

Dietmar Waterkamp (Germany)

Coronavirus Pandemic in Spring and Summer 2020 and the School in Germany

Abstract: What we are doing to continue learning during the current pandemic is not so much an experiment as a reaction. Given the rush to provide schooling for children and young people, helpful terms such as "distance learning", "online schooling" and "homework" are mentioned. The author notes that both educators and economists are concerned about the short and long-term effects of our situation, especially with regard to disadvantaged groups, and he points out that the "new normality" may well become normal.

Keywords: distance learning, online schooling, homework, "new normality"

摘要 (迪特玛·瓦特坎普: 2020年早春和夏季及在德国学校的新型冠状病毒大流行): 在当前的病毒大流行期间, 我们为了继续学习所做的不仅仅是一项实验, 而是一种反应。鉴于迫切地为儿童和年轻人提供教育, 文章提到了一些有用的术语, 例如“远程学习”, “在线教育”和“家庭作业”。作者指出, 教育工作者和经济学家都关心我们处境的长期和短期的影响, 特别是对处境不利的群体, 他指出“新常态”很可能会成为常态。

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Zusammenfassung (Dietmar Waterkamp: Coronavirus-Pandemie im Frühjahr und Sommer 2020 und die Schule in Deutschland): Was wir tun, um während der aktuellen Pandemie weiter zu lernen, ist weniger ein Experiment als vielmehr eine Reaktion. Angesichts der Eile, Kindern und Jugendlichen Schulbildung zu bieten, werden hilfreiche Begriffe wie "Fernunterricht", "Online-Schulung" und "Hausaufgaben" genannt. Der Autor stellt fest, dass sowohl Pädagogen als auch Wirtschaftswissenschaftler über die kurz- und langfristigen Auswirkungen unserer Situation, insbesondere im Hinblick auf benachteiligte Gruppen, besorgt sind, und er weist darauf hin, dass die "neue Normalität" durchaus normal werden könnte.

Schlüsselwörter: Fernunterricht, Online-Schulung, Hausaufgaben, "neue Normalität"

Резюме (Дитмар Ватеркамп: Пандемия коронавируса весной и летом 2020 года и школы в Германии): Те меры, которые мы предпринимаем, чтобы продолжать обучение в период коронавирусной инфекции – это в меньшей степени эксперимент, это, скорее, реакция. С учетом того, что нужно было срочно найти замену классическим форматам обучения, в оборот были введены такие оперативные понятия как «дистанционное обучение», «онлайн-обучение», «домашнее задание». Автор констатирует, что и педагоги, и экономисты, прежде всего озабочены последствиями существующей ситуации (как в краткосрочной, так долгосрочной перспективе) для наиболее уязвимых групп населения; в статье указывается также на то, что «новая нормальность» скоро вполне может начать восприниматься в обществе «нормально».

Ключевые слова: дистанционное обучение, онлайн-обучение, домашнее задание, «новая нормальность»

Some of the statements about the implications of the Coronavirus (Covid 19) crisis on schools and education sound as if we are undertaking a big experiment in education. Yet it is not an experiment, it is a reaction to a suddenly occurring danger. When a danger arises we must avoid it. The Coronavirus pandemic is not a type of danger from which we can flee because we know from experience that it invades all human environments, and especially urban environments. We had to learn this lesson in a short amount of time. When we were informed that the infection spread, we only knew that the most effective way of avoiding infection was to keep distance from infected people. There existed no medical way to subdue the infection and until now only so-called social distance could save us – or at

least made an infection less probable.

This was a bitter conclusion for our schools and for education in general. Every educational relationship needs closeness and face-to-face interaction. We had to reorganise our school-life from new. After a common recommendation on the federal and the state levels (Chancellor Merkel and the Prime Ministers of the 16 states) was given on March 12th 2020, all states of Germany decided individually within several days to lock down their schools, and asked students and parents to compensate for the lack of formal instruction by engaging in learning activities at home. Teachers sent assignments home and would evaluate them when they were returned. The public at first focussed on the students who were in grades that were close to taking the final exams for their school level. The heads of the school departments in the state governments gave their word that the final exams would take place, and schools were advised to care for specific preparation for the students for their final exams. Students in those grades received instruction in limited groups and limited instruction time in preparation for the final exams, which took place in June. This type of instruction was focussed on the most important subjects such as German, Mathematics, and English. Included were the students in the fourth grade of primary school because the average grade of their final school certificates of primary school determines their available school type in their following school career. As the Easter school holidays were ahead, the lock down for all schools was terminated until the middle of May – in correspondence with the individual schedules for holidays of the states. By this time, the students had roughly two months of absence from school. When the schools were reopened in May in a reduced capacity, the authorities communicated that regular schooling would only start after the summer holidays which were more or less close ahead depending on the schedules for each state. This meant that in May the majority of classes would resume school lessons for the present in the limited version of the pre-Easter regulation.

In the aftermath of the lock down, teachers and educationists tried to identify a model of instruction for the limited variant of instruction that had to be practised in the lockdown and was more or less continued after. Different models were brought forward: Is it a variant of homeschooling? A full version of homeschooling very seldom appears in Germany because school attendance is compulsory and is to be fulfilled in institutions regulated by the state. The endorsement on the appropriateness of the term 'Homeschooling' is split among educationists. Another suggestion is 'Distance Teaching.' Although this is a specific term also, some educationists in Germany accept it for this purpose. 'Online Schooling' is even more specific and indicates a specific market in education just as 'Distance Teaching' does. A term that reflects daily life in schools more exactly is 'Homework assignment', which indeed comes close to what teachers are doing at this time. The main characteristic of the type of instruction that prevails in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic is the use of digital devices. Students receive assignments that they have to complete and send back to be graded. This is in accordance with the intent of the German government on federal level to increase the use of digital tools. The key word in the political language is "digitalisation of education." The federal government and the state governments are prepared to spend several billions of Euros to enhance the use of digital tools in schools. Yet, in the case of the Coronavirus-induced type of schooling the aim is not digitalisation but simply to preserve at least a part of the schooling that existed before the pandemic broke out. Teachers have had to create written instructions and assignments, and there is no standardisation. Also, individualisation of teaching was not the aim, but came in closer sight when students and teachers started their exchange on the contents of learning and of assessments. The most important tool was the exchange of e-mails.

Although there was uncertainty about the appropriate model for the type of schooling that was enforced by the pandemic, researchers began a number of short range research studies on teaching and learning in the period of lockdown and of reduced schooling. Educationists and also economists warned against the prolongation of the scenario of reduced instruction because they found indications for a deepening of social gaps among youth. Especially those students who are not used to German as their first language are endangered by a fall back of language proficiency. This is similar for all disadvantaged students. There is large variance in detail in the practice of 'distance education' or 'homeschooling' (Fickermann, & Edelstein, 2020).

Most of the survey results were positive for more digital instruction. On the other hand, the German Institute for Youth was critical about transferring instruction into the home environment. They found school to be a safe place for children and youth. Violence against children often is exerted in the home, whereas schools have the opportunity to give support. In cases of so-called endangering of the well-

being of children, school is a protected place. The term 'distance education' attracted money from foundations in the realm of telecom-firms that organise online instruction. As these surveys had to be produced in short time there was no chance of establishing representativeness. Some authors concluded positively, that the Coronavirus pandemic gives a chance for reforming our routines in education. Nearly all authors insisted that learning in schools must be more self-regulated. A term that used to be central in educational texts in the 1970s is becoming topical again: individual facilitation (furtherance). One researcher concluded that the attitudes and practices of teachers with respect to stand-alone learning at home differs with the age of the students. Teachers at High Schools (gymnasium) mostly lay stress on cognitive activation, whereas teachers at integrative or comprehensive schools prefer application for every-day life. The researcher underlined how important the ability for self-motivation is in the models of homeschooling and distance-learning.

Although several authors seem to believe that the pandemic will be a singular event of relatively short length and some even speak as if its end is foreseeable, we have to think in longer terms. What seems to be exceptional in these months of Coronavirus may turn out to be the new normal for a long while. The virus is by no means defeated today.

Reference

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About the Author

Prof. em. Dr. Dietmar Waterkamp: Retired professor in comparative education at the Technical University of Dresden (Germany); e-mail: dietmar.Waterkamp@gmx.de

