Desiring involved parenthood: Swedish middle-class parents’ engagement in their children’s education

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Abstract

This paper explores issues of governing in home-school relations among Swedish middle-class families. The empirical data is taken from a larger ethnographic study of family life and draws on participant observations with video camera in families, interviews with parents, and analysis of school letters written by teachers to parents. Theoretically, the paper departs from Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s discussions on power and subjection, and argues that power and governing is exercised through a complex relationship between norms and the individual’s desire to become the expected subject. In the present paper, I show that home-school relations are characterized by a negotiation about the responsibility for children’s education and rearing. The division between public and private responsibility for children is negotiated in terms of expertise. Teachers understand themselves as ‘educational experts’ and are able to prescribe how parents are supposed to be involved in children’s education. Teachers construct parents as ‘rearing experts’ and ask them to take responsibility for their children’s behavior in school and to discipline them at home, a subject taken up by parents, in particular mothers. The paper argues that teachers homogenize parents and, consequently, obscure gender differences in parental involvement.