

Class and Gender in Conflict: Engendering Social Reproduction through the Gendering of Parenthood in Education

Why is parenthood gendered in the field of education? To address this question, the article analyzes how the gendering of parenthood reinforces class-based inequalities, using the Austrian school system as its point of reference. It demonstrates how mothers' involvement in their children's schooling both shapes and is shaped by broader social structures, making it a practice that (re)produces class inequalities.

The article begins by examining a praxeological perspective on the gendered nature of home–school relations. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction,¹ it engages with praxeological theories and draws on related research in gender studies. The analysis then identifies education-related interpellations of parenthood in Austria that are embedded within the organizational structures, programs, rules, and routines of schools, focusing on how gender and class is invoked—explicitly or implicitly—and with what effect. To this end, the article draws on Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation,² in which individuals are positioned within a preexisting social order—such as mother, father, or parent—through repeated, identity-based appeals. These education-related interpellations are enacted by various institutions and actors, including schools, teacher unions, policy frameworks, academic research, media, and political discourse. The analysis concludes by illustrating—using the example of a working-class single mother—how parents are explicitly addressed in gendered ways within a rural primary school context, thereby rendering class differences invisible. The concept of addressing refers to a basic structure of interaction and communication, in which individuals are directly engaged and positioned through speech, gestures, or bodily cues. In educational research, addressee analysis explores how individuals are explicitly or implicitly positioned through various modes of contact, including language and non-verbal signals.³ The article emphasizes that parental positions in schools are shaped both by how parents are addressed by educators and by the structural

1 | Cf. Bourdieu/Passeron, 1973.

2 | Cf. Althusser, 1977, 108–153.

3 | Cf. Rose/Ricken, 2018, 166–167.

interpellation of parenthood—thus maintaining an analytical distinction between structural interpellation and everyday forms of address.

1 A praxeological perspective on the gendering of home–school relations

Drawing on praxeological theory and empirical research, the article demonstrates that education is a key site of social reproduction and that social reproduction's gendered constitution operates as an instrumental logic within this process. According to Bourdieu's praxeological concept of social reproduction⁴, social being does not simply exist, but only is insofar as it is continually maintained and produced—both through social reproduction and social change, which are therefore not opposites, but rather interconnected processes. The extent to which the social structure and the social order of modern society remain stable at any given time and within any given societal context depends on this dynamic interplay. Furthermore praxeology conceptualizes the social as a dual structure, positioning itself in contrast to structuralist and ethnomethodological approaches.⁵ “Social reality, so to speak, exists twice—once in things and once in minds, in fields and in habitus, within and outside the actors [...], because [the world, MW] has produced me and because it has produced the categories that I apply to it”.⁶ Habitus and field—like all other aspects of the praxeological framework—simultaneously always exist in the tension between social reproduction and social change.

In Bourdieu's conception of social reproduction, education is a decisive factor in the social differentiation of modern societies as knowledge societies and the education system plays a key role in perpetuating social inequality.⁷ On the one hand, it serves the function of legitimizing the reproduction of hierarchical access to prestigious social positions under the guise of equal opportunity.⁸ It fosters the belief that one's place in the social hierarchy is determined not by social origin but by success within educational institutions. In reality however, social origin still plays

4 | Cf. Bourdieu/Passeron, 1973.

5 | Cf. Wacquant, 1996, 27.

6 | Bourdieu/Wacquant, 1996a, 161.

7 | Cf. Bourdieu, 2001a [1966].

8 | Cf. Bourdieu/Passeron, 1971.

a decisive role in shaping educational success. On the other hand, the education system produces intermediaries who internalize and embody those schemes of perception, thought, and action—those dispositions—which generate practices adapted to existing social structures, thereby contributing to the reproduction of those very structures.⁹ In this process, the various habitus and perspectives of individuals from all positions within the social space—by those disadvantaged by the education system as well as by those advantaged by it—are aligned with the classification systems recognized as legitimate by the dominant social order. Bourdieu refers to this alignment as *symbolic violence*.¹⁰ It is a form of subtle, often invisible domination whereby the existing social structures and hierarchies are perpetuated—not through overt coercion, but through the habitualization of these structures as natural, legitimate, and self-evident by those subjected to them. Symbolic violence thus ensures that social domination is maintained even with the complicity of those dominated, as they come to see their position within the social hierarchy as just and deserved. In this, pedagogy reveals itself as symbolic violence by leading the disadvantaged to accept their subordinate position, despite the negative aspects that manifest.

Referring to Bourdieu's conceptualization of the *sense of family*¹¹ at this point, helps to uncover how the family becomes naturalized and depoliticized within dominant social structures. He illustrates how the modern state has promoted the modern nuclear family—modeled on the class-specific bourgeois family form—by giving legal privilege to this particular form of family life. In doing so, the state favors and reinforces those parents who are capable of aligning with its expectations, using all the material and symbolic resources at its disposal.¹² This family model is gradually generated by the routine application of state logics by institutional actors surrounding the family—most notably official statisticians, family court judges, teachers, social workers, pediatricians, child psychiatrists, and psychologists—all of whom assess various indicators of “conformity to the official conception of the family.”¹³ Particularly, with regard to the home-school relationship, it is state-employed professionals who act as key agents in continuously invoking, maintaining, and shaping alignment with the legitimized social order of

9 | Cf. Bourdieu/Passeron, 1973, 92.

10 | Cf. Bourdieu, 2001b, 210-245.

11 | Bourdieu, 1998.

12 | Cf. *ibid.*, 135.

13 | *Ibid.*

the family. As Bourdieu notes, “the monopolization of the universal is the result of a work of universalization that is carried out primarily within the bureaucratic field”, as it facilitates the gradual internalization of the dominant view of the social world.¹⁴ In and through this process, the modern, state-sanctioned sense of family is continuously reproduced and normalized, and the functioning of the privileged family form is supported. The habituation of this sense of family requires—beyond formal regulation and ongoing routinization of the bourgeois family model from which the modern two-parent nuclear family emerged—several generations of lived family life in order to be experienced as *legitimate* by the many who are governed by the few.¹⁵ A successful institutionalization depends on “the production of a collective belief in the self-evidence of the institution’s existence and its unquestioned legitimacy (*doxa*), and on the creation of individual willingness and inclination among agents to practically invest in its existence (*illusio*)”.¹⁶ The notion of family that, through naturalization, has come to be perceived as self-evident in this way, constitutes a central site of social reproduction. The naturalization of the social and legal privileging of the family conceals the fact that the entity referred to as ‘family’ rests on social conditions that are unequally distributed. “The family, in its legitimate definition, is a privilege that has been elevated to a universal norm—a factual privilege that entails a symbolic privilege: the privilege of being as one is supposed to be, of conforming to the norm, and thus gaining the symbolic benefits of normality.”¹⁷

The institutionalization of parenthood in the emerging modern nation-states was also shaped by the bourgeois family model¹⁸ and developed in conjunction with various parallel institutionalization processes—most notably those of childhood, schooling, the family itself, youth welfare (today known as child protection), and the academic disciplines and professions concerned with childhood.¹⁹ Educational responsibilities of the state and the family should be understood as mutually reinforcing, with the goal of producing contract-capable individuals.²⁰ The legal privileging of the bourgeois family as the normative life form entailed a dual intervention by the state—an intervention rooted in the dynamics of a class society

14 | *Ibid.*, 123.

15 | Cf. Bourdieu, 1998, 129f.; 2017, 288ff.

16 | Florian, 2008, 4299.

17 | Bourdieu, 1998, 131–132.

18 | Cf. Waterstradt, 2015.

19 | Cf. Donzelot, 1980; cf. Bühler-Niederberger, 2010.

20 | Cf. Casale, 2012, 131.

shaped by the development of productive forces—and culminated in the classed and gendered construction of modern parenthood within the educational field.²¹ “In both lines of dissemination of the modern conception of family, the mother is codified as the primary pillar and addressed by the new stakeholder groups concerned with child welfare. Her position is thus inextricably configured with the institutionalization of modern childhood as both family-based and school-based childhood.”²²

Through the gendering of the division of labor and the accompanying feminization, privatization and economic devaluation of family work, gender becomes both a fundamental social institution and one of the most important socio-cultural organizing principles of modern society, as well as a decisive factor in social reproduction. Gender is interwoven with and secured through all processes of institutionalization. Thus, *institutional reflexivity*²³ pre-structures modern gender differentiation at the institutional level of social order.

The increasing attention to education-related parental responsibilities in recent decades correlates with the rising importance of education for the neo-social reorientation of welfare production in the context of neoliberal societies.²⁴ Welfare state policies aim at producing morally responsible subjects, encouraging them to translate societal risks into matters of personal responsibility and obligation, and to manage these risks autonomously. This results in new demands on parents to structure the family and leisure time as learning environments in order to optimize their children’s future educational success.²⁵ In particular, parents from the social milieus of the new middle class are able to position themselves as entrepreneurs of their children’s school success, to distinguish themselves from less privileged groups, and to engage in a ‘social struggle for distinction’ through education.²⁶ This shift away from the “ideology of meritocracy” to the “ideology of parentocracy”²⁷ can be observed in other Western countries as early as the 1990s, reflecting broader changes in educational policy and home-school relationship. It characterizes a transformation in the education system where children’s participation in education and their academic success increasingly depends on their parents’ resources and

21 | Cf. Wolf, 2024, 214-217.

22 | Ibid., 217.

23 | Goffman, 2001.

24 | Cf. Jergus, 2018; cf. Wolf, 2024.

25 | Cf. Thompson, 2015.

26 | Ibid., 22-23.

27 | Brown, 1990, 71.

influence, rather than on their own abilities or the education system itself. Philipp Brown characterized this shift in education policies as “third wave” in the socio-historical development of British education. He identified the “first wave” as the rise of mass schooling for the working classes at the end of the nineteenth century. The “second wave” was marked by the individualization of merits and achievements, which replaced what John Dewey called the “feudal dogma of social predestination”.²⁸ In the current third wave, the “ideology of meritocracy” is being replaced by the “ideology of parentocracy”.²⁹

In this context, educational research in gender studies, informed by praxeological theories, place particular emphasis on analyzing the home-school relationship and the gendered dynamics of parental involvement in recent decades. Above all, the extensive research conducted by British scholars Gill Crozier, Diane Reay, and Carol Vincent has been especially influential in this field.³⁰ For example Diane Reay, drawing on qualitative empirical studies, has particularly highlighted “the centrality of women to social reproduction through a focus on the social and cultural processes embedded in parental involvement”³¹ in their children’s primary schooling. She made visible “the ways in which mothering work in support of children’s schooling structures and is structured by wider social systems”³² and unveiled their crucial importance in the perpetuation of class inequalities. Her ethnographic study offers a nuanced account of the continued relevance of social class, as gendered and racialized.³³ Through a focus on the home-school relationship, she explores some of the mechanisms through which class differences are maintained and reproduced, and she conceptualizes mothering work as strategically positioned in relation to schooling systems.

Gill Crozier, drawing on her extensive quantitative and qualitative empirical research on the relationship between parents and their children’s secondary schools, also emphasizes that, for an understanding of the home-school relationship and the factors influencing it, both social class and the often ignored or rendered invisible work of mothers in relation to their children’s education, “notably due to the absence of analyses of mothering work within academic research”, are crucial.³⁴

28 | Ibid.

29 | Ibid.

30 | Cf. Crozier, 2000, 2011; cf. Reay, 2003, 2006, 2017; cf. Vincent, 2017; cf. Vincent/Ball/Braun, 2010.

31 | Cf. Reay, 1998, 195.

32 | Ibid., 196.

33 | Cf. Reay, 2003.

34 | Crozier, 2000, XV.

Crozier summarizes that, while the stated aim of parental involvement initiatives is to enhance children's and young people's participation in education and to improve their academic achievement and opportunities for social inclusion, in practice, as her research findings demonstrates, these initiatives have often "exacerbated the inequalities of access to educational opportunities for mothers and fathers, and in turn, for their children."³⁵ This underscores that the home-school relationship is fundamentally underpinned by power relations. As Crozier writes, quoting Iris Marion Young: "In a society where some groups are privileged while others are oppressed, the perspectives and interests of the privileged will tend to dominate, marginalizing or silencing those of other groups."³⁶

Carol Vincent, drawing on data from twenty years of qualitative research projects, highlights the processes of social change through which, within the neoliberal climate of the past two decades, a new model of parenthood—termed "intensive parenting"—has been constructed.³⁷ In affluent countries, parental responsibilities now extend far beyond providing basic needs such as food, shelter, and love; parents are increasingly held accountable for the emotional, social, educational, and physical development of their children. These heightened expectations are particularly gendered, as mothers face significantly stronger public scrutiny and sanctions than fathers when failing to meet normative ideals of parenting. She draws on scholarly research to demonstrate the long-standing history of state-produced discourses surrounding so-called 'bad mothers'.³⁸ She argues that public policy debates have long been largely centered on—and have consistently "surged and seethed around—the lives of working-class mothers"³⁹. She emphasizes the need to examine how these are taken up and contested by different social groups.⁴⁰ In addition, she argues that understanding the home-school relationship also requires moving beyond the binary between middle class and working class, calling for attention to those positioned as an "intermediate class" and to the intersectional dimensions of identity—including class, ethnicity, gender, religion, and place of residence—that shape parenting practices and educational strategies.⁴¹ Finally, she draws attention to the problem that the category of "the

35 | *Ibid.* , 117.

36 | Young, 1989, 257.

37 | Cf. Vincent, 2017.

38 | Waterstradt's article in this volume addresses this issue, using the example of praise and gossip about parents.

39 | Vincent/Ball/Braun, 2010, 123.

40 | Cf. Vincent, 2017, 542-549.

41 | Cf. *ibid.* , 549-551.

parent” appears as a broad and neutral term, while in fact concealing a wide range of behaviours, privileges, and disadvantages.⁴² With reference to Reay’s, Crozier’s and Vincent’s study, this article proceeds on the assumption that mothering work both structures and is structured by broader social systems, and is therefore a practice that reproduces class inequalities.

A comparison of international studies on the home-school relationship confirms, above all, the criticism that the various programs have not succeeded in reducing educational disadvantage.⁴³ However, issues of gendered parenthood receive little attention in these analyses. German-language educational research has also offered nuanced critiques of the enduring nature of classism, while frequently reproducing a silence around gendered power relations within the field.⁴⁴ Despite this critique, the discourse on the home-school relationship in the German-speaking context remains largely conciliatory in tone, and such initiatives continue to enjoy considerable popularity.⁴⁵ By contrast, it is argued that greater attention must be paid to the fundamental differences between home-school relationships that should be recognized and acknowledged, with compromises negotiated and their irreducible distinctiveness accepted.⁴⁶ Recent research analyzing legal, political, and professional discourses in Germany, alongside international literature, emphasizes this challenge.⁴⁷ Scholars have pointed out that studies tend to align with institutional priorities, positioning parents as subordinate, while leaving the institutionally embedded hierarchical tensions between teachers and parents to pedagogical practice. Consensus-oriented communication is rarely subject to critical scrutiny, and children’s perspectives—though rhetorically foregrounded—are seldom explored in depth and remain shaped by adult interests.⁴⁸ The concept of the *Bildungs- und Erziehungspartnerschaft*⁴⁹ has—especially after 2013—gained prominence

42 | Cf. *ibid.* , 552.

43 | Cf. Wolf, 2019b.

44 | Cf. Betz/Bischoff/Eunicke/Kayser/Zink, 2017; cf. Knoll, 2020; cf. Großkopf, 2020.

45 | Cf. Knoll, 2020.

46 | Cf. *ibid.* , 89.

47 | Cf. Betz/Bischoff/Eunicke/Kayser/Zink, 2017.

48 | Cf. *ibid.* , 143–163.

49 | In the German-speaking context, various terms are used to describe the (desired, expected, or promoted) relationship between families and schools—such as *Bildungs- und Erziehungspartnerschaft* (educational and up-bringing partnership), *Elternarbeit* (parental work), *Elternmitwirkung* (parental participation), *Elternbeteiligung* (parental involvement), and *Zusammenarbeit mit Eltern* (collaboration with parents)—most normatively charged and often conceptually inconsistent. Recent scholarship advocates using the phrase cooperation between home and school (cf. Killus/Paseka, 2020, 12–29). This article adopts the term home-school relationship due to its widespread use in the English-speaking context and its capacity to denote the structural dimensions of the relationship between the two institutions.

in practice-oriented journals for early education and primary schools but it is largely presented uncritically and in a consistently positive light.⁵⁰ While it promotes cooperation between teachers, parents, and children, it simultaneously conveys a deficit view of parents, who are often labeled as ‘inadequate’ or ‘overwhelmed’. Scholars have criticized the fact that this contradiction—recognizing parents as partners while questioning their competence—is rarely examined. Despite the model’s promises, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support its effectiveness, and longitudinal studies show little to no measurable benefit for children’s educational outcomes.⁵¹

2 Classed and Gendered Interpellations of Parenthood in the School System

Educational disadvantage remains prevalent in Austria, with the country performing below the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average, especially in providing equal opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged children and those with a migrant background.⁵² Children’s educational participation and success remain closely tied to their parents’ socioeconomic status, educational attainment, nationality, native language, permanent residence in either urban or rural areas, as well as their economic, cultural, social, and symbolic resources.⁵³ For instance, first-year students whose parents have a higher level of education are overrepresented at universities compared to the general domestic population.⁵⁴ An analysis of trends in educational qualifications and educational mobility in Austria from 1986 to 2016 reveals a consistently high level of intergenerational transmission of education among respondents whose parents have a medium level of education (such as an apprenticeship or vocational secondary school qualification). The analysis also shows a declining level of transmission among respondents whose parents have at most a compulsory graduation certificate, and an increasing level

50 | Cf. Betz/Bischoff/Eunicke/Kayser/Zink, 2017, 60–67.

51 | Cf. *ibid.*

52 | Cf. Gruber, 2019; cf. OECD, 2018.

53 | Cf. Statistik Austria, 2025, 34–35; cf. Schnell/Gruber, 2023; cf. Ernst, 2023, 99; cf. Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung (BMBWF) 2021, 321; cf. Gruber, 2019; cf. Statistik Austria 2018; cf. Moosbrugger/Bacher, 2018; cf. Herzog-Punzenberger, 2017; cf. Bruneforth, 2016, 120.

54 | Cf. Unger, 2020, 117.

among those from academic households.⁵⁵ Between 1986 and 2016, intergenerational mobility in Austria came to a standstill, resulting in the emergence of two clearly delineated educational classes: (a) a class with apprenticeship-level attainment and (b) a class with tertiary educational attainment.⁵⁶ The meritocratic principle, which serves as the legitimizing basis for inequality in education, is clearly being called into question. State schools⁵⁷ offer insufficient levels of educational equity and equal opportunities.

In Austria, the home-school relationship is governed by the School Education Act (SchUG). According to § 2 SchUG, this law regulates the internal organization of the school system to fulfill the mission of Austrian schools, serving as the foundation for the cooperation of teachers, students, and legal guardians as a school community. § 47 addresses the school's participation in the upbringing and education of pupils and § 61 addresses the rights and duties of parents or legal guardians to support the school's teaching and educational work.⁵⁸

Primary school (Volksschule)⁵⁹ in Austria is the first school for all children aged six to nine. In the 2022/23 school year, 95.1 percent of primary school pupils attended a state school.⁶⁰ Upon entering school, and at later stages, children may be assessed and categorized as 'not (yet) ready' for school. As a result, they may be placed in a pre-school program⁶¹ or a school for children with special educational needs⁶² or within integrative/inclusive classes in regular primary schools. For the latter model, parents are required to submit an application for the determination of special educational needs when their child starts school. Special education schools may cover grades one through twelve, and typically, children do not return to mainstream primary schools after being placed in such institutions. Pre-school may be conducted in separately run pre-school classes or integrated with Year 1 or Year 2

55 | Cf. Bacher/Moosbrugger, 2019, 144.

56 | Cf. Moosbrugger/Bacher, 2018, 298.

57 | In Austria, as in most OECD countries, the private school sector is relatively small. In the 2023-2024 school year, 89.6 percent of all pupils in compulsory education attended state schools, while only 10.4 percent attended private schools (cf. Statistik Austria, 2025, 149). The vast majority of pupils attend public schools in the secondary education sector, with even fewer opting for private schools in the compulsory education sector.

58 | SchUG, 2025.

59 | Cf. Österreichische Agentur für Bildung und Internationalisierung (OEAD), 2025a.

60 | Cf. Statistik Austria, 2025, 149.

61 | Cf. OEAD, 2025b. High pre-school attendance rates of up to 14 percent are recorded in Tyrol and Vienna (cf. Bruneforth, 2016, 74).

62 | Cf. OEAD, 2025c; cf. Bruneforth/Vogtenhuber/Lassnigg/Oberwimmer/Gumpoldsberger/Feyerer/Siegle/Toferer/Thaler/Peterbauer/Herzog-Punzenberger, 2016, 74.

class groups. After completing the pre-school year, the child will be admitted to Year 1 of primary school or to a special school.

Primary school is where the central foundation for a child's educational career is established.⁶³ In Austria, the transition to Secondary Level I occurs after completing the first four grades, when children are, on average, nine or ten years old. This early selection point has significant stratification effects, amplifying the social, economic, and regional disparities in educational outcomes.⁶⁴ Progressing to Secondary Level I is particularly important because this level in Austria is divided into three parallel school types: Compulsory Secondary School (*Mittelschule*, MS), Academic Secondary School Lower Cycle (*AHS Unterstufe*) and the Special Needs Education/Inclusion.⁶⁵ The schools provide graduation diplomas that vary significantly in value. Generally, the Lower Level of the Academic Secondary School progresses to the Upper Level (*AHS Oberstufe*), which paves the way for higher education qualifications. In a pan-European comparison, it is clear that children in countries where the first selection occurs later, at ages 15 or 16 (such as in France or Sweden), achieve greater success in terms of educational equity.⁶⁶

The issue of early selection at the end of primary school in Austria is further exacerbated by the fact that primary schools are typically organized as half-day schools. This structure significantly increases the reliance on the economic, cultural, and social resources of parents to support their children's academic success. Parents must either be available to care for and support their children with learning and homework in the afternoons or arrange for alternative care. However, the availability of after-school childcare for primary school varies significantly by the federal state and region⁶⁷ and usually requires a monthly fee, parental contributions, placing an additional financial burden on families.⁶⁸

As a result, less than one-third of primary school pupils receive afternoon care in full-day schools or after-school care centers (referred to as *Horte*), with only

63 | Cf. Wohllhart, 2015, 35.

64 | Cf. Statistik Austria, 2025, 96; cf. Bruneforth, 2016, 76; cf. Schnell/Gruber, 2023, 154.

65 | Cf. OEAD, 2025d.

66 | Cf. Gruber, 2019, 151-154; cf. Herzog-Punzenberger, 2017.

67 | There are significant differences in after-school childcare provision across all school types, depending on the specific type of school and the federal state. For example in the 2022-23 school year this includes 32.6 percent in primary schools, 18.2 percent in middle schools, 32.3 percent in special schools, and 41.2 percent in lower secondary academic schools (*AHS*). In Tyrol, only around 16 percent of pupils across all school types attended full-day school programs, while in Vienna, more than half of the pupils did. (BMBWF, 2023)

68 | Cf. Mitterer/Hochholdingner/Seisenbacher, 2022, 25.

a small number being cared for by childminders (referred to as *Tageseltern*).⁶⁹ There are significant differences between the federal states and municipalities, which are responsible for the operation of primary schools and after-school care centers⁷⁰, as well as notable disparities between urban areas, which have higher levels of after-school childcare, and rural areas, where such services are below average.⁷¹ As a result, primary schools in Austria do not offer equal opportunities for all children.

A 2012 study on the acceptance of full-day schools in Austria⁷² highlights a high level of acceptance among parents for full-day school programs, as many of those surveyed rate the quality of afternoon care for schoolchildren as unsatisfactory and therefore expect a high-quality expansion of the school system. However, on the part of the schools, the study reveals a distinctly ambivalent attitude towards full-day schooling among the teachers.

Austria has performed worse in international educational studies compared to countries with full-day school programs.⁷³ Therefore, the political representatives in the government also want to reduce the visible weaknesses, particularly the high social selectivity of the school system and the large proportion of students at risk. A government decision from 2011 includes the expansion of full-day school programs to address these issues.

Furthermore, the half-day school system increases the demand for privately paid tutoring, commonly known as *Nachhilfe*. For a third of all pupils, regular school lessons and learning at home are insufficient to meet their academic goals.⁷⁴ In 2020, 16 percent of primary school pupils utilized external tutoring services (7 percent received paid tutoring, 5 percent benefited from unpaid private tutoring, and 5 percent attended free school-based tutoring). At the secondary level, 30 percent of students in Secondary Level I and approximately 40 percent in Secondary Level II received external tutoring.⁷⁵ Up until now, it has predominantly been the parents who can least afford it, who have hired paid tutoring services.⁷⁶ In the 2022/2023 school year, parents in Austria spent a total of 121.6 million euros on private

69 | For example, in 2021, after-school childcare in full-day schools was provided to only 28 percent of children aged six to nine (Mitterer/Hochholdinginger/Seisenbacher, 2022, 31), with the highest rate in Vienna (42 percent) and the lowest in Tyrol (11 percent) (ibid., 32). Additionally, 15 percent of children were cared for in extracurricular after-school care centers, and 5 percent by childminders (ibid., 33).

70 | Cf. Mitterer/Hochholdinginger/Seisenbacher, 2022, 12.

71 | Cf. ibid., 45.

72 | Cf. Hörl/Dämon/Popp/Bacher/Lachmayr, 2012.

73 | Cf. ibid.

74 | Cf. Erdost/Larcher, 2023, 2.

75 | Institut für empirische Sozialforschung (IFES), 2022, 28.

76 | Cf. ibid., 29.

tutoring.⁷⁷ However, many parents cannot afford these costs, and 20 percent of pupils who did not receive paid tutoring expressed a desire to have it.⁷⁸

Around 75 percent of parents support their children's learning at least occasionally, with 58 percent supervising homework and study sessions at least once a week. Mothers are involved 69 percent of the time even if they work full-time, while fathers participate only 22 percent of the time. For a quarter of parents, it is challenging to assist with homework or to assess their child's knowledge, and twelve percent feel overwhelmed by certain school subjects.⁷⁹ As a result, the privatization and feminization of homework exacerbates educational inequalities in Austria.

In this context, it is noteworthy that studies investigating the ways in which families and schools in Austria complement each other have found that teachers often express concern about pupils' lack of social skills, which is sometimes attributed to perceived shortcomings in parental involvement in upbringing. Parents, on the other hand, frequently voice concerns about having to cover academic content at home, which they associate with perceived deficiencies in teachers' instructional effectiveness.⁸⁰

Teachers often present the traditional middle-class, two-parent family as a model for educational success and child welfare. To illustrate this issue, I refer to one of the few qualitative studies conducted in two federal states in Austria. This study examined the professional self-concept of teachers in all-day schools at the Secondary Level I, which serves pupils aged ten to fourteen, using guided individual interviews.⁸¹ The results of the study indicate that teachers are generally open to diverse family structures and the various marital statuses of parents. However, they also believe that after-school care outside the home in the afternoon cannot match the value of home care provided by mothers. Consequently, they view all-day schools as an inferior option compared to private family support.

According to the teachers interviewed in the study, if families function well—particularly when mothers or, in some cases, grandmothers are at home in the afternoon—there is no need for afternoon school sessions.⁸² In their professional judgment, they refer to the traditional family model as an idealized environment for raising children, glorifying the mother-myth and viewing mothers as idealized

77 | Cf. Erdost/Larcher, 2023, 3.

78 | Cf. *ibid.*

79 | Cf. IFES, 2022, 6.

80 | Cf. Kapella, 2017, 4.

81 | Cf. Popp, 2015.

82 | Cf. Popp, 2009, 99.

resource persons.⁸³ Guided by these normative expectations of gender roles within families and the traditional division of labor among parents, they diminish the value of their professional work in all-day schools, reducing it to a repair service for children from less stable families while judging parents as inadequate.

Their initial openness to diverse family forms and circumstances is overshadowed by a return to the mother-myth associated with the bourgeois-patriarchal family structure.⁸⁴ In this way, they dismiss the diversity of mothers and accept diverse families only when they fit within the privileged middle-class context, where there is minimal need for educational support from schools. Consequently, they reinforce the model of half-day schools, perpetuate stereotypes of a mother-centered childhood within a two-parent family with a male breadwinner⁸⁵, and uphold the classism and sexism inherent in the school system.

From a statistical perspective, it can be summarized that Austria's differentiated compulsory state school system, which predominantly operates as a half-day school, functions as an institutionalized form of classism and sexism. This is because the system not only perpetuates educational inequality but also reinforces class relations in primary schools and even more during the transition from primary school to Secondary Level I. However, the half-day school model contributes to social reproduction by reinforcing the traditional bourgeois-patriarchal gendered division of labor. Thus, parenthood is rendered as inherently gendered within the Austrian education system. As a result, an institutionalized form of sexism that supports the institutionalized form of classism becomes evident, as the half-day school system typically operates at the expense of mothers' economic and social security. This is clearly reflected in the employment statistics for 2022⁸⁶, which show that more than three-quarters of mothers of primary school students are available for their child(ren) in the afternoons for school-related support. Additionally, less

83 | Cf. *ibid.*, 104.

84 | Cf. Wolf, 2024, 217.

85 | Cf. Popp, 2009, 99; cf. Bauer/Wiezorek, 2017.

86 | In 2022, for example, the mother of only 15.4 percent of primary school pupils aged six to under ten was in full-time employment (more than 35 hours per week). For 57.2 percent, their mother was in part-time employment, 17.9 percent had a mother who was not employed (e.g., as a housewife), 4.4 percent had a mother who was unemployed, and 3.7 percent had a mother on maternity leave or maternity protection. Additionally, 1.5 percent of primary school children lived without a mother in a private household. (cf. Kaindl/Schipfer, 2023, 59).

than one-third of primary school pupils⁸⁷ participate in after-school care in full-day school programs or after-school care centers.

The availability of mothers usually depends on either a high income from the husband, the children's father, or on state support. This situation perpetuates both private and public patriarchal structures. In both scenarios, mothers find themselves economically dependent—either on the husband (private patriarchy) or the welfare state (public patriarchy). The various forms of part-time employment that these mothers typically engage in during the morning do not provide a living wage but rather serve as supplementary income. Coupled with the significantly higher income disparities between men and women in Austria compared to other European countries, this situation has led to a pronounced gender pension gap, the second highest among European Union member states.⁸⁸

The school system ultimately operates to the disadvantage of mothers. The structure of half-day schooling exploits mothers' time—both working hours and personal time—since their unpaid labor related to schoolwork precludes them from securing livelihoods both presently and in the future.⁸⁹ Furthermore, half-day schooling contributes to the isolation of mothers, as they must remain at home in the afternoons to oversee school-related tasks and manage conflicts, that arise for their children from school.⁹⁰ This situation exacerbates the focus on the mother-child relationship in a negative way and diminishes the recognition that children receive from their mothers beyond academic achievement.

Additionally, mothers must possess sufficient skills to help their children with homework. The unpaid support that well-educated mothers provide in assisting their children with learning and homework thus becomes a crucial element in the cultural class struggle they engage in within the traditional gender-specific division of labor.

This, in turn, motivates and legitimizes the adoption of intensive parenting practices by middle-class women who can afford to forgo their own income. Mothers who need to contribute financially to the family's upkeep and/or lack academic knowledge or proficiency in the language of education typically experience a sense of powerlessness when trying to support their children's educational success. This

87 | In the 2022/23 school year, 32.6 percent of primary school pupils in Austria attended full-day school programs or after-school care centers, with the highest rate in Vienna at 55.7 percent and the lowest in Tyrol at 16.6 percent.

88 | Cf. Mairhuber, 2012, 39ff; cf. Marin/Zólyomi, 2010.

89 | Cf. Enders-Dragässer, 1991.

90 | Cf. Beham-Rabanser/Weber/Bacher, 2010.

situation underscores the inherent classism in the Austrian school system, which is sustained, among other factors, by sexism.

3 Classed and Gendered Modes of Addressing Parents in Schools: A Case of a Working-Class Single Mother in a Rural Primary School Context

The analysis concludes by illustrating how social structures and the norms of the dominant social order are perpetuated not only through their continuous interpellation in public policy debates and in school structures, programs, rules, and routines, but also through the explicitly gendered ways parents are addressed within the school context. For this, an example drawn from a qualitative interview study that examined the experiences of working-class parents with their children's primary school in Tyrol is used.⁹¹ The case of Ms. A—a 24-year-old, divorced single mother of Austrian background, employed full-time as a semi-skilled worker—is particularly noteworthy. It illustrates the specific challenges faced by a single working-class mother in rural areas and highlights how class serves as a key entry point for interrogating the notion of the rural as a classless space. In doing so, it sheds light on the intersection of gender, class, family structure, and regional disparities in access to educational resources and support systems. It also was a specific objective of the research to move beyond a city-centered approach,⁹² acknowledging that in Austria, not only social but also regional origin significantly contributes to social reproduction, given that more than half of the population resides in rural areas.⁹³ Ms. A's experiences as a new resident in a rural community,

91 | The research project constituted a sub-project within a broader initiative funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture, implemented under the title *Parental Knowledge—Strong Together*. (Wolf/Bechter/Schlesinger, 2019a, 9). The overarching aim of the project was to empower parents from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in enhancing their children's participation and success within the education system. The sub-project *Research* conducted a preliminary investigation based on a qualitative-empirical research design (ibid., 92-100). This investigation focused on understanding how the parents in question perceived their children's primary school experiences and what concerns they expressed. The study deliberately incorporated the heterogeneity of the target group—regarding gender, family structure, means of subsistence, parental division of labor, migration status, and place of residence—into the interviews selected for analysis. The research findings were subsequently utilized by project partners to identify concrete focal points for the development of training programs for parental advisors.

92 | Cf. Fuhs, 1997.

93 | According to the urban-rural typology, in 2015, 57.6% of the population lived in rural areas and 14.9% in suburban zones (cf. Statistics Austria, 2018, 7).

where she lives with her son, reveal how social class can come into conflict with the institutional expectations of primary schools—expectations that are often shaped by gendered norms of parenthood. The experiences she reported can be grouped into four structural and action-related problem areas: (1) challenges in balancing professional and family life; (2) vilification and benevolent paternalism faced as a full-time working single mother; (3) the use of an integrated preschool concept as a form of humiliating pedagogical practice; and (4) exonerating distance through a rigid separation between family and school.

The primary school in the rural community provided very limited afternoon childcare for primary school pupils. Ms. A points out that only a few mothers expressed their need for afternoon childcare, and consequently, did not enroll their children in it. As a new resident, single mother, with no family or relatives in the village and a full-time job, she felt like an outsider. “All women are married, have their husband at home. They don’t need to be employed and they are at home all day. I mean, that’s simply a dream. So they did not understand my situation. That’s just how it is. I don’t know how to explain that. Perhaps nobody believes it. I would bet that 80 or 75 percent are married couples”. She found herself in a situation where she received neither understanding nor solidarity from the other mothers. The school operated on the assumption of a traditional nuclear family with a male breadwinner, and the mothers there adhered to long-established patriarchal cultural norms. As a result, Ms. A struggled to meet her work obligations. While her employer was initially accommodating during the first few weeks of school, he eventually issued an ultimatum: “Either I’ll find a solution for afternoon childcare or I have to leave the company”. For that reason she decided to enroll her son in a primary school in the nearby city where she worked and where an after-school childcare center was attached to the school. However, primary school pupils in Austria are generally required to attend the local school in their neighborhood or place of residence. For that reason, Ms. A turned to the town mayor requesting a special exemption permit. Her request was denied, with the explanation that the municipality would have to cover the costs if her son attended a school outside their local parish. Ms. A then appealed to a higher authority, asking the school inspector of the federal state of Tyrol for a special permit, but he also refused. In order to keep her job, Ms. A was ultimately forced to relocate to the city, where she was able to secure a place for her son in an after-school childcare center (Hort). The move to the city also has negative consequences. On one hand, it was due to the housing prices: “We now have a much smaller apartment, of course. [...]”

Unfortunately, but we have to make do.” On the other hand, it also meant saying goodbye for her son, who found it very difficult to say goodbye: “He didn’t want to leave; he didn’t understand why he couldn’t go to his school anymore. [...] But I simply had no choice. Well, I did have a choice, namely by saying I would quit my job, okay.”

Ms. A perceived the discussions surrounding this matter as vilification and benevolent paternalism, as she constantly had to justify her situation and explain why she works full-time, especially to the head of the primary school. She repeatedly confronted Ms. A with her skepticism toward fully-employed mothers. As a result, Ms. A felt patronized and devalued by her. The head teacher questioned her choice to work, criticizing her by asking why she was working: “How can this poor kid only be put in daycare all the time”. She noted: “You have the possibility to stay at home. We live in Tyrol, so you will get social welfare benefit”. They suggested to Ms. A that she should give up her job in the best interest of her son and to ensure his scholarly success. However, Ms. A reported: “I mean, well, it sounds a little mean, but I was unwilling to give up my job for the sake of this rural school and to live off social welfare benefits”. So the head teacher asked Ms. A “If it would be possible, that the mother of her son’s father might support her in looking after their son in the afternoon”. Ms. A reacted angrily and replied, “that is really none of your concern”. She considered this question as an offensive intrusion into her private life.

Beyond that, Ms. A reported that the saleswoman at the bakery had informed her that the head of the primary school had spoken about Ms. A because of her appearance in a derogatory and condescending manner. Unwilling to tolerate this malicious gossip, Ms. A decided to confront her. “I told her at that time that it was pure prejudice to assume she was a bad mother because of her appearance [...]. That was the first time I spoke to her. [...] But she pigeonholed me, which was not fair”. The practice of praise and blame in gossip functions as a mechanism of social control and discipline, targeting social deviants and free riders by serving as a warning to others.⁹⁴

But it wasn’t just Ms. A, her son also faced difficulties at school. Ms. A reports on this by describing the integrated preschool as a humiliating pedagogic action. Her son passed an aptitude test and started primary school as a first grader. After two months, his classroom teacher and the head of the primary school informed her that it would be better for her son to continue school as a preschooler: “He got into

94 | Cf. Waterstradt, in this Volume.

first grade, and then, after two months, they decided to put him into preschool into an integrated preschool program". The school justified this measure by referencing her son's restlessness in class and problems with concentration. Ms. A agreed with the measure but criticized the experience her son had at this integrated preschool during the interview. Because of this "reassignment" he was given a special status in the classroom community. He was branded as a preschooler, behind the first graders, who were being taught by the same teacher in the same classroom. Ms. A illustrates this by pointing to the "voluntary" homework assigned. After her son was singled out and demoted to a preschooler, he emphatically refused to do any homework from school at home. Ms. A interpreted this as a protest reaction on his part. She assumed that her son felt excluded and ashamed. This pedagogic action discouraged him. In addition, he wasn't given any assignments that were suitable for a preschooler. Ms. A argued: "The problem was that in the village primary school, he didn't get any preschool homework, but first-grade homework. They said he didn't have to do it if he was not able to. Of course, he picked up on this: I don't have to do it, I can say, I don't know how to do it, and so I don't do it." This homework strike of her son disappeared after changing schools.

Finally, after changing schools, even Ms. A experienced a sense of relief due to a clear separation between family and school. In the new primary school in the city, Ms. A felt unburdened. The anonymity of urban life, in particular, allowed for a more distanced relationship between private life and school. "That's why I am highly impressed by this school. Because there is a distance between parents and teaching staff, and between private life and school. I'm simply saying, that's important and right. And I am one of many working parents and single moms there. And that's quite normal." Communication between teachers and parents takes place via a personal notebook (the so-called *Mitteilungsheft*), unless face-to-face interaction is necessary. She mentioned that the teachers only want to talk to the parents in case of extremely important matters. Ms. A felt greatly relieved by this written form of communication, as it provided a kind of protection against intrusions into private life and enabled objective detachment in her view. "I have to say that it should be this way. Even more so, it must be this way. When I talk to the teacher, then it's just about school and just about my son, but not about private things."

The experiences that Ms. A reported can be theoretically interpreted as follows. The central aspect from Ms. A's perception that caused her bad positioning in the field of school education is the fact that she is a new residential, full-time working, single mom in a rural community. She attempted to defend herself by

stating, “I said, I did not choose that”. This statement reflects her recognition of the social structures inherent to her unique social situation. These overarching structures must be understood within the context of theoretical interpretation. Her attitude towards the school is shaped by her social position within the social space, influencing how she interacts with the school system and the practices she adopts in relation to it. The half-day school system and the near absence of afternoon childcare infrastructure in rural communities present a significant risk, particularly for full-time working single mothers without local family support. This risk is striking, as it may push them towards unemployment and dependence on social welfare. Her fear that the half-day school system threatens her independence and may force her into social assistance is so deeply ingrained that, during the interview, she repeatedly returns to the most critical issues for her—namely, how to maintain her employment—and finds it difficult to discuss other topics.

Ms. A romanticized the idea of raising her son in the countryside, envisioning it as the perfect environment for him to grow up surrounded by nature and in a manageable, serene living space. However, the deeply ingrained social structures of the rural area clashed with her dream of providing her son with an uncomplicated childhood. As a single mother with a full-time job, she found herself at odds with the traditional rural social order that favored a male breadwinner model. Additionally, her aspiration for choosing the right school for her son was thwarted by restrictive educational laws, leaving her with limited options.

In this case, the immense power of the state over space becomes evident, through which it promotes the formation of socially homogeneous groups. It illustrates that the allocation to school districts that depends on the residential address leads to an increasing segregation of public schools based on how segregated the residential population is.⁹⁵ In rural areas, the half-day school system contributes to the social segregation of primary school pupils, as this type of education demands specific family structures. This system is a key element of the inadequate social infrastructure, which, alongside the limited availability of specialized employment, drives young women away from rural regions and perpetuates the unequal distribution of care work between men and women.⁹⁶ In Austria, the half-day primary school system is upheld at the expense of mothers’ social security, as I previously mentioned.

95 | Cf. Biedermann/Weber/Herzog-Punzenberger/Nagel, 2016.

96 | Cf. Maurer/Fischer, 2014.

Ms. A finds that her parenting practices are judged by the structures of the school system and the actions of the head of the primary school, who, by upholding the standards of a male breadwinner household, represents the interests of the school, since the half-day school system relies on the mother's presence and involvement in school-related activities within the private home. By emphasizing the child's well-being, she underscores the values and benefits of the two-parent middle-class family, implicitly criticizing single-parent families as disorganized. As a result, Ms. A is made to feel that her son is a child at risk, and that for his well-being, she should remain at home. Ms. A learns that mothers in particular are interpellated as suppliers—expected to function as a “support system” and as unpaid, permanent assistants to the school—through organizational structures, programs, rules, and routines, and are also addressed as such by educational professionals.⁹⁷ She is angry at being addressed as such a supplier—an expectation legitimized by the head of the school through the underlying norm that only under such conditions can she be considered a ‘good’ mother.

She rejects the classist and sexist claim that only stay-at-home mothers can be considered ‘good’ mothers.

Ms. A experiences the homogenization of social space within the rural community, shaped by school structures and exclusionary practices, with the school serving as a pivotal point in the figuration of established-outsider relations, a concept theoretically articulated by Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson.⁹⁸ The long-term residents' social affiliation allows other mothers to partake in their dominance, which also reinforces the gender norms of the traditional nuclear family. Each mother, in turn, must conform by adjusting her gendered behaviors and daily practices to fit specific patterns of emotional control. As a new resident, Ms. A is seen as an outsider, not only by the long-established residents but also by other newcomers. The established residents view her as disoriented and disorganized,

97 | Dagmar Killus and Angelika Paseka have identified different forms of how parents are addressed and positioned within school contexts. For example, parents may be addressed as *opponents*—who are expected to enter the school building only on specific occasions; as *clients*—who need support in helping their children learn and navigating the school system; as *suppliers*—who function as a ‘support system’ for the school, with mothers in particular expected to act as constant assistants and monitors of their children; as *experts*—whose knowledge about their child is considered valuable for schooling and learning; as *actors*—who, in line with broader societal processes of democratization, are expected to participate in school life, for instance through parent representation; as *partners*—who share responsibility for the education and upbringing of children and adolescents with teachers; or as *customers*—who are courted in the context of increasing school competition, especially where parents can freely choose their children's schools (cf. Killus/Paseka, 2020, 59–69).

98 | Cf. Elias/Scotson, 1990, 7–56.

and they distance themselves from her to preserve their sense of exclusivity and superiority.

Established members who socialize with a newcomer risk losing their reputation within the group. Often, those who are already established use distinct terms for newcomers, speaking with a condescending tone that only holds meaning in the local context. This behavior serves to humiliate the newcomers, marking them as outsiders who fail to meet the prevailing standards. Elias and Scotson argued that the reinforcement of these standards gratifies the established members by boosting their collective self-esteem.⁹⁹ Individuals are always part of a figuration—a network of mutual dependency—and are never socially independent. From this perspective, it becomes clear why the established mothers kept their distance and were unable to assist Ms. A in her time of need regarding the care of her son. It also explains why the head of the primary school, during a conversation with the saleswoman in the bakery, reinforced her allegiance to the moral standards of the established by speaking disparagingly about Ms. A.

Ms. A experiences herself as an outsider due to the traditional use of the school by the mothers of the established group, as well as through the activities of the school principal, who makes it clear to her how she should orient and organize herself. In this context, the school emerges as the quintessential social institution, one that judges the social affiliations of residents, reinforces the naturalization and gender roles of the nuclear family, and upholds the existing social structures within rural communities.

The criticism expressed by the head of the primary school regarding the mother's practices—such as, “how can this poor child be placed in daycare all the time”—is indicative of the entrenched outsider relationship that Ms. A experiences. There are no professional grounds provided to justify why or how her son would be considered a ‘poor child’ for attending an after-school care center.¹⁰⁰ This criticism can therefore be seen more as a moral judgment, reinforcing the standards of the established group, rather than a professional evaluation. In turn, this notion can also be used to show how social canons¹⁰¹ of ‘good’ parenting are gendered in a class-typifying manner in the interest of the school. Consequently, the school can function as a public authority that promotes logical and moral conformism to the

99 | Cf. *ibid.*, 18ff.

100 | Cf. Röhr-Sendlmeier, 2012, 288.

101 | Cf. Elias, 2022.

normal family model, using all physical, structural, and symbolic means for its own interests, as Bourdieu argues.¹⁰²

From the school's perspective, parents are judged based on the family structures they live in. In summary, Ms. A's school-related experiences can be seen as an illustration of the state's perspective on families in Austria. The structural and everyday practices that reinforce nationalized views on families within primary schools serve as a prerequisite "for the very functioning of the family [...], the so-called private reality of public origin".¹⁰³ Ms. A has come to understand the extent to which "the private is a public matter".¹⁰⁴

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102 | Cf. Bourdieu, 1998, 126-140.

103 | Bourdieu 1998, 135.

104 | Ibid., 136.

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