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The Equitable Classroom:
A Critical Comparison of the Austrian and American Educational Systems

In our postindustrial world, one in which information and expertise are largely regarded as more valuable than physical labor, there is a near universal belief in the idea that the pursuit of knowledge by way of formal education will lead children to promising futures. This belief has placed an until now unprecedented pressure on both students and teachers to produce good grades and prepare young minds for the rigorous work in store for them at colleges and universities. Under the most ideal circumstances, parents, educators, school administrators, and policy makers would each do their part to create the best possible learning environment for all students. However, due to factors such as the economic hardships of working class families and the unequal distribution of resources between schools and school districts, this kind of optimal collaboration is not always feasible.

One does not have to look very far to see the effects of social and economic inequality on American public education. Much of author, social researcher, and former public school teacher Jonathan Kozol's work illuminates the fact that in some of the poorest school districts in the United States teachers are often left alone and unarmed in the struggle to prepare their pupils for college and the workforce. In many regards, it can be said that the United States has much learn from countries like Austria that allocate resources at the federal level and provide ample support for students and families from the start of kindergarten until the end of university—for those students who are put on the university track, at least.

However, some scholars such as Eric A. Hanushek and Ludger Wößmann in their paper “Does Educational Tracking Affect Performance and Inequality? Differences-in-Differences Evidence across Countries” have argued that the early tracking of students, and their placement into different programs or schools based on their performance in early grades, also has disproportionately negative effects on the economically disadvantaged. Based on my experience working as an English language assistant at Hernalser Gymnasium—a public secondary school in Vienna’s seventeenth district serving students between the ages of ten and eighteen—and the findings of sociological and educational researchers, I have concluded that the ideal educational system would incorporate positive elements of both the Austrian and the American systems, while discarding those elements that perpetuate social inequality.

The qualitative and quantitative research of other scholars and my personal observations working as a language assistant at a Viennese secondary school suggest that there is much to be lauded in both educational models. From the current Austrian system, funding at the federal rather than the local level reduces inequality in the resources allocated to different schools and students. Also, the existence of vocational programs, such as the Hauptschule system in Austria, creates viable career paths for students who will not attend university. However, in a more ideal system, students would be able to opt into vocational programs instead of getting assigned to them by primary school teachers. From the American system, flexibility in the college process—especially the option for people without a high school diploma to take the GRE—creates avenues for low-income adults, many of whom had to drop out of high school because of economic stress and familial obligations, to pursue a degree later in life. By adopting the most flexible aspects of these two systems and disregarding the most rigid ones, an

educational system rooted in social equality and strongly focused on meeting the needs of all students can be born.

References

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