Intersecting Spaces

Relational dynamics and educational inequalities at the intersection of family and school

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1 Introduction

School and family are often seen as separate institutions with different driving motivations and functions. In this dichotomous and differentiating perspective, the family is characterized by emotional care and exclusive togetherness, whereas schools focus on qualification, allocation, and achievement-based student selection. Yet these two spheres share numerous connections, and it seems reasonable to assume that they are not two rigidly separated institutions, but rather overlap and intersect in some areas. Moreover, studies in educational science have repeatedly stressed the key role played by the relationship between school and family in perpetuating inequalities – neither of which can be seen as solely responsible for that process. In light of this, my interest here is to examine some specific practices at the intersection of family and school in which inequalities are generated and processed. First, I consider the institutional intersection of family and school, and discuss it in the context of educational inequality theory. I then empirically illustrate these theoretical considerations with reference to two ethnographic case studies.

2 Family and school: Two central institutions of childhood and youth

Without question, family and school are the two most important institutions of educational practice involving children and young people. Structural-functionalist theory views the school and the family as the two central systems responsible for socially integrating each new generation via education. According to Tyrell and Vanderstraeten (2007), the two institutions differ in terms of space, time, participants, and participants' inherent dynamics, and these differences give them specific and complementary functions. School is a public space for formalised educational processes, which aims to qualify and socialise students in a general and universal way.

However, school also has selective functions. At least conceptually, this function is based on meritocratic ideals. Furthermore, school is practically structured by professional pedagogical interactions. In Germany, which strongly references educational theories by Humboldt (1903 [1792]; Koller 2001), the culturalisation function of school is bound to the idea of Bildung, or formal education. Family is seen as a particularistic space of exclusive care, based on emotional relationships across generations. Family practices can be understood as a jointly-produced intergenerational performance of participants' "family style" — as Müller and Krinninger (2016) describe it — or as "doing family" (Jurczyk et al. 2014). A unique factor that distinguishes families from school is their organisation around private practices interwoven with everyday life situations, education, and care. Familial practices belong to what is known in German as Erziehung (Brezinka 1978; Budde 2021), which can be best translated as child-rearing.

However, such a view tends to overestimate institutional boundaries and to overlook cross-border transformations. Aside from the fact that families also engage in Bildung and schools also engage in Erziehung, institutional boundary shifts must also be considered. Schools' and families' educational practices have become increasingly intertwined, as the 'scholarisation of the non-school sphere' and the 'familialisation of school' have unfolded simultaneously, softening the lines between the two. Boundaries cannot always be brightly drawn; both institutions are in a state of constant change and have murky peripheries. Bollig et al. (2018), for example, speaks of an observable "pedagogisation of childhood", whereas Ecarius et al. (2011) note that parenting styles have changed in recent decades, as parents eschew authoritarianism to embrace a more guidance-based approach to parenting. Today's "responsible parenting" (Franz et al. 2014)[1] is increasingly organised intentionally and in terms of a "culture of negotiation" (Fuchs 2012: 333). Consequently, family-based education is becoming more planned, pedagogical and professional — and thus increasingly similar to school. In short, we are witnessing what could be described as the 'scholarisation of childhood'.
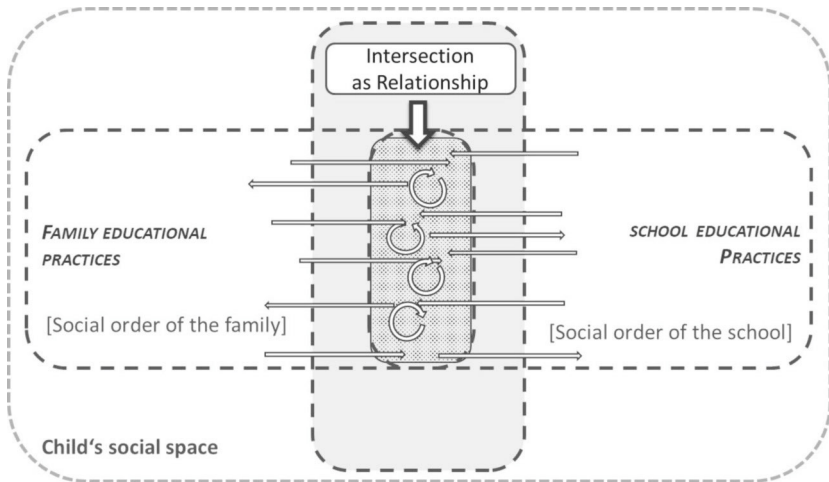
At the same time, we also see a "transformation of school" (Idel et al. 2013: 249) in which particularistic and family-oriented activities – for instance, those carried out in contexts geared towards inclusion or open and individualised learning – are growing, replacing the universalistic orientation of school. This transformation can also be termed a 'familialisation of school'. Informal and care-based activities are increasingly taking place at school, such as concerning meals, school-sponsored leisure activities or tutoring. These activities do not mean that school is becoming less powerful, but rather are part of a governmental strategy to increase students' autonomy and personal accountability. Breidenstein and Rademacher (2016), for

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1   All original German quotes are translated by the author.

example, show that the focus in learning has shifted from disciplinary practices to the simultaneous processing of individualisation and control.

These concurrent and interconnected transformation processes suggest that, when talking about school and the family, it makes more sense to focus on linkages rather than boundaries. Indeed, the relationship between school and the family has more of the character of an overlapping (and in a certain sense, institutionally independent) intersection (see fig. 1) than a bright boundary between two distinct institutions. This intersection can be seen as a highly ordered space in which cooperation is sought, sovereignty claimed, and demands are made. In practical settings, schools communicate their educational expectations to families and vice versa. In this process, practices transform into their own social orders.

Figure 1: Relational Dynamic at the Intersection of Family and School (own illustration).
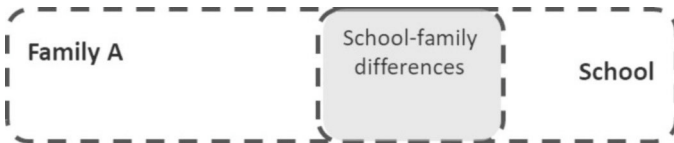

3 Inequalities between family and school

In his now-classic study, Willis (1978) showed the confluence of family and school practices that leads to male working-class youth's (self)exclusion from school, thus demonstrating how social categories (in this case, class and gender) reproduce educational inequality. More recent studies analysed the reproduction of educational inequality based on various social categories of difference. Maaz and others (2010) locate educational inequalities in family-based milieus that offer differentiated learning and development opportunities, which provide children and youth with different educational resources depending on the family's social position. Families,

according to the authors, make different educational decisions based on a cost-benefit calculation. In this context, the reproduction of educational inequality along the axes of immigrant status (see, e.g., Gomolla/Radtke 2009; Hummrich 2009) or gender (see, e.g. Budde et al. 2008) has been widely demonstrated.

We can theoretically identify two relevant contexts for the emergence of educational inequality. The first context involves a single family and a school (see figure 2). In this context, educational inequality can be seen as a relational construct that emerges at the intersection of family and school and is based on social categories – well-known ones like class, ability, gender, and race, as well as others such as age or behaviour. Only in the 'mirror of the school' do family educational practices become relevant to school and vice versa, potentially leading to inequality.

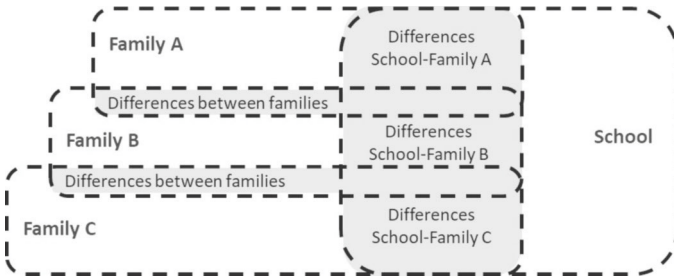*Figure 2: Emergence of educational inequality A (own illustration).*

Educational inequality arises particularly when these categories of difference are used to position students along school-specific achievement hierarchies. There is a large body of literature pointing to this relation. School achievement hierarchies are particularly oriented towards middle-class ideals of education and are therefore less accessible to children from marginalized backgrounds (e.g., Rabenstein et al. 2015; Carlson et al. 2017). Thus, "parents have to be measured against general standards of behaviour, which are decisively set by an academic milieu" (Schinkel 2017). The German-language discourse surrounding the shift in educational vulnerability from a 'Catholic working-class girl from the countryside' to the 'boy with a (Turkish) immigrant background from the big city' likewise proves that social categories of difference are intertwined and at the same time individually attributed (Geißler 2005). In turn, Helsper and others (2009) analyse the relationship between school and the family in the transition from primary to lower secondary school by looking at students' habitus and the culture of their specific schools. They examine whether and to what extent habitus and school culture match, showing how a misfit can contribute to the reproduction of educational inequality (see also Thiersch 2014). In addition, unexpected transitions can be documented, in which more or less successful educational trajectories emerge due to the self-activating potential of students and specific characteristics of school culture. According to Helsper et al., students' struggles for acceptance result in dominant orders that contain desirable, accepted, marginalised, and taboo cultural concepts and practices. Budde and Rißler show

that social categories of difference, such as social or immigrant background, "connect to concepts of family among teachers" (Budde/Rißler 2016: 194), but naturalise them as individual 'characteristics' of students and their families. Teachers' conceptions of family function "like a transmission belt that ties schools' orders of knowledge and behaviour to macrostructural categories of social inequality" (ibid.). In the same project, Budde and Geßner (2016) analyse achievement orders using the example of checking students' homework and show divergent educational practices by school form in which relations to various ideal concepts of families are embedded. These diverse ideals can have the effect of reproducing differences and thus increasing inequality.

The second context involves several different families and the school (see figure 3). It should also be kept in mind (as previously mentioned) that difference, hierarchy, and inequality do not emerge between the school and one individual family, but rather in the relationships between different families. Only an (implicit or explicit) comparative analysis allows teachers to differentiate between various families (and their children) and subsequently place them within hierarchies that culminate in long-lasting inequalities. This second context is both theoretically and empirically less elaborated in school and family research. Given the lack of studies on this question, the connection has only been formulated theoretically as a hypothesis so far. Inequality is – according to the theoretical hypothesis formulated here – not an effect of the individual relationship between the school and individual students, but a fundamental mode of comparison and hierarchisation. In particular, the school achievement order 'translates' differences between families into unequal hierarchies. Neither an individual family nor school alone produces educational inequalities; rather, these are formed by the dynamic families-school relationships that emerge at the intersection of both institutions, and specifically through the generational and hierarchical ordering of differences here. On the teacher side, this can be seen in comparisons of different students' performance or behaviour, for example, or in parents' differential participation in school activities or engagement in school-related concerns (Buchna et al. 2015). Betz and Kayser (2016), for example, document that ideas about a 'good relationship' between school and families are contoured differently according to social class. While parents from privileged milieus emphasise emotional qualities in the cooperative relationship, parents from underprivileged milieus take a more functional view of school. Budde and Bittner (2018) document that the intersection with the families is essential for the construction of 'good' as well as 'bad' students' (In this context, Kotthoff finds that differences in families' cultural and economic capital correlate with differences in students' competences to cooperate (Kotthoff 2012: 290). It can be assumed that families also relate to each other. In the end, the school-families intersection is the space in which educational inequality manifests itself. For this reason, it is not merely an interface, but rather an intersection with its own social order.

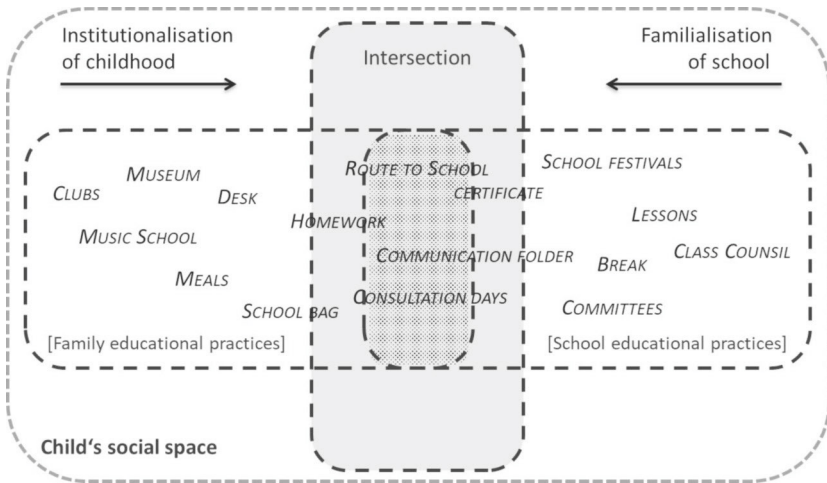*Figure 3: Emergence of educational inequality B (own illustration).*

4   A practice-theoretical approach to relationship analysis

The following analysis applies a practice theoretical methodology (Budde/Eckermann 2021). Our practice-based approach draws on the systematic theory set forth by Schatzki (2012). He points out that the social is neither entirely based on rational and explicit knowledge, nor is it entirely contingent. The social is interwoven with what Polanyi (2009) calls "tacit knowledge", which is based on practical know-how.

Schatzki's theoretical approach first relies on the core concept of practices. The 'doing of something' — for example, 'doing family' — takes place via practices. A practice can be understood as an "open, temporally unfolded nexus of doings and sayings" (Schatzki 2012: 14) or as an "organized manifold of doings and sayings" (Schatzki 2009: 39). It is the nexus – or connection – between activities that forms a practice out of the repetition of these activities. The activities that constitute a practice are structured through a tetrad of organising items, such as practical and general understandings and rules, as well as through a teleoaffective structure. Altogether, a practice's organisation circumscribes "a normativized array of understandings, beliefs, expectations, emotions". The organising items give the practice a specific form of directionality and enable the "direction of its movement" (Budde/Rißler 2017b). The second core concept is that of material arrangements. These can be understood as a set of interconnected material entities. Materialities consist of different types of physical-material objects like "people, organisms, artifacts, and things" (Schatzki 2002; Budde et al. 2024). The intersections of family and school are constituted by discourses and activities, but also by material objects and the bodies of children and adolescents. Some discourses, activities, material objects or bodies are located more within the family (e.g., parents, leisure time), other more within the school (e.g., teachers, lessons): they travel back and forth and change their character just like the fields in which they travel. Accordingly, the sociomaterial spaces of childhood at the intersection of family and school are
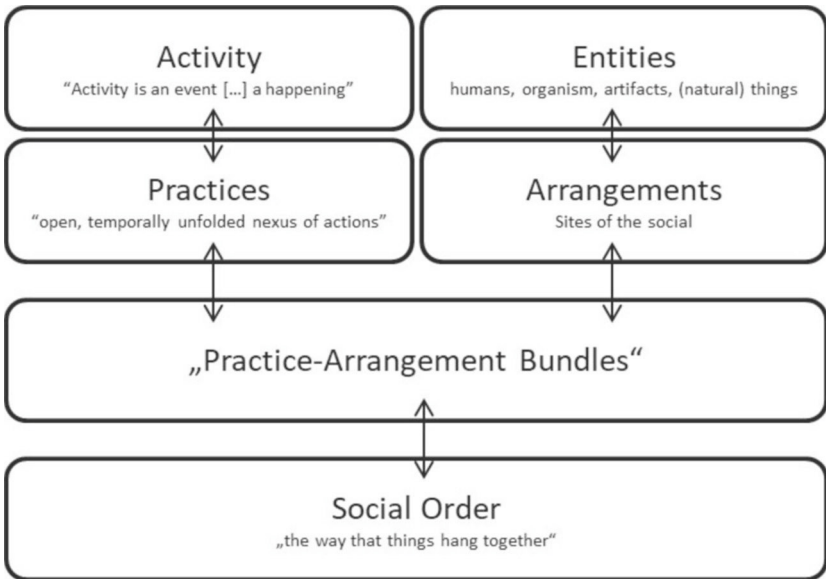
formed from a constellation of objects, places, events, and other elements (see fig. 4). Which specific elements are relevant can vary depending on the field.

Figure 4: Objects and occasions at the intersection of school and family (own illustration).

Interconnections of practices and material arrangements form "bundles", and these in turn form social orders, which are understood as "the basic disposition [...], the way that things hang together" (Schatzki 2002: 1; see fig. 5). Therefore, models of social order that assume separate and hierarchical levels (e.g., the distinction between micro and macro) must be rejected. In contrast, a "flat ontology" assumes "that what constitutes a given phenomenon extends on a single level of reality" (Schatzki 2016: 30) and that schools and families are constellations with "greater or lesser spatio-temporal extension" (ibid.: 38).

Figure 5: Practice-theoretical approach (own illustration).

5 Empirical analysis

Using data from two ethnographic research projects as examples, in the following section, we analyze the intersection of schools and families and relate them to 'orders of educational inequality' by connecting institutionalised educational practices to each other.[2] All data analysis is based on Grounded Theory (Strauss/Corbin 1998; Mey/Mruck 2011).

5.1 The perspective of the school

The first example comes from the research project "Instruction|Diversity|Inequality" [Unterricht|Heterogenität|Ungleichheit], which focuses on the (re)production of social inequality at the level of instructional practices and teachers' perceptions in lower secondary schools (Budde/Rißler 2017a).[3] In this article, data from a reform-oriented comprehensive school will be analysed. The reconstruction focuses

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on a fifth-grade student named Juvan (pseudonomized). His class was observed in its first year at the new school.

Juvan was one of the lower-achieving students in the class; he had already repeated a grade during primary school. His parents supported their family of seven by working low-skilled service jobs. At the beginning of the year at the new school, Juvan's teachers were informed about his financially strapped home circumstances and relative lack of access to cultural capital in Germany. However, the teachers were less concerned about these challenging circumstances than about Juvan's problems following the school's behavioural order. In the very first month in his new class, Juvan pointed out that his mother was not able to support him in completing school requirements. Thus, he indirectly marks the limits of parental support for class-related work:

> It's noisy in maths class. The teacher repeats that the homework is a worksheet. She says that the students "should try", and otherwise their parents should help. Gürkan mumbles something I can't understand. Juvan shouts: "My mother doesn't get it at all". The teacher reminds Juvan not to interrupt and asks him to "sit down properly".

The observation protocol records disruptions of the lesson. The teacher instructs the students to ask their parents for help with the homework, thus mobilizing family resources for educational success. Juvan openly states that his parents cannot provide this support, his "mother doesn't get it at all". Faced with this knowledge, however, the teacher neither modifies the task nor responds to Juvan's statement except to issue a disciplinary request. Because the information that he lacks family support is provided in a way that goes against the school's behavioural order (a shouted interruption), it fades into the background vis-à-vis rule infringements such as shouting and sitting incorrectly. For the teachers, the behavioural aspect of his problem is the tip of the iceberg – they are unable to see what lies below. Their self-perpetuating disciplinary practices (discipline is supposed to take place via the requested, but unavailable, family support) effectively erase or render unrecognisable his difficulties with outside-of-class learning. The 'problem' is familialised and in this way framed as not a matter for school, but implicitly as an individual or family issue.

In an interview that took place later in the school year, the teacher expanded on her perception of the situation, in a statement that used negative and racialised stereotypes:

> The mother always says "Juvan good boy", "Juvan good school" [spoken in broken German] and so on, where we think "Yes, you're telling us" [...] and Juvan walks through the schoolyard and greets all the eighth graders, which on the one hand is of course quite lovely, but it's not the nice, sensible eighth graders, it's the ones

> where you think "please just graduate and leave this school" […] Juvan will […] I'm afraid become one of those giant Turkish machos.

The teacher states that the mother has a positive image of her son, as she seems convinced of Juvan's academic potential. However, this does not correspond to the reality perceived by the teacher. To underline this, the teacher imitates the mother's way of speaking, including verb-less broken German ("Juvan good boy", "Juvan good school"), and thus applies negative stereotypes that are common in Germany, which then find their culmination in the term "giant Turkish macho". The concern that Juvan is looking for the 'wrong friends' – namely "not the nice, sensible eighth graders" – also testifies to the teachers' negative perspective of him. By referring to the wrong friends, who they wish would soon leave the school, Juvan is also defined as belonging to the group of students who do not fit into the school order and should "please leave". This reveals a family-school dynamic at the intersection of the two institutions, in which Juvan's recognition of his family's academic deficits plays no role, while his family's immigrant background is applied by the teacher as a racialized explanatory variable for behaviour she perceives as problematic. As this example shows, school and family practices often conflict with each other. In such cases, the intersection between the two is characterised by misunderstandings, disregard, and exclusion, and emerges as a conflict-laden 'battleground'. The practical organisation of school and the practical organisation of the family clash with each other. Inequality emerges in the lack of connections between the two, especially given that this intersection can be organised differently in other constellations, as the following example shows.

5.2 The perspective of the family

In order to analyse the perspective of families, the exploratory pilot project 'Inequality between the Family and School' [Ungleichheit zwischen Familie und Schule] looks at school-related educational practices in families (Bittner/Budde 2018). To this end, over a period of seven months, project researchers visited several families with primary school children in the afternoon, in the early evening and during dinner. In addition, the children were followed at school.

The Iversen family lives in a single-family home in the suburbs that they own. Both parents are college-educated. The father works full-time; the mother was a teacher before giving birth to their first child. The image below represents the Iversen family's weekly schedule and is reminiscent of a school timetable (see fig. 6), in which specific daily tasks for each family member are designated. For example, one child must unload the dishwasher on Thursday, another must take the garbage out on Tuesday, and a third must water the flowers on Friday.

Figure 6: The Iversen family's household chores chart (own photograph).

Some of the Iversen family's specific educational practices are already evident in this image. The family's parity-based organisational structure is documented in the fact that both children and adults are given tasks, thus forming a kind of 'community of responsibility' — albeit one that is differentiated by age and gender as well as presence in the household. The family also has the children practice writing, since the weekly schedule was filled out by hand by one of the children. It is already evident from this material object that the school's methods of organisation and representation overlap with those of the family.

However, the Iversen family's activities are also influenced by the school. The following observation protocol is about the Iversen family's nine-year-old daughter, Ivy, preparing a presentation together with her classmates Romy and Lynn. All three girls attend the same class. Also present are siblings Ian (age 7) and Issy and Isaac (both in pre-school), as well as Ivy's mother Irene, and Romy's mother Renate, who is good friends with Irene.

> We are all in the spacious, open-concept living and dining area. Ivy, Lynn and Romy want to practise their presentation about blue whales. Irene suggests that we move the sofa so that there is an audience. Irene and Renate sit on the sofa, and Isaac and Issy have found a place at the edge of the sofa and are drinking cocoa with a spoon. The three girls stand next to the television by the window and begin the presentation. Romy, Lynn and Ivy have memorised individual sections of the presentation — they have to do this in order to speak without notes, as Ivy and Lynn explain later. In between, they point to an imaginary poster.
> The girls maintain their concentration and don't let themselves be thrown off track when Isaac almost knocks over his cup of cocoa and a little later his pacifier lands at Lynn's feet. When they are done, Irene praises them for doing a good job. Renate asks how the lesson is going and thinks it is positive that they will be going fourth or fifth with their presentation. Irene puts her hand on Renate's thigh

and says that it can also be "good" to be asked to go first. The situation slowly draws to a close. The children disappear to the second floor of the house to play.

The report shows that the three girls smoothly integrate school tasks (such as practising a presentation on the subject of blue whales) into their collective family practice. Pedagogical practices of the school and the family seamlessly connect with and also complement each other. The two mothers stage the presentation as an educational event by participating like an "audience" and as 'coaches', thus giving the presentation special attention and highlighting it as a privileged activity. The mothers' 'coaching' comments include compliments as well as questions about the planned procedure, and thus support social-emotional aspects of learning. Also notewothy is the fact that the other family members also 'participate' in the practice; however, they are not bound by the school order: they may continue to drink their cocoa; the disturbance due to the pacifier does not lead to discipline or punishment.

Two weeks later, the school's grading system becomes the topic of a dinner conversation.

Irene mentions to her husband that Ivy got an A on her presentation. Other students received lower grades. "Marcel, Sidney and Jason got Ds", Irene says. Ivy adds that these three students only said one sentence each. However, one sentence was too little. Marcel did get a C later because he made the poster all by himself. Another student, on the other hand, was sick and had to read some parts of the text out load, but she still got an A or B because you can't do anything about it if you're sick, Ivy says.

The school's unspoken achievement order becomes the organising element of the family dinner conversation. The family shows its expertise in the matter by collectively interpreting the substance of the grading criteria (speaking duration, individual effort, illness) as legitimate explanations for divergent achievement in school. The fact that Ivy's very good grade is not given special consideration suggests that it is not to be understood as a special achievement, but as an ordinary horizon of expectation.
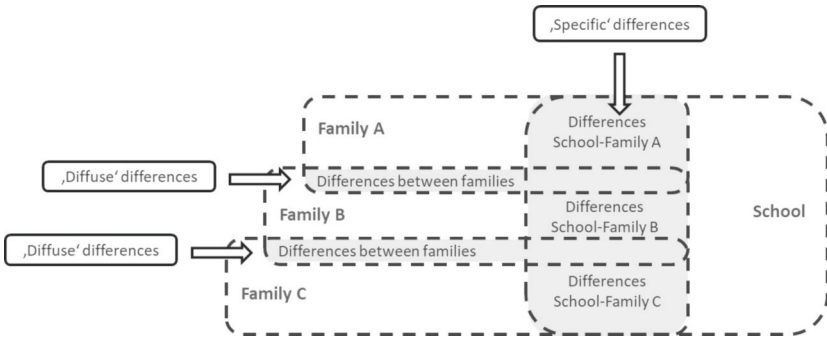
The case of the Iversen family shows that family and school practices together co-produce an intersection in which educational practices are seamlessly related to one another without rupture. Furthermore, other students' lower achievement, which is also mentioned, illustrates the thesis that the social order of the intersection always exists in relation to other families and students, whose lower-rated performance the members of the Iversen family define themselves against. In other words, the relational dynamic does not unspool solely within the Iversen family, but only through the practical participation of multiple families.

6 Conclusion

This paper has sought to show, firstly, that school and family cannot be seen as separate institutions, but rather create an intersectional space at their junction. Secondly, it discusses the fact that educational inequalities result from educational practices that make up the intersection between school and families. Furthermore, educational inequalities are not prefigured by macro social structures. Rather, they are practical bundles and constellations in and between the two institutions, in which children and adolescents position themselves and are positioned. Comparative relational dynamics in which all parties tacitly recognise their place within an unspoken hierarchy play a key role in creating educational inequalities. Three aspects of these relational dynamics can be particularly highlighted with regard to their impact on educational inequality.

The first is 'interfamilial; that is, it involves different families. Difference is processed when teachers (mostly implicitly) compare different families to one another. Through 'other families', a constellation of participants comes into view that has not received attention so far in either school or family research. Currently, families emerge in research primarily as (admittedly different) systems of interaction in relation to themselves (Krinninger 2015; Audehm 2007) or in their relation to social institutions such as school. Accordingly, school research tends to focus on individual families, rather than the constellation of families within a school class, for example. Focusing on the intersections between families, conversely, could broaden the analytical perspective on family-school relations and thus also develop a new perspective on inequality. What is specific about differences between families is that they remain diffuse in terms of inequalities and are barely concretised in pedagogical practices (see Diehm et al. 2013; fig. 7). Obviously, differences are produced and negotiated (as the descriptions of practices at the comprehensive school and within the Iversen family show). However, in order to decide whether these differences are institutional 'orders of educational inequality', every comparison needs an 'external' reference against which the dimension of educational inequality can be 'measured', and which the school represents.

Figure 7: Educational inequalities in the intersection (own illustration).

Accordingly, the second relational dynamic is established between the constellations of the family and those of the school. The specific structuring of this intersection on the school side indicates that different categories are used and that they are given different significance. While Juvan's parents' lack of academic support or resources, which he highlights, are not considered, racialised differences are used to mark a mismatch. Thus, this analysis indicates that differences between families lead to inequality. This is documented both in Juvan's case (in the maths teacher's perspective, which springs from and reinforces a relational dynamic involving his and other families) and in the Iversen family's practical positioning vis-à-vis the school. It is primarily the school's unspoken achievement order in terms of performance and behaviour (Budde et al. 2022) that represents the 'external' reference of inequality.

Third, other families are of essential importance to a family's — or families' — relationship to school and vice versa. The relation between different families co-constructs the organisation of the intersection. Educational inequalities emerge as the joint product of educational practices at the intersection of different constellations, and they arise at/out of the intersection of these two spheres. This fluid relational dynamic in the space where family and school overlap shows that families and schools are more diverse and less separable than is often assumed.

However, as the analysis also shows, the structure of the intersection reflects an imbalance between school and the family. it's the assignment of institutional responsibilities, which are primarily preconfigured by schools and delegated to families, shows a clear bias in favor of schools. While families as pedagogical institutions would also exist without schools, schools could not exist without families. Hence, schools determine when and in what context an intersection can arise. This can be clearly seen in the example involving Juvan. But school and its tasks also 'spill over' into the practices of the Iversen family. Therefore, educational inequalities can be seen as the outcome of divergent educational practices in school and the family –

with the normative horizons of school predominating. In contrast to existing studies, which, for example, use Bourdieu's habitus thesis to examine relationships between schools and individual families (Lareau 2011; Kramer 2016), the benefit of the perspective adopted here lies in its focus on relations and constellations. This also makes it possible to look at how social categories of difference are generated as a process at the intersection between the two institutions. In doing so, social categories are not taken a priori, for example, by deducing a familial habitus directly from the family's capital stock in each individual case. The categories that are ultimately negotiated at the intersection are only ever revealed in practice and can therefore also be the focus of empirical analysis.

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