

Berufliche Grundbildung gegen Bezahlung

Eine Fallstudie von den Rändern des Schweizer Bildungssystems

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Vocational Education for Sale: A case study from the margins of the Swiss vocational education system

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Abstract: There are gaps in the Swiss vocational education and training system. Not all young people find their way into the world of work. Some struggle to find their place over hurdles. A case study.

In international comparison, the Swiss vocational education and training system (VET) is considered a successful model (Strahm et al. 2016). The duality of school and company guarantees - according to the thesis - a solid and future-oriented education because of its orientation towards the labour market. For a not insignificant number of young people living in Switzerland, however, this educational promise seems to be only partially fulfilled (Scharnhorst / Kammermann 2020). Since the mid-1990s, the proportion of those who find themselves in a so-called transitional training or transitional measure after lower secondary school without an apprenticeship has been rising. Currently, a quarter of all apprentices have attended such pre-vocational training before starting an apprenticeship. (Sacchi / Meyer 2016). Accordingly, the number of young people in transitional education in Switzerland is about the same as the number of young people who enter high school (Gymnasium) - about 20,000 per year. In addition, the rate of apprenticeship resolution remains high, depending on the sector (Lamamra / Duc 2018), and even a successful completion of vocational training is no longer a guarantee for a secure, i.e. not precarious, job entry and employment trajectory (Meyer / Sacchi 2020).

At the margins of the Swiss VET system, these "at-risk young people" (Häfeli / Schellenberg 2009) try to maintain access. Increasingly, they are also being targeted by private schools on social media and in free newspapers with educational advertisements such as "No apprenticeship yet? We'll help you!" or "Turn your dream into a career". These private vocational schools have hardly been studied in educational science. They offer courses in business and information technology (e.g. businesswoman/man; computer scientist), in design and medicine (e.g. photographer, medical practice assistant). With the exception of a lower secondary school leaving certificate, there are no additional school entrance requirements (e.g. with regard to

grades). The only decisive factor is whether the prospective students are able and willing to pay the school fees of 30,000 to 40,000 Swiss francs for these vocational training courses.

Using the example of the individual case study of a young person named Anna, the following article provides insights into these unexplored margins of the Swiss VET system. On the one hand, it becomes visible how these private schools try to position themselves on a thinned-out apprenticeship and training market, thereby reinforcing social inequalities. On the other hand, this also shows how young people like Anna try to make use of these private schools in a subversive way in order to gain access to further (vocational) education

The single-case Study of Anna

The description of Anna's case is based on several informal conversations and a qualitative interview conducted with Anna and her mother between 2017 and 2020 as part of my dissertation at the Institute of Educational Science at the University of Basel (Preite 2022). Anna is a young woman who, after completing her compulsory schooling in the Zurich area, was unable to find a connection either to the Gymnasium (due to grades) and to VET System - this despite several applications for apprenticeships. That is how she found herself in a bridge year programme – a transitional education. Here they tried to place her in apprenticeships with which she could not identify. Anna and her mother finally decided to continue her vocational education at a private vocational school, a private commercial secondary school. As they both affirm, neither Anna nor her mother had ever intended to pursue vocational training at a private school. It was only when Anna found herself without an apprenticeship after the bridge year programme that she considered this option, for which she had to pay. For her mother, the experience with her first daughter, Anna's older sister, also played a role. After dropping out of upper secondary grammar school, she found herself in a rather unpleasant apprenticeship. Despite her VET degree, her entry

into professional and working life has been difficult; she currently lives with her grandparents and is in the process of clarifying whether she will receive a disability pension due of mental illness.

Also in light of this history, the private vocational school seemed to be a real alternative for Anna from her mother's point of view. Furthermore, the mother had also completed her VET degree as a stone sculptor on the second educational path with the support of cantonal subsidies at a private school. At that time she already had both daughters (Anna and Anna's sister) and had completed an pre-apprenticeship at the post office. However, as a semi-trained part-time worker, she was unable to support her family and was on welfare. Given these existential difficulties on the one hand and her educational advancement on the other - the mother was admitted to the art academy on the basis of her vocational qualification, then studied at the School of Education (University of Teacher Education) and has just obtained a teaching diploma for lower secondary level - she wanted to contribute everything possible so that Anna could obtain a vocational qualification. Together they researched on the internet and decided that Anna would attend a private business school in the tourism sector. This, even though it was unclear until then how the school fees would be paid. The mother's confidence prevailed.

Looking back, Anna and her mother remember how easy it was to register at the private vocational school. An email expressing interest was enough and the director of the private school immediately made the family a reduced offer with the option of paying in instalments. For the mother, this was significant in that it differed from what she had experienced as a single mother in contact with authorities, schools and social services - in her words, "Basically, they just tell you: 'You can't handle the kids'". (Interview with Anna and her mother, April 2017). Here at the private school, at least in this first phase of acquisition, her status as a single mother was never addressed. Later, this changed. But for the time being, it seemed somewhat realistic to finance the education by instalments. Her mother had received a loan from her parents, two retired guest workers, and Anna contributed from her savings account, which her grandparents had set aside for her. Anna began her long-awaited (private) vocational education always aware that the next three years would be a financial challenge for the whole family.

But the joy about her vocational education did not last long. By the second year at the latest, when Anna, like all learners, completed an internship in a company arranged by the private school, the mood turned around. This was preceded by repeated conflicts between Anna, her teachers and the school administration. Anna's school performance was good. In disciplinary matters, however, she was increasingly called before the school administration. In this context, the school administration repeatedly criticized Anna for not appreciating the school's financial concession (reduction of school fees and installment payment option) and for behaving in a provocative manner instead. The mother describes this situation as follows:

There are a few factors that come together. On the one hand, Anna does not put up with everything and defends herself very quickly. And on the other hand, they [the school administration] had the feeling that they made it possible for us to pay less for school in the first year, and now they think we don't appreciate that we were given this opportunity. (Interview with Anna and her mother, April 2017)

The conflict escalates in the course of the internship. Anna remembers it:

The internship year was a terrible disaster. I wanted to quit several times. I had a problem with the boss. I was harassed... For example, we had to go to different fairs. There he would say things like: "Anna can dance on the pole and attract people to our stand". Just things like that, which I told at school afterwards. And the school administration said: "Ah, that's not possible, maybe we can look for another place." But nothing was done. I just had to sort it out myself. I had to go there every morning, say hello to my boss, let him tell me what to do, where and how, and so on. And that just got worse and worse, because I didn't want to be told anything anymore. And in the end, but only after I had already finished the internship, he was fired. So it was completely stupid, because I still had to get through the year.

After Anna told the school administration about these circumstances, he asked her to go through with the internship anyway. But the longer the year went on, the more this was no longer an option for Anna. Again she turned to the school administration. She was told that she could only change her internship if she organized a new one herself. Otherwise, it was unclear whether she would be allowed to complete her education at the private school, let alone whether she would be reimbursed for the school fees she had paid so far if she dropped out. Knowing the effort her

family had made to finance her private vocational education, Anna decided to go through with the internship. At the same time, she filed a complaint with the company's international management. They suspended her direct supervisor. The management implied that he had already been warned in similar matters before Anna's time.

It is remarkable with what persistence Anna completed her vocational training. From a developmental psychology perspective, one could speak of resilience in this context, i.e. the ability to advance positive developments despite adverse circumstances (Oser / Düggele 2008). Nevertheless, this was all very stressful for Anna and her mother, as both emphasised in the interview. After another year at the private school, Anna took part in the qualification procedure and the final apprenticeship examination in the summer of 2017. She passed with distinctions. It was already clear beforehand that she had passed the entrance examination for the in design. Three years later, after being expelled from the vocational baccalaureate school and being readmitted, she has now also passed the vocational baccalaureate and thus attained the entrance qualification for universities of applied sciences.

Looking back, for Anna and her mother this all feels like a lucky coincidence. From a sociological perspective, however, it should be noted that in Anna's case, social inequalities were overcome only insofar as she took them upon herself - both in terms of payment of school fees and internship conditions.

Private schools in vocational education: an unexplored field

In its uniqueness, Anna's story cannot be representative of the multitude of trajectories and experiences of young people at risk in Switzerland. Nor does it provide a representative picture of private vocational schools. Further research is needed for this. And yet, by looking at this single case study from the margins of the Swiss Vet system, we can learn more about how these paid VET options reinforce social inequalities. Because, if vocational education was denied to these young people in the public education system, it is now accessible against payment.

The search for an apprenticeship has been difficult for young people like Anna not only since the Corona crisis (Meyer / Sacchi 2020). Educational trajectories

in Switzerland are strongly characterised by social inequalities, which is shown for example by the above-average number of academic children at grammar schools (Becker / Schoch 2018). There is also evidence of discrimination against foreign young people and those with a migration and refugee background in the assignment process of apprenticeships by companies (Imdorf, 2017). Given this background, it is questionable to what extent young people like Anna can also benefit from a so-called apprenticeship surplus, i.e. an excess supply of apprenticeships over apprenticeship seekers.

It is a fact that a certain number of advertised apprenticeships remain unfilled every year (SKBF 2018). Contrary to the interpretation of the Swiss Coordination Office for Research in Education (SKBF), however, this development is also partly due to the fact that companies prefer not to assign advertised apprenticeship positions despite having received applications. In more than two-thirds of cases, the companies justify this non-allocation by saying that they "only receive unsuitable applications" (Golder et al. 2019, 44). However, it remains unclear what exactly is classified as unsuitable: school grades, school performance, social behaviour, gender, nationality? In a labor market-oriented vocational training system, companies are not obliged to assign advertised apprenticeship positions. And so it is not surprising that young people like Anna remain without an apprenticeship and at the same time apprenticeship positions remain unfilled.

Critical educational research has been pointing out for some time that the dual VET system has "reached the limits of its functioning" (Meyer 2009, 76) with regard to the vocational integration of young people who tend to have a poor school record. Access to the low-threshold, two-year vocational training certificates (EBA), which were created about fifteen years ago to enable at-risk youth to obtain vocational training, is also proving more difficult than expected (Hofmann / Häfeli 2015). At this point, private vocational schools can act as an educational niche in the educational market. For a fee, they open the way to the VET system for young people who previously had difficulty accessing it.

Further studies are needed on how this paid vocational training is to be interpreted in relation to an inequality perspective. Private VET schools have not yet been studied in either VET or private school research. They are also not included in the education

statistics. Against this background, it would be necessary to find out exactly how many and which young people attend these paid vocational training programmes. On the other hand, it is necessary to research in depth why young people do this and how they come to pay for vocational education and training.

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