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The differentiation of family and school education: historical conditions and current tensions

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ABSTRACT

The genesis of the education system is linked with the rapid expansion of school education in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The genesis of the education system therefore brought about a primary form of differentiation in the education system, viz. the differentiation between family and school. Family education and school education can be seen as differentiated units of a more encompassing unit. This paper explores changes in the relationship between these subsystems with the help of systems theory. We particularly discuss tensions between families and schools that have emerged in recent decades as a consequence of the growing societal impact and status of formal schooling. Highlighting the heterogeneity that exists within the education system, we argue that loose coupling, instead of strict coupling, may have major advantages for the primary subsystems of the education system. In the concluding section, we call for more careful reflections within the education system on the pressures and tensions between its primary subsystems.

Introduction

'What shall I do with my son?' With this question, John Locke began in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, originally published in 1693, a discussion about the deficits and merits of the prevailing educational settings. He asked, more precisely, whether boys, destined to be gentlemen, should be educated privately at home or publicly at school. Conceding that 'both sides have their Inconveniences' (Locke, 1752, p. 76), he emphasized that the inconveniences of public education far outweighed its benefits. At school, masters had too many boys to look after, and could not be expected to 'instruct them Successfully in anything, but their Books' (Locke, 1752, p. 81). Schools could not suitably prepare for the moral values and social order Locke believed in: 'He that considers how diametrically opposite the Skill of living well … is to that Malepertness, Tricking, or Violence, learnt among School-Boys, will think the Faults of a private Education infinitely to be preferred' (Locke, 1752, p. 78). For noble families that could afford it for their sons, Locke argued, education in the family (mostly with governors) was to be preferred to education in schools.

At the end of the seventeenth century, Locke did not present a new view on the deficits of school education and the merits of family education, but rather defended an established, early-modern understanding of the social importance of the family. To send a child to a school was thought to reflect unfavourably on its family. Schools were a symptom of the family's failure. They existed only for the benefit of irresponsible parents or unusually recalcitrant children.

In nations characterized by strong social hierarchies, such as the UK, such views have persisted for quite a long time (Musgrove, 1966). Altogether, however, we now live in a quite different world, and, if we would want to pose Locke's question again, we would first of all have to rephrase it. It is no longer acceptable to distinguish between the education of boys and girls – and to give priority to the education of our boys. In addition, the question 'What shall I do with my children?' is likely to be answered in a different way. In many parts of the world, the answer has become something like: to make sure that children have a good education, we send them to a good school – and also: to a good university. Families are nowadays under pressure to make significant financial efforts for the schooling of their offspring. If one considers the options, it might be said, paraphrasing Locke, that the faults of school and university education are nowadays infinitely preferred.

This does not mean, however, that schools and universities have become the only (or the major) setting within which education takes place. The family and the school must rather be perceived as different, but co-existing settings. At times, the boundaries between both settings may be blurred, as in the case of

homeschooling, which is the education of 'school-aged' children at home, and which has emerged in a number of countries as a legal alternative to schooling. In traditional boarding schools, on the other hand, children live during large parts of the school year within the premises of their school and thus away from their families. Altogether, however, it is reasonable *not* to see the family and the school/university as opposites or alternatives, but rather as different subsystems of an internally differentiated system of education, and to depict family education and school education as differentiated units of a more encompassing system (Tyrell, 1985, 1987).

Differentiation is widespread within the education system, especially at the school level. It can, for example, be linked to aspects such as age/maturity, student achievement, or differences between topics. But this paper particularly looks at characteristics of what might be considered the primary form of differentiation in the education system, namely, the differentiation between the family and the school. The following section particularly focuses on the formation of the 'modern' education system and the ways in which the expansion of school education has contributed to this process. Next we try to clarify the relationship between both primary subsystems – the family and the school – in terms of strict and loose coupling. Afterwards we look at some of the tensions between the family and the school, which have emerged in recent decades as a consequence of the growing societal status of formal education within schools and universities. In the concluding section, we point to the need for more sensible or careful reflections on the changing relations and the tensions between the primary subsystems of the education system.

In theoretical terms, we distinguish between two types of differentiation processes, namely the differentiation of the education system within modern society, and the internal differentiation of the education system. Both types of differentiation processes – at the level of society and at the level of the education system – are related to one another, and the complexities of this relation are of central interest to the following reflections. At both levels, differentiation processes may also be complemented by, and depend on, processes of integration. We do, however, not assume that the differentiated subunits (have to) build a well-integrated system. Our focus is not on the unity, coherence or 'systemness' of the differentiated systems, whether at the level of society or of the education system. We rather direct attention to the heterogeneity and difference that may exist within complex, differentiated systems. Against that background, we hereafter contrast the views of Talcott Parsons, on the one hand, and Niklas Luhmann, on the other. Building upon the work of Luhmann, we also try to demonstrate that loose coupling, in contrast to the strict coupling which is mostly characteristic of well-integrated systems, may have significant advantages for the differentiated

subsystems, both at the level of society and of the education system.[1]

Differentiation of/in the education system

Although different forms of public education already existed, it should not come as a surprise that private education, in the sense of education in the household setting by the parents or living-in governors, received much support under the *Ancien Régime*. In the social order in which Locke lived and in which *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* needs to be situated, the upper ranks of society were generally held responsible for maintaining their own traditions and status. Because the family household was perceived as the most appropriate setting to learn what was important for maintaining the family household itself, as well as the social order within which it had to fulfil an important function, education was almost naturally seen to belong within the family (Stichweh, 1991, pp. 51–58). Within this highly stratified social setting, it also seemed evident that only the 'defective' family household needed to send its children to a public school.

The transitions which led to the fall of the *Ancien Régime* created new expectations and new opportunities for education. It is mostly argued that the prospects for education began to change in the eighteenth century, especially in reaction to the differentiation of other systems, such as politics, the economy, religion and science (e.g. Smelser & Halpern, 1978; Vanderstraeten, 2006). As Luhmann argued, the differentiation of the system for education was triggered by the breakthrough of a new form of differentiation. But Luhmann also questioned the 'rationality' of this arrangement: 'As with the completion of a puzzle, the pieces that have already been differentiated (from the others) have a suggestive influence on what can possibly and must necessarily be connected to them. But, unlike with a puzzle, it is not certain from the outset that a complete picture will be produced or that it will be understandable as a whole' (Luhmann & Schorr, 1988, p. 24).

Education can take place within different kinds of social structure. From Luhmann's perspective, the formation of the modern system of education was first of all dependent on a redefinition of education. Similar to his analyses of a number of other modern systems, Luhmann argued that the institutionalization of inclusion ideals and inclusion imperatives constituted a central moment in the differentiation of the education system. He referred to the diffusion of the idea of general education, of education for all, and plans to introduce compulsory education, but also built on the literature on the 'invention' or 'discovery' of the child (see also Ariès, 1960; Snyders, 1965).

The discovery of the child refers, more particularly, to a process at the completion of which the child is no longer viewed as an incomplete adult who lives in the same world as adults do, who grows into this world and who therefore can be educated (i.e. completed) by adults, but who does not necessarily need systematic education in order to become a human. Instead, the child is held to be a specific type of human being, who lives in a specific type of world and who is naturally responsive to education (for example, by being curious), but who also makes education difficult because it lacks good reason and is at the mercy of its own whims and weaknesses (e.g. Morelly, 1745, pp. 33–53; Rousseau, 1991). Such a re-description could serve to underline the need for an appropriate and stimulating educational milieu. The eighteenth century's fascination for the *enfants sauvages* or the 'wolf children' (such as Victor of Aveyron or Kaspar Hauser), for example, signifies first of all an interest in the optimal conditions of educational interaction. As the child was not be treated in the same way and with the same means as an adult, the social invention of the child could also explain the need for specialized educational approaches, special criteria, special equipment, etc. Trapp (1977, p. 21), for example, who was the first university professor in education in history, argued from this perspective that education was an art of its own that needed to be practiced by its own professionals.

The invention of the child thus allowed for the elaboration of new kinds of distinctions, of new ways to imagine and practice education.[2] At the same time, it seems evident that this new way of looking at education is linked with the growth of the number of schools, i.e. organizations which primarily focus on education, and with the introduction of compulsory schooling for all. Although there might be a wide variety of educational moments within families, the family setting hardly provides support for intensive and long-term processes of learning. Families rather can be seen as 'multifunctional' units, which have to balance different demands and expectations. By contrast, schools and school classes seem better able to provide long-term support for specialization and differentiation. This structural setting makes it relatively easy to see education as a distinct social unity, as a system in its own right. The expansion of schooling, and the introduction of mandatory schooling for all, may also be seen to demarcate the difference with early-modern realities and the prominent position of family households in the social order of the *Ancien Régime*.[3]

After the introduction of compulsory schooling, every child had to go to school. For nearly every child, education has since come to take place in different settings, in the family and in school. It has become common to describe education in the family and in the school as complementary, successive phases of long-lasting processes of education. In the sociological literature, it is often argued that elements of 'primary socialization' in the family and 'secondary socialization' in school organizations build upon one another (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 120–135). But it might be useful to look more carefully at the ways in which the different systems adapt to one another, and whether and how they are integrated within an encompassing unity.

As already indicated before, discussions of differentiation processes can look in two directions. On the one hand, the question is whether and how the system of education fits within our modern, highly differentiated type of society. On the other hand, the question is how families and schools adapt to one another, when both settings take responsibility for 'the child'. Of course, education has remained important in the modern family. Most families strongly orient themselves to their children's school performances. But schools have also developed ways to involve families, and especially parents, in the curricular and extracurricular activities which they organize. However, the relationship between the family and the school deserves closer attention. The complexities of this relationship need to be explored in more historical and sociological detail. In this light, we hereafter look at the relationship between the family and the school/university against the background of the differentiation of the education system in modern society.

Strict and loose coupling

In the second half of the twentieth century, Talcott Parsons probably provided the classic account of the 'systemness' of socialization and education in modern society (e.g. Parsons, 1959; Parsons & Bales, 1956; Parsons & Platt, 1973). The family and the school were, in his view, complementary subunits of the modern education system, which both contributed to the same system goal. By and large, these two subunits corresponded with two phases in the entire process: primary socialization takes place in the family, where newcomers learn the 'particular' values of their family and community, while secondary socialization through the school should acquaint them more strongly with society's 'universalistic' value orientations (Parsons, 1959). And Parsons did not expect much tension between the value orientations of these systems, as they 'have similar functions' (Parsons & Bales, 1956, p. 399). 'Probably the most fundamental condition underlying this process [of socialization and education] is the sharing of common values by the two adult agencies involved – the family and the school' (Parsons, 1959, p. 309).

Parsons argued, moreover, that formal schooling was gaining importance in modern society, not only because 'universalistic' value orientations were becoming more prominent, but also because schools were increasingly operating as the 'principal springboard … [to] the labor force' (Parsons, 1959, p. 313). From the perspective of a meritocratic society, it may be both functional and justified that schools sift and sort people into their 'appropriate' jobs. In this light, schools could fulfil important selection and allocation functions. 'From society's point of view', Parsons maintained, a crucial function of the process of formal education at the secondary and higher level is 'a selection and allocation of its human resources relative to the adult role system' (Parsons, 1959, p. 309).

Within this approach, the basic features of schools are believed to correspond with the basic features of our modern society. Such expectations also feature in a number of 'Parsonian' studies that deal in more detail with the relationship between the family and the school. Robert Dreeben, for example, sketched in *On What is Learned in School* (Dreeben, 1968) the unique role of the school in preparing children for adulthood. What children learn in school, by means of the official *and* the hidden curriculum, serves in this perspective as a bridge from the limitations of family-centred behaviour to the behaviour of adults in society. Even the limitations and 'uneducational' effects of schools, such as those that follow from the fact that 'student crowds' limit the activities that can be pursued in classrooms and the roles that teachers can assume (sergeant, gatekeeper, privilege granter, participation signaller, etc.), do seem to fulfil a function for the 'unpersonal' type of society that became dominant in the 1950s and 1960s (see also Jackson, 1968).

From this perspective, there is also little doubt about the leading role that schools (have to) take within the modern education system. Schooling has rightfully modified the expectations with regard to parenting and education within family contexts. For example, participation in school education typically upgrades the status of children in their family, if only because schools confer upon them a particular status – as pupil or student with particular duties, responsibilities and obligations (such as 'home work') – to which their families have to give due attention. Parents are expected to orient themselves to the expectations of schools and school teachers and provide support to their 'schoolchildren'. Despite important differences between both units, it is in other words not expected that differentiation stands in the way of unity or 'systemness'. Following Parsons, the expansion of the school system did upgrade the function which socialization and education – both in the family and in the school – could fulfil within modern society.

Although (or because?) Luhmann had been a student of Parsons in the early 1960s, he contrasted his own approach with that of Parsons (see Vanderstraeten, 2019, 2022). Luhmann did not dispute that the introduction of compulsory schooling for all constituted the main trigger of the differentiation of the education system, but he emphasized both the differences between the education system and its societal environment, and the differences between the subunits (family and school) of the education system. Referring to research about the hidden curriculum, for example, he argued that the characteristic structures of school classes are quite different from those of most other social settings: the numerical inequality between one teacher and a large group of students of about the same age, the asymmetrical role relations between the teacher and the pupils, the strict temporal order of the school year and the schooldays (often determined by the school bell), the strong focus on the curricula that need to be learned, etc. In other words, school classes are no 'microcosms' of modern society, but do have their own distinctive features. They have differentiated themselves from their environment. And in this light, the most pressing sociological question perhaps first of all is "how and with which repercussions and countermovements the social environment of the education system can cope with the socialization and education processes in schools" (Luhmann & Schorr, 1988, p. 26; see also Luhmann, 1984, pp. 643–645, 2002, pp. 102–110).

Tensions between the family and the school are from this perspective also expected, especially after the expansion of school education. The educational literature of the eighteenth century constitutes in certain regards a goldmine of reflections on the relation between the family and the school. One doubted, for example, whether school teachers would be able to exercise the kind of 'natural' authority that was thought to be required when there were no 'blood-ties' between them and their students. Problems of trust were also dealt with from this perspective, especially in respect to how the mistakes of school teachers stand out more and are less easily excused than those of parents (e.g. Ehlers, 1766). But it was at the same time argued that teachers could compensate for the lack of a natural basis of authority and trust on the basis of their educational competencies and the careful selection of the subject matter included in the school curricula. Professionalization became an important topic (e.g. Trapp, 1977) and discussions of the professionalism of school teachers and the lack of professionalism of parents would redefine the relation between the family and the school (see Luhmann & Schorr, 1988).

But it should also be added that much less attention was given to the disjunction between the family and the school in the nineteenth century. Samuel

Wilderspin, for example, one of the pioneers of the infant school movement in England in the first half of the nineteenth century, no longer contrasted the family and the school, but rather focused on 'the evil [... which occurs when children] are suffered to pass their time in the streets, without any one to protect or control them' (Wilderspin, 1852, p. 20). As most working-class parents were not able to invest much time in their children, the choice was not between the school and the family, but between the school and the streets. Schools were necessary, if only because 'the child is deprived, during the whole of the day, of the controlling presence of a parent, and is exposed to all the poisonous contamination which the streets of the large cities afford' (ibid.). Under the pressure of such external threats, collaboration between families and schools could of course easily be expected. But, in as far as this internal 'division of labor' seemed more or less natural, the differences and tensions between both settings also disappeared as topics of reflection within the educational literature.

The subsystems of the education system seem to operate largely independent from one another.[4] Altogether, there are not that many points of 'structural coupling' between the family and the school. One can think, for example, of the ritual of the family-school evenings in primary and secondary schools. Occasional encounters at the school gate at either the start or the end of the school day may constitute an alternative kind of exchange between parents and teachers. Other initiatives to increase parental involvement in schools are also undertaken (Fine & Carlson, 1992). But since the 1960s, a wide variety of compensatory education programmes, designed to compensate for the shortcomings of 'poor families' and to help 'at-risk' children, illustrates that schools have become able to redefine education (see Beatty, 2012). These interventions have, moreover, not remained limited to 'at-risk' families and children. In many other regards, schools are now able to exercise pressure on the family, thereby reducing the family to some kind of preparatory function, whose yardstick, as far as education is concerned, ultimately is their children's success at school (Luhmann, 2002, p. 111). Hereafter, we therefore pay closer attention to the growing status of schooling within modern society, and try to shed light on the changes that have in recent decades taken place in the structural coupling between the subsystems of the education system.

Dominance of schooling

As indicated before, differentiation depends on inclusion ideals and inclusion imperatives. In the case of education, legislation on the introduction of mandatory mass schooling was, as Francisco Ramirez and John Boli once observed, 'adopted in virtually every Western European country in the "long" nineteenth century, from Prussia (1763) to Belgium (1914)' (1987, p. 3).[5] With the massive expansion of school education, school education became a normal, almost natural element within the life course of large parts of the population throughout the entire world. The school has come to dominate the ways in which education is currently conceived of. A number of examples may illustrate the gradually shifting relationships between the school and the family.

It should, first, be remarked that school participation has long been limited in time. In many parts of the world, the majority of each new generation was long not included after the compulsory school age. In 1961, for example, more than two-thirds of the total adult population of a typical modern country such as Belgium had only completed primary education and had left school at the age of 14 (which was in Belgium at that time the mandatory school age) (see Vanderstraeten & Van der Gucht, 2023). In many parts of the world, school participation has however expanded rapidly in the past decades. Not only has enrolment in primary and secondary education become in many places compulsory, but enrolments in postsecondary institutions have also grown apace. The proportion of an age cohort going on from secondary school graduation to higher education is nowadays often more than 50 per cent – a situation historically unprecedented (Baker, 2014). We might also say that inclusion pressures have in recent decades reached the level of tertiary education.

In the same period of time, a variety of phenomena related to these inclusion pressures can be observed. As a consequence of the expansion of school education, for example, the distinction between high- and low-schooled individuals has acquired special importance. Because it has become almost self-evident to participate in tertiary education, it has also become problematic *not* to finish school and graduate. Early school leaving has become perceived as a form of failure, just as university graduation now equalizes success. In this sense, the 'school dropout' is now the opposite of the university graduate. However, it should be noted that the 'school dropout' did become a 'social problem' at precisely the time when the number of people dropping out of school was declining sharply. It is thus not an 'objective' problem, identified on the basis of longitudinal statistical data series; the perceived problem rather is an identification of deviant behaviour, of not living up to the changing expectations. It is a consequence of the growing pressure to finish school or university and graduate. Inclusion pressures in the education system bring about new problems of

exclusion (see Baker, 2014; Dorn, 1996; Vanderstraeten & Van der Gucht, 2023). And they do not only lead to the stigmatization of various 'at-risk' parts of the population, but also serve to legitimate all kinds of intervention programmes (see Wilson et al., 2011).[6]

New legal and political tools to enforce school inclusion have also been put to use. While school participation is still mandatory, the support for schooling has reached another level. Families and parents are now not only expected to foster positive attitudes towards schooling, but are also held responsible for exclusion problems, especially in the case of truancy, i.e. unauthorized and illegal absenteeism from school. Fighting truancy was and still is legitimized as a way to contribute to the improvement of school success. National policies with regard to the problem of truancy differ, but if pupils are absent from school for a long period of time, their parents can be fined in a wide range of countries. Local child services or social services officers may in some cases even petition a court to remove child custody from the parents (see, e.g. Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). A child's exclusion from its family of origin is in other words legally possible in order to ensure its inclusion in schools. In a broader sense, the label of 'at-risk families' or 'problem families' is used for families which provide insufficient support for the school attainments of their children.

There is, moreover, mounting evidence from a range of 'value studies' that the support for school education is becoming widely institutionalized within contemporary society. International studies, which focus on what adult members of society believe and value about education, have in the past decades consistently found that most adults agree that schooling is *the* legitimate way to prepare for life, and that educational achievement is generally a fair and uncontroversial way to determine responsibilities in the economy and commensurate rewards in adulthood. And, not surprisingly, adults with more exposure (attainment) to the institution of education hold the strongest beliefs in its legitimating authority within contemporary society. At the same time, moreover, the social legitimacy of non-schooled and family-based forms of social status is increasingly contested (for a balanced overview of the literature, see Baker et al., 2024). While the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century is at times called the 'era of human capital investment', with educational expenditures being among the top public investments and with school administrators, teachers, and professors representing the largest occupation in the white-collar labour force (Goldin & Katz, 2008), these value studies show that the greater public and private investments in schooling go along with, and rely on,

the growing institutionalization of beliefs in the value of schools and of school education as 'just' and legitimate source of authority in society.

Interventions during the recent COVID-19 pandemic provide other, specific examples of the ways in which the relationship between the family and the school is changing. As we are all familiar with, lockdowns have been carried out in order to reduce the spread of the virus all around the world. As 'social distancing' seemed required, various social practices came under pressure. Schools and universities were closed, partly or entirely, and 'life in classrooms' (Jackson, 1968) did come to a halt. Many responsibilities were transferred to the family, where neither face masks nor 'social distancing' seemed required. Driven by technical possibilities and perceived biomedical risks, rather than by concerns about the specific merits of family life and family education, parents were forced to oversee that their children learn at home what their school teachers expect them to learn. Such interventions were not only driven by highly simplified ideas about school education – as if, for example, education is only about the official curriculum, not about the hidden curriculum. As in the case of truancy politics, they are also based on highly simplified and 'normalized' views about the family – as if, for example, only highly stable family relations exist and parents do not have irregular working hours or children may not live in blended families, etc. Altogether, the ways in which families have been overburdened by the interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic testify again to the perceived importance of schooling at the political level.

Following ideas presented by Lewis Coser (1974), it might be tempting to characterize schools as 'greedy institutions', while they are able to extend their grasp on other institutions, to enforce their own definitions of the situation on a variety of other social settings. Rather than fitting within existing social structures, the school system seems able to assert its wide-ranging social relevance. In several sociological analyses, the growing importance of schooling in modern society has been emphasized. Randall Collins, for example, has spoken of the modern 'credential society', in which educational credentials constitute formal requirements for entry into a broad range of positions (Collins, 1979). Others have added that the expansion of school participation supports a belief which gives legitimacy to schooling and which pushes aside other, non-schooled sources of know-how. Recurrence to family-based social capital has in many contexts become taboo, because it is considered socially unjust. More than before, it can be argued, scholarly determined status is seen as providing a legitimate social hierarchy (see esp. Baker, 2014; Frank & Meyer, 2020).

It probably goes too far to characterize our contemporary society as a 'schooled society' (Baker, 2014), but it should be seen that the increasing societal legitimacy and status of schooling affects the internal differentiation of the education system. The ways in which the 'output' of the system of education is valued within its societal environment puts pressure on the relations between the school and the family. It reduces the range of options available or imaginable within this system and forces the family into a preparatory or support function for schools (Tyrell, 1985, 1987). The relation between the primary subsystems of the education system is again shifting. Schools now almost naturally export their standards to their social environment, especially to families.

Conclusion

In early-modern Europe, family households played an important social role. Noble families were expected to take care of the upraising of their children (and especially of their sons, who had to assume responsibility for maintaining the family household and its social position). Even in the eighteenth century, the 'good' parent typically was not the one who sent her/his child to school, but the one who did not. The embeddedness of education within existing household structures lost its legitimacy in the modern era, however. The expansion of schooling, which began in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth century, not only constituted a reaction to changing expectations at the level of society, but also led to an important new form of differentiation within the system of education, namely the differentiation between the family and the school.

In the literature, the integration of, or the strict coupling between, these primary subsystems is often believed necessary in order to optimize the role which education can fulfil within modern society. This point of view is not often questioned; available conceptual distinctions – such as the distinction between 'primary socialization' and 'secondary socialization' – hardly allow us to articulate the basis of the tensions between both subsystems. Inspired by the work of Bourdieu or Bernstein, much ongoing research about the relation between families and schools, and, more particularly between family background and school achievements, also presupposes high degrees of correspondence between families and schools. Using the ideas of differentiation and loose coupling, however, we have on the foregoing pages tried to discuss in a bit more detail the basic structure underlying the tensions that currently exist between these subsystems.

The rapid expansion of school education at the secondary and higher level, which started in the second half of the twentieth century, changed the relationship between the family and the school. As signalled by the success of programmes to introduce compensatory education (such as Head Start in the US), the school system has increasingly become able to impose its own standards and values on its environment (especially on so-called at-risk families and their children). As human capital theory (which equally originated in the 1960s) underlined, financial and career goals had to press youngsters and their parents to invest in school education, to 'go for it', and to adapt family life accordingly. Other examples that we discussed in this paper, such as policies aimed at fighting truancy or school dropout, also illustrate that the school system has in the past decades come to dominate the education system. In many regards, families are nowadays expected to adapt and give support to demands and expectations of the school system. The societal visibility and status of schooling is increasingly changing the relation between the family and the school. The 'value' of family education is increasingly measured in terms of the children's school success.

The ensuing differentiation problems might be difficult to solve within the education system. But it might be helpful to take into consideration that social integration does not have to be equated with forms of strict coupling, or with strict adherence to a set of shared values and norms. Loosely coupled subsystems might constitute well integrated systems, because loose coupling limits the pressures which the subsystems are able to elicit on one other. In this sense, loose coupling might be instrumental in protecting the *Eigenlogik* or autonomy of the different subsystems. Decoupling and loose coupling might thus help us to address the inequality between both subsystems. Loose coupling between the family and the school also creates more space for children. Children might not only learn from the *Eigenlogik* of the different subsystems within which education takes place, but also from the differences between these subsystems. They might learn to develop themselves, to do it their own way, so to speak, despite the demands of the different social systems in which they participate (Luhmann, 2002; Vanderstraeten, 2022). The increasing societal status of schools and schooling might be applauded within the education system, but the ensuing social pressures on education within the family deserve more attention than they currently receive.

Some of the pressing problems of modern society are problems which emerge from the fact that our society imagines itself as a system – highly integrated, well regulated, carefully planned and responsibly engineered. But systems do not have to be conceived of as entities that (try to) control everything inside themselves. Focusing on system differentiation and loose coupling is a way to reflect on and appreciate the heterogeneity and functional diversity within

social systems. In the case of the primary differentiation within the education system, there certainly are a range of good pedagogical reasons for protecting the underlying social differences.

Notes

1. This paper is based on my keynote address to the conference 'Differentiation Renaissance: Revisiting a Powerful and Multilayered Concept of Education' at Uppsala University in June 2022. I am grateful to the organizers of the conference for the way they borne with me. An earlier version of this paper appeared in the journal *Soziale Systeme* (Vanderstraeten, 2020).
2. Given the growing importance of education which is not directed at 'the child' (such as lifelong learning or adult education), it might be useful to give more attention to the construction of 'the learner' and the ways in which education has become connected with people's entire life course (Luhmann, 2002; see also the recent discussion in Brosziewski, 2023).
3. At times, Luhmann fully focused on the introduction of compulsory schooling. In an early, programmatic text on the differentiation of society, for example, he wrote: 'If the society introduces compulsory school education for everyone, if every person regardless of his being nobleman or commoner, being Christian, Jewish, or Moslem, being infant or adult, is subject to the same legal status, if "the public" is provided with a political function as electorate, if every individual is acknowledged as choosing or not choosing a religious commitment; and if everybody can buy everything and pursue every occupation, given the necessary resources, then the whole system shifts in the direction of functional differentiation' (Luhmann, 1977, p. 40).
4. Inspiring as their approaches are in other respects, the work of Basil Bernstein and that of Pierre Bourdieu does not address these differences in a systematic way. Both Bernstein (with his focus on language codes) and Bourdieu (with his concern about the reproduction of social distinctions) stress, on the one hand, the difference between existing family and school structures. But, on the other hand, they both also assume much correspondence between these systems, particularly for the privileged parts of the population. They assume a 'differential' fit between the language code or habitus of families with different class backgrounds and the official and dominant school cultures (e.g. Bernstein, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2018).
5. For a related discussion of the worldwide expansion of mass schooling in the course of the 'long' twentieth century, see Meyer et al. (1977) and Meyer et al. (1992). It should, of course, be kept in mind that children more or less automatically participate in the socialization processes in the family (although family socialization may be difficult), but that school participation requires extra efforts, that it depends on participation in a special subsystem that is specialized in education.
6. While educational credentials presently play an important role within society, the 'fit' itself may depend a variety of circumstances. From a sociological point of view, it is plausible to see school grades and school certificates as social 'signposts'. These signposts may or may not stand for real competences, but it suffices that individuals orient themselves to these signposts (or the absence thereof in the case of the so-called unschooled or low-schooled part of the population). Pierre Bourdieu speaks in this context of *illusio*, i.e. the belief that the fictions we create constitute reality (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). It might be added that the integration of our society is likely to depend on the institutionalization of such beliefs.

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