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## Evaluation of Homeschoolers' Soft Skills: Initial Survey Results

### Abstract

Soft skills are key for the successful realisation of individuals in their personal, professional and social life, but scientific research conducted on the soft skills of homeschoolers is still scarce so far. One of the most frequent questions, when homeschooling is discussed concerns the presumed lack of social skills of homeschoolers. A common assumption is that homeschoolers' socialisation is compromised and homeschooled individuals' soft skills development is, therefore, impaired. However, researchers, education specialists, and homeschooling families have differing opinions about this question. Research shows that the concern of social skills deficit comes often from outside the families, although parents usually care the most about their children's wellbeing. Homeschoolers, who were surveyed in the framework of this research did not confirm this assumption either. Therefore, there seems to be a clear need for deeper understanding and further exploration of the soft skills of homeschoolers. This paper aims to present the initial findings, discovered through theoretical study and qualitative and quantitative analysis of the preliminary results of an online survey conducted with homeschoolers from 3 countries aged over 16 years in order to explore the soft skills they develop.

Keywords: homeschooling, home education, soft skills, social skills, leadership, critical thinking, adaptability, problem solving, communication

### Introduction

Homeschooling is nowadays a growing educational phenomenon, which is gaining more and more popularity and exposure over different countries and continents, no matter if it is legally recognised, regulated, not mentioned in the legislative texts or even illegal (Roche, 2017; De Beer, Vos & Myburgh, 2020; Sakarski, 2022). Homeschooling does not have a commonly accepted definition and different terms are used in the scholar literature to name comparable concepts and practice, including the terms *homeschooling*, *elective home education*, *family education*, and other similar terms, depending on the country, the language or the understanding of the author. In this paper the term homeschooling describes the education given to children by parents, tutors, private teachers or other individuals, outside of schools, where at least one of the parents takes responsibility for the education of the child.

There is a large variety of approaches and styles used by families who homeschool their children, as homeschooling is a personalised and most commonly individualised practice per se. Despite this variety of practices and ways to educate children outside of schools that have been explored by scholars, there are still a lot of questions that remain unanswered. One of them concerns the development of soft skills in

homeschooling. Soft skills are transversal or transferable life competencies acquired through life experiences and situations. They can be “cognitive, social and emotional skills, which enable children and adolescents to continue lifelong learning and become active and productive citizens” (UNICEF, 2022), which combine with other fundamental or specific technical skills, needed for the individuals to thrive in their professional and personal lives. “The term Soft Skills is used to indicate all the competencies that are not directly connected to a specific task; they are necessary in any position as they mainly refer to the relationships with other people involved in the organization” (Cimatti, 2016, p. 98).

This paper aims to present the preliminary findings from ongoing research, conducted in the framework of the PhD thesis of the author. The research methods used include literature study and empirical analysis of the responses of an online survey designed to gain insight into homeschoolers’ soft skills development. The analysis presented here is based on the anonymous responses collected between July and November 2022 from 13 current or former homeschoolers aged over 16 years. Random sampling was used in this research.

## Literature review

A very common question, when it comes to homeschooling, concerns the social skills development of homeschoolers. Social skills are part of the soft skills individuals gain and enhance over a lifetime. There is no starting age to develop soft skills and there is no unique measure. Although not much research has been conducted on the topic of soft-skills development in the process of homeschooling, the socialisation question has often been addressed in the scholarly literature. There seems to be a common belief that homeschooled children do not have opportunities to socialise with their peers, therefore their social skills development would be compromised (Fineman & Shepherd, 2016).

However, these presumptions have not been confirmed by scientists who explored this alternative teaching practice. Recent research conducted with adults, who were homeschooled as children found that “homeschooling had not hindered their ability to navigate society effectively” (Hamlin & Cheng, 2022, p. 332). Although empirical research on this topic had some limitations (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020), due to the sampling challenges and self-reporting approach, some conclusions can still be drawn about the results of homeschooling: “It would generally produce results equivalent to those of school attendance, for academic success, socialisation, socio-affective development of children and their professional and social integration in adulthood.” (Brabant, 2021, p. 101).

The social interactions have not necessarily occurred at school with peers of the same age, but, as stated by Respondent 3, “Homeschooling means a family will have to work harder to find opportunities for their children to socialize with those outside the family”. These opportunities have often been created through extracurricular and social activities, sports, cultural visits, travel, community activities, hobbies, private courses, and family relationships. “The acquisition of social skills in homeschooling is dependent on the individual parent’s approach towards homeschooling and their main objectives for adopting this method of child education” (Abuzandah, 2020, p. 1071).

## Research design

The purpose of the research was to observe and comparatively analyse the degree to which current or former homeschoolers aged over 16 years assessed their soft skills development. The age threshold was selected as it has been assumed that younger individuals might not have the necessary self-awareness needed for the purpose of the study. An anonymous questionnaire was designed for this research. It consisted of a total of 75 items, including open questions, Likert questions, rating scale questions, multiple choice questions classified in four sections: General Information and Demographics; Education & Employment Status; Soft Skills Self-assessment; Other Questions. The choice of different kinds of questions was motivated by the will to obtain a panoramic examination of the soft skills profile of the respondents. The research was randomly distributed online by email. The responses, analysed in this paper, have been collected with the Google Forms platform. The soft skills assessment section included 50 items with five-scale rating, divided into 10 groups of soft skills, including Time management, Communication, Adaptability, Teamwork, Creativity, Leadership, Interpersonal skills, Work ethics, and Critical thinking. Each soft skill item was rated separately by the respondents on a five-point scale (1 = Not developed; 2 = Underdeveloped; 3 = Good; 4 = Very strong; 5 = Excellent).

## Results

### *Demographics*

The evaluation was based on an experimentally designed self-assessment questionnaire, completed by 13 participants from 3 countries spread as follows: 2 from Bulgaria, 5 from Canada, and 6 from the USA. The average participants' age was 25 years, the mode and the median age was 20 years, while the younger respondent was 16 years old and the eldest was 45 years old. 57.1% of the respondents were women, and 42.9% were men. The highest level of education completed by 9 of the respondents was high school, 1 secured a Bachelors' degree, 1 graduated with a Masters' degree, 1 had a Doctoral degree and 1 was still in grade 10. The respondents, enrolled in a higher education institution at the moment of the survey, declared to have specialised in the following fields: data science, pastoral studies, elementary education, missional leadership, communications, non-profit leadership, creative writing/fiction, theatrical operations and management.

### *Education and employment*

In terms of main occupation, 10 of the respondents indicated that they were enrolled in a higher education institution; 6 had a job; 1 was a student enrolled in a regular school, and 1 was a homeschool teacher. The respondents generally felt they were successful in their higher education and other studies, with 76.9% rating their success level at 4 and 23.1% rating at 5, and 84.7% felt that they had been prepared for their current studies, with 15.3% who rated their preparedness perception at 2 and 3 points (based on questions with a five-points scale: 1 = minimum; 5 = maximum). In terms of employment status, 69.2% of the respondents had a job when they completed the questionnaire, where the majority of the jobs were jobs, which could be qualified as "student jobs", and 33.3% were full time and permanent positions. The respondents were employed in a variety of sectors including information technologies, education,

healthcare, public sector and other services, which all of them found in less than a year; and a third of them declared have found in less than a month. The majority of the positions had been found through networking, including personal networks, social networks, previous networking with recruiters, which allowed the assumption that homeschoolers had to mobilise a set of soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, communication, networking and other job-specific competences in order to secure their employment. 61.5% (8) have had access to career counselling services, but the link with the professional realisation have not been confirmed and could be a ground for future exploration. The results of the survey showed that all the respondents had a good preparedness and success in their current work (rated 4 and 5 by all the respondents); and 77.8% (7) felt satisfied or very satisfied with their work, with only 22.2% (2) respondents rating their work satisfaction level as good (3 points).

### *Soft skills self-assessment*

In terms of soft skills, the resulting data showed that the questioned homeschoolers had mitigated evaluation of their time management skills with good to excellent organisation skills, at least very strong prioritising skills, but less categoric stress management skills, whereas for 46.2% of respondents this skill remained underdeveloped. This controversial result about time management skills is consistent with previous research findings (Sakarski, 2022). The time management skills were considered as a positive outcome of the homeschooling for some of the homeschoolers, but for others, this skill, including prioritising, planning, goal setting and stress management, was less consistent. The participants noted mainly good, very strong and excellent communication skills, with affirmed presentation and written communication skills (more than 8 respondents rated these skills as at least very strong). Learning and growing mindset was clearly one of the strongest skills all of the respondents noted as at least very strong, which can be due to the way their learning experience occurred from daily life situations, allowing them to cultivate adaptability. Optimism and positive attitude (76.9%), situational analysis (69.2%) and in learning and growth mindset (100%) are also among the skills which participants assessed as at least very strong (rated with 4 and 5 points). Self-management and self-motivation were judged as less developed or at least unequally developed by the respondents.

These results differ from Gaudreau and Brabant's findings, who identified self-determination and self-motivation of unschoolers as one of the highly rated positive repercussions of unschooling (Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021). The skills assessed by the respondents as at least good (graded at 3 points or above) were: verbal communication, presentation, calmness, learning and growth mindset, logical reasoning, observation, brainstorming, coordination, idea exchange, imagination, innovation, questioning, generosity, humour, tolerance, discipline, acuity, questioning.

The average of the self-assessment rating provided by the respondents, rated the following skills in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile: learning and growth mindset (avg. 4.38), logical reasoning (avg. 4.38), empathy (avg. 4.31), humour (avg. 4.23), analysis (avg. 4.23), responsibility (avg. 4.23). Only 2 of these skills are from the same group of interpersonal skills. The skills rated in the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile, based on the average group of interpersonal skills are: stress management (avg. 2.77), assertiveness (avg. 2.92), networking (avg. 3.15), mentorship (avg. 3.15), mediation (avg. 3.23). The skills are from different skills groups, except for two of them, which are classified as leadership skills. The table

below presents an overview of the soft skills assessed in the survey with mean, mode, median, minimum, and maximum value.

*Table 1: Summary of auto-evaluated soft-skills, assessed in the current research*

Skills group	Soft skills	Average	Mode	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Adaptability	Calmness	3,62	3	3	3	5
	Learning and growth mindset	4,38	5	5	3	5
	Optimism and positive attitude	4,08	5	4	2	5
	Self-management	3,54	3	3	2	5
	Self-motivation	3,54	5	4	1	5
	Situational analysis	3,92	4	4	2	5
Communication	Active listening	3,62	4	4	2	5
	Constructive feedback	3,69	4	4	2	5
	Presentation	4,15	5	4	3	5
	Verbal communication	3,77	4	4	3	5
	Written communication	4,08	4	4	2	5
Creativity	Experimentation	3,62	3	3	2	5
	Imagination	4,08	5	4	3	5
	Innovation	3,77	3	4	3	5
	Mind-mapping	3,31	3	3	2	5
	Questioning	4,00	4	4	3	5
Critical thinking	Acuity	3,38	3	3	3	5
	Attention to detail	3,69	4	4	2	5
	Questioning	4,08	4	4	3	5
	Scheduling	3,69	4	4	2	5
Interpersonal skills	Cultural intelligence	3,69	5	4	2	5
	Diplomacy	3,62	3	3	2	5
	Empathy	4,31	5	5	2	5
	Humour	4,23	4	4	3	5
	Networking	3,15	3	3	2	5
	Tolerance	4,08	4	4	3	5
Leadership	Assertiveness	2,92	2	3	2	4
	Generosity	3,92	3	4	3	5
	Initiative	3,92	5	4	2	5
	Management skills	4,00	5	4	2	5
	Mentorship	3,15	3	3	2	5
Problem-solving	Analysis	4,23	5	5	2	5
	Brainstorming	3,92	4	4	3	5
	Decision making	3,38	4	3	2	5
	Logical reasoning	4,38	5	5	3	5
	Observation	4,08	5	4	3	5
Teamwork	Collaboration	3,62	4	4	2	5
	Conflict management and resolution	3,77	4	4	2	5
	Coordination	3,69	3	3	3	5
	Idea exchange	3,62	4	4	3	4
	Mediation	3,23	3	3	2	5
Time management	Goal setting	3,54	4	4	1	5
	Organisation	4,00	5	4	3	5
	Planning	3,92	4	4	2	5
	Prioritising	3,77	4	4	2	5
	Stress management	2,77	2	3	2	4
	Work ethics	Commitment	4,00	4	4	2
Discipline		4,00	5	4	3	5
Professionalism		3,77	4	4	2	5
Responsibility		4,23	5	5	2	5

In addition to the auto-evaluation of the soft skills, the survey included five open questions, allowing the respondents to express their views and perception of the results of their educational experience. The comparison highlighted the flexibility of the schedule which differs much from the formal schooling paradigm.

According to Respondent 4, currently in college in Chicago, USA, specialising in Elementary Education “Homeschooling could lead to development of a love for learning, time management skills, the ability to communicate with different people, and the opportunity to grow in areas of talent or interest”. Respondent 6 evaluated the “good work ethic, taught from a Christian perspective, [...] time management and self-motivation” as positive outcomes of homeschooling. Respondent 10 assesses “personal exploration and development of passion and self-motivation” as propitious consequences of homeschooling. According to Respondent 3 “Homeschoolers who have a good work ethic are prepared to achieve their goals on their own even if they are not as strictly pushed toward them as public schoolers might be. Homeschooling often gives students more flexibility in their schedule to pursue part time jobs and other educational and vocational experiences that can help prepare them for the future.” “HS [homeschooling] fostered a curiosity and love for learning new things in me that I am unsure I would have received in the public school system” said Respondent 13.

These statements align with conclusions, previously drawn by several researchers exploring homeschoolers’ social skills that, in some cases and under conditions, soft skills developed by homeschooled individuals could be fostered as a result of homeschooling.

A convergence of evidence from different perspectives can be observed: from the results of the survey and the study of previous research we can conclude that homeschoolers develop soft skills mainly through various life experiences. Their social skills seem to be honed through interactions with people of different ages, provided that the families allow these interactions and invest the necessary time to create such opportunities for their homeschooled children, as opposed to the granted opportunities to socialise with peers of the same age, usually provided in regular schools.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The results presented in this paper have indicative character as they are based on self-assessment by a limited number of respondents, which does not allow their generalisation. However, they are still suggestive of similarities and differences, which are observed in homeschoolers’ soft skills.

One of the most notable conclusions is that the surveyed individuals have a large variety of skills, according to their self-assessment, and they do not seem to confirm the assumption that homeschoolers lack social skills. These findings could be used as additional support for training, mediation (Ranev, 2021) and supervision of social workers (Staneva, 2022), assessing homeschoolers achievements in order to get insights not exclusively limited to the academic performance and the social environment of the assessed children.

Soft skills are complex, dynamic and largely dependent on the context, which makes their assessment a challenging task. Therefore, more in-depth research is needed in order to draw general conclusions. Although the results of this study provide a simplistic view of the soft skills development of the questioned homeschoolers, the findings could be used as a starting point for future explorations of the long-term social effects of homeschooling.

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