

I came to the Netherlands as a highly skilled migrant (*kennismigrant*). I did my MSc in educational technology at University of Twente, worked in various educational settings in Russia, did research with companies and universities in the Netherlands and internationally, and earned a PhD studying knowledge work and social media in Utrecht University.

I am also a mother with home education experience of 9 years. We are Russian-Dutch family residing in the Netherlands and we are homeschooling our three children aged 13, 10 and 8. We use *unschooling* as the term to describe the educational approach of our family, where learning of a child is self-directed and often informal. It is supported and facilitated, although in a different way than learning in a structured educational setting.

My reaction to this bill comes from combining those two sides: as an educational professional and as a parent with hands-on experience and insider knowledge of home education in the Netherlands. I first address the unsafe legal climate surrounding home education and then discuss the impact of what is proposed in the bill on various aspects related to the quality of education.

Unsafe legal climate

Home education in the Netherlands is legally possible as an exemption (article 5b of the Compulsory Education Law) based on parents objections to the orientation (*richtingbezwaren*) of schools within a reasonable distance from home. In addition, homeschooling is not possible after attending a school.

Article 5b

Unfortunately, the bill does not change the current situation, making home education accessible to only a small fraction of families in the Netherlands, depriving the others from choice of this form of education for their children.

This is especially unfortunate for those children who do not thrive in schools despite all the efforts of teachers, parents and external specialists. Lack of alternatives to schools, such as home education, leads to unthinkable situations as the one described in the recent podcast from NVO (*Nederlandse Vereniging van pedagogen en onderwijskundigen*) where a child is brought to school against his will with violence: defending his right to an education goes as far as breaking his will with physical and psychological assault by professionals.

In addition there are many more kids who could benefit from an individualised learning trajectory and a fitting environment that is easier to provide at home than in a class of thirty. The bill makes home education not accessible for any families who experienced during the lockdown that this is a form that fits their kids better than school.

It also makes the choice of continuing education in a school very complicated for homeschooling families. Even when there are objective reasons to see if school is a good option for one of the children, the risks of losing an exemption for the siblings or not being able to home educate again are too high. This prevents parents and children from making a

choice between school and home education based on experience of what works better in practice and not on guesses and beliefs.

Educational objections

The bill also does not address the current conflict between objection to directions of schools (*richtingbezwaren*) and objections in respect to educational philosophies, methods or ways schools are organised (*inrichtingbezwaren*) that are currently used to disqualify the request for an exemption.

Currently, it is up to the parents how much of their educational philosophy they reveal in communication with the authorities. Saying nothing about it is the safest bet – there are enough examples in the home education community when being open about your educational choices results in court cases. Given that the bill explicitly requires a learning plan **it creates the ground for disqualification for everyone.**

The problem here is that it is impossible not to have an opinion on educational approaches, methods and materials when you homeschool in practice. Parents make educational choices that fit the child and those choices might be very different from what is feasible in schools. It is not clear from the bill if doing something differently from schools education-wise might be treated as an objection.

Questionable procedural requirements

There are many potentially challenging points in the process of securing the exemption according to the bill. Some of them are questionable from the perspective of respect for the private sphere (e.g. compulsory house visit). Others are described so vaguely that they could be interpreted in different ways, creating opportunities for misusing the law (e.g. the requirements for pedagogical qualifications of the parent or lack of clarity on how testing results are used for further decision-making).

Given that getting a court case instead of an exemption already depends a lot on the local political situation and personal approach of compulsory education officer (*leerplichtambtenaar*), adding more points where things can go wrong creates an uncertain and unsafe environment for the families that do not fit into the school system because of their beliefs.

The bill does not address the current problem of lack of legal protection for rights of children for most appropriate education form. It creates more potential legal problems for the homeschooling families who are already living under a constant threat of court cases, criminal charges and investigation by child protection services. All of it does not create safe and nourishing environments for the kids.

And, as an educational professional, I am particularly worried that the bill does not change the situation where homeschooling parents can not speak openly about their educational choices because of the risks it involves. Silencing discussion about problems with school education and learning from the alternatives does not fit with democratic values of the Dutch

society. It also prevents dialogue between educational practitioners in schools and those providing home education, which could result in useful improvements on both sides.

Addressing the points discussed above, my suggestions would be:

- make home education accessible for everyone by making it a recognised educational form next to education in a school
- recognise the value of different educational approaches based on their merit and not on their current status/feasibility in schools
- streamline most questionable procedural requirements based on the reactions to the internet consultation
- create clear procedures for an appeal/second opinion in case of a disagreement between parents and educational authorities involved prior to starting a court case or involving Child Protection Services

Quality of education

Language requirements

According to the bill, the parent applying for an exemption has to demonstrate a level of proficiency in Dutch at B2- or 3F level. This obviously eliminates the possibility of homeschooling for expats, for whom it is often an important option for keeping continuity in education for their kids while they are relocated between countries.

The bill also specifies that Dutch has to be used as a language of instruction. For students with a non-Dutch background, speaking their mother tongue is allowed as an exception. It is not clear how “non-Dutch background” will be defined in a case of mixed families like ours where Russian and Dutch are spoken from birth and kids have both nationalities.

We use “one parent, one language” strategy consistently for communication with kids and we speak English with each other. Our educational approach is intentionally multicultural and multilingual. We use educational materials, interaction and guidance in those three languages to provide continuity and depth in language development. Comparison of languages, looking for differences and similarities in alphabets, expressions, grammatical forms or subject-matter terminology, as well as underlying reasons for those, are often used as a starting point for a discussion about how languages work.

Switching to Dutch would deprive kids of those opportunities. Given that it is not my native language it is also detrimental to the quality of guidance that I can provide: while having functional Dutch at C1 level I do have an accent and much more limited vocabulary than in Russian or English. Learning something in Russian with me and then discussing it in Dutch with their father or other people, confirming in Dutch books or applying in Dutch-speaking contexts works not only for the language development, but also for more practice and better transfer of knowledge to the new situations.

The requirement for learning Dutch and learning in Dutch for the children who live in the Netherlands is understandable. However, it should not come at the cost of other languages

used in the family and decreasing the quality of education as a whole. In this respect I would suggest using the requirements for Dutch language in bilingual or international schools as a starting point. It is also important to involve experts studying bilingual development of children to address differences between bilingual education in a school and in a family.

Education given by one parent

From what is proposed by the bill it seems that it is expected that education should be given by one parent. Structural educational activities in a group or by other adults are not allowed.

It is strange to see those requirements while most common concerns about homeschooling are related to the risks of radicalisation and social isolation of children educated at home. As for any other children it is important that home educated children have regular contacts with a variety of people of different ages. **Structural educational activities outside of the family, ideally in a group with other children, should be encouraged, not forbidden.**

While parents can provide educational basics, learning from the experts with deeper subject-matter expertise and passion for what they do provides children with richer educational experience. For example, while we do a lot of outdoor and nature-related educational activities with our children, they also follow an online biology course in Russian, which provides depth far beyond what is expected in a school for their ages.

Structural educational experience in a group of other children allows not only for a deeper subject-matter learning, but for a development of communication and presentation skills, as well as an ability to work as a team. For example, in a series of maker workshops that I organised together with an artist, we could lead a group of home educated kids through designing and manufacturing a wooden board game. Managing group dynamics, roles and responsibilities in the process next to learning about design, game development or wood-working skills was an important educational experience for the participants. Such learning experiences require regular contacts and trust between the participants and a deeper knowledge of the group by the organisers, which are not possible in an occasional excursion or a field-trip.

Regular educational activities with others allow children to see a variety of perspectives and ways of learning, creating a bigger societal exposure than contacts of their family allow. Being part of various homeschooling groups, as a participant or an organiser, did more for my own exposure to people from different socio-economic backgrounds and various aspects of the Dutch culture than 10 years of working in a Dutch research institute.

These are just a few examples of what would be impossible with one parent providing home education.

Evaluating educational quality

The requirements and ways of evaluating the quality of home education proposed in this bill are definitely an improvement from the one of 2017. Still there are measures “copied” from school inspection approaches that do not address the personalised nature and the scale of home education. The flexibility and freedom of educational choices that home educating parents have according to the proposal is substantially less than what is possible in private schools, while the amount of administration per child and potential privacy concerns are much bigger.

As a homeschooling parent and a member of NVvTO (*Nederlandse Vereniging voor ThuisOnderwijs*) I have participated in many informal conversations, knowledge sharing workshops and intervision sessions. There is a lot of expertise in the homeschooling community that could be used for improving the current proposal. I hope that in further work on the bill expectations from home education families and freedom to choose education that works the best for their children will be brought in balance.

The experience of *Stichting Keurmerk Thuisonderwijs* could be particularly useful in this respect. We did a certification trajectory with them for our three kids and they have been able to handle all the complexities of home education in our family: unschooling as an educational approach that does not rely substantially on educational methods and predefined curriculum, multilingual education and addressing very different personal needs of every one of our three children. Working with them on the evaluation was a challenging experience, but also one full of mutual respect and learning. I hope that this also could be an experience with educational inspection: at the end we share the same goal of providing a good education for every child.