

Homeschooling as a Chance for the Student's Mental Well-being?

Homeschooling szansą na dobrostan psychiczny ucznia?

**Emilia Agnieszka
Mazurek**

University of Szczecin,
Poland

ORCID

0000-0001-5772-9167

emilia.mazurek@usz.edu.pl

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Abstract: Homeschooling in Poland is a relatively recent phenomenon that elicits strong and often polarised reactions across different social groups. Proponents emphasise, above all, the individualisation of instruction, which is a defining feature of home education. Opponents, on the other hand, focus primarily on concerns about the potential for social maladjustment among homeschooled children. This context gives rise to a fundamental question about the nature and necessity of homeschooling—more specifically, about its potential benefits and limitations in supporting the mental well-being of students. The aim of this article is to address this issue. Some of the doubts surrounding this topic are clarified through a review of the relevant literature, which serves as a foundation for the analysis of the research problem. The conclusions presented herein are further supported by the results of original, objective qualitative research. In particular, the analysis draws on those aspects of the empirical findings that relate to the mental well-being of homeschooled students. As a result, the study presents an image of homeschooling as a practice that can foster students' psychological well-being, especially in cases where this well-being was compromised during their time in the traditional school system. While the article does not exhaust the complexity of the issue, it offers a valuable starting point for further exploration of the mental well-being of students in the context of home education.

Keywords: pupil, homeschooling, home education, well-being, subjective well-being, children outside formal schooling

Abstrakt: Homeschooling (edukacja domowa) w Polsce jest stosunkowo nowym zjawiskiem. W różnych grupach społecznych budzi skrajne emocje. Zwolennicy podkreślają przede wszystkim indywidualizację nauczania, która jest cechą konstytutywną edukacji domowej. Przeciwnicy zaś koncentrują się na obawie niedostosowania społecznego wychowanków. W takiej sytuacji rodzi się pytanie o istotę i potrzebę edukacji domowej, a dokładniej o jej możliwości i ograniczenia dla dobrostanu psychicznego podopiecznych. Cel artykułu sprowadza się do uzyskania odpowiedzi na tę kwestię. Pewne wątpliwości na ten temat rozwiewa literatura przedmiotu, z której korzystałam w opracowywaniu postawionego problemu. Sformułowane wnioski wsparłam również wynikami autorskich obiektywistycznych badań jakościowych. Szczególnie zaś wykorzystałam w niniejszej analizie te wątki badań własnych, które odnoszą się do dobrostanu uczniów w edukacji domowej. W rezultacie otrzymałam obraz edukacji domowej jako wspierającej dobrostan psychiczny ucznia, zwłaszcza tego, który poczucie tego dobrostanu utracił w trakcie trwania nauki szkolnej. Tekst nie wyczerpuje podjętego zagadnienia, stanowi jednak pewien punkt wyjścia w pogłębieniu problemu poczucia dobrostanu psychicznego ucznia w edukacji domowej.

Słowa kluczowe: uczeń, homeschooling, edukacja domowa, dobrostan subiektywny, dobrostan psychiczny, dziecko poza środowiskiem szkolnym



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INTRODUCTION

Each year, the number of children and adolescents experiencing mental health crises in Poland continues to rise. UNICEF statistical data on the well-being of Polish children compared to that of peers in EU and OECD countries are discouraging. Poland ranks 31st out of 38 countries surveyed in terms of quality of life and 30th with respect to child well-being (UNICEF 2020). Furthermore, as many as 60% of Polish students report frequent bullying within educational institutions (UNICEF 2020). Scholarly research in pedagogy provides studies that describe schools as places unfriendly to children (e.g., Nowotniak 2002) and as environments where they experience violence (e.g., Cudak 2023). Barely half of Polish pupils (53.3%) report being satisfied with their school environment (Rzecznik Praw Dziecka 2021). The sharp growth in the number of children participating in homeschooling in Poland provides an interesting context for this problem. Currently, approximately 54,000 children pursue compulsory education through this form of instruction (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej 2025). One reason for the choice of homeschooling is the growing awareness among children and parents of the determinants of, and strategies for, preventing, the deterioration of mental well-being arising from the negative impact of the school environment. Consequently, some families deliberately adopt homeschooling as a means of safeguarding or enhancing their child's well-being.

This article considers homeschooling as one method for maintaining the mental well-being of children—students, focusing, among other aspects, on fulfilling compulsory schooling through an alternative mode of education. It presents data from Polish research on the motives and sources of decisions to undertake homeschooling, the process of homeschooling within the family, and the consequences of such a choice. The analysis of homeschooling as a means of maintaining or restoring children's well-being, draws primarily on Kaczmarek's (2016) findings regarding psychological well-being. Some of these findings are supplemented by the author's own research, which focused on the concept of education as perceived by homeschoolers. Research material was collected using qualitative interviews. The issues examined concerned the sources and goals of homeschooling concepts, the methods, forms, and teaching resources used in homeschooling, the strategies for developing educational concepts, and the consequences of adopted educational concepts (Mazurek 2022). Through the analysis and interpretation of the research results, the article presents themes linked to the concept of well-being in the context of homeschooling.

It should be emphasised at the outset that homeschooling (home education) is a practice in which parents choose not to send their children to school in order to assume control and responsibility for the process of raising and educating their own children (Tłuściak-Deliowska & Krawiec 2020, 194). This approach promotes family cohesion, mutual connections between its members, and enables action in accordance with the family's worldview.

1. IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL WELL-BEING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Well-being is widely recognized as one of the key determinants of healthy development and a fulfilling life. The concept itself admits of multiple definitions. The conventional understanding of the term “well-being” suggests that it is synonymous with life satisfaction, a subjective sense of happiness, or overall welfare (Dobrostan 2025). The concept of “well-being” is particularly elaborated within psychology, especially in the context of the positive psychology movement. Positive psychology, which emerged in 2000 under the influence of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, draws upon the principles of humanistic psychology while simultaneously distancing itself from its later developments (Strelau & Doliński 2008).

In psychology textbooks, well-being is commonly associated with “subjective (or psychological) feelings of happiness and life satisfaction” (Strelau & Doliński 2008, 684). This term also appears in *Encyklopedia pedagogiczna XXI wieku* (Pedagogical Encyclopaedia of the 21st Century), where Agnieszka Zych (2003) defines it in accordance with a psychological framework as “psychological well-being.” Psychological well-being has also been incorporated into the analyses of Polish educational scholars, including Nikiel (2024), Gierczyk & Renzulli (2023), and Farnicka & Liberska (2015). However, the themes investigated by these authors pertain almost exclusively to pupils in formal schooling. This article seeks to broaden that perspective by extending the discussion to students fulfilling compulsory education through homeschooling.

According to Diener (1984), well-being—defined by the author as “subjective well-being”—consists of two principal components: the cognitive and the affective. Subjective well-being may be assessed through instruments such as the Satisfaction with Life Scale, the Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences, or the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Kaczmarek 2016). Niškiewicz (2016, 140) conceptualises well-being as “the effect of a cognitive and emotional assessment of one’s life, which consists of a high level of fulfilment and life satisfaction,” emphasizing that it constitutes a state, a specific type of “feeling,” or the outcome of a process that precedes a positive evaluation of one’s existence. Accordingly, key correlates of well-being are the values of happiness and satisfaction. The experience of well-being is undoubtedly desirable and inherently rewarding. Given the pronounced subjectivity of well-being, each individual is the sole authority in evaluating their own state. Consequently, self-awareness is a critical factor in the determination of well-being. Self-report is also important from the perspective of self-knowledge of one’s well-being. In view of the above, the role of both family and educators seems to consist in: (1) providing conditions and opportunities enabling the child to experience well-being, (2) supporting the child in cultivating self-awareness and in adequately assessing the situations, events, and processes they encounter, and (3) intervening when the child’s well-being is at risk, bearing in mind that well-being is neither permanent nor irrevocably secured (Niškiewicz 2016).

In the early 2000s, research demonstrated the significance of children's well-being on their academic achievement (Mok & Flynn 2002). High levels of well-being were also found to correlate with elevated altruism, satisfaction with social relationships, and good mental health (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener 2005). More recent research such as that conducted by Aulia (2018), likewise points the importance of school-related well-being in the life of the child. In its absence, children may engage in risky behaviours, exhibit apathy, become victims or perpetrators of violence, develop inadequate or diminished self-esteem, or face suicidal crises. Farnicka & Liberska (2015) highlight that the well-being of a child—particularly one at the threshold of school education—constitutes a crucial resource in the process of adaptation. Accordingly, prior educational experiences are of considerable importance for sustaining the continuity of a child's well-being.

2. SCHOOL AS A SOURCE AND PLACE OF EXPERIENCING MENTAL CRISES

Phenomena associated with school functioning can be broadly divided into those that are constructive and beneficial, and those that are detrimental and can be classified as pathologies. The desirable and positive dimensions undoubtedly include education understood as “the totality of influences on individuals and human groups that promote their development, enabling them to become conscious and creative members of the social, cultural, and national community to the highest degree, and to be capable of active self-fulfilment of their own identity and self by undertaking supra-personal tasks (...) it is guiding others towards higher levels of development and their own activity in achieving their full and unique potential. It is the totality of activities and processes that promote development and the state of their effects, that is, the achieved level of competence, identity, and subjectivity” (Kwieciński 1991, 89). Kwieciński's definition aligns closely with the notion of well-being. First, it underscores the development of personal awareness and agency. Second, it points to positive aspects—self-fulfilment, self-development, a sense of identity, and activity—as potential constituents of well-being. Third, Kwieciński emphasizes the interpersonal dimension of the educational process. Well-being is likewise experienced in situations where individuals engage in frequent and satisfying relationships with others (Growiec 2015). In conclusion, education can provide a child with a sense of well-being insofar as it encompasses all these essential elements. Nevertheless, the quality of education significantly conditions this potential, and the everyday reality of schools is interwoven with numerous large-scale pathologies, as demonstrated by research conducted by UNICEF (2020) and Pyżalski (2022).

Social pathologies—defined as behaviours dependent on social judgment, widely condemned (though often culturally relative), and causing harm (Pospiszyl 2008)—are endemic to human groups, and it is difficult to identify environments that are free of them. Such pathologies include corruption, stereotyping, prejudice, terrorism, aggression, addiction, sexual misconduct (e.g., incest), human trafficking, suicide, social exclusion, and scapegoating (Pospiszyl 2008). Each of these phenomena

is extremely complex, both in terms of conceptualisation, causal explanation, prevention, and intervention. Researchers investigating school-related pathologies typically focus on violence and aggression among children and adolescents (e.g., Orłowski 2022). Manifestations of such violence include physical, verbal, relational aggression, as well as the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of cyberbullying (Czemierowska-Koruba 2015). All of these forms constitute grave violations of school regulations and of the principles of social coexistence. The enumerated pathologies observable within school environments may be understood as both anti-socializing and anti-educational in nature. Perpetrators may include teachers (individually or collectively) or students (acting alone or in groups), the latter typically directing aggression either towards peers or teachers. Olweus, one of the leading researchers of bullying, extended his analysis to the concept of mobbing, which he defined as “exposure to negative actions by another person or persons,” characterized by an imbalance of power, and identified as a fundamental and growing problem within schools (1998, 16). Strategies for addressing aggression and violence in schools vary considerably. School support tasks include a range of activities involving prevention, diagnosis of existing pathologies, and intervention, with particular emphasis on victim protection and perpetrator accountability (Olweus 1998). Nevertheless, despite these measures, schools and teachers are sometimes accused of insufficient responsiveness, failure to protect victims, or tacit acceptance of sporadic or ongoing abuse (Mróz, Wójcik & Pyżalski 2022).

Consequently, many parents—especially when their child’s mental well-being is seriously compromised—decide either to transfer the child to another institution or to opt for homeschooling. However, it would be unfair to suggest that schools and the governing ministry are not working towards positive changes. One of the most recent initiatives, designed with student safety in mind, is the enactment of so-called Kamil’s Law (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2022), which provides for a range of preventive programmes and the expansion of psychological and educational specialist staff. Equally important are interventions undertaken in individual cases by teachers, psychologists, parents, or parent councils, and, finally, by students themselves. For example, student communities regularly organize marches, such as the Stop Violence March (Marsz Stop Przemocy). Such attempts to “heal” Polish schools—particularly through grassroots initiatives—are invaluable, especially when considered in the context of the slogan “schools for all,” which aspires to go beyond the discourse of mere inclusion.

3. WELL-BEING IN THE CONTEXT OF HOME EDUCATION

Providing optimal conditions for a child’s development is among the primary responsibilities of the family. It is parents who are responsible for their children’s socialisation, for ensuring care at the mental, physical, social, moral, and aesthetic levels (Winiarski 2017). The creation of an appropriate educational environment, however, does not end within the family unit. From the perspective of a broader

understanding of the educational process, parents are also expected to consider the child's future developmental environments, such as preschool or school, which include teachers and educators. Ultimately, the decision whether to send a child to a formal educational institution rests with the parents or legal guardians. When parents decide to homeschool their children, they cite numerous reasons for this decision. The literature identifies, among others, religious motivations (particularly opposition to perceived indoctrination in schools), dissatisfaction with the education system and the quality of instruction, concerns regarding the prevalence of violence in schools, the preservation of family values, and health-related considerations (Neuman & Oz 2020). Additional factors include the desire to strengthen family bonds, the flexibility of the educational process (learning at convenient times and locations), logistical advantages for large families, and, in some cases, the geographical distance of the school (Kunzman & Gaither 2020). The motivations for parental decisions are difficult to exhaust in a few sentences; the article will present only a few of them. Although the reasons for homeschooling are frequently comparable across families, it is important to recognise the specific cultural and national contexts in which such decisions are made, as emphasised by researchers such as Ray (e.g., Ray 2020; Mazama & Musumunu 2014; Thomas 2019).

Homeschooling in Poland is not subject to particularly restrictive regulations. In order to homeschool a child, it suffices to obtain the consent of the school principal for the fulfilment of compulsory schooling outside the school, preceded by a parental application and a declaration that the child will be provided with conditions enabling adherence to the core curriculum applicable at a given educational level. Parents must also undertake to ensure that the child passes annual qualifying examinations in each school year (Prawo Oświatowe, art. 37, 1-2). Given these relatively moderate formal requirements, homeschooling may appear as an accessible means of withdrawing from the school system. To continue homeschooling, the student must pass examinations in the required subjects, thereby demonstrating mastery of the curriculum at the relevant educational level. Parents and children are not obliged to provide extensive justification for the initiation or continuation of homeschooling. However, "homeschoolers"—as both parents and students are referred to (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, online)—are guided by a number of reasons, including those mentioned earlier, for their decision not to send their children to school.

At first glance, homeschooling may appear to be a viable means of individualising both the upbringing and the educational process. Indeed, a recent Polish study (Lendzion & Wołk 2023) examined the motivations of parents who opted for homeschooling. According to these authors, parents frequently emphasised educational concerns such as the limited possibilities for individualised instruction, excessive competition among pupils, the overload of tests and examinations, and the perceived benefits of independent learning. However, other findings are more troubling, as they point to motives grounded in school-related difficulties, including school phobia, parental perceptions of the

school environment as unsafe (violence, drugs, alcohol), and relational problems experienced by children with their peers. Parents additionally report that these are not the only issues affecting a child's well-being. Other contributing factors include excessive time spent at school, inconvenient transport (e.g. due to distance), and the child's heightened sensitivity (Lendzion & Wołk 2023). These findings are consistent with those reported by Gierczarz-Borkowska (2019), Frasunkiewicz (2022), and with the author's own research (Mazurek 2022).

Beyond these specific events prompting families to withdraw children from schools, it is important to examine the deeper sources of parental decisions to homeschool. Based on the author's typology (Mazurek 2022), these may be classified into three categories: (1) external sources, (2) internal sources, and (3) indirect sources. External sources comprise the legal framework of education and unforeseen events; indirect sources refer, for instance, to children's or parents' earlier school experiences; and internal sources encompass the circumstances, traits, and difficulties specific to each family (Mazurek 2022, 115). When considering children's physical or psychological well-being (or well-being in general), such factors are most appropriately classified as indirect or internal. Among indirect sources, the most salient are prior negative school or preschool experiences (e.g. exposure to violence). Internal sources, by contrast, are those related directly to the child, such as pre-existing mental health conditions or current crisis experiences (Mazurek 2022). The examples of motives provided by homeschooling families consistently highlight threats to children's well-being. In many cases, homeschooling is perceived by parents as a strategy to preserve or restore their children's well-being and happiness. Parents interviewed in the author's research frequently underscored this motivation, particularly when reflecting on what they considered important in homeschooling and what they aimed to achieve through it. Moreover, as a result of adopting homeschooling, parents observed a regression in negative symptoms associated with previous school experiences, such as school phobia, nervous tics, and emotional exhaustion caused by bullying (Mazurek 2022, 117). At the same time, homeschoolers identified a range of positive outcomes, including more satisfying peer relationships, opportunities to pursue personal passions, adequate sleep, and stronger family bonds. Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that homeschooling may contribute positively to the well-being of children and adolescents. Building on the author's own research, this article highlights several fundamental dimensions of children's well-being in the homeschooling context. Drawing on Kaczmarek's (2016) conceptualisation of happiness, the analysis assumes that well-being comprises four interrelated domains: psychological, social, eudaimonic, and socio-psychological functioning. Homeschooling, as a context conducive to psychological well-being may be interpreted through the eudaimonic framework proposed by Ryff (1989). Within this perspective, it is oriented towards autonomy (expressed in the subjective conceptions of education developed by homeschoolers, where independence functions as a core value underpinning educational aims), personal growth

(homeschooled children are afforded greater time to cultivate and realise their talents), positive relationships (the development of more satisfying peer and family bonds, often reinforced through participation in educational cooperatives), and self-acceptance (manifested in the continuation of homeschooling as a lifestyle, the discontinuation of medication previously prescribed for stress or low mood, visible improvements in emotional state, and children's articulation of homeschooling as "better" than their prior school experience). Parents of homeschooled children frequently describe this process as a kind of metamorphosis, noting the acquisition of qualities such as assertiveness, responsibility, and resilience in the face of learning challenges that had previously gone unnoticed when the child was enrolled in conventional schooling.

With respect to social well-being, adopting Keyes' (1998) classification, and drawing on the author's own research (Mazurek 2022), it emerges that homeschoolers often display heightened openness to others (the dimension of social acceptance), active involvement in educational cooperatives (the dimension of social integration), and engagement in volunteering or community service (an expression of social contribution). The social well-being of homeschooled children also derives from the families' deliberate choices of community. Homeschoolers frequently establish their own networks, often in the form of educational cooperatives (Mazurek 2022, 116). These are not necessarily based on shared worldview or religious affiliation but rather on cooperation for the sake of children's well-being, collective participation in education, and the sharing of skills and time. Older children sometimes form cooperatives independently, according to their own rules. Those not involved in such groups typically sustain friendships outside school, thus maintaining social connections through family, neighbourhoods, playgrounds, and extracurricular activities (Topp 2008).

Homeschooling has also been shown to foster eudaimonic well-being in the sense described by Waterman et al. (2010), particularly through processes of self-discovery. Children explore their abilities and talents via an individualised learning trajectory, supported by parental approaches such as child-led education. Parents, by means of ongoing quasi-assessment, seek to respond to their children's evolving needs and interests. This responsiveness is closely linked to further aspects of eudaimonic well-being, such as high engagement in meaningful activities and the intrinsic satisfaction of self-expression (e.g. through homeschooling projects). In terms of socio-psychological well-being, as conceptualised by Diener et al. (2010)—encompassing competence, optimism, purpose, meaning, and respect—homeschooling families emphasise the importance of children understanding both why and what they are learning. Particular attention is given to practical "life skills," such as cooking, caregiving, household maintenance, and gardening. Parents also encourage participation in activities that bring joy and satisfaction. In addition, annual examinations conducted within the formal school framework are generally experienced positively, as occasions of accomplishment rather than fear. Nonetheless, some studies present homeschooling in more critical terms: as

a countercultural movement (Kunzman & Gaither 2013), an escape from the system (Frasunkiewicz 2022), as a response to existing problems, or a potential threat to the children's proper socialisation or the broader social good (Lubienski 2000). This raises the question of whether, in particular cases, schools as institutions and environments of children's lives are capable of addressing difficulties in ways that restore or safeguard children's well-being in the face of problems. Where this is not the case, a cautious, evidence-based approach to homeschooling appears justified (Budajczak 2010). Yet, the very existence of homeschooling continues to elicit legitimate concerns regarding socialisation and academic outcomes. Given the relatively recent expansion of this phenomenon, definitive conclusions about its shortcomings should be withheld until more comprehensive empirical evidence becomes available.

CONCLUSION

The subjective mental well-being of students may be regarded as dependent on a wide range of interrelated factors. Among these, the school and broader extracurricular environment in which the pupil is embedded plays a particularly significant role. When this well-being is compromised, some families opt for homeschooling. Although the motivations underlying such decisions are varied, one recurring rationale is the perception of homeschooling as both an intervention in a child's difficult circumstances—enabling them to continue their education without interruption while maintaining their well-being—and as a preventive measure for sustaining the child's current state of balance and fulfilment. Equally important are the aspects of homeschooling that appear to facilitate the restoration of children's and youth's well-being lost during their prior school experiences. The increasing interest in homeschooling in Poland highlights the urgency of undertaking systematic and critical analysis of this phenomenon, particularly with respect to “dropping out” of school as a strategy for regaining or preserving both mental and physical well-being. Based on the analysis of scientific literature on the well-being of children and young people, complemented by empirical findings concerning the functioning of children in home education—including the author's own research—it may be concluded that homeschooling demonstrates significant associations with students' subjective well-being.

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