Social and academic interest in homeschooling: Brazilian perspectives

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Abstract

Homeschooling is not yet regulated in Brazil, despite the growing number of families that have adopted this practice. Following international trends for homeschooling regulation—particularly in the United States—Brazilians who support homeschooling have used international human rights protection documents to advocate for the practice and created associations to influence policymakers and make homeschooling widely known in society (Barbosa, 2016). In this context, this study analyzes the homeschooling movement in Brazil in recent decades and the growing social and academic interest in this practice. Bibliographic research and analysis of press publications were used as methodological procedures. The main findings are: the homeschooling movement in Brazil has gained strong national visibility since former President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) highlighted homeschooling regulation as a priority in the context of conservative agendas; the growing social interest in homeschooling has also been supported by the press, with pieces of information showing disagreements between defenders and critics of homeschooling regulation in Brazil, also spreading common sense and polarization about homeschooling (Barbosa et al., 2022); academic studies on homeschooling are recent, so an important channel with data about it is the website of Observatório de Educação Domiciliar e Desescolarização (OEDD), affiliated to the Laboratório de Políticas Públicas e Planejamento Educacional (LaPPlane) of the School of Education (FE) at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp).

Key words: Homeschooling; Brazil; Brazilian education; Social interest; Academic research.

1. Introduction

The right to educate children at home and not enroll them in regular schools is already a commonplace in North America's education. However, in Brazil, homeschooling is a new practice that involves complex challenges in the ongoing movement for homeschooling regulation, stimulating discussions about the right to education in the country.

The history of education in Brazil shows that in the 19th century, families of the traditional elite hired preceptors or private teachers to educate their children at home, mainly due to the lack of schools (Vasconcelos & Boto, 2019). In the Brazilian constitutions enacted in 1934 and after that, homeschooling was allowed in different periods and in different legal instruments (Cury, 2019).

However, with the 1988 Federal Constitution, which is still in force, the provision of free education was defined as a responsibility of the State, with school enrollment compulsory from the age of four to 17 (Art. 205 and 208) for all citizens, based on the principles of equal access to school and school

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attendance. Other national laws emphasize compulsory school enrollment and attendance, such as the Law of Education Guidelines and Foundations (Law 9,394/1996); and the Child and Adolescent Statute (Law 8,069/1990), which states that "parents or guardians have the obligation to enroll their children or wards in the regular school system" (Art. 55).

Despite these laws, at the end of the 1990s, some Brazilian families began to practice homeschooling under the religious influence of Brazilian and American leaders (Vieira, 2012). Questioning the compulsory nature of school education and criticizing Brazilian schools, this group began to use the language of human rights to claim the right to teach their children at home, following the North American path for homeschooling regulation (Barbosa & Evangelista, 2017).

Following these foreign trends, Brazilians who support homeschooling have used international human rights protection documents to advocate for the practice and created associations to influence policymakers and make homeschooling widely known in society (Barbosa, 2016).

This movement of families in favor of homeschooling in Brazil led to the creation of the Associação Nacional de Educação Domiciliar (ANED) in 2010, which began to provide support to families who teach their children at home, defending "[…] the family's right to homeschooling in Brazil by representing its members before relevant authorities, bodies, and entities." [1]

The number of Brazilian families practicing homeschooling in Brazil is not accurate and there are no official figures about it. In 2018, a study published on the ANED website estimated that more than 7,300 families were practicing homeschooling; by 2024, this number had increased to around 35,000 families.[2.] Homeschooling in Brazil has been discussed by the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches (Barbosa, 2016), but was in the spotlight following the Supreme Court's position on the topic. In 2018, the Brazilian Supreme Court issued its decision regarding Extraordinary Appeal 888,815, after the ministers debated the constitutionality of homeschooling in Brazil. The verdict was that homeschooling cannot be practiced because it requires the creation of a law to regulate it (Teles, 2020). After this decision, homeschooling families began to press the Legislative House for homeschooling legalization. Although several bills to regulate homeschooling in Brazil have been rejected since the 1990s, Bill 3,179/2012 was approved by the Chamber of Deputies in 2022. It is currently awaiting the vote of the Federal Senate, but several educational organizations have expressed their opinion against the approval of homeschooling (Teles & Barbosa, 2024).

This scenario has attracted the interest of society in this alternative type of education, highlighting the issue of homeschooling in both academic debates and media (newspapers, news websites, and social media). Therefore, this study aims to analyze the recent homeschooling movement in Brazil and the growing social and academic interest in homeschooling.

Understanding the phenomenon of homeschooling as a social issue that requires investigation and analysis, this qualitative study used as its main procedures: review of homeschooling literature, documentary analysis based on educational legislation and bills, analysis of reports published from 2011 to 2020 using Google News. The keywords used in the search were: Homeschooling, *Educação Domiciliar* [Home Education], and *Ensino Domiciliar* [Home Teaching]. Based on data collected, categories of analysis were created, which are presented below.

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[1] National Association for Homeschooling. Available from: https://aned.org.br/. Accessed on May 9, 2024.

[2] Available from https://aned.org.br/ed-no-brasil/. Accessed on May 10, 2024.

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2. Growing interest in homeschooling of Brazilian society and its implications

Recently, homeschooling has attracted social interest mainly due to the media, as these channels disseminated information about important events, including the election of former President Bolsonaro (2019-2022), which encouraged a movement to regulate homeschooling at national, state, and municipal levels (Bumba, 2023); and the establishment of distance education in 2020 and 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The election and administration of former President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) promoted discussions about homeschooling in Brazil, as homeschooling regulation was a campaign proposal, along with other conservative education projects. After elected, Bolsonaro included homeschooling regulation in the agenda for the first 100 days of his administration, reinforcing the association between homeschooling and conservatism (Cecchetti & Tedesco, 2020). In addition to his explicit support, the president proposed Law 2,401/2019 to regulate homeschooling nationwide by amending the Law of Education Guidelines and Foundations. Vasconcelos and Pires (2021) assess that, after this fact, homeschooling began to attract even more media attention, with newspapers and magazines criticizing or supporting bills or the practice itself.

Given Bolsonaro's involvement with the topic of homeschooling, highlighting it with other conservative and reactionary projects (Cunha, 2016), there is a direct association of homeschooling as a conservative movement in Brazil. On this topic, it is worth highlighting that, after the period known as the Pink-Tide Governments (Panizza, 2006) with more progressive and center-left references (2000 to 2015), South American countries have had a recent 'right wing movement' due to election of conservative governments since 2016. In some countries such as Brazil, the growth of conservative groups together with the emergence of conservative politicians have resulted in projects and actions which attack democracy and bring setbacks concerning social rights (Oliveira-Dri, 2023).

As education in Brazil is considered a social right, it was also affected by the former president Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) actions who supported the regulation of homeschooling around the country as well as other conservative projects through attacks on public schools and to democracy. Thus, educators, civil society entities and public bodies expressed their vehement opposition to the standardization of homeschooling practice in Brazil arguing that it could lead to an increase in inequalities and fragility in training for citizenship also the strengthening of democracy in the country (Teles; Barbosa, 2024). Neoliberalism is another factor associated with the growth of homeschooling. Oliveira and Barbosa (2017) present neoliberalism as one of the theoretical pillars of homeschooling in relation to the opposition to the State that forces all citizens to compulsory school education and the defense of individual freedom of choice. Although homeschooling is a heterogeneous movement at the international level, with "a wide variety of anti-statist positions, including anarchists, liberal individualists, and religious fundamentalists, among others" (Oliveira & Barbosa, 2017, p. 194), in recent years, homeschooling advocates in Brazil have used neoliberal and conservative ideals and discourses. Follow some arguments presented in the neoliberalism foundations and in defense of homeschooling: questioning the State role; denial of compulsory school education; emphasis on the person and individual freedom of choice; among others. Lubienski (2003) also argues that homeschooling reveals itself as a form of privatization of education in its extreme sense by bringing it to the private sphere of the family as a task that has historically been recognized as a social and public function, such as education.

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In Brazil, the speeches of freedom of choice by families who defend homeschooling as the best education option for their children end up opposing the public education project provided for the 1988 Federal Constitution along with other legislation, which value education in collective spaces. Taking this into account, by prioritizing the individualization of education, families end up failing to invest in the school institution, especially in public schools and, ultimately, 'decide to invest in their own children to the detriment of an investment in the collective or a commitment to the public good that directly affects the maintenance of democracy' (Barbosa, 2016, p.158-159).

Another factor that contributed to an increased interest of Brazilian society in homeschooling was the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. With social distancing, there was a false association between homeschooling and distance education. Education outside the school environment and provided remotely due to social distancing that was adopted as an emergency measure, proved to be a temporary measure in Brazil's basic education in 2020 and 2021, managed by the Departments of Education and schools. On the other hand, homeschooling refers to the "freedom of parents to make choices related to the education of their children regarding methods, curricula, learning spaces, among others" (Barbosa et al., 2022, p. 8). However, despite their different natures and objectives, distance education and homeschooling have been used as synonyms in news, affecting how society understands homeschooling, such as the headlines: "Homeschooling during quarantine: Celebrities have new routines with their children's classes," "Homeschooling x remote work: it's hard to balance the challenges of quarantine," among others (Barbosa et al., 2024).

Jardim and Barbosa (2023) report an increase in the number of publications on websites and digital news portals about homeschooling since 2018. This growing social interest in homeschooling was also supported by the press, which has helped shape opinions about the practice. Besides the false association with the pandemic, as mentioned above, the press has also promoted a polarization between those in favor and those against homeschooling regulation in Brazil, as well as common sense and untruths when discussing the practice of homeschooling (Barbosa et al., 2024) in order to highlight the purposes of the groups that defend homeschooling (Vasconcelos & Boto, 2019).

In this sense, academic research on the topic in Brazil should be taken into account. Vasconcelos and Kloh (2020) report that there is a lack of research on the topic in the country, with existing studies mainly analyze the legality of the practice and the confrontation between home and school in the face of the compulsory nature of the school system.

Barbosa (2016, p. 165) adds that "the incipience and complexity of the debate on this practice in the country show the need for a research agenda with detailed studies related to it." Barbosa (2016, p. 166) also highlights that the debate on homeschooling in Brazil "should consider the analysis of the history of education in Brazil and the cultural, social, and economic characteristics of the country." In this sense, Brazilian education has historically been characterized by school attendance, considering that "in 2023, there were 47.3 million students enrolled in the 178,500 basic education schools in Brazil […]."[3] Therefore, for a long time, academic studies were mainly dedicated to analyzing the school institution, while studies on out-of-school education—such as homeschooling—are still in the beginning. However, as a result of the recent growing social interest in homeschooling, an increase in academic studies on the topic has been observed in Brazil. Vasconcelos and Kloh (2020, p. 545) "academic studies on this topic have increased over the years, of particular interest to researchers in the fields of education

[3] Available from https://download.inep.gov.br/publicacoes/institucionais/estatisticas_e_indicadores/resumo_tecnico_censo_escolar_2023.pdf. Accessed on May 11, 2024.

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and law". However, despite this increase, the academic production is still incipient in the face of other major themes that guide debates in the Brazilian educational scenario.

In this situation and, considering the political and social scenario that promotes disagreements between supporters and non-supporters of homeschooling, the website of the Observatório da Educação Domiciliar e Desescolarização (OEDD)[4] was created in 2021, linked to the Laboratório de Políticas Públicas e Planejamento Educacional (LaPPlane)[5] of the School of Education at Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp/Brazil). This platform was created to develop and maintain a collection of academic studies and data on homeschooling in Brazil and worldwide, accessible to the general public, in order to contribute to the dissemination of scientific information on the topic.

The OEDD was created in a context in which homeschooling was discussed in different circles: the legislative and judiciary branches, media, and the academic community, highlighting the controversies and different conceptions of society and education. Therefore, the OEDD is an instrument that disseminates academic data and materials produced at national and international levels, as well as a source of sub-themes and new issues related to homeschooling, becoming a powerful driver of new academic studies.

3. Final considerations

In conclusion, social and academic interest in homeschooling has grown in Brazil in recent decades, especially when the press started to disseminate information on the topic on the following occasions: when Extraordinary Appeal 888,815 was judged by the Brazilian Supreme Court in 2018; when former President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) presented homeschooling as a priority topic in his administration, associating it with conservative projects; and the establishment of distance education in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

Despite the growing number of academic studies on homeschooling, it is still incipient, given that most studies focus on the Brazilian education system, and the historical struggle to expand access to school for all, with free and compulsory school attendance as an achievement of the right to education in the country.

Due to this historical struggle for access to education for all which is also common in other Latin American countries, the process of regulating homeschooling in Brazil has generated an opposite reaction from several different entities and groups. One reason is that homeschooling does not offer a choice for everyone, considering the great socioeconomic inequalities that affect the majority of Brazilians and do not allow people to choose to give up work to teach their children at home. Thus, home education is a privilege for only few Brazilian families precisely because of the socioeconomic factor that is essential for choice, i.e. the 'right to choose' is restricted only to those with a certain income and resources available for homeschooling (Barbosa, 2016).

This analyzes also highlight concerns about the proposals for regulating the practice, considering the country's socio-political context. On the one hand, if a broad law that makes school attendance more flexible and guarantees freedom of choice for families is approved, the fulfillment of the right to

[4] Observatory of Homeschooling and Unschooling. Available from: https://www.educacaodomiciliar.fe.unicamp.br/ Accessed on May 11, 2024.

[5] Public Policy and Educational Planning Laboratory. Available from https://www.lapplane.fe.unicamp.br/ Accessed on May 11, 2024.

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education of Brazilian children could be put at risk when considering socioeconomic inequalities and social problems arising from them which lead children to stay out of school (such as in child labor, for example). On the other hand, if the law is more restrictive, imposing mechanisms to protect the rights of homeschool children to a greater extent by making demands related to the training of guardians, the need for school enrollment and the requirement for supervision by public authorities, among others, it will still require a series of actions from public authorities to guarantee the viability of this right for a minority. As a result, it is estimated that there would be a transfer of efforts and resources from public education, which serves the vast majority, to those few families that have the economic conditions to practice homeschooling in Brazil.

During the process of regulating homeschooling in Brazil, the media has represented a significant means to publish the topic, which is still in its beginning in the country, boosting social interest in the modality. However, the release of news by the press has also contributed to increasing polarization and the dissemination of common sense, increasing a scenario of antagonism between defenders and critics of the practice (Barbosa et al., 2022).

In this context, the OEDD plays an important role against common sense by expanding access to scientific content, disseminating the results of national and international academic studies, legislations and legal opinions, and offering a rich collection of articles and reports published by national media channels. This information helps analyze the debate on the topic in the country and contributes to new studies.

Finally, the importance of in-depth research and analysis of the Brazilian homeschooling movement should be emphasized, allowing individuals to move away from common sense and polarization on the topic and, above all, consider the challenges of regulating homeschooling in Brazil, given the cultural and historical aspects of the Brazilian education system.

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