

The Push for Private Education during COVID-19: Analyzing Potential Consequences of Homeschooling Pods on Society, Politics, and Culture

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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about radical transformation in the ways that we form worldviews, make decisions, and navigate interpersonal relationships. Besides introducing extensive physical limitations such as travel restrictions, household bubbles, and the overall shift to living and interacting virtually, the pandemic has also altered how people perceive each other, government, and society. Unsurprisingly, the pandemic has exacerbated levels of distrust, fear, and anxiety across the globe. Such levels of distrust and fear, compounded with widespread misinformation and the growing prevalence of ideological echo chambers, have served to highlight and intensify patterns of social fragmentation and political polarization. One of the more novel and potentially influential products of the pandemic has been the growing wariness of public schools and the shift towards private education, most notably seen in the establishment and adoption of homeschooling pods.

Homeschooling pods are, in essence, self-organized micro-schools wherein the families of around five to ten children collaborate to fund and facilitate at-home learning programs.¹ For the most part, the motivation for adopting homeschooling pods has arisen amidst increasing apprehensions about the safety of in-person public schooling during the pandemic or the quality of a virtual education in areas that have made the transition to online learning. However, this paper is not so much concerned about inquiring into the cause of homeschooling pods as it is about the potential social, political, and cultural consequences they

may incite or aggravate moving forward. Through a detailed evaluation of these consequences, this paper will ultimately contend that homeschooling pods, under their current formation process and structure, threaten to engender social inequality and discord and destabilize traditional democratic values and ideals. The first part of this paper examines the adverse effect of homeschooling pods on various measures of social equality and analyzes the intersectional implications on broader patterns of social fragmentation and stratification. The latter part of the essay considers the repercussions of homeschooling pods on politics and democracy; it highlights the distinct polarizing effect of education inequality on society and explores how homeschooling pods might reflect and threaten anti-democratic sentiment. Finally, this paper spends some time examining potential solutions to help disincentivize the adoption of homeschooling pods, as well as mitigate the severity of their social and political consequences if created.

Despite the lack of scholarly literature on the direct effect of homeschooling pods on social inequality, this relationship can still be reasonably and accurately analyzed by exploring literature on the broader shift towards private education. Both private schools and homeschooling pods reflect a rejection of the public education system. Two distinct features of a private education are additional costs and independence from the public education curriculum. Homeschooling pods incur similar additional costs, and, depending on the pod, their curricula also differ from those in public schools to varying degrees.

In a paper by Richard Murnane of Harvard University and Sean Reardon of Stanford University, it is noted that private school enrolment rates indicate that income and class disparity are the primary forms of inequality directly produced and reinforced in the shift to private education. Murnane and Reardon highlight that if affluent families believe that private schools provide a better education than public schools, the choice to privately educate their children tends to be repeated in following generations, creating an intergenerational economic advantage.² Not only do such generational practices support the rich staying rich and paralyze, if not exacerbate, measures of wealth inequality, they also further engender class divides. Specifically, between the wealthy, white-collar, and privately educated on one side, and the lower-middle class, blue-collar, and publicly educated on the other. Even if the quality of education in private schools is no better than that in public schools, Murnane and Reardon contend that “the opportunity to build relationships with children from other affluent,

well-connected families may confer long-term economic advantage.”³ In other words, private schools afford their students the opportunity to network and benefit from nepotism, which results in socioeconomic inequalities, even if the quality of private education mirrors what is provided in public schools.

While it is difficult to argue that private education directly incites racial inequality, there is a case to be made for its indirect impact when examined alongside income inequality through an intersectional lens. In 2013, private education enrolment rates for white, Hispanic, and Black students in the US were 11%, 3%, and 5%, respectively.⁴ Given that the majority of Americans are white, it is clear that white students are overrepresented in private education. Thus, the intergenerational economic advantage offered in private education is more so afforded to white students than to Black or Hispanic students, which further reinforces intersectional racial inequality in areas like wealth disparity, rates of intergenerational wealth, and representation in high-paying and influential jobs. Having established a general understanding of the deteriorative effect of private education on social equality, the disparity implications of homeschooling pods themselves can now be better inferred and explored.

Like private schools, the additional costs of homeschooling pods, in terms of financing educators or caregivers and in-home education resources, renders them inaccessible to those without the necessary disposable income. Furthermore, homeschooling pods tend to lack the institutional capacity of private schools to provide scholarships or bursaries to low-income students. Given that homeschooling pods typically require a family to be in the middle-high income bracket or higher, it can be assumed that they will produce and reinforce similar wealth and class disparities as those in the overall shift to private education. However, it seems homeschooling pods also have the potential to engender other forms of inequality, such as racism, sexism, or ableism. In addition to the racial inequalities of private education in general, homeschooling pods may also serve to exacerbate race inequality given the growing prevalence of residential segregation. As family income inequality in the US has risen sharply over the past few decades, there has also been a rise in residential segregation, wherein affluent families increasingly live in different communities than lower-income families.⁵ Given the correlation between race and income in the US in 2019, where on average Hispanic families earned 73% and Black families earned 59% of the median household income that white families earned, it becomes clear that the families who can afford the costs of a pod tend to be

located near each other, and that these families are less likely to be Hispanic or Black.⁶ Even if families in lower-income neighborhoods (that are more likely to be Hispanic or Black) could afford the costs of a pod, it is unlikely that there would be enough other families with similarly aged children in the area who could also afford the costs of a pod.

The implications of homeschooling pods for gender equality arise when looking at who tends to take on the burden of organizing and caretaking in the pods. In a peer-reviewed study on the public response to homeschooling during the pandemic in Australia, Lee-Ann Ewing and Huy Quan Vu found that women expressed concerns about gender inequality on Twitter. Many users highlighted that men’s jobs have typically been prioritized in relationships and, as a result, women have taken on the majority of childcare during COVID-19.⁷ This burden of childcare often comes at the expense of the woman’s career or mental health, should they be forced to juggle a career and childcare. The statistics seem to be consistent with these anecdotes: in a poll conducted by *The New York Times* during the pandemic, 80% of women said that they spent more time supervising distance learning than their husbands and 66% of women reported that they had taken on all or almost all of the childcare duties, further demonstrating how the rise of homeschooling pods is associated with the reinforcement of traditional domestic labour responsibilities on women.⁸

Lastly, it is important to note the ableist bias that emerges in pandemic pods and homeschooling overall. In forming pods, there is a risk that disabled students who require extra resources for their schooling will get left behind altogether. If disabled students are included in a pod, there is the potential that their learning will suffer, given that some students require additional or specific educational support that can be difficult to provide when learning from home. This disparity is not insignificant either: in the 2018–2019 school year, 14% of students in the US received special education services.⁹ Home learning for students with special education needs is typically much more expensive and more challenging to organize than for other students, and often parents lack the awareness of exactly how to facilitate their child’s special education needs.

At this point, it seems that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that homeschooling pods have the potential to exacerbate several different forms of social inequality in the long-term. At the very least, homeschooling pods appear to hinder progress in educational and social equality in the short-term. The next section of this paper explores the potential im-

pact of homeschooling pods and the social inequalities they aggravate on measures of social solidarity and shared senses of identity.

Inequality, as produced and reinforced in homeschooling pods, has the potential to deteriorate levels of social unity and solidarity on the whole. Before examining the nature of this indirect impact of homeschooling pods, it is important to consider that critics of homeschooling worry that it may incite social fragmentation and impoverish the public good. Joseph Murphy outlines that academic criticisms of homeschooling often revolve around the assertion that its practice “is characterized by reduced concern for and commitment to the larger democratic society by homeschool parents.”¹⁰ The retreat from the public sphere represented by homeschooling can be linked to reduced social cohesion and solidarity, resulting in increased social disintegration and disengagement. Some critics argue that homeschooling tends to be accompanied by a reduction of political capital and material resources for public schools.¹¹ Should the popularity of homeschooling pods grow moving forward, especially amidst the widespread economic fallout of COVID-19, the public education system could potentially face funding cuts. Reduced public education funding would further exacerbate the social discord and unrest produced by homeschooling pods in the long-term.

Sue Winton, an associate professor at York University, argues that homeschooling pods lead to troubling social consequences by isolating the implications of the inherent marketization that comes with private education. She contends that private education positions families and students as consumers and enables them to pay for better resources and opportunities than those found in public schools, effectively reversing the purpose of the education system by restructuring it “primarily as a private—rather than a collective—good.”¹² To get a better idea of the consequences of the social fragmentation and stratification that homeschooling pods threaten to cause, it is helpful to consider Michael Sandel’s writings on the cultural effects of inequality. He argues that the growth of income and class inequality—disparities that homeschooling pods and private education threaten to exacerbate—entrenches corrosive meritocratic ideals in society, creates a large social class that feels disenfranchised, and poses a risk to the dignity of work.¹³ Not only do these effects themselves have a deteriorative impact on society and politics, but these are also the same kinds of social divides that lead to other social issues, such as the paralysis of public discourse, the rise of right-wing populism, civil unrest, elitism, ex-

tremism, intolerance, and the overall undermining of social solidarity and shared senses of identity. Before exploring some possible solutions to address homeschooling pods and their potential troublesome consequences, this paper will first hone in on the political implications of homeschooling pods and the overall shift to private education.

While the political impacts of homeschooling pods parallel the social impacts in terms of the patterns of fragmentation and polarization that they produce, they vary in outcome. This section will highlight how the political fragmentation and polarization that may be caused by homeschooling pods threaten to further intensify anti-democratic sentiments, the prevalence of ideological echo chambers, and reservations about the adoption of traditional state-run institutions. Critical scholarly literature emphasizes how homeschooling denies democratic accountability and disenfranchises the community from its legitimate interest in education.¹⁴ The inherent individualization in homeschooling directly inhibits the collective’s ability to conceive and express its interest in education, and while public schools have their faults, their structure at least offers the opportunity to address issues collectively. Homeschooling, on the other hand, does not allow this opportunity since it is overwhelmingly privately funded, privately facilitated, and almost entirely privately regulated.¹⁵ Given that collective action and decision-making are fundamental principles of democratic ideology, it would seem that the inherent individualization and privatization of homeschooling pods render them both a product and producer of anti-democratic sentiments.

Homeschooling pods have the potential to cause or exacerbate echo chambers, wherein individuals are primarily exposed to conforming opinions and filter bubbles, wherein algorithms amplify ideological segregation by displaying and recommending content with which an individual is likely to agree.¹⁶ Over the past couple of decades, experts have noted the growing prevalence of echo chambers and filter bubbles amidst the rise of social media platforms and advancements in search engine algorithms. The digital age has brought about an unprecedented supply of and access to a wide variety of information and political perspectives. Compounded with the growing popularity of social media, wherein users can view, post, and share information immediately with friends and followers, and the difficulty of regulating misinformation and disinformation online, the digital world has become a breeding ground for confirmation bias.

Unsurprisingly, the drastic shift from the physical to the virtual during the pandemic has only

amplified the presence of echo chambers and filter bubbles. Homeschooling pods can easily organize and source their curricula through social media sites like Facebook. Dependence on these online spaces can make pods more vulnerable to echo chambers and filter bubbles. The concern with echo chambers and filter bubbles is that they encourage political fragmentation and undermine democracy. Since it is largely held that “functioning democracies depend critically on voters who are exposed to and understand a variety of political views,” it would seem that the susceptibility of homeschooling pods to echo chambers and filter bubbles renders them a threat to political solidarity and democracy.¹⁷

In the larger scheme of things, the rise of homeschooling pods may be a stepping-stone to the rejection of traditional state-run institutions. The public education system is frequently viewed as a “unique institutional vehicle through which fellow citizens from diverse backgrounds may be bonded together around a shared set of values.”¹⁸ In many ways, the public education system functions as a glue that holds society together and forms the basis from which the state structures the rest of its institutions and exercises its power. Therefore, the growing popularity of homeschooling pods could lead to the rejection of public education as an institution and to the abandonment of state-led institutions in general. Beyond the potential to foster political polarization and identity fragmentation, evidence suggests that homeschooling pods possess the potential to acutely aggravate anti-democratic sentiment and fundamentally challenge the common acceptance of government institutions and the state’s traditional role in society.

The current homeschooling pod phenomenon may pose a significant threat to social equality, political solidarity, and democracy. However, there do seem to exist methods of mitigating these negatives. This section will discuss two such methods in particular: (1) adopting policies that deter the initial formation of homeschooling pods and/or (2) adopting policies that encourage parents to engage in healthy homeschooling practices after pod formation. The first avenue revolves around financial support. Implementing policies such as universal basic income (UBI) and educational subsidies will allow parents to make the best decisions for their children regardless of socioeconomic status. The second avenue centres around compromise, advocating for more: (1) opportunities to negotiate with governments and school boards, (2) resources and support needed to form a healthy pod, and (3) flexibility to homeschool while still being enrolled in public school.

The notion of universal basic income has recently come to the forefront of public discourse due to the impact of COVID-19. Amidst widespread economic fallout and unemployment, many governments have implemented stimulus packages that resemble a kind of UBI. In scholarly literature, it is often argued that a UBI policy would mitigate the deteriorative consequences of hard dependent relationships in society today, wherein the “have-nots” are widely and deeply dependent on the “haves” for survival.¹⁹ Given that homeschooling pods have been argued to exacerbate inequality, and therefore the prevalence of hard relationships of the dependence, it seems that a UBI policy could help deter the harmful effects of homeschooling pods. Not only could the extra income help more families be able to cover the costs of homeschooling pods, thus mitigating the wealth and class inequality produced and reinforced by pods, it could also be used by families to facilitate better learning in the public school system, either through donations to the schoolboard for better learning programs and resources or through investments in better learning materials and supplies for one’s children, thus disincentivizing the creation of pods in the first place.

Subsidizing education is another, somewhat more obvious, policy option to discourage the creation of homeschooling pods. After all, the central motivation for adopting pods arose out of uncertainty around the school year and concerns around the quality, especially when delivered virtually, and safety of public education during the pandemic. By enabling public schools to fund better health and safety protocols, curricula, and education support resources overall, education subsidies can significantly reduce the initial incentive to homeschool. While these policy options may prove to be very effective, they require large-scale government action that is both unlikely and unrealistic, at least in the short-term.

Even if the creation of homeschooling pods cannot be wholly disincentivized, there are still several ways in which parents can mitigate the negative impacts of homeschooling. First and foremost, parents could refocus some of the energy they spend organizing and facilitating pods into advocating for better funding from the government and solutions from school boards to reduce the perceived need for these pods in the first place. Parents also can make more equitable decisions when forming and organizing homeschooling pods to reduce inequality. In terms of choosing families to form pods with, pod organizers can opt for families to pay a sliding-scale rate based on what they can afford. In terms of hiring teachers and caretakers, pod organizers can make an effort to hire

women and educators of colour, many of whom have left childcare and teaching because it did not pay them a living wage.²⁰ Lastly, parents also have the option to form homeschooling pods that do not reflect outright rejection of the public education system. Rather than taking children out of public school to form independent homeschooling pods, parents can choose to keep their children enrolled in public school and use pods as a way for students to work through online school curricula together.

In summary, in this paper I have argued that homeschooling pods, as they are currently formed and structured, could have significant adverse social and political implications, should their popularity grow and persist long-term. The case has been made that homeschooling pods themselves, insofar as they reflect a shift to private education, are incredibly susceptible to exacerbating wealth, class, race, and gender inequalities. These intersectional inequality implications led to the contention that homeschooling pods have the potential to engender social stratification, resulting in increased social fragmentation and the overall disintegration of a shared sense of identity. Finally, homeschooling pods have also been argued to possess considerable political repercussions. Not only does their vulnerability to echo chambers and filter bubbles threaten to amplify political polarization and discord, but homeschooling pods also seem to both produce and be a product of anti-democratic sentiments that may set a dangerous precedent in terms of the abandonment of traditional state-run institutions.

In terms of possible solutions to the adverse effects of homeschooling pods, I have suggested some policy options in the form of UBI and education subsidies, and I have offered some alternate choices parents can make in the formation and execution of pods to mitigate their harmful effects. Moving forward, the prevalence and severity of these troublesome consequences of homeschooling pods will depend on three factors: the extent to which pods grow in popularity, their persistence after the pandemic, and the particular manner in which pods are formed and executed. Should they stagnate in popularity and only persist in the short-term, the impact of homeschooling pods would likely be reduced to paralyzing advancements in the areas they threaten. If they continue to grow in popularity and persist long-term, homeschooling pods could have a significant adverse impact, though at this point it is too soon to predict this outcome.

Endnotes

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