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An immigrant's reflections on the Swiss public school systems

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«International evidence shows that countries with a strong vocational system have lower youth unemployment rates.»

Equalizing opportunities ist the best way to fight growing income inequality. A strong public school system like the Swiss one can serve as role model. A column by Fabrizio Zilibotti.

A week ago I attended the Maturafeier of Kantonschule Hohe Promenade in occasion of my daughter's graduation. It was a fun cheerful event that ended the high school years for 92 bright youngsters.

It inspired me to use this column to relate my impressions about the Swiss educational experience, capitalizing on the rare privilege of having lived in four countries, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, and Sweden. This makes me familiar with different school systems.

My wife and I moved to Switzerland in July 2006 when we accepted two chair offers at the University Zurich. When we arrived, our daughter was seven. She was born in Stockholm, and Swedish was her adopted main language.

English, Italian, and Spanish were spoken at home, but none of us spoke any German. One of the big concerns at the time was how difficult it would be for her to integrate in a new country and in a new school system.

Expats are exposed to wild rumors about such a process. Horror stories foster fears and induce newcomers to consider short-sighted options. A concrete example is the department of economics at the University of Zurich, which offers foreign professors attractive packages with private schools luring them out of the local public school system.

Thankfully, no such program was in place when we arrived. My advice to decline such poisoned apples is often ignored, as people coming from Anglo-Saxon countries simply cannot conceive that public schools can be (much) better than private schools, a notion that is instead totally familiar to the Swiss. This is how money gets spent on building barriers to integration.

Here is our story. Our daughter was initially placed in an integration group with other non-Germanspeaking children. In the wealthy expat narrative, this is a terrible start. They imagine their children exposed to the deviant influence of dangerous peers.

In today's world, children from wealthy families live socially segregated and are hardly exposed to any social diversity. Far from endangering her development, the integration group turned out to be a positive formative experience.

Interacting with children from diverse backgrounds under the guidance of responsible and committed personnel was a healthy and fun experience. She quickly learned German and then moved without traumas to a regular group in the Primary School.

In other countries (e.g., Italy), the public reject the idea of integration groups alleging that they would be discriminatory. Or, more likely, political correctness is used as an excuse for saving money. Then, foreign children suffer the frustrating experience of sitting in a class without understanding what is going on.

Promoting a strong vocational system

The Primary School she attended, Huttenschule, was a nurturing place. She met good teachers who try to make the best of children's learning instinct. In sixth grade, she faced the challenge of the preparation of her Gymiprüfung.

In the expat narrative, this is the most brutal and terrifying experience one can imagine. The narrative has different parts. The first is that children

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with a foreign background stand no chance. The reality is brighter: in my daughter's class, more than half of the successful children came from a foreign background.

The second is that a failure to earn admission to Gymnasium would be equivalent to a lifetime sentence. In reality, Switzerland offers several entry opportunities. A former PhD student of mine went through the Sekundarschule and entered university only at a later stage. He became one of the best student in the course and is currently a professor of economics in the United States.

Moreover, the international evidence shows that countries with a strong vocational system have lower youth unemployment rates. The system opens opportunities to the less proficient students who are left behind and neglected by school systems which insist on providing a one-size-fits all general education.

A major point of contention is the age at which children are tested, too early according to the critics. From the left, people object that success in the Gymiprüfung is heavily driven by the socio-economic family background: wealthy and educated families do much better.

This is true. Nobel prize winner James Heckman wrote that the biggest market failure in economic systems is the market for parents. However, the international evidence shows that school success is highly correlated with the family background even in countries with no early tracking.

Yet, there is a very important difference between a test-based admission and systems where the discrimination stems directly from economic factors. In the UK and in the USA, the key factors are where a family lives (public schools being much better in wealthy areas) and whether a family can afford private school tuitions.

These schools are highways to the best universities. In a test-based system like Switzerland, a gifted hard-working child with a modest family background can simply pass the admission test – then, the best schools like Hohe Promenade are free.

Having said that, I believe that the public primary schools should do more to support children who prepare for the Gymiprüfung. What is unfortunate is the proliferation of expensive private courses to prepare children for the test. These tend to be effective and produce a disadvantage for the less affluent.

Privileges of wealthy families

From the right, some of my academic colleagues forcefully argue that the state has no right of excluding children from the best education opportunities against their parents' choice. Many of those colleagues defend in their published research the virtue of competition and meritocracy.

Unfortunately, they reject what they preach for when it comes to their own children. In reality, even in Switzerland wealthy families have some privileges; if their children fail the admission exams, they can opt for enrolling them in private schools.

This is an expensive opportunity that is only available to those who can afford it. It is also a not-so-great opportunity. I have not heard many success stories. Troubles often surface again at the university.

Perhaps, a vocational training would have been a better option. While our daughter attended Gymnasium, I had the opportunity to compare her curriculum with that of friends living in other countries (Spain, Italy, Norway, Germany, the United States, including expensive private schools).

In both absolute and relative terms, the educational services she received were first rate. Their market price in countries like the UK and the US would be prohibitively high for many people. While we, her parents, are now moving to Yale University, she is a Swiss citizen and her Hohe Promenade Matura allows her to start studying physics at the ETH Zurich, one of the best institutions worldwide.

There is a lively debate about the causes and effects of growing income inequality. Some economists advocate more progressive taxation and redistribution. We know how difficult and possibly counterproductive this can be in practice (witness the failed reform of the Hollande government).

I believe that it is much better to equalize opportunities. A strong public school system that supports excellence and does not leave behind the less gifted is a very powerful vehicle. No country has a perfect system, but Switzerland has a good system that conjugate good schools with diverse opportunities.