

Book review: Dieter Dohmen and Klaus Hurrelmann (eds.) (2021): Generation Corona? Wie Jugendliche durch die Pandemie benachteiligt werden

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Dieter Dohmen and Klaus Hurrelmann (eds.) (2021): *Generation Corona? Wie Jugendliche durch die Pandemie benachteiligt werden* (engl.: *Generation Corona? How young people are disadvantaged by the pandemic*)¹

Reviewed by Lutz Finkeldey²

Topic

The title of the book says it all. The authors present a comprehensive work on the Corona pandemic which – by the standards of academia – takes a very up-to-date look at children, young people and their parents in relation to day-care, school, transition to and from training and work, in order to scientifically explore individual and institutional factors with regard to educational inequality such as health and well-being. In a concluding outlook, the two editors clarify whether there is a “Generation Corona”.

Authors

In addition to the two editors, 51 authors have contributed to the book. They come from the fields of qualitative and quantitative health as well as social, educational and childhood research. In terms of research strategy, they work at the interface of children, young people, parents and institutions with society, politics and the economy.

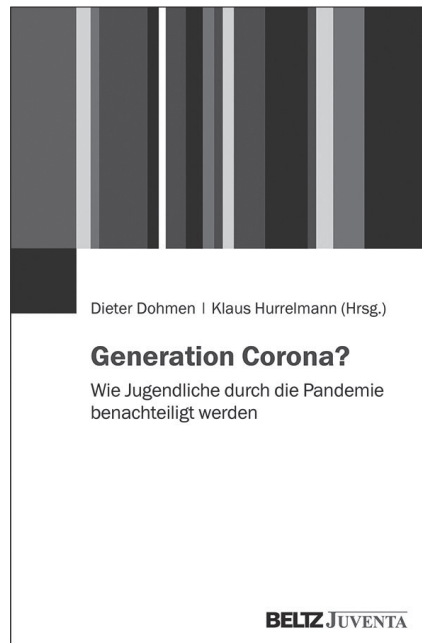
Structure

The introduction and overview are laid out in a classical manner. General framework data are confronted with the special situation of children and adolescents. The phases of the pandemic are included as far as possible in order to capture factors of change in the behaviour of children, young people, families, and educational institutions.

The book's contributions are divided into four thematic areas: The pandemic with regard to family and day-care centres, its influence on teaching and learning behaviour, its effects on the life-stages of school, education and occupation, and consequences for health and well-being. A commented summary on the question “Will there be a Generation Corona?” concludes the anthology.

Contents

Without lapsing into sweeping judgements and prejudices, all authors ultimately pursue the question of whether, as the editors write in the preface, the metaphor “Generation Corona” is viable. They eschew labelling and an inflationary use of the term. Lasting stigmatisations are avoided, which is why a clear scholarly pic-



ture of “Generation or Non-Generation Corona” emerges.

In the first section of the first topic *Pandemic, Family, Day-care*, Wido Geis-Thöne criticises the too-late intervention of politics during the first lockdown – a neglect which obviously turned out better the second time, even though old and new social imbalances were still being dragged along. Families with problems in the domestic environment, including single parents, families with a migration background, educationally disadvantaged families, families with several children and families with social benefits in the background are among the losers, both statistically and qualitatively.

The article *Being a child in times of Corona* by Alexandra Langmeyer, Thorsten Naab et al. focuses on exactly that. Corona, as something that has suddenly arrived,

is changing the living environment of children to an extreme degree, because hardly any face-to-face communication remains possible – which is why new forms of media-mediated communication have to be developed. Children of parents with system-relevant professions were more often able to fall back on family networks. Necessity and possibility are the antipodes here. Corona hit early childhood education the hardest because there are no concepts for staying at home. A change, though well-known, is even more drastically evident in media behaviour. Children from well-educated households are more likely to use the educational function of computers, while educationally deprived children focus on play. In both groups, a lack of social contacts constitutes a higher risk, which, if it were to become manifest, would have to be addressed by educational policy.

Findings on the home and institutional learning environment during the closure of day care centres by Elisa Oppermann, Franziska Cohen et al. is the last article in the first thematic focus. The authors present a (partial) study by the Otto Friedrich University of Bamberg. Children's learning environments are the focus of domestic educational activities during lockdown. A central question concerns the possible compensation of institutional education. It is clear that complete compensation is never possible. Good support systems especially for disadvantaged families would have to be in place. When investigating contacts between children

and day-care centres, it became clear that day-care centres have established (organisational) contact with parents, but regularity in the sense of educational partnerships is very rare.

The second topic area begins with an article by Nele McElvany, Chantal Lepper et al. which is entitled *Teaching during the Corona Pandemic*. The authors point to a hitherto unknown situation in which students have hardly any digital experience in home-based self-organisation – even with the support of their parents. Even at the time of the second lockdown, schools were still inadequately equipped with digital media, and concept-oriented distance learning was often unknown. Moreover, a new form of social inclusion had to be tapped.

Nevertheless, there are many positive evaluations from both sides, although there were definitely learning deficits in some subjects.

How do German schools deal with the Corona crisis is the next article by Werner Klein on the school barometer. From 9 to 15 December 2020, an online survey that was designed to be representative was conducted among 1015 teachers. According to the author, it is difficult to give a clear answer to the initial question because many problems at schools occur very differently. Grammar schools have better digital equipment than other types of schools. Only one third of the teachers have a sufficient internet connection at home and social requirements of pupils are not taken into account. On the other hand, learning by doing is often seen as positive for self-organised learning. Hybrid and distance learning are seen as self-taught digital fast-track courses with an extended professional habitus. The accumulated learning arrears during the lockdowns remain the most critical factor that needs to be addressed.

Stephan Gerhard Huber, Christoph Helm et al. also take up the view Werner Klein has cast on the German school barometer for Austria and Switzerland. Positive or negative effects vary greatly between pupils. Autonomy and independence as well as family support are on the positive side, while exam anxiety and a loss of both daily structure and social contacts are on the negative side. A correlation between positives and negatives is evident in younger students compared to older students, because a higher autonomy of personality and learning behaviour develops with increasing age. Experiencing positive self-efficacy is the key.

Ludger Wößmann, Vera Freundl et al. analyse learning failures and educational policies by asking the question: *How have school children spent the time of school closures?* For example, learning time has almost halved from 7.4 hours a day to 3.6 hours. The time freed up is spent consuming media, especially in the case of lower-performing pupils. Parents assume that their children learned less than usual, although they were more engaged in school. Well over half of the school children had digital lessons only once a week. Individual conversations hardly took place, while familiar worksheets were the most common learning medium. Here, too, there is a clear discrepancy between children from higher-education families and those with little education. Finally, the authors note that the economic and educational consequences of the pandemic must be considered together.

Marc-André Chénier, Joana Elisa Maldonado and Kristof de Witte entitle their quantitative research on the pandemic *The impact of school closure days on standardised test scores*. Although it is known worldwide that school closures entail enormous individual and societal costs, they are not the focus of government strategies. To name but one negative example of widespread school closures:

a broad-based study (6th grades in Flemish Catholic schools) in Flanders shows results that are probably not to be expected at first glance. Mathematics grades remain more or less the same, while deficits in the language spoken at school become continuously virulent. This affects disadvantaged pupils in particular. The result may not be as severe in other countries, but without the commitment of policy makers, this discrepancy is likely to widen. Globally, it can be said that many negatives are striking in school closures – albeit in broad heterogeneity.

The article by Mathias Huebener, Laura Schmitz et al., *Familial, Individual and Institutional Factors Influencing Educational Inequalities*, first establishes that educational inequalities are reinforced by the lockdown because the “equaliser” of collective learning is missing. If, in addition, family resources are scarce or non-existent and school is no longer a place of integration, inequalities are reinforced. Digital equipment and use intervene on both sides.

Burghard Jungkamp and Kai Maaz present the recommendations of the FES-Commission *Creating Equal Opportunities for All Children and Young People*. The chronology of a “real-time experiment” is followed by the still unfulfilled equal opportunities in schools and education, which must continue to be addressed. Lessons from the pandemic mean developing a Plan B and C, in addition to Plan A, to provide students with security and guidance. System relevance, disparities, structures, design, prioritisation, support, common learning time, understanding inequality as equality, digitalisation, necessary competences, learning mentorships and teacher training (and more) are the more internal fields of equal opportunities. Social risk situations also prevent possible educational success.

The third topic area opens with *Homeschooling, digitalisation and educational justice* by Christina Anger and Axel Plünnecke. There are fewer staff shortages in the STEM professions due to the economic slump. The demographic need for replacements as well as an economic recovery after Corona show a great need. If no countermeasures are taken today, the less educated pupils, in particular, will be lost. In Denmark, digitalisation has been going on for about 20 years, so that Corona, for example, can be handled flexibly. What is lacking in Germany is a systematic development of digitalisation in schools, the corresponding concepts, and appropriately trained teachers.

Dieter Dohmen, in his article *The transition from school to apprenticeship: The eye of the needle is narrowing*, deals with the increasing academisation of professions and its consequences. On the one hand, classic apprenticeship occupations are falling away because of higher qualifications, while on the other hand, the current pandemic is leading to a further downward spiral for educationally disadvantaged young people because they do not meet the demands of the apprenticeship market.

The fourth and last topic area is opened by Ulrike Ravens-Sieberer, Anne Kamann et al. with *Mental health and quality of life of children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Critical life events – such as COVID-19 – certainly lead to psychological stress. The COPSY study, which the authors take a look at with borrowings from the BELLA study, was developed for children and adolescents in order to look at their resources and stresses during the pandemic. The study gives important indications of how socially disadvantaged children and adolescents are affected. The care given to this vulnerable group was also taken into

account because, among other things, their subjective views were collected.

The last contribution in the main part of the book, *Youth and Corona in Germany and Austria: Young People in Lockdown*, was made by Simon Schnetzer, Klaus Hurrelmann et al. The data used for the conclusions come from the study *Young Germans 2021*, in which 14- to 39-year-olds were surveyed. On the positive side, the study shows that two thirds of young people behave adequately in terms of learning during the pandemic. On the negative side, about one third are in transition from school to work and do not make a smooth transition into working life. The findings show more positive things than are conveyed in public. Despite all this, a third of them have no prospects for the future.

Dieter Dohmen and Klaus Hurrelmann summarise and classify the contents and the subject matter of the book. The authors come out against the inflationary use of the notion “Generation Corona”. This term can only be used in a distinct sense if “more fundamental and lasting structural restrictions or deterioration of the future opportunities of a larger group of children, adolescents and young adults can be identified and these are quite predominantly due to the circumstances during the Corona pandemic.” (277). The findings from this book on social differences, qualification restrictions, future opportunities, the position of parents, the structural overload of educational institutions including digital equipment, digital competences of teachers, family conditions and learning opportunities correspond to this definition. Linguistic and pedagogical competences of pupils, teachers and parents flow into the mentioned criteria accordingly. In terms of the educational hierarchy, grammar schools were indirectly better prepared due to the more pronounced self-education processes of the pupils. Corona has negative consequences for the transitional system between school, training and work, which, if the qualifications of young people continue to diverge, will become even more of a refuge for those who have failed. Corona accelerates this process towards “Generation Corona”.

Discussion

The articles are ambitious and show a broad understanding of a very recent social challenge. The versatility of the approaches to the Corona pandemic is impressive. This approach always leads to relative contradictions because the value setting of the initial discipline, when confronted with others, perpetuates the original logic. Dohmen and Hurrelmann confront this briefly in the summary. Corona shows that our previous knowledge is not sufficient and that we have to work with open concepts of knowledge. This creates a relative dilemma for the book. Why Corona has been able to triumph worldwide remains a mystery. On the one hand, digitalisation is called for, but on the other hand, its culpability in the spread of the pandemic as well as youth unemployment through the forcing of an increasingly accelerated world market cannot be entirely denied. A necessary criticism of this book lies in its defensive inclusion. Education could set standards that are in the interests of the people and not dependent on economic processes and, as it happens, Corona. We would have to ask ourselves, what mistakes have we made to make anyone unemployed in the first place? If we want to take children’s and human rights seriously, we have to address this thinking taboo. The problem is not the “Corona generation”, i.e. those who have been excluded at an even faster rate, but those who live in today’s thinking bar-

riers. That is where the real generation problem lies, because large parts of the education and labour market are sacrosanct and thus structured by relations of power. Therefore, we have already left the future behind us.

Conclusion

This is an impressively up-to-date book which contains well-founded contributions that are also tied together very well. For people from all corners of the education sector, this book will serve as a very good basis for reading up on the Corona complex or for drawing aspect-related conclusions. The topics are aptly and clearly presented for practitioners in day-care centres and schools, child and youth welfare services as well, and form an excellent basis for current conceptual developments. As absurd as it may sound, this is one of the books that should be compulsory reading in politics and economics in order to escape the hearsay and to breathe some actual substance. Understanding is very much based on the core competence of reading. Managing is at the top of the list today... with what content? “Generation Corona” provides all young people, especially the third of the excluded, with a scientifically sound voice that only resonates when we want to hear it. Beyond the book, it remains important to transform the repair shop for the excluded into a society for all. Give them the rod and not the scales from the fish.

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Notes

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