

IS HOMESCHOOLING DETRIMENTAL TO SOCIOEMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY WITH SPANISH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

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Abstract

In recent decades families that decide to homeschool their children have increased significantly. The situation of these families is very different depending on the country of residence. For instance, in Europe, most countries recognize homeschooling (HS) as a legal right. However, existing regulations vary in a wide range of situations, ranging from rather lax regulations (Austria, France, Belgium) to quite restrictive ones (Italy, Norway, Portugal) (Blok et al., 2017). These differences in regulation highlight the lack of consensus about the benefits and consequences of HS. The issue of social and emotional adjustment is closely associated with socialization, which is a key issue in HS. The HS advocates appeal to the authoritarian, uncritical and competitive environment of the educational system, to the possible situations of mistreatment and/or discrimination between peers or to the difficulty in maintaining social status as variables of the school context that can harm the social development of children (Dalaimo, 1996; Farris & Woodfrud, 2000; Medlin, 2000; Meighan, 1995; Murphy, 2014; Taylor, 1986). Detractors of HS consider that the school context is critical in learning social norms, values, and social interaction skills and that, therefore, reducing it to the family context can result in isolation and poor social and emotional development (Farris & Woodfrud, 2000; Medlin, 2000; Murphy, 2014; Romanowsky, 2001; Shyers, 1992). The objective of this work is to analyze the impact that homeschooling has on the socioemotional development of school-age children. The participants were 205 families with children between 6 and 11 years old. 124 of these families school their children in public schools and 84 are homeschooled. An ex post facto design has been used in which the psychological adjustment of the participants has been compared through two measures: on the one hand, self-report of the Child and Adolescent Evaluation System Questionnaire (SENA, Fernández-Pinto et al., 2015) and, on the other hand, hetero-report of the same instrument completed by the family. Preliminary results suggest that there are no significant differences in the socioemotional development of school-age children depending on the type of schooling. The implications of these findings will be discussed.

Keywords: *Homeschooling, socioemotional development, school-age children, social adjustment.*

1. Introduction

Families that decide to homeschool their children have increased significantly in recent decades. It has been estimated that approximately 3% of school-age children in the United States currently are homeschooled (HS) (Ray, 2023). Most European countries recognize HS as a legal right. In some cases, they are governed by rather lax regulations (Austria, France, Belgium) and in others they are quite restrictive (Italy, Norway, Portugal) (Blok et al., 2017). In Spain, for instance, according to national legislation full-time compulsory education cannot be provided at home.

Previous studies don't clarify about benefits of homeschooling due to some methodological and ideological issues (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020; Valiente et al., 2022). Many authors pointed out the following methodological problems found in these studies (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020; Murphy, 2014; Valiente et al., 2022): samples are usually convenience samples and are not representative, many studies do not take into account variables that could explain some of the differences (such as socioeconomic status, parental involvement, the time of onset, and years of homeschooling or specific contexts of children's social relationships) and most studies only use parents as informants. In terms of ideological issues, some authors have found that many parents who homeschool their children have had bad

experiences at school during their childhood, and this experience contributes to develop a negative perception of the school context (Arai, 2000; Neuman, 2019; Wyatt, 2008). McQuiggan et al. (2017) in the United States found that 51% of families decided to homeschool their children to provide religious instruction and 67% to offer moral education. Moreover, 80% of families were dissatisfied with the school environment and 61% were also dissatisfied for academic reasons. These results show that, in many cases, the families' main motivations go beyond academic issues and are related to ideological, religious, and contextual aspects.

Socioemotional adjustment in homeschooled children

In one hand, the homeschooling advocates refers to the authoritarian, uncritical and competitive environment of the educational system, the potential situations of peer mistreatment and/or discrimination or the difficulty maintaining social status as variables of the school context that may be detrimental to children's social development (Dalaimo, 1996; Farris & Woodfrud, 2000; Medlin, 2000; Meighan, 1995; Murphy, 2014; Taylor, 1986). In the other hand, detractors of homeschooling point out that the school context is critical in learning social norms, values, and social interaction skills, and that, therefore reducing it to the family context can lead to isolation and poor social and emotional development (Farris & Woodfrud, 2000; Medlin, 2000; Murphy, 2014; Romanowsky, 2001; Shyers, 1992).

Present Study

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the knowledge of the impact that homeschooling has on the adjustment and socioemotional development of school-aged children in a Spanish sample. There are no previous studies in Spain that evaluate the psychological state of children who are homeschooled. It is important to note that in Spain, homeschoolers can be considered a hidden sample.

2. Methods

An *ex post facto* design has been used in which the psychological adjustment of the participants has been compared through two measures: on the one hand, self-report of the Child and Adolescent Evaluation System Questionnaire (SENA, Fernández-Pinto et al., 2015) and, on the other hand, hetero-report of the same instrument completed by the family.

2.1. Participants

The participants were 205 families with children between 6 and 11 years old. 124 of these families opt for school their children in public schools and 84 are homeschoolers. There is some particularity regarding the samples as the measures were taken at different times. Depending on the variable, the sample was different. In this sense, for the measurement of anxiety the sample is the following:

Table 1. Composition of the sample according to gender and type of schooling for anxiety.

		Schoolers		Homeschoolers		Total
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
Self-report	6-7 years old	40	33	14	15	102
	8-11 years old	75	63	22	7(4*)	171
Hetero-report	Families	124		79		205

Note: *participants didn't inform about gender

The sample for the rest of variables is the following:

Table 2. Composition of the sample according to gender and type of schooling for the others variables.

		Schoolers		Homeschoolers		Total
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
Self-report	8-11 years old	46	36	22	7(2*)	113
Hetero-report	Families	31	44	50	26 (8*)	159

Note: *participants didn't inform about gender

2.2. Instruments

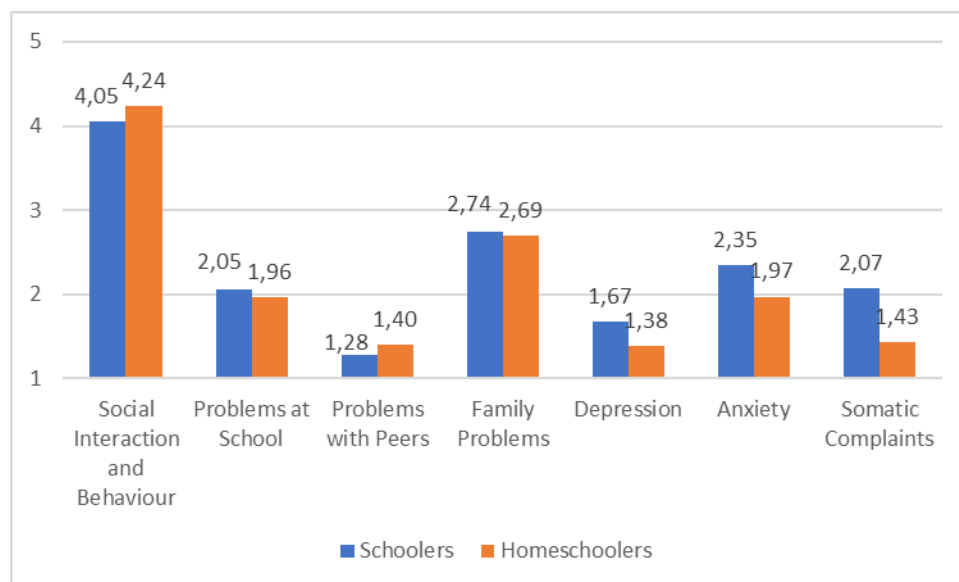
The Child and Adolescent Assessment System Questionnaire (Cuestionario Sistema de Evaluación de Niños y Adolescentes - SENA, Fernández-Pinto et al., 2015), scaled for the Spanish population in its self-report and hetero-report version, was used. This questionnaire allows a broad exploration of child psychological adjustment, covering ages from 3 to 18 years.

In this study we chose the scales that measure aspects more related to adjustment and social skills, such as Anxiety, Depression, Problems with Peers, Family Problems, Problems at School, Interaction and Social Behaviour, and Somatic Complaints for the self-report version. For the hetero-report answered by the parents, the scales Anxiety, Depression, Emotion Regulation, Willingness to Study, Attentional Problems, Hyperactivity and Challenging Behaviour scales were chosen. The instrument is scored on a Likert scale where 1 means "Never or almost never", 2 "Rarely", 3 "Sometimes", 4 "Very often" and 5 "Always or almost always". For the authors of the test, scores of 3 and above are indicative of problems.

3. Results

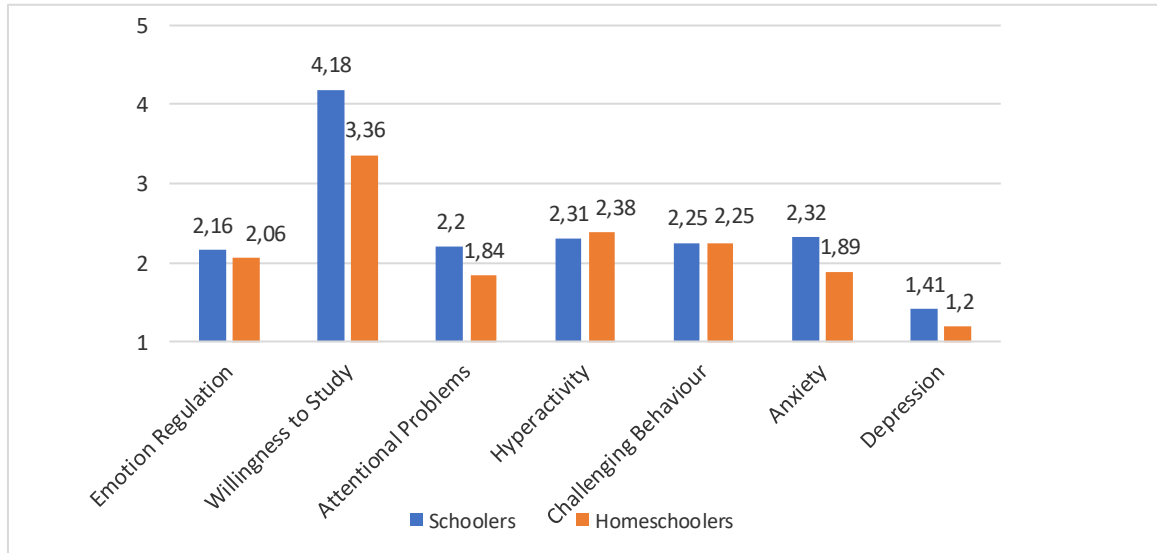
The normality of the data was tested using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test. Mann-Whitney U test was applied for the variables that showed a non-normal distribution and T-Student test was applied for the variables that showed a normal distribution. Mean scores for self and hetero-report can be seen in figures 1 and 2. In the self-report significant differences were observed only for the Depression ($U=851$, $z=-2.079$, $p=.007$, $r=-.25$), Anxiety ($t(155)=-2.366$, $p=.019$; $d=.66$) and Somatic Complaints ($U=463.5$, $z=-5.205$, $p=.000$, $r=-.49$) scales. In all cases, the HS children obtained lower scores than the school children.

Figure 1. Mean scores for self-report.



In the hetero-report significant differences were found in the Attentional Problems ($U=2371.5$, $z=-2.69$, $p=.01$, $r=-.21$), Depression ($U=2362.5$, $z=-2.76$, $p=.01$, $r=-.22$), Anxiety ($U=3622.0$, $p=.001$, $z=-3.38$, $r=-.02$) and Willingness to Study ($U=1427.5$, $z=-5.97$, $p=.00$, $r=-.47$) scales. In all the scales mentioned, the score of the homeschoolers was lower than that of the schoolers.

Figure 2. Mean scores for hetero-report.



4. Discussion

The objective of the present study was to compare the socioemotional adjustment of students who are homeschoolers and those schooled in educational centers. Multi-informant measures (self and hetero-reports) were used. Our results showed that, in the self-reports, the homeschoolers scored significantly lower in Depression, Anxiety and Somatic Complaints. No differences were found in any of the other measures of socioemotional adjustment. Likewise, the parents' view through the hetero-reports also showed that the homeschoolers scored significantly lower in Depression, Attentional Problems, Anxiety and Willingness to Study than schooled children.

Probably the most interesting found of this study was the consistency between parents' and the children's scores for the measure of depression and anxiety. These results are in line with those of other Guterman and Neuman (2017), who found that homeschoolers between the ages of 9 and 12 show significantly lower levels of depression.

Another interesting result has to do with the Somatic Complaint scores. The Somatic Complaint Scale asks children to rate the frequency of certain physical complaints that are considered indicative of psychological manifestations. As some previous studies have shown, stomach aches, headaches, backaches, or fatigue in preschool children have been found to be predictive of depression and anxiety in childhood and adolescence (Lien et al., 2011; Shelby et al., 2013; Woods, 2020). It is important to note that children's assessment of this symptomatology could be especially revealing, as it is a physical experience that can be much easier for children to assess than other issues more linked to emotions or thoughts. In this sense, it is feasible that the differences between the two groups support and add coherence to those found in the Depression and Anxiety scale.

One surprising result was found in the so-called Willingness to Study. In this case, school children obtain higher scores than homeschoolers. Analyzing a bit more in detail this scale, it seems that it refers to issues that can be important in the school context but not necessarily in the context of homeschoolers.

Taken together, our results suggest not only that homeschoolers present similar levels of psychological adjustment compared to school children, but also that they score higher, on some scales. It is important to point out that the measures of social adjustment, one of the main concerns of the studies that have evaluated the well-being of homeschoolers, do not reveal social interaction difficulties. In the same sense, no differences were found in family interactions (neither in the Family Problems scale nor in the Challenging Behavior scale) compared to school children.

This study presents some limitations: the size of the sample and the lack of certain relevant information for the correct interpretation of the results (such as socioeconomic characteristics, the reasons that led to the decision of homeschooling - religious issues, disagreement with the educational system, negative experiences in educational institutions -, the methodology of teaching used in the family context or the time they have been homeschooling, etc.)

Besides those limitations, one of the most important strengths of this study was to access a sample of homeschoolers in Spain. The non-regularized situation of homeschooling in Spain makes it

difficult to access this type of participants for research, thus our results could contribute towards modifying the image that, at least in Spain, is usually held of families that educate their children at home. Likewise, in line with the few previous works carried out (Guterman & Neuman, 2017), our results suggest the need for more studies to better understand the impact that this type of schooling has on children's development.

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