to improving learning outcomes for students who have experienced formal education. Additionally, best practices may be applied to enhance the homeschooling experience for families who have chosen this educational path. The findings may also contribute to the expansion of knowledge in social pedagogy practice. This dissertation provides a foundation for further research and the application of findings to support families who have opted for homeschooling due to special needs.

Main objective

The main aim of this dissertation is to investigate and compare the development of soft skills acquired or developed in the process of homeschooling in the studied countries.

Goals for the realisation of the main objective

1. To examine and present the essence of the phenomenon of homeschooling.
2. To explore the development of soft skills in homeschooling.
3. To conduct an international comparative study of soft skills in homeschooled individuals.

Tasks

Tasks to be achieved in Goal 1:

- To analyse the concepts and characteristics of homeschooling.
- To outline the regulatory frameworks of homeschooling in six countries.

Tasks to be achieved in Goal 2:

- To explore the concepts of soft skills.
- To examine approaches and practices used to develop and enhance soft skills.

Tasks to be achieved in Goal 3:

- To conduct a survey among homeschooled individuals and their parents in different countries.

- To analyse and present the findings from the survey.
- To formulate conclusions and recommendations.

Object

The object of this dissertation is homeschooling.

Subject

The subject of the research is the soft skills acquired and developed by homeschoolers.

Countries included in the study

This dissertation applies a model of comparative research with a "flexible number of countries" (Popov, 2019, p. 97), where the number of countries is not fixed during the process of achieving the specific goals. The total number of countries included in the study is eight: England, Bulgaria, Spain, Canada, Namibia, the USA, France, and South Africa. While England is not a country, but a nation within the United Kingdom, it is referred to as a country for brevity. The analysis of the regulatory framework covers six countries, while the individual stages of empirical research involve between five and seven countries.

Research questions

This study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- Which soft skills are most prominent among homeschooled individuals?
- Is there a relationship between the parenting style applied by homeschooling parents and the development of soft skills in homeschooled individuals?
- Is there a relationship between the teaching approach used by parents in homeschooling and the development of soft skills in homeschooled individuals?
- Do the traditions and practices of homeschooling in different countries influence the development of soft skills in homeschooled students?

Research Methods

- *Theoretical methods:*
 - ✓ Study of theoretical sources
 - ✓ Bibliographic analysis of the relationship between homeschooling and the development of soft skills
 - ✓ Comparative analysis of results across several countries

- *Empirical methods:*
 - ✓ A series of in-depth interviews with homeschooled individuals from various countries
 - ✓ A survey distributed among homeschooled individuals in different countries
 - ✓ A survey distributed among parents of homeschooled individuals in various countries
 - ✓ Analysis of the results from the series of interviews
 - ✓ Statistical analysis of survey data
 - ✓ Comparison of results obtained from the empirical research across different countries

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation examines the development of soft skills in the process of homeschooling through an international comparative study. The research has been based on both qualitative and quantitative data, collected through interviews and surveys, to identify the specific approaches and practices that contribute to the development of these skills.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a declaration of originality, the scientific contributions of the dissertation, a list of references, the author's publications, and appendices. The total length of the dissertation is 185 pages.

The sources used have been cited according to the APA Style. The total number of cited sources is 136, including texts, videos, regulatory documents, and other publications in Bulgarian, English, and French.

The appendices include:

Appendix 1: Questions for Interviews with Homeschooled Individuals

Appendix 2: Survey Questionnaires (Online)

Appendix 3: List of Figures

Appendix 4: List of Tables

Appendix 5: Preliminary Results from the Survey of Homeschooled Individuals

CHAPTER ONE: THE ESSENCE OF THE HOMESCHOOLING PHENOMENON

Chapter One explores the concepts and characteristics of homeschooling. The chapter begins by defining key terms and examining the various motivations that lead parents and students to choose this form of education. It then looks into the approaches, styles, and practices of homeschooling, as well as the social and emotional aspects associated with it. The chapter also describes the implementation of homeschooling and the specific challenges involved in studying this form of education. Additionally, a review and comparison of the regulatory frameworks for homeschooling in England, Bulgaria, Canada, the USA, France, and South Africa is presented. Conclusions and recommendations have been drawn from the analysis.

1.1. CONCEPTS AND FEATURES OF HOMESCHOOLING

1.1.1. Defining the concepts

This section defines key terms and concepts related to homeschooling. The different definitions of homeschooling proposed by various authors and institutions have been examined in detail, and their nature and scope have been analysed.

1.1.2. Motivations for choosing homeschooling

This section discusses the different motivations that have led families to choose homeschooling for their children. Factors such as dissatisfaction with the traditional school system, religious and cultural beliefs, and the individual needs of children have been analysed.

1.1.3. Approaches, styles and practices in homeschooling

This section provides an overview of the different methods and styles used in homeschooling. Approaches such as moderately structured, structured, unstructured, highly structured, and alternative teaching methods have been discussed (Brabant, 2020). Various teaching styles observed in homeschooling, such as classical, Montessori, Charlotte Mason, the university model of homeschooling, unschooling, and others, are also examined, along with their practical applications in the homeschool environment. The practice of homeschooling is also considered through the lens of parenting style according to Baumrind (1996). An attempt

has been made to classify homeschooling according to parents' teaching methods and goals, including traditional, personalised, experimental, school-based, and social approaches. The types of practices, depending on the goals of the educational process, the interests and needs of students, and the relevant legal requirements in different countries, have also been revealed. Finally, the following types of homeschooling have been outlined, which summarise the boundaries of the phenomenon under study:

- *Standard homeschooling*, where parents provide their own education to their children in a home environment to ensure personalised education.
- *Group homeschooling*, which takes place with the help of learning centres, parent cooperatives, schools, and other private educational structures that offer programmes meeting the needs of children and the requirements of home-educating families.
- *Virtual homeschooling*, where learning primarily occurs through virtual resources, support materials, and online discussions with teachers and other students.

1.1.4. Social and emotional aspects of homeschooling

This section examines the social and emotional effects of homeschooling on children educated outside of traditional schools. Issues such as socialisation, the development of emotional intelligence, and interaction with peers have been discussed.

1.1.5. Realisation of homeschoolers

This section examines the realisation of individuals who have been home-educated. The academic development and career fulfilment of home-educated individuals remain under-researched globally to date. This is due to the many challenges that have been identified in researching the alternative education phenomenon of homeschooling, which are outlined in the following section.

1.1.6. Specificities of homeschooling research

This section discusses the methodological challenges and specificities of homeschooling research. It describes the various research challenges faced by researchers studying this complex educational phenomenon. Numerous organisations and international networks have been established by parents and followers of homeschooling, operating in parallel with educational systems in their respective countries. These organisations aim to assist families with the pedagogical, social, and institutional organisation of homeschooling. Therefore, a list

of some of the organisations working in the field of homeschooling in the countries studied is presented.

1.2. REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

1.2.1. Regulatory framework for homeschooling in England

This section provides an overview of the legal and regulatory requirements for homeschooling in England. It examines the specific regulations and control mechanisms relevant to the educational phenomenon under study.

1.2.2. Regulatory framework for homeschooling in Bulgaria

The regulatory framework for homeschooling in Bulgaria has been described, with a focus on the rights and obligations of parents and educational institutions involved in homeschooling.

1.2.3. Regulatory framework for homeschooling in Canada

This section reviews the legal requirements for homeschooling in Canada, including provincial differences and specificities.

1.2.4. Regulatory framework for homeschooling in the USA

This section provides information on the regulations and legal aspects of homeschooling in the United States, discussing both federal and state laws.

1.2.5. Regulatory framework for homeschooling in France

This section presents the regulatory framework for homeschooling in France, including legal requirements and registration procedures.

1.2.6. Regulatory framework for homeschooling in South Africa

This section presents the regulatory framework for homeschooling in South Africa, including legal requirements and registration procedures.

1.2.7. Comparison of regulatory frameworks

This section presents a comparative analysis of key aspects of homeschooling regulations across the countries examined, highlighting the main similarities and differences. The comparison focuses on the regulation of homeschooling within legal acts, the role of

educational authorities in regulating homeschooling, the presence of centralised platforms for distance education, and the possibilities for financial or resource support for homeschooling families. It also compares the level of centralisation in the management of school systems across the studied countries, according to Popov (2019), and the degree of regulation of homeschooling by regulatory bodies (Sakarski, 2022). A trend has been identified, suggesting a connection between the level of centralisation in educational management and the degree of regulation of homeschooling. In countries with decentralised management of school education (England, Canada, USA), homeschooling ranges from highly regulated to unregulated. In countries with centralised management (Bulgaria, France, South Africa), homeschooling is highly regulated. As a result of these observations, it can be hypothesised that centralisation in educational governance leads to stronger regulation of homeschooling, while decentralisation results in uneven regulation of homeschooling.

1.3. SUMMARY

Chapter One of the dissertation provides an in-depth analysis of the concepts, features, and normative frameworks of homeschooling. It serves as a foundation for further research on the phenomenon and its various aspects. In summary, it can be said that the recognition and regulation of homeschooling have varied significantly from country to country and remain a subject of ongoing discussion and controversy, the standardisation of which would be a difficult and complex process.

CHAPTER TWO: SOFT SKILLS THROUGH HOMESCHOOLING

Chapter Two of the thesis examines the soft skills acquired through homeschooling. The chapter contains two main sections: concepts of soft skills and approaches to their construction and development.

2.1. SOFT SKILLS CONCEPTS

2.1.1. Defining the concepts

This section presents different definitions and theoretical frameworks related to soft skills. It analyses different approaches to their interpretation and their integration within the context of homeschooling.

"Soft skills are abilities that determine how a person works and interacts with others" (Herrity, 2018, online). Numerous other terms have been used to describe these abilities, including personal skills, interpersonal skills, non-technical skills, essential skills, and transferable skills. These terms have appeared frequently in both academic literature and the business sector. Soft skills have also been referred to as generic skills, key skills, core skills, or foundational skills. More recently, they have been termed "power skills," as practice has shown that these competencies enable individuals and organisations to succeed in their endeavours. In other words, they align with a person's strengths and highlight their unique personality traits.

A defining characteristic of soft skills is their strong connection to an individual's personal and social qualities, which contribute to success not only in professional settings but also in personal life. The significance of soft skills has been widely acknowledged as a key factor in effective teamwork, as well as in an individual's motivation, productivity, and job satisfaction. Moreover, they have been considered fundamental to fostering competitiveness, not only at the individual level but also within organisations (European Commission, 2016, 2020).

This dissertation focuses on 50 soft skills identified in homeschooled individuals, categorised into 10 main groups, summarized in the following table:

Skills set	Soft skills
Adaptability	Calmness Learning and growth mindset Optimism and positive attitude Self-management Self-motivation Situational analysis
Communication	Active listening Constructive feedback Presentation Verbal communication Written communication
Creativity	Experimentation Imagination Innovation Mind-mapping Questioning
Critical thinking	Acuity Attention to detail Interrogation Planning
Interpersonal skills	Cultural intelligence Diplomacy Empathy Humour Networking Tolerance
Leadership	Assertiveness Generosity Initiative Management skills Mentorship
Problem solving	Analysis Brainstorming Decision making Logical reasoning Observation

Teamwork	Collaboration
	Conflict management and resolution
	Coordination
	Idea exchange
	Mediation
Time management	Goal setting
	Organisation
	Scheduling
	Prioritising
	Stress management
Ethics	Commitment
	Discipline
	Professionalism
	Responsibility

Table1 . A grouping of some sought-after soft skills studied by the author (Author: G. Sakarski)

2.1.2. Challenges in the study of homeschoolers' soft skills

This section examines the specific challenges associated with measuring and assessing soft skills in children educated in a home environment. Methodological approaches to addressing these challenges have been analysed.

2.1.3. Criteria for assessing soft skills in the process of homeschooling

Various criteria and tools for evaluating soft skills in homeschooled children have been presented. These criteria may be applied not only in educational settings but also in business contexts or other situations requiring the assessment of different soft skills. In the context of homeschooling, these criteria can be adapted based on the child's age, specific needs, family dynamics, and activities. The assessment of soft skills in children should be supported by constructive feedback and followed by opportunities for further skill development.

2.2. APPROACHES AND PRACTICES FOR SOFT SKILLS BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT

2.2.1. Adaptability

This section explores the significance of adaptability as a soft skill and how it has been cultivated through homeschooling. Strategies and methods for fostering adaptability in home-educated learners have been discussed.

2.2.2. Communication skills

This section examines the importance of communication skills and their development through homeschooling. Various strategies for enhancing children's communication abilities have been presented.

2.2.3. Creativity

Methods and approaches for fostering creativity in homeschooled children have been explored. Both theoretical concepts and practical applications for developing creative skills have been described.

2.2.4. Interpersonal skills

This section analyses interpersonal skills and their role in the social development of homeschooled children. Methods and strategies for fostering effective interpersonal interaction have been examined.

2.2.5. Critical Thinking

This section focuses on the importance of critical thinking and how it has been developed through the homeschooling process. Various theoretical models and practical tools for encouraging critical thinking in children have been presented.

2.2.6. Leadership

Different aspects of leadership and how it has been shaped through homeschooling have been explored. Strategies and exercises for developing leadership skills in home-educated learners have been described.

2.2.7. Creative problem solving

The significance of creative problem-solving and how it has been cultivated in homeschooled children have been examined. Various methods and techniques for encouraging creative thinking and problem-solving have been analysed.

2.2.8. Teamwork

Teamwork skills and their importance for the personal development of homeschooled children have been explored. Approaches and methods for fostering these skills through educational projects and collaborative activities have been presented.

2.2.9. Time management skills

This section discusses time management skills and how they have been developed through homeschooling. Practical strategies and methods for teaching children effective time management have been outlined.

2.2.10. Ethics

This section focuses on ethical skills and their development within the homeschooling process. Both theoretical aspects of ethical behaviour and practical methods for integrating ethical standards into non-institutionalised education have been explored.

2.3. SUMMARY

Chapter Two of this dissertation provides an in-depth analysis of soft skills acquired through homeschooling. By systematically examining key concepts and various approaches to their development, this chapter contributes to a broader understanding of the significance of soft skills in contemporary education, as well as the strategies and practices for fostering them within the homeschooling context.

CHAPTER THREE: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HOMESCHOOLERS' SOFT SKILLS

This chapter presents the empirical research conducted on soft skills development of homeschoolers. The study was international and involved individuals from 7 countries including Bulgaria, Canada, Namibia, France, South Africa, Spain and the USA.

3.1. STUDY DESIGN

The empirical research presented in Chapter Three offers a detailed comparative analysis of the influence of homeschooling on the development of soft skills in homeschoolers. This analysis is conducted from a comparative perspective. Various methods and instruments, including surveys, interviews, and comparative analysis, are employed to assess and analyze the levels of soft skills development in home-educated individuals across several countries (ranging from 5 to 7 countries at different stages of the empirical study).

The primary aim of the empirical study is to provide a comprehensive overview of the soft skills of homeschoolers from different countries, drawing conclusions based on an international comparative study involving both homeschoolers and parents who practice homeschooling.

The ultimate goal of the study is not only to examine the impact of homeschooling on soft skills but also to offer recommendations for enhancing educational practices and providing better support for homeschoolers. This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of homeschooling in soft skills development and to offer insights that can inform future educational practices, transferable to other educational contexts.

The individual stages of the research are illustrated in the following figure, which outlines the research trajectory undertaken in the development of this thesis.

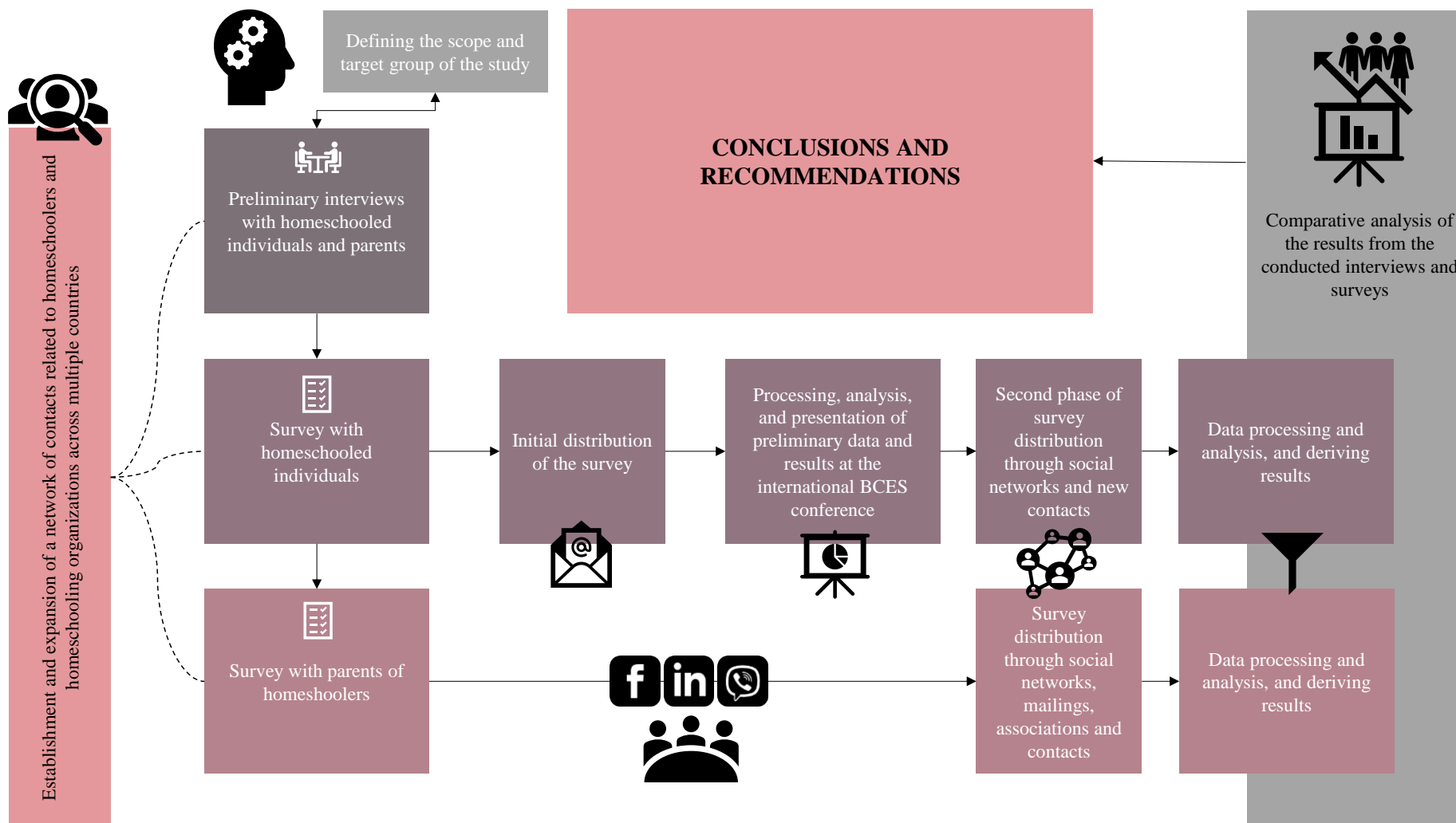


Figure1 . Stages of the study (Author: G. Sakarski)

Methods

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, including qualitative analysis of interviews, statistical analysis of online surveys, and comparative analysis. The selection of research methods was guided by the study's objectives, ensuring precision, adherence to ethical standards, respect for confidentiality, and an effective integration of both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

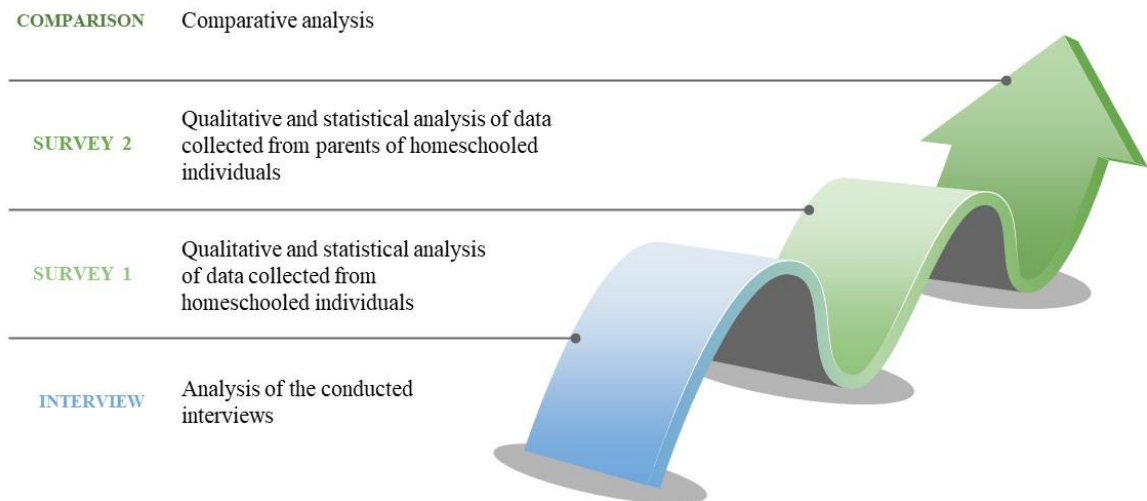


Figure2 . Research methods (Author: G. Sakarski)

Toolkit

The empirical research presented in this thesis was conducted in several stages, based on a toolkit developed specifically for the study, which is illustrated in the following figure.

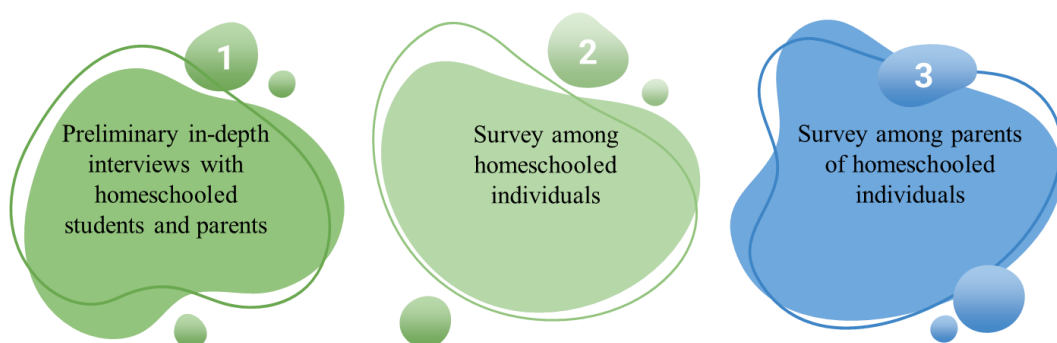


Figure3 . Toolkit used for the study (Author: G. Sakarski)

The study was based on the skills selected and classified into 10 main groups, which were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = lowest level to 5 = highest level).



Figure 4. Schematic representation of the studied soft skills (Author: G. Sakarski)

3.2. RESEARCH RESULTS

This subchapter presents the results of the empirical study.

3.2.1. Results of in-depth interviews with homeschoolers and parents

For the purposes of the research, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with students who received home education, alongside three interviews with parents. The analysis of the information exchanged with the interviewees aimed to outline a preliminary framework and establish the foundation for the subsequent stages of the empirical study. Key characteristics of homeschooling as an educational phenomenon have been identified, potential areas for further investigation have been uncovered, and data have been provided on the similarities and differences that emerge in the development of soft skills among home-educated students. The results from the initial interviews were presented in a report published in the proceedings of the Fourth Scientific-Practical Conference with International Participation "Education and Arts: Traditions and Perspectives" held in 2023.

3.2.2. Results of a survey conducted among homeschoolers

The survey on individuals who have undergone a period of homeschooling was conducted online using the Google Forms platform from July 2022 to July 2023. The total number of respondents participating in the survey targeting homeschooled individuals was 33, comprising participants from five countries: Bulgaria (5%), Canada (5%), the USA (27%), France (3%), and South Africa (39%).

The respondents ($n = 33$) had an average age of 22 years at the moment of the survey distribution, with ages ranging from 12 to 45 years, of whom 36% were male and 64% were female. The respondents came from various educational backgrounds, including higher education, secondary education, or ongoing education that had yet to be completed, which could be attributed to the respondents' ages. The responses indicated that homeschooled individuals most commonly continued their education after completing their homeschooling. The surveyed students were pursuing degrees in the following fields: business administration and marketing, business management, data science, theology and religious studies, communications, NGO management, creative writing, theatre management, foreign languages and linguistics, music, computer science, health sciences, journalism and communications, industrial engineering, agriculture, nutrition and dietetics, human physiology, genetics, and psychology.

Among the students, more than half (52%) reported their academic success in the institutions they had attended as above average, with 36% rating their performance as very good, excellent, or with high honours, and 9% declared that they were in the top 5 of their class. A large proportion of respondents (45%) were unable to make such comparisons, as the nature of their out-of-school education did not allow for such an evaluation. In some cases, homeschooling did not involve grading in the conventional school manner, making it even more difficult to answer this question.

The main employment status of the homeschooled respondents at the time of the survey is illustrated in Figure 25. Among the students, 12% were currently homeschooled, 6% were students who had previously undergone homeschooling, and 58% were university students. It can be concluded that more than half (52%) of the surveyed individuals were students who were working or running their own businesses, combining these activities. Among the respondents, 61% reported having employment at the time of the survey, even if it was not defined as their primary activity. Among the employed, 9% were entrepreneurs developing their own business ventures.

The average professional experience of the respondents was 3.5 years, with the maximum work experience reported as 6 years. Seventy percent of respondents indicated that their job search took no more than one month, with only 5% of them having reported a job search duration of 6 months to one year. The majority of respondents (60%) found their jobs through networks of contacts with employers, indicating the presence of skills for effective communication and the building of professional relationships. Networking skills were crucial not only for job searching but also for successful career and entrepreneurial development. Ninety percent of working respondents felt successful in their current job, rating their success with at least 4 points on a 5-point Likert scale, and 90% of them felt prepared for their current professional life, with 65% reporting satisfaction with their work (at least 4 points on a 5-point Likert scale).

A five-point scale was used to assess self-perception of soft skills among homeschooled individuals, where 1 represented the lowest value and 5 represented the highest. Statistical analysis of the data suggested that the most developed skills, based on the mean ratings from the respondents, included: a learning and growth mindset (4.4), logical reasoning (4.2), empathy (4.2), and responsibility (4.2). These results confirmed preliminary findings obtained from the analysis of responses from the first 13 respondents (Sakarski, 2023). Other soft skills that stood

out with a high average value (4.1) included written communication and imagination, which were not considered the strongest in the preliminary data analysis (n = 13). All these skills fell within the 90th percentile.

The skills with the lowest values (10th percentile) included: networking (3.4), mentoring (3.4), assertiveness (3.4), decision-making (3.4), conflict resolution (3.3), and stress management (3.0). Goal setting, self-motivation, innovation, and assertiveness were among the skills some respondents identified as underdeveloped, with a minimal score of 1. The only skill that did not reach the maximum value of 5 was stress management, with the highest value recorded being 4, and the lowest 2. This result aligned with conclusions from the qualitative analysis of the conducted interviews.

Respondents most frequently reported the following skills as excellently developed (Mode = 5): optimism and a positive mindset, a learning and growth mindset, empathy, initiative, and responsibility. It can be hypothesised that homeschooling supported the development of these universal human values through positive upbringing, motivation, and a curriculum tailored to the interests and pace of each child.

Respondents held varying views on whether they would choose homeschooling if they could make this choice today. Some respondents expressed a strong preference for homeschooling, citing advantages such as a calm and flexible learning environment, protection from bullying, the development of self-discipline and critical thinking skills, as well as the ability to focus on individual interests and talents. They also valued the opportunity to form closer relationships with their parents and the ability to instil family values and morals. However, there were respondents who would not choose homeschooling, mentioning the loss of social interactions and common cultural experiences, as well as potential challenges in developing social skills and dealing with inappropriate situations in the world. Some expressed concerns regarding the lack of accountability and structure in homeschooling, as well as the potential for a narrow worldview if the surrounding environment consisted solely of like-minded individuals.

Many respondents shared that they would choose to educate their children at home or would prefer a hybrid form of education combining family education with access to schools or learning centres, allowing for flexibility and individualized learning. Many of them mentioned that they wished to provide the best possible education and experience for their children, similar to what they themselves had received as homeschooled students. They valued the ability to

learn at their own pace, form close friendships, have more time for extracurricular activities, and enjoy a high level of education. Some also mentioned that they would like to protect their children from certain situations or opinions with which they disagreed. Nevertheless, some respondents expressed concerns about social skills and the need for more social interactions, indicating that homeschooling may not be a universally ideal choice for every child and family.

It can be stated that homeschooled individuals participating in the study considered their lives to be happy, with 94% answering the relevant question with at least 4 points on a 5-point Likert scale (58% rated 4 points, and 36% rated 5 points).

3.2.3. Results of a survey conducted among homeschoolers' parents

The survey conducted among parents of homeschooled individuals aimed to provide a broader scope and a basis for comparison of the results with those from the survey of the homeschooled individuals. A total of 71 parents, who currently homeschool or have homeschooled their children, participated in the survey. These parents lived in 7 countries: 15% in Bulgaria, 1% in Spain, 32% in Canada, 3% in Namibia, 7% in the USA, 3% in France, and 38% in South Africa.

According to the study's findings, parents most frequently used an authoritative parenting style, characterized by moderate control and clear expectations from the parent, while maintaining an environment of respect and consideration for the child's opinions. The autonomy given to the child in this style created a foundation for the development of soft skills across various groups. A moderately structured educational approach was identified as preferred by 55% of the surveyed parents.

To assess the soft skills of homeschooled individuals as perceived by their parents, a 5-point scale was used, where 1 represented the lowest value and 5 represented the highest. Statistical analysis of the soft skill assessments provided by parents revealed that the most highly developed skills, according to the parents (90th percentile), were: imagination (4.4), investigative thinking (4.3), questioning skills (4.3), humour (4.3), observation (4.3), and generosity (4.2). These average values for soft skills, as rated by parents, differed from the self-assessments of soft skills by the surveyed children. Other soft skills that stood out with high average scores (4.1) included verbal communication, innovation, experimentation, attention to detail, empathy, cultural intelligence, logical reasoning, and responsibility.

The soft skills with the lowest average scores, according to the parents' evaluations, were: stress management (3.4), organization (3.5), written communication (3.4), planning (3.4), conflict management (3.4), prioritization (3.4), time management (3.4), and goal setting (3.4). Among the assessed skills, more received the lowest score of 1 from parents compared to the results from the survey with homeschooled students. However, unlike the homeschooled individuals' survey, no skills were rated below the maximum score of 5.

Surveyed parents most frequently reported the following skills as excellently developed (Mode = 5): self-management, calmness, self-motivation, a learning and growth mindset, verbal communication, imagination, innovation, experimentation, research, questioning, attention to detail, empathy, humor, cultural intelligence, initiative, mentoring, generosity, logical reasoning, observation, collaboration, idea exchange, responsibility, discipline, commitment, and professionalism.

3.2.4. Comparative analysis

In the comparative study of parenting styles, notable trends have emerged in the development of soft skills. High levels of skills such as experimentation, questioning, empathy, and tolerance have been observed in the uninvolved parenting style. Meanwhile, the permissive parenting style has been associated with enhanced skills in calmness, active listening, observation, collaboration, conflict resolution, responsibility, discipline, commitment, and professionalism.

By contrast, the authoritarian parenting style tends to result in significantly lower scores for some of the examined soft skills. In this approach, the parent provides strict instructions, leaving little room for the child's self-expression—an essential prerequisite for the development of personal competencies.

An analysis of the average scores assigned by homeschooling parents and homeschooled individuals for each soft skill indicates that the highest scores were recorded for imagination, exploration, empathy, humour, logical reasoning, observation, and responsibility.

Conversely, both groups—homeschooled individuals and their parents—reported the lowest average scores for the following soft skills: planning, conflict management, stress management, and prioritisation.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has sought to clarify the impact of the increasingly widespread and controversial educational phenomenon of homeschooling, which has attracted growing attention across various regions. While homeschooling has gained support from many, it has also faced considerable criticism. The literature has presented both positive and negative effects associated with its practice, and it is crucial that any regulation of homeschooling considers its full scope, including its impact on homeschoolers. Although numerous studies have examined homeschooling from an academic achievement perspective, a review of English and French literature has revealed a lack of research exploring the long-term life outcomes of home-educated individuals.

In an era marked by rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and robotics, soft skills have become more essential than ever. These skills are not only critical for young people's career development but are also vital for society's overall well-being. As academic knowledge has become increasingly accessible and many technical skills have been rendered obsolete by technology, human qualities and transferable skills—those that cannot be replicated by machines—should remain the focus of contemporary educational efforts.

By examining the intersection of homeschooling and soft skills development, this dissertation has addressed the challenges associated with studying this relationship. It has aimed to enhance our understanding of the effects of alternative educational practices outside traditional schooling, providing valuable insights into the development of soft skills in homeschooled individuals.

Conclusions:

From the *theoretical study*, the following conclusions have emerged:

- Homeschoolers develop a wide range of soft skills, heavily influenced by family dynamics, parental involvement, and the motivations behind choosing homeschooling. The study refutes the notion that home-educated individuals are disadvantaged in terms of socialization, particularly when there is empathy, awareness, and an environment conducive to social interaction.

- Homeschooling is a multifaceted educational phenomenon, characterised by diverse practices and approaches that allow for flexibility and individualised learning. Its popularity has largely stemmed from the ability to quickly adapt to each child's unique rhythm and needs.
- Despite growing interest, many aspects regarding the career development of home-educated individuals, particularly in relation to soft skills, remain unexplored. This gap is partly due to the complexity of researching homeschooling as an alternative model and the dynamic nature of soft skills, which requires longitudinal research.

From the *empirical* study, the following conclusions are been drawn:

- A variety of soft skills essential for professional success and social integration can be cultivated through homeschooling, making it a viable alternative to traditional education in many cases.
- A correlation has been identified between parenting style, the educational approach in homeschooling, and the mean soft skill scores of home-educated individuals.
- No significant correlation has been found between the country in which homeschooling takes place and the average soft skill scores of home-educated individuals.
- Parenting style has had a greater impact on the development of soft skills than either the homeschooling approach or the country of residence.

Recommendations:

Based on the theoretical and empirical findings, the following recommendations are made:

- The diverse practices and adaptability of homeschooling make the establishment of a national or international framework for homeschooling challenging. A standardised model would contradict the motivations of many homeschooling families. However, implementing a system to validate the knowledge and skills of home-educated individuals in Bulgaria could help facilitate their academic and professional advancement.
- Recognising different forms of homeschooling as a legitimate alternative to traditional schooling would promote stronger connections between homeschooling families and existing educational institutions. Access to facilities such as laboratories, sports halls,

and educational events would enrich learning experiences and provide greater opportunities for social interaction.

- Increasing awareness among professionals, educators, and social workers about homeschooling would contribute to a more balanced understanding of homeschooling families and enable a more comprehensive evaluation of its effects. This could also improve the prevention of potential challenges faced by these families.
- Developing training modules for homeschooling parents would bridge the gap between state education institutions and homeschooling families, enhancing the quality of homeschooling with a focus on soft skills development.
- Offering training on the identification and development of soft skills should be integrated into educational modules not only for homeschooling parents but also for social workers, educators, and other professionals involved in supporting young people.

Homeschooling does not offer a one-size-fits-all solution and must be considered within the context of family dynamics, which form the foundation of the educational process. The decision to homeschool is shaped by the values, preferences, and circumstances of each family. While some view homeschooling as a pathway to a high-quality education and a positive learning environment, others may prefer the socialisation and experiences offered by traditional schools. Regardless, homeschooling has continued to gain attention as a flexible educational alternative suited to the needs and opportunities of the modern world.

SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE THESIS

1. Conducted a theoretical and empirical study on a significant educational phenomenon that has not been independently researched in Bulgaria to date.
2. Investigated and analysed for the first time both nationally and internationally the relationship between a broad set of specific soft skills and homeschooling.
3. Developed a detailed categorization of 50 soft skills, enabling a deeper exploration of the 10 most in-demand soft skills, and proposed approaches and practices for their development.
4. Constructed a soft skills assessment model applicable not only to research on homeschooling outcomes but also to broader national and international studies on soft skills in traditionally educated individuals. The assessment criteria, along with the author's toolkit, can be used in casework within social services and in the training of social workers who interact with home-educated individuals, as well as being adapted for larger studies on soft skills in individuals within formal education systems or the business sector.
5. Investigated the development of 50 soft skills in home-educated individuals, examined their relationship to parenting style and homeschooling approach—an area not fully addressed in the English, Bulgarian, and French research literature to this extent.
6. Provided an analysis of the self-assessment of soft skills by home-educated individuals in comparison with assessments made by homeschooling parents.
7. Reported the results of soft skills assessments and self-assessments for home-educated individuals in a comparative analysis across seven countries.

PUBLICATIONS OF THE AUTHOR

1. Sakarski, G. (2022). Overview of the Home-schooling Phenomenon in Bulgaria. *Towards the Next Epoch of Education. BCES Conference Books*, Vol. 20, 117-123. Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society. ISSN 2534-8426 (online).
<https://www.bces-conference.org/onewebmedia/117-123%20Gergana%20Sakarski.pdf>
2. Sakarski, G. (2022). A comparative review of home schooling in seven countries. *Proceedings of the Third Scientific and Practical Conference on Education and the Arts: Traditions and Perspectives*, 532-543. ISSN 2738-8999.
3. Sakarski, G. (2023). Evaluation of homeschoolers' soft skills: initial survey results. *BCES Conference Books*, Vol. 21, 117-123. Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society. ISSN 2534-8426 (online).
<https://www.bces-conference.org/onewebmedia/2023%20117-123%20Gergana%20Sakarski.pdf>
4. Sakarski, G. (2023). A study of soft skills in home educated persons in Bulgaria. *Proceedings of the Fourth Scientific and Practical Conference "Education and Arts: Traditions and Perspectives"*, 393-401. ISBN 978-954-07-5061-3
5. Sakarski, G. (2024). Are homeschoolers happy with their educational experience? Education in Developing, Emerging, and Developed Countries. Paper accepted, expected to be published in July 2024.

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OTHER SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE AUTHOR AND PRESENTATIONS OF THE SCIENTIFIC WORK

Participation in research projects

Project	Period
BG-RRP-2.004-0008-C01 "Sofia University - Innovation and Technology Transfer Marker (SUMMIT)", Member, European Union NextGenerationEU, Contract Number: No.70-123-463/ 27.06.2023.	2023 - 2024
Social pedagogy in the XXI century. Contract number:80-10-106/27.04.2023, Member, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Contract Number:80-10-106/27.04.2023.	2023
Opportunities and Challenges in the Practical Training of Students of Social Pedagogy in the Conditions of Crisis, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Contract Number: № 80-10-173 from 27.05.2022, Member, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"	2022

Participation in competitions

Contest	Period
Student of the Year of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" 2nd place in the category "PhD Student of the Year", Sofia, Bulgaria	May 2023
Finalist at the International Final of the "Ma thèse en 180 secondes" Competition, Montreal, Canada	Oct. 2022
Winner of the Audience Award and first place, awarded by an international jury, in the national final of the competition "Ma thèse en 180 secondes", Sofia, Bulgaria	June 2022

Participation in scientific forums and events

Event	Period
XXII BCES Annual International Conference Education in Developing, Emerging, and Developed Countries: Different Worlds, Common Challenges <i>Are homeschoolers happy with their educational experience?</i>	July 2024
European Researchers Night 2023 - PhD Students Panel <i>What can we learn about soft skills from homeschoolers?</i>	Sept. 2023
XXI BCES Annual International Conference Sofia, Bulgaria <i>Evaluation of home-schoolers' soft skills: initial survey results</i>	June 2023
National Homeschooling Conference Lecture and workshop on <i>"On the road to your career"</i>	June 2023
Innovative Forum "Pedagogy of Everyday Life - New Realities" <i>Homeschooling - educational practice outside the framework</i>	Feb. 2023
The Third Scientific and Practical Conference of the FNOI EDUCATION AND ARTS: TRADITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES <i>A comparative overview of homeschooling in seven countries</i>	November 2022
Educational Forum "Out of Form: Through the lens of non-formal education"	November 2022
Colloque L'instruction en famille en France. Des terrains et regards renouvelés sur le homeschooling?	Oct. 2022
XX BCES Jubilee Annual International Conference <i>Overview of the Home-schooling Phenomenon in Bulgaria</i>	June 2022
Second International Virtual Conference on Comparative School Counseling	March 2022

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