

Analysis of Homeschooling in Colombia as a Growing Social Educational Phenomenon

By Andrea Suárez Salazar

International Education Week 2023
Teachers College Columbia University

Slide 1

Good afternoon, everyone

My name is Andrea Suárez, and I am currently a Visiting Research Scholar from Colombia in the Curriculum and Teaching Department.

I've been studying at Teachers College for the last three months and it is a pleasure for me to participate in this International Education Week with the presentation of my doctoral research project on homeschooling practices in Colombia. My dissertation is entitled: "*Analysis of Homeschooling in Colombia as a Growing Social Educational Phenomenon*".

Slide 2

For the next 40-45 minutes, I'm planning to go through this agenda:

First, I would like to share with you some information about my educational background, as well as my professional and working experiences in Colombia.

Second, I will share with you my experience in the field of education, letting you better understand the sociocultural context I come from and some general information about the University and the School I am currently working in.

Third, I will tell you the main purpose of my study and the reasons that took me where I am now, making emphasis on all the interests or specific objectives I'm trying to achieve with this process.

Fourth, I would like to talk about all the general methodological aspects of my research, considering that this is a qualitative study with a very specific methodological design, research paradigm and methodological approach.

Fifth, I will focus on the five homeschooling experiences or approaches I've found in Colombia so far, and I will try to summarize certain conceptual, pedagogical, ideological and legal perspectives around this social-educational phenomenon.

Sixth, I would like to share some thoughts about my publications.

Seventh, I will talk about all the activities I've been doing for the last three months in *Teachers College* and in NYC in general in reference to my research interest.

At the end, I will provide some references and will give 15-20 minutes for questions.

Slide 3

In relation to my educational background, I am a Ph.D. Candidate in Social Social Sciences, Childhood and Youth at the Universidad de Manizales-CINDE, Master of Science in Education and Human Development and Bachelor of Arts in Modern Languages and Literature. As you can see, I have been particularly interested in education for a long time.

Slide 4

I would like to tell you about my experience and the sociocultural context I come from.

Slide 5

Colombia has 32 states. One of them is Caldas, which is located in the middle of the Coffee Growing Area. Its capital is Manizales, a small city with a population of approximately 500,000 inhabitants.

Slide 6

Manizales is well-known for having many universities which receive lots of students from all over the country.

I have been working at Universidad Autónoma de Manizales for the last 18 years as a French, Spanish and English professor. I am an Associate Professor and have a part-time job there now. This iconic building is part of my city's heritage because it was a train station in the past.

Slide 7

Also, I am the principal of Colegio León de Judá, an Elementary, Middle and High School that we founded in 2009 in Manizales, my hometown.

This is a private school which provides educational services to 147 kids and teens from K2 to eleventh grade (in our Colombian school system, high school ends at the eleventh grade).

Slide 8

Actually, this school was founded after a long period of hard work with a homeschooler community in the city.

As a grassroots organization, we were only a small group of educators trying to help homeschooled kids around 14 years ago, more or less. I mean, we gave particular support to the kids of the community. This means that we simply oriented tutorships of different subjects, such as Math, English, Spanish, Social Studies, Social Sciences, Information and Technology, and others. So we were working on that, and some families just started to say: “*Hey, why cannot this become a school?*” You know. So there was this big discussion on if we really wanted to found a school or not... and we finally worked with those families who wanted to have a legal certification. And that was it. We got our legal license to work as a formal and regular school in 2019.

This picture was taken in July this year.

Slide 9

Given this previous experience with that community, and the fact that I started to study my Ph.D. Program in Social Sciences, Childhood and Youth during the pandemic, I quickly knew I really wanted to study homeschooling more in detail.

Although statistics are hard to tell, according to the *National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI)*, there is a recent estimated number of three million and a half homeschooled children in this country. It seems that this number is increasing progressively.

Interestingly, in my research I've found around 30 doctoral dissertations about this educational phenomenon in the US. In contrast, to my knowledge, I have not found any in my country at a doctoral level.

So it seems like my dissertation is probably going to be the first one.

This is something that really encourages me to keep on doing research about it, and also the reason why the main purpose of my doctoral thesis is to understand homeschooling in Colombia as a growing social educational phenomenon.

Slide 10

Having said that, I also have other specific interests, such as:

- to identify the most meaningful homeschooling approaches in Colombia, and be able to talk about their origin, history and principles,
- to analyze the content of the information presented in some Colombian digital educational resources and websites about homeschooling services, and
- to explore the lived experiences, motivations and perceptions of homeschooling leaders, school principals, parents, and homeschooled kids and teens.

Slide 11

In reference to the methodology, I should say that...

Slide 12

...this research is a qualitative study using the textual hermeneutics proposal as its methodological approach.

In simple words, we could say hermeneutics is textual interpretation, or, the fact of finding meaning in the written word.

When we do research using a hermeneutical methodological proposal, there are at least two embedded assumptions. The first one is that humans experience the world through language and this language provides both understanding and knowledge.

These are precisely the reasons why its research paradigm is interpretative, having ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions.

Slide 13

From its ontological assumptions, we can conceive Homeschooling practices being part of a very complex and diverse social reality in which many different realities can coexist at the same time.

Thus, we understand this research as an intersubjective and interdisciplinary knowledge creation that will analyze the phenomenon from a historical and cultural perspective.

Slide 14

From its epistemological assumptions, we understand this phenomenon as a reality that is being symbolically represented by certain specific individuals that wouldn't be "together" if it were not because of their interest in homeschooling.

This study will allow the creation of meaningful knowledge around a phenomenon that has not been studied in depth in our national context.

Slide 15

From its methodological assumptions, this study is interactive and emerging, which means that knowledge will be built on the basis of the speech provided by the participants and some intentionally selected text fragments that are found in some websites.

Slide 16

Now, let me tell you a little about homeschooling in Colombia.

Slide 17

Discussions around homeschooling started in the 90's with the emergence of email lists including homeschooler families in Bogotá.

Short publications in magazines were done by homeschooler moms who started to study about the Unschooling Movement in the United States in the 60's and 70's, which quickly allowed the creation of small co-ops in the capital city as well as in other important cities.

Slide 18

It has been growing for the last two decades for many reasons, but clear regulations have not yet been made about it.

The only national effort to make homeschooling legal was the 094 law project presented by the senator Emma Claudia Castellanos in 2020.

It was quickly rejected not only by private and public schools, but also by homeschoolers. They prefer not having regulations about it.

Slide 19

So far, I've identified five meaningful homeschooling experiences or approaches in Colombia. These are the ones you can see inside the map: *Unschooling*, *Achievement-focused Homeschooling*, *Catholic Homeschooling*, *Christian Homeschooling* and *Other experiences*, such as the Colombian *communes* (also called "eco-villages").

I am basically working with two data sources: websites and people interested or involved in the phenomenon in different ways. I'm analyzing websites about online communities, blogs, virtual schools, and international curricula.

Also, I'm interviewing homeschooling leaders, writers and/or blog writers, principals of virtual schools, kids, teens, young adults, and parents.

Please notice the question mark, which indicates the estimated number of the sources of information.

Of course, I have selection criteria for each one of the sources of information, which is something I won't go through in detail today.

It is important to clarify I'm not doing this research with the intention of making comparisons among these experiences nor among the sources of information. What I'm really looking forward to doing is to 'recreate' or write about their history, principles, practices and legal issues.

This means that, at the end of this process, I'm expecting to present a much more complete description of them by chapters in the final document of my thesis.

Now, let me tell you broadly about those experiences.

Slide 20

Unschooling is an educational philosophy that relies on the child's innate curiosity and desire to learn.

Unschooler Colombian families are the ones who educate their children without any school intervention.

In this type of experience we could talk about Ana Paulina Maya, the author of the first book about homeschooling in the country entitled: "*Si el colegio no existiera*". She is an unschooler mom, educating her four children for more than 20 years now. She's a homeschooler activist in the country who has also had the opportunity to participate in policy making discussions about the topic. Her website is "*Educar en familia*".

Erwin Fabián García López is also one of the ones who considers himself as an unschooler; more recently, an alternative and flexible educator. Professor at Universidad Nacional de Colombia, García organized

two national congresses about homeschooling with the help of his research group “*Un mundo por aprender*” in 2009 and 2010. The last decade he has been publishing papers and participating in discussions about these issues mostly in LatAm countries. Universidad Nacional de Colombia hasn’t organized any other national congresses so far, as far as I know.

Slide 21

More specialized and achievement-based homeschooling is kind of the name we have given to the approach that intends to develop academic, artistic or sports skills in homeschooled children, mostly with the help of Homeschooling Co-ops, Online communities

Slide 22

...and virtual schools. In these slides you are quickly looking at some of those communities and schools supporting a great number of homeschooled children. So, what I am basically doing is going through those websites, analyzing their content, and also interviewing those who work for them.

Slide 23

The next two are the Catholic and Christian Homeschooling approaches. Families are more interested in teaching their values and biblical principles to their children, while providing what they consider are the best resources to develop their cognitive skills as well.

Slide 24

Here you can see some Christian international curricula, schools and communities that are currently helping Christian families.

Among the other homeschooling approaches or experiences, I am considering including Colombian immigrants coming to the US who were into the school system in Colombia and decided to start homeschooling after coming to the US for different reasons.

I’ve only interviewed two families here. I hadn’t considered those cases before coming here.

Slide 25

I’ve written two papers in Spanish so far. The first one is entitled: “*Home Education or Homeschooling. A journey to its terminology evolution*”. In this literature review I analyze 25 different terminological units about this phenomenon which have been used both in Spanish and English in a corpus of 50 scientific papers between 1990 and 2020.

The second one is entitled: “*Theoretical Approach to the Social Phenomenon of Home Education in Colombia*”. In this paper, I reflect on some theoretical issues related to homeschooling based on three historical approaches, such as: Unschooling, Homeschooling 1,0 and Homeschooling 2,0. Both pieces have been published in Colombian Scientific Journals of Education.

I am not a homeschooler mom nor a homeschooling advocate. I wouldn’t call myself a homeschooling critic either.

What I’m intending to do is to get closer to a social-educational phenomenon I am passionate about, and understand its different conceptual, pedagogical, ideological, and legal perspectives about it.

Slide 26

I think that this is one of the reasons which brought me here.

Besides my desire of living an academic experience in New York City and spending time with my family, what I mostly wanted was to understand the dynamics of homeschooling in this context.

I would also like to make comparisons between its American and Colombian pedagogical practices, so new knowledge can be written about this.

Slide 27

I arrived in NYC last August 25th. Since then, I've been doing lots of research. I am currently updating the references of my dissertation.

Slide 28

I'm also attending classes and learning from TC professors.

The course named: "*Histories, Curricula, and Current Issues in Teacher Education*" is being oriented by Prof. Friedrich, and it focuses its attention on histories of teacher education around the world. So we have studied the way teacher education is considered and seen in different countries, such as Namibia, Bolivia, China, Palestine, United States with special emphasis placed on the question of what it means to modernize the teaching force.

The second one is entitled: "*Curriculum Theory and History*". Its professor is Andrew Greene, and it intends to introduce students to the field of curriculum history. This course has helped me look at different curricular theories, theorists, and their contexts. I have read about some influential curricular perspectives from the beginning of the field of curriculum studies through contemporary curriculum debates.

The third one is named: "Collaborative Communication in Cultural Contexts" oriented by Prof. Kara G. Hollins. As a school principal, I've really liked this course. It has taught me about strategies for developing effective communication and interpersonal interaction skills appropriate for both collaborative and consultative relationships in schools. I've found it useful for my job because I have been able to reflect on social skills that will help me a lot for communicating with both school professionals and family members of the students of my community.

Slide 29

I am working on my first paper in English with the help of the *Graduate Writing Center*.

Slide 30

I am also visiting institutions (homeschooling centers, schools, charter schools, satellite schools...). I must thank Professor La Toya Caton, Field Placement Coordinator in the Elementary Inclusive Education Program for all her support with this institutional process and school visits.

Slide 31

I am also interviewing American homeschooler moms. I have been given permission to use their photos as well as to record the Zoom meetings.

Slide 32

I am having fun!

Slide 33

The social-educational phenomenon of Homeschooling is much more complex and diverse than what I thought it to be when I got here.

It can be understood from many different perspectives.

The fact that it has been growing a lot for the last decades is one of the reasons why some researchers are getting interested in it.

The social educational phenomenon of homeschooling is much more complex than what I thought it to be when I got here.

It can be read and understood from different perspectives in diverse sociocultural contexts.

Its progressive growth for the last decades is one of the reasons why some researchers are getting interested in it.

There are many related debates around homeschooling that enrich this discussion and allow the creation of new knowledge, such as the issue of elitism, the questions around neoliberal interests or anti-state ideologies, the social inequalities shaping school choice (more recently called 'strategic schooling'), the questionable and diverse stances in reference to the school system as a public good, the discussion about what 'private' and 'public' mean, the legal and social implications of having children out of the official and regular school system of a country, as well as other issues.

Slide 34-36

You can see the references here.

Slide 37

I wonder if you have any questions now.

Slide 38

Thank you very much!