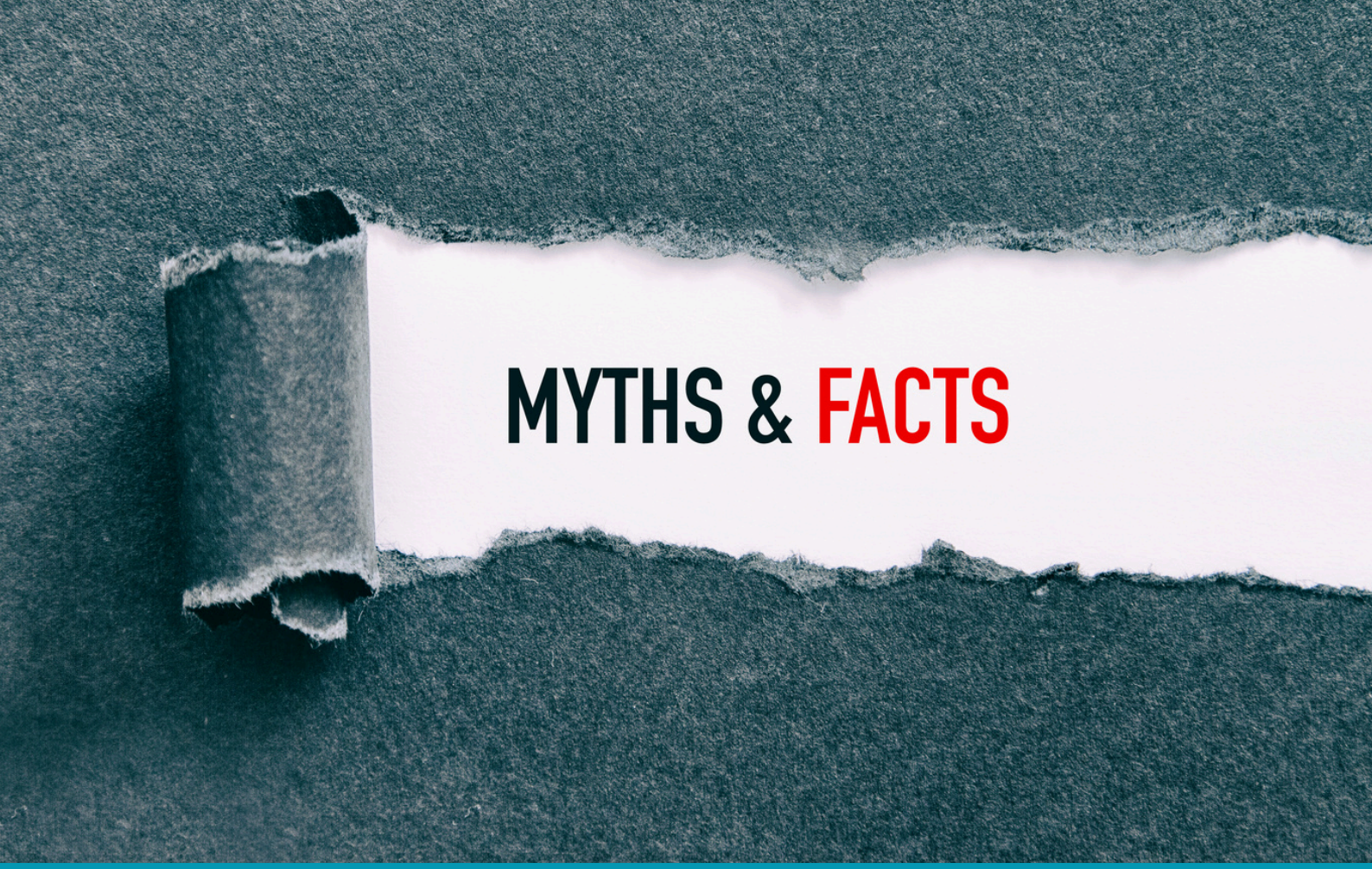


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Bad neighbourhoods are a myth

Do bad neigbourhoods influence the educational success of primary school pupils?

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Many parents believe that it is central to a good upbringing and to educational success that their children have contact to the “right” peers, make the “right” friends and avoid the “bad” neighbourhoods with the “wrong” people. While some contexts apparently foster friendship, high moral values, and good grades, hanging around the “wrong” people will lead to bad morals, slacking in school and potentially even worse problems, like drug addiction and crime. Therefore, living in the good neighbourhoods is a central goal of many parents.

And indeed, some sociological theories agree that contexts and peers can influence life greatly (Sewell et al., 2003; Coleman, 1988). Especially attitudes and aspirations are often transmitted through peers and significant others, like friends, peers, relatives, teachers or other persons of respect. However, these research results often stem from the US, which face conditions radically different than those present in the European context. Especially for Germany, only a few research findings support the idea that bad academic results might be a consequence of where children grow up (Helbig, 2010; Groos & Jehles, 2015).

These prior findings are challenged by recent results of a large sociological study, including more than 4,000 families from all over Germany (Kleinert & Bittmann, forthcoming). In this study, educational aspirations and measures of success were investigated, depending on three main contexts: first, the neighbourhoods, meaning the people that live in areas close to the families. These context effects were measured by the share of people receiving social welfare support and the share of lowly educated people living in that area. The second context were the primary schools, which usually have larger catchment areas and bring together pupils from various areas. Apparently, schools, just as neighbourhoods, can also be “good” or “bad”. Finally, the social status of the family itself was included, measured through the income and average education of both parents.

At first it seemed that bad neighbourhoods and schools did have a negative influence, as aspirations and the probability to transition to the academic track (Gymnasium) were slightly lower for children from the socially worse off areas. However, as soon as the individual status of each family was considered as well, the effects vanished completely. In the most comprehensive models, it became obvious that only the individual status of the family influenced educational outcomes.

While this effect could potentially be explained by self-selection of families, meaning that parents had already chosen the “right” area for their own social status, follow-up analyses could not confirm this hypothesis. Even socially benefited families who lived in socially disadvantaged and “wrong” areas of a city did report quite favourable outcomes for their children. While this seems like a good thing, it was also shown that socially worse-off families did not profit from living in a socially benefited area with respect to the educational success of their children.

To summarize, while it is obvious that many parents might want to live in a nice area with a high standard of living, they can be ensured that even moving to a worse-off area (maybe for a limited time), will not ruin the prospects of their children. Apparently, what counts much more are the individual care and support children receive from their parents.

NOTE
Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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