



Time Poverty or Time Welfare in Austrian Families? Impact of family factors on children's school achievements

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This Policy Brief illustrates the main findings of the European Centre's research projects "PISA & Patchwork-Childhood. Parents' Time Use and Children's School Achievements" and "Do Children Count? Time Use of Parents with School-aged Children" (both studies were commissioned by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Social Affairs and Consumer Protection)

Background

It seems that in today's fast-paced and globalised world, time has become a precious commodity. The number of people reporting time poverty and stress has increased, as has the amount of advice on how to use time efficiently. Time plays a significant role, in particular in the lives of families. As children grow older, their need for time spent together with their parents decreases; however, they demand attention from their parents and want them to be available for them.

But often, the media show parents who are stressed out and overburdened; this image is often linked with pictures showing hurried and/or neglected children. For example, the so-called PISA shock triggered debates on Austria's relatively low score, which put the country's education policy and parents' responsibility for the comparatively low results of their children to the fore. What was then blamed for this was the concern about the negative impact of increasing divorce rates and affluent neglect as well as parents' lack of time. To date, however, there has not been much scientific research into time poverty of Austrian families.



Current studies

The European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research has carried out two studies (Kränzl-Nagl et al. 2006 a,b) on whether today's parents have enough time for their children and/or provide sufficient support (for their children's achievements in school) focusing on:

1. the time spent by parents with their children of compulsory school age and
2. the links between family factors and school achievements.

Research design: national and international data on the views of parents and children

National and international data was analysed and surveys were carried out among Austria's parents with children of compulsory school age (9 to 14), which could be put into context with the data taken from surveys carried out simultaneously among these students. The analysis of national data comprised a (child-related) analysis of micro-census data (2002/4) and EU-SILC data 2003 as well as analysis of up-to-date reports and trend data on the recreational habits of parents with children aged 0 to 14¹. The analysis of international data comprised PISA data² of 2003 and data³ taken from the study „Young Voices“ (UNICEF 2002).

Why are today's families under time pressure?

The causes for parents' time pressure are complex

There is a range of reasons why families have problems coordinating their time. On the one hand, there are changes in the field of work, such as working times and locations becoming more flexible and an increasing number of types of work, which is closely linked with an increasing shift of responsibility towards employees and which takes up time originally reserved for recreation and leisure activities. On the other hand, parents, in particular mothers, are under time pressure because in countries like Austria and Germany, despite increasing labour market participation of mothers and changes in the roles of mothers and fathers, the time organization of schools is still oriented towards the male-breadwinner model, where at least one parent is available in the afternoon.

Is it true that parents do not have enough time for their children?

In spite of their coordination problems, Austria's parents, in particular mothers, are trying to meet their children's need for time spent together with them. The majority of the parents seem to be quite successful



Parents try to have sufficient time for their children, but 1 out of 10 children wants to spend more time with their parents in doing so: most children are satisfied with the amount of time their parents devote to them on weekdays. Approximately 1 out of 10 Austrian children aged 9 to 14, however, would like to spend more time with their parents. Analysing the data taken from the study “Young Voices” has shown similar results: 11% of the Austrian 9 to 17-year-olds want more time with their parents; the average in the 14 countries in which the survey was carried out is 9%. According to this, it is mainly the younger children and girls who miss time spent together with their parents.

Children are more satisfied with the time their parents devote to them than the parents The survey carried out in 2005 makes it clear that parents are more critical of themselves as far as the amount of time they have available for their children is concerned than the children themselves. Whereas mothers and fathers would like to spend more time than is possible with their children on weekdays, only a small proportion of the children surveyed were not satisfied with the amount of time spent together with their parents: 28% of the mothers and 51% of the fathers are not at all or only slightly satisfied with the time they spend with their children on weekdays. However, only 7% of the children are not satisfied with the time of their mother, and 27% are not satisfied with the time of their father on weekdays.

A moderate degree of gainful employment of parents is best for children of school age The least satisfied are children whose parents are under heavy job pressure, and those children whose parents work little and whose mothers report financial bottleneck situations. As a result, a “moderate” degree of gainful employment is most likely to meet the needs of children for time with their parents and is supposed to contribute to the economic security of the family as well as providing a well-balanced degree of control and freedom. The discrepancies between the answers given by the mothers and fathers and those given by their children point to the fact that adolescents do not need their parents’ permanent presence, but do need parents who are available when needed.

Are parents competent supply teachers?

Austria’s parents, in particular mothers, devote much time to studying with their kids Parents in Austria devote a significant amount of time to “studying” with their kids, in particular if their children attend primary schools organised as half-day school. It has been shown that (in all analysed levels of school from levels 4 to 8) approx. 70% of the mothers spend up to 3 hours a week studying with their children and a further 19% devote more than 3 hours a week to studying with their kids. In two-parent families, 60%



of the fathers also spend up to 3 hours a week supporting their children with school-work and a further 6% devote even more than 3 hours a week to providing school-related support.

Like the answers given by the parents, the answers of their children (aged between 9 and 14) have shown that a proportion of the parents spend a significant amount of time studying with their children: 17% of the children stated that their parents “help them with school-work (almost) every day”; 45% stated that “sometimes their parents provide support”. Only a minority of 12% stated that this is never the case; in 25% of the cases, parents provide help when asked to do so by their children.

The amount of time devoted to studying together is highest at primary school level

Generally speaking, the amount of time invested in providing support for school-related issues is highest when children attend primary school and decreases as the child grows older. The greater amount of time invested in the fourth level of education can be explained by the fact that parents step up their efforts in this last level before their children start secondary education at the age of 10, which internationally speaking is relatively young. The fact that less support is provided by parents for older students can be explained by the children’s increasing degree of independence and by the academic topics that become more and more complex and difficult, which is why the number of private tutor lessons increases as the students become older.

Children do not always benefit from studying with their parents

There have been critical discussions (also among experts) about the significance of this targeted support provided by the family for the child’s achievements in school. It is questioned whether (all) parents have enough competence for providing adequate help. The results of the survey carried out among parents prove that this question was worth asking: 27% of the mothers and 21% of the fathers felt that the academic topics were partly very difficult. 20% of the 9 to 14-year-olds answered that studying together with their parents was not very or not at all helpful.



How much influence do families have on their children's achievements in school?

- Family structure and degree of gainful employment have no impact on children's success in school** Contrary to public opinion that children's achievements in school depend on the school's quality and the teachers' commitment, and failure and divergent behaviour result from a non-supportive family background, it has been shown that it is not so much the structural features of the family such as its composition which influences the achievements of children and adolescents. It is in line with other studies that neither (significant) differences regarding the type of the family nor the degree of gainful employment of the mother could be identified as having an impact on the children's marks and success or how they cope with the requirements in school.
- Socio-economic situation of the families and a background of migration have an influence** According to the re-analysis of the data of the PISA study of 2003 carried out in 2006, educational aspirations, a positive self-image and, in particular, the socio-economic background of the family have direct and indirect (via the available cultural resources) impact on the (analysed) performance. Likewise, there are direct and indirect connections with a background of migration. This outcome applies to all seven countries compared by the data of the PISA study of 2003 (Austria, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland, The Netherlands) and again confirms the relevance of the socio-economic background and cultural resources for children's success in school.
- Atmosphere within the family, parenting style and a positive and supportive relationship between parent and child are of significance** Moreover, re-analysing the data of the study "Young Voices" by UNICEF has supported the thesis that, apart from the type of family, a harmonious atmosphere in the family and emotionally involved parents are conducive to the children's success and well-being. A positive attitude towards school in the children and adolescents surveyed is linked to a positive relationship with their parents and a "well-regulated" atmosphere in the family, with prohibitions and regulations (e.g. concerning watching TV) as well as having a say in family matters and being treated appreciatively. These results, in turn, confirm existing reports that the parenting style has an influence on the child's success at school, in particular by way of planning and controlling the amount of time spent watching TV, helping with the homework as well as talking about school matters.



Conclusions and policy recommendations

Problems of reconciling family and job are different for mothers and fathers, various types of family constellations and depend on job opportunities and perspectives; therefore, measures taken in the field of family policy must be specific to the individual target groups. Couples where both partners have various job options and development perspectives face different challenges from couples or lone-parent families working in an unstable job. What is required are combined monetary and structural measures which take into account the specific needs of families.

The greater the percentage of one-parent families, families where both parents work and children with a background of migration, the more significance solutions to questions of reconciliation have. To this end, school must be included in the debates on matters of reconciliation and has so far been largely neglected in traditionally oriented countries. Promoting all-day schools and day care as well as extracurricular institutions cooperating with schools (such as after-school clubs) would not only contribute to achieving equal opportunities, but also to relieving (gainfully employed) parents and contribute to keeping family time free of such burdens.

If we take the children's wishes concerning the working time policy seriously, better conditions and opportunities are required so that parents can coordinate working times and care times so that they can be there for their children when needed.

The outcomes of both studies prove again that children and adolescents – depending on their social and migrational background – often face different familial conditions regarding their educational perspectives and the way in which they are supported by their parents. Wealthier parents are more likely to be able to afford support in coping with the requirements at school as well as to have access to extracurricular recreation and leisure institutions than less wealthy families. Furthermore, cultural and social resources support abilities and skills in varying degrees, which is expected in the existing school system. As has been shown in more recent works on the significance of families in the field of education policy, families are not only a prerequisite and help develop skills for learning in school, but also parents play a crucial role in helping their children.



Therefore, equal opportunities can only be put into practice if educational reforms not only focus on school, but also recognize the efforts of families who are limited to financial and cultural resources and time and support them in performing the way they are expected to.

Against this background, a new and comprehensive attitude toward education is required which involves as many players as possible and takes into account the different aspects of gaining skills and knowledge. Apart from political conditions to help parents reconcile family and working life, a new way of thinking is required. It must not be the private matter of the “affected” people themselves or a luxury whether families in the future will have more time or not. Families are very important care providers and parts of society. Therefore, their financial well-being as well as their well-being concerning their time, their time welfare, is in the interest of the whole of society. Finally, political measures which support these aims are not only good for the parents, but also for their children.

References

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Further Reading

Kränzl-Nagl, Renate/Beham, Martina (2007): Wieviel Elternzeit brauchen Schulkinder? Zeitwohlstand oder Zeitnotstand in Österreichischen Familien aus der Sicht von Müttern, Vätern und Kindern. In: ZS Kinderschutz Aktiv (Hg. vom Österr. Kinderschutzbund), Wien, Heft Nr. 75, 20. Jg., September 2007, 3-5 (in German)

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Notes

1 These data have been provided by the Institute for Leisure and Tourism Research in Vienna.

2 The following countries have been regarded in the secondary analysis of the 2003 PISA data: Austria, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland.

3 The special analysis of the UNICEF data made use of the replies of 9-to-17-year-olds from the following 14 countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.



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