Friedrichs Bildungsblog

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Why we should stop acting like teachers at home

Themen: Bildung

Blog

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By Prof dr Talja Blokland

Bild 1: Talja Blokland von Talja Blokland

Years ago, my phone rang while I was teaching a university seminar. The screen showed the caller-ID of the teacher of my then 3rd grader. Expecting an emergency, I interrupted my class and took the call. The 3rd Grade was going to roller-blade. My son had not brought his. Could I please make sure he had them after the morning break?

In an elementary school in the affluent South of Berlin, it wasn't at all problematic to call a working mother in the middle of a Monday morning to ask this. The teacher was doing her best to include my child, of course. I had learnt by then that I had an immigrant and an 'incomplete family' status as single mum. I had added *Rabenmutter* to my German vocabulary and met *Helicopter Mothers.* I had learnt not to bring donuts bought at the S-Bahn station to a school party. In short, I had learnt how much Berlin educational institutions rewarded a particular public performance of motherhood. Film, television, handbooks and other media have contributed to the spread of a dominant *Mommy Myth* for decades, as Douglas & Michaels (2005) show. Since the 1980s, they argue, mothers and motherhood have come 'under unprecented media surveillance'. As social media is currently the only way to present ourselves to the world, the postings of women and some men celebrating their 'home schooling' success has brought the presentation of perfect parenting to a new level.

Before the shut-down, German law forbad home schooling. Home schooling, originated in the 1970s as a somewhat anarchist, anti-capitalist education reform movement, is the decision of parents – for various reasons - to not send their children to school but teach them at home (Muchmore 2008; Gaither 2017). It is increasingly common in the USA. Jennifer Lois' study (2010) showed that home-schooling is now mostly done by stay-at-home mothers, who sacrifice a lot of emotional labor and time to savor the experience of motherhood – and are stressed, dissatisfied and face burn-outs as a consequence of *their*

choice. They negotiate what to teach their children with the local boards of education and get *their* plans approved. In its historical tradition in Germany, as in the case of Goethe or Mozart now happily referred to on social media, it meant mostly teaching in mansions by *Hauslehrer* who did not have to follow a state-wide *Bildungsplan.*

It is not about home schooling – it is about the social reproduction of inequalities

What parents and children are currently exposed to in a way that poisons the daily atmosphere in many families is not home schooling at all. It is a half-baked attempt to not let regular state schooling stop while the state closed the schools. That is all it is. In home schooling, parents (and their children) decide what to learn. What we have now is extensive homework: work defined by teachers, mostly state employees required to stick to a state curriculum, who determine the things children have to do, and outsource (especially for younger children) the responsibility for ensuring that it gets done to parents. And why do these parents simply swallow this?

The imagery of the multi-tasking parent who now combines home office with home schooling and invents one project of arts, math or physics after the other. She uses long lists of websites that all sorts of organizations, including state organizations, now refer parents to so they can find ideas to practice home schooling as a way of 'helping' them. This all, like the total use of the very word home schooling itself, relies on what the sociologist Sharon Hays(1996:4) calls an ideology of 'intensive mothering':' a gendered model that advises mothers to spend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children. Hays traces this cultural construct through history; Barbara Vinken analyzed the specific German understanding of mothering, and the (West) German family policy: the dominant culture in Germany has *never* been based on the idea that full time work and motherhood can be combined, and the word which mothers in my interviews often used for bringing a toddler (or even a baby!) in a daycare (*abgeben*, surrender or give up) still reflects what Vinken described as the West German credo:

'… they did not get the children after all in order to get rid of them right away again, but in order to experience and prove themselves as good mothers. That can only be achieved by bodile presence with no break for 24 hours in one's own home or that of a befriended mother. Child care (…) can certainly not be 'outsourced' (Vinken 2007: 252, Transl. by author)

The depth of this ideology is coming apparent in the current crisis of the shut-down for COVID-19. We live in a city that for all its liberal values, smear-on-the-walls-because-it-is-politics and creative protests, has stopped being critical overnight in the most important fields of all, the social reproduction of inequalities. All the Critical Activists, in other times happy to go to every demonstration, have massively turned to do as they are told by the state at the moment that the state sent their children home and the teachers started to fill the inboxes, whatsapp groups, chatrooms and postboxes with work to do at home. I was flabbergasted. I carefully asked a colleague with children who writes on inequality what he did – he said he did think it would increase inequalities.

The impact of social class on educational outcomes and why homework is disastrous

Indeed, we know that in Germany more than in any other European country schools do not compensate but reinforce the impact of social class, especially through the amount of cultural capital, on educational outcomes (overview: Solga & Dombrowski 2009). Homework is particularly disastrous. Studies show that homework increases the privilege of privileged students, because of the resources their parents can draw on to organize homework support for them. Studies show that *Bildungsfern* has mostly nothing to do with ambitions of parents, but everything with how much space family members have in a residence, the times and hours that parents have to work to make ends meet, parents' language and other academic skills to support children, in short: with wealth (Solga & Dombrowksi 2009:21-22). Prof Allmendinger, President of WZB, pleaded in 2013 for abolishment of homework to reduce social divisions of class, race and ethnicity in educational outcomes. But while acknowledging all this, my colleague would not turn his children into a social politic project, so did as teachers told (an argument also made by liberals when choosing schools, as we showed in our book *Creating the Unequal City* (2016)).

I asked my most 'radical' academic friend. She said she raised it in her whatsapp group of mums but the others raved about how much they love it and how their children love it, so that was it: she had to 'home-school' her son. She was doing only the minimum and would argue with the school why her son did not fill out all the sheets. Here is another dimension of how well-educated parents will add to more inequality. As McCrory Calcaro (2020) shows in her study, teachers gave better grades to homework of engaged parents than to other children, even if they scored the same on tests in class. She studied how teachers dealt with non-compliance with rules and found:.middle class children have privileges not only in the supportive context in which they can do homework, but if they violate homework rules, the support of their parents in relations to the teachers produces better excuses for them. As these mothers are always ready to help out, to participate in the Parents Teachers Association and make time for thePTA Meetings, they tend to have good and personal relations to teachers - and their children are less likely to get penalties for late, forgotten or missed homework than children from families with lower social status. Teachers made judgements about grounds for non-submissions of the latter children based on few facts, assuming that 'it is not a priority for them'. As similar competences bring differential treatment in German's educational system, this is likely to happen here, too (overview: Solga & Dombrowksi 2009:13). Only Germany's vocabulary, after all, has this word *bildungsfern* (ask that famous search engine, and it will tell you it means *not interested in* education, which is not the issue (Blokland & Serbedzija 2018)).

Prevent rising inequalities: Take a Corona Vacation!

The roller-blade incident is years ago but had stuck to me. Being able to take that call itself was the result of privilege. During my work in a poor inner-city neighborhood in the USA, I had witnessed how Timika, mother of an 8 year old with learning difficulties, had to hear form the school that if she missed another meeting with the teachers, the school had to report her to the child protection services. Yet they scheduled the meetings at times that Timika was working her Dunkin Donuts shift. Timika did not get time off. Afraid that the school would think she did not put the interest of her child first, she asked a co-worker to cover for her - who did not show up. Timika lost her job. I have been thinking again about such mechanisms these last few weeks, when we were ordered to 'home schooling.' Timika gifted me an eye for the huge mismatch between school's expectations, practices of

supporting children in care and schoolwork, and public performances of mothering. Since then, we interviewed 130 Berlin mothers. While we must still analyze these systematically, the overall picture shows women pressed to perform motherhood to standards set by others: other mothers, the *Kita* and the school.

Intensive parenting was a luxury that Timika could not afford. It is mistakenly thought of as something that parents who don't follow the ideology of intensive parenting in practice may not want. School's expectations, practices of supporting children in homework and public performances of motherhood are three factors that contribute to increasing inequality in any school situation before COVID19. The effects of the lockdown will be highly unequal, and detrimental to those in our city already most marginalized. In Belgium, when a teacher strike made going to school impossible for a few months in parts of the country, children who lived through the strike were more likely to stay back, wrote lower grades, and it is even suggested that they made less money later in life than children whose schooling continued. Berlin schools are very differently equipped in how to teach their children from a distance. Teachers are left to their own devices as to how to do this in many cases. Prediction of truths is the realm of virologists or those with crystal balls. As a sociologist, we know all realities include unintended consequences of intended behavior. Therefore, we do not like to predict stuff. But let me predict: this extensive homework situation – not COVID19 itself - will enhance existing inequalities in educational outcomes between various boroughs and between children. The privileged will come out of this more privileged. Right now, we are actively enhancing these inequalities which were already disproportionally large compared to other European countries, by uncritically nodding our heads and doing as told: extensive homework.

We therefore urgently must turn to a Corona Vacation for elementary schools, release parents from duties to teach children, while providing proper on-line and through-the-window *lifesupport* for all children living in poverty (as now, rather late, has been proposed).

The middle classes may show solidarity by stepping back. As they can be so disciplined to #stayathome in their relatively large apartments and houses, going out riding their expensive bikes-with-baby-carrier, ensuring their toddlers wear helmets even on their *Laufrad* and eating vegetarian to stay healthy, they know all about discipline and restrain. So it is time to restrain from replacing our kids' teachers. If you cannot resist, because you ought to define yourself through the project of your motherhood and think your children's heads will never 'return to normal again' if they play computer games all day, do proper homeschooling instead. Let your kids learn whatever they want so they don't get bored. Bake donuts, learn bird sounds, build a ship out of the box in which your new garden furniture was delivered. Just stop doing extensive homework.

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