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This Isn't What Anyone Planned: What Homeschooling Mothers Can Teach Us About Pandemic-Schooling

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Figure 1



Note. Reaction meme of the actress Kristen Wiig, dressed as a character from “Saturday Night Live” in a pink suit and dowdy haircut wig, making a disgusted face. The meme is presented here in triplicate with the words “Every parent right now” above and “Starting School in Person; Starting School Online; Homeschooling” below each of the identical images. This meme has been circulating online but was collected from a COVID homeschoolers (pandemic-schooling) parent support group on Facebook in June 2020.

In the world of education, we are accustomed to incrementalism—at both the macro and micro levels, schools are slow to change. Yet, it is difficult to overstate how quickly and thoroughly the American education system has transformed in the past six months. For now, and for the foreseeable future, traditional forms of schooling have been replaced by public school closures, hybrid learning models, multi-family “pods” (Wenner Moyer, 2020), and in-home education. The educational implication of the COVID-19 pandemic is that we are now a nation of homeschoolers, a populace unexpectedly engaged in the largest educational experiment the country has ever seen.¹

In the mad dash to accommodate practical implications of this shift, parents, educators, administrators, and districts have been understandably preoccupied with fiscal and logistical questions. How should we all move forward into this Not-So-Brave New World? The experiment of pandemic-schooling has

¹ School closures are being decided at the district, region, and state levels and are in a constant state of flux. EdWeek is one publication that is doing daily updates of school closures and re-openings at <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-covid-19-schools-open-closed.html>

thus far taken little note of the wisdom of those with longstanding experience in homeschooling: the mothers who have engaged in the daily praxis of home education and consider themselves scholars of the work. Those in the homeschooling community have shifted quickly from welcoming America to the fold to loudly proclaiming that “this current situation is not homeschooling”; suggesting instead the terms “*pandemic-schooling* or *quarantine-schooling*” (Wilson, 2020).

Indeed, although American families are currently schooling at home—one of the hallmarks of homeschooling—their experiences miss many of the other characteristics of flexibility, adaptability, and sociability that homeschooling families prize. Variety and variation are central to homeschooling, but the practice is generally characterized by five features: (a) Education is parent-directed; (b) education is customized/customizable to meet child and family needs; (c) education can take place outside of classrooms and “book learning”; (c) education is primarily home-based; and (d) within state homeschooling laws, educational choices are up to the parent (definition adapted from the Home School Legal Defense Association [HSLDA], 2020). Instead, pandemic-schooling is a new iteration of old institutional policies, curriculum, and relationships, all bent and stretched by the human and technological capacities of this moment. Conflating pandemic-schooling with homeschooling misses their crucial differences and overlooks thoughtful critiques of homeschooling families. Thus, I offer that, in order to understand and contextualize the now nearly universal experience of pandemic-schooling, we should look to the wisdom and experiences of *MotherScholars* well versed in the practices of home education and its attendant critiques of American institutionalism—school, family, and work.

The field of *MotherScholarship* builds on feminist standpoint epistemology to radically posit the value of maternal knowledge and ways of knowing. This, in opposition to what Jane Duran calls academia’s “masculinist, androcentric² tradition that yields a hypernormative, idealized, and stylistically aggressive mode of thought” (Duran, 1991, p. 8) valuing the appearance of

² The claim that the Academy is built on a foundation of androcentric epistemology is a central claim of *MotherScholarship* (see Lapayese, 2012, specifically Chapter 2, “Androcentrism in Schools”). Simply, androcentrism is the centering of masculinity. Within the academy, Elizabeth Anderson writes that “androcentrism occurs when theories take males, men’s lives, or ‘masculinity’ to set the norm for humans or animals generally, with female differences either ignored or represented as deviant; when phenomena are viewed from the perspective of men’s lives, without regard to how women see them differently; and when male activities or predicaments are represented as the primary causes or sites of important changes, without regard to the roles of females in initiated or facilitating changes or the ways the situation of females has been crucial to determining structural constraints and potentials for change” (Anderson, 1995, pp. 57–58).

objectivity, rationality, and knowledge produced by men while simultaneously devaluing the personal, biographical, and knowledge produced by women. As Lapayese (2012) writes, “the mother-scholar standpoint challenges the notion that maternal identity is a devalued form of knowledge, believing that it should be elevated to the same space occupied by science and rationality” (p. xii). This goal of challenging androcentric epistemology has largely taken place in the context of the academy by focusing on the intersectional experiences of mothering faculty members. Thus far, MotherScholarship has insisted that scholars can also be mothers.³ These insights are crucial but neglect the vital corollary—mothers can also be scholars. This is the agentic claim made by the homeschooling mothers that I have spent the last few years interviewing, researching, and getting to know; mothers who position their maternal care and educational expertise as support for their assertions of parental decision-making rights. Current struggles with pandemic-schooling (Cooney, 2020) are symptomatic of larger cataclysmic changes to family, home, work, and life, many of which were well underway long before COVID. The pandemic has only laid bare the anomie, opportunism, and individualism of neoliberalism (Duggan, 2012; Gilmore, 2006; Harvey, 2007), as well as the fragile but essential set of childcare, nutrition, and education services provided by schools.

The findings of my dissertation research on the labor and advocacy of homeschooling mothers, conducted in the pre-COVID “beforetime,”⁴ reveal homeschooling as both a protest against and capitulation to the institutional features of American neoliberalism. Homeschooling serves as an agentic rebuke against schools, a way for some women (often wealthier on average) to “lean out” of still inequitable workplaces. For many of the mothers I talked to in the course of my dissertation research, homeschooling served as an extension of other holistic birthing and parenting practices or as a means to find a community of like-minded families. Appealing to quintessentially American notions of freedom and liberty, homeschooling simultaneously creates new educational markets and places the onus for reform on individual families (Harvey, 2007). At the same time, in the sense that it is agentic, homeschooling is an individualized solution to systemic problems of education, economy, and family, and, in that respect, functions as a quintessentially neoliberal answer to neoliberal questions. This

³ Early data about the impacts of pandemic-schooling on female academics is worrisome, from the stalling of tenure clocks (Minello, 2020) to the immediate decrease in publications submitted (Kitchener, 2020). These effects are vital to the political mission of MotherScholarship, but focusing only on outcomes for the academy is both too narrow and a missed opportunity to expand the radical premise of this critical theory.

⁴ What many are calling the pre-COVID era, in a nod to both post-apocalyptic/dystopic narratives and the shared sense that time is moving slowly in quarantine.

tension is held in delicate balance by the unpaid domestic labor of homeschool mothers, who find that they are able to advocate for themselves and their children at the expense of their own time and effort. That it is a cost many were glad to pay did not negate the price, and the homeschool mothers I interviewed had to shape new identities as home-educators.

Similarly, pandemic-schooling parents are finding that juggling between paid work and the unpaid labor of homeschooling is incredibly difficult. Mothers, who are particularly saddled with a greater share of childcare and homeschooling responsibilities (Cain Miller, 2020), despairingly proclaim that there is no way to do both (Dickson, 2020; Perlman, 2020). Pandemic-schooling mothers are discovering what homeschooling mothers have known for some time: Absent institutional supports, the family's capacity for agency and stability is predicated on a mother's capacity for unpaid labor. The fact that the United States has forced parents into such an inequitable patchwork of pandemic-schooling goes back to the same tension at the heart of homeschooling: It is an individualized solution to national education, childcare, and public health crises. Further, pandemic-schooling represents a wholesale failure of our institutions—failure to believe in and follow the dictates of science, which would have allowed us to get back to something like normal schooling, and a failure of imagination to create centralized or systemic responses to what is a national public health emergency, as other countries are doing.⁵

After six months of quarantine, homeschoolers are finding the 2020 “back to school” fall a monumental challenge. They may be used to schooling at home, but this is not homeschooling. The pandemic has temporarily suspended many elements of choice and customizability that homeschoolers cherish. Yet in late-night text conversations, they tell me they consider themselves better off than pandemic-schoolers; not because they've practiced this, but because at least they are free from tedious zoom meetings, intense scrutiny of their teaching, and state incursions into their homes. The longstanding homeschooling critique of state control over education has new meaning now as accounts of suspensions (Jankowicz, 2020), new foster care cases (Vázquez Toness, 2020), and juvenile detention imprisonment (Cohen, 2020) have all been linked to the technology and oversight inherent in pandemic-schooling. What we see in pandemic-schooling is a recapitulation of old inequities along race and class lines. Rich families with the time, resources, and access to the social capital of whiteness are forming pods (Wenner Moyer, 2020) and hiring private tutors. Meanwhile, poor, racially

⁵ In Mexico, for example, national television and radio broadcasts have been turned over to educational content. A simple but highly effective centralized strategy, as the Mexican Education Minister, in his announcement about the move, reported that 94% of Mexican schoolchildren had access to a television (Esposito, 2020).

minoritized, families—more likely to be low-paid frontline and essential workers—are suffering the increased technical surveillance of the state.

The COVID-19 pandemic has begun radically reshaping our economy and relationship to work. United States unemployment has soared to record rates⁶ and whether working from home, serving as an essential worker, or hoping for unemployment benefits or an extension of the CARES Act, Americans are forming new relationships to their working identities. At the same time that the economy is “closed,” Americans are working harder than ever on the domestic labor of homemaking, cooking, cleaning, childcare, caregiving, and education. Yet this effort is not valued by economists because it is normally shared, hidden, and/or women’s unpaid labor.

The vast pandemic-schooling experiment currently underway is radically reshaping schooling and having profound effects on the lived experiences of families. New numbers released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for September 2020 show 800,000 women leaving the job market compared to 216,000 men (Statistics, 2020). Analysts suggest that these figures are largely due to the loss of jobs in “pink collar” fields, wage disparities, and care burdens faced by women (Gupta, 2020). Lockdown may prove an opportunity for collective action, as in the case of striking front-line essential workers (Covert, 2020) and the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests. Pandemic-schooling might result in renewed support of public schools and teachers’ unions, as parents discover a newfound appreciation for their neighborhood schools. Alternately, the restrictions and retractions of the pandemic could allow for further consolidations of power (Gebrekidan, 2020), permanent redundancies, and a long-term continuation of something like pandemic-schooling (Kamenetz, 2020). Whatever happens, it is clear that pandemic schooling, like so much of the domestic labor that has come before it, relies on the work of mothers.

⁶ Statistics vary, but on April 23rd, 2020, *Fortune* magazine reported that the real unemployment rate was above 20% and that the United States has now lost more than 26.5 million jobs due to COVID-19 (Lambert, 2020).

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