



Swiss National Science Foundation – New Project on Geographies of Education (2021-2024)

Young people's transition to Gymnasium and the role of private and public supplementary learning programs

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Project Summary

Educational aspirations have risen worldwide, and educational policies in many countries have sought to increase the numbers of students gaining access to tertiary and higher education (OECD, 2017; 2019: 3). Alongside public education, supplementary learning activities, such as private tutoring and test preparation courses, are expanding significantly in all world regions (Bray, 2017: 476).

These global trends can also be observed in Switzerland. What makes the country a special case internationally is that, in comparison to other OECD countries, the rise of educational aspirations and the growing demand for higher education qualifications takes place in a context of relatively restricted access to and relatively low graduation rates from Gymnasium, which grants direct access to university education (SKBF, 2018). In this a competitive environment, private, fee-based supplementary learning programs have witnessed a boom, above all in cantons with highly selective educational systems (Hof & Wolter, 2014). Complementary to this increasing market of private supplementary learning programs, schools and private initiatives have started to offer own programs that are free of cost to students (e.g. Stadt Zürich, 2011). This project analyzes educational transitions to Gymnasium at this crossroads of increasing competition and equality of opportunity (Chancengleichheit) through a case study in the City of Zurich. Convinced of a need to extend scholarly literature with research that engages with how educational transitions to Gymnasium unfold for various “market stakeholders”, we pay particular attention to the perspectives and discursive representations of school representatives, private and nonprivate suppliers of preparation courses, and young people attending supplementary learning programs and their families. We pursue three goals in our study:

- (1)** conceptually, we apply a critical human geography approach to students' educational transition to Gymnasium;
- (2)** methodologically, we add a qualitative research design that includes the voices of young people to the traditionally more quantitative educational research in Switzerland; and
- (3)** we focus on both private and nonprivate suppliers of preparation courses, as both are shaping the educational transition market at the threshold to Gymnasium.

Methodologically, the study will apply qualitative research tools, including expert interviews, semi-structured interviews with young people and parents, participant observation, and document analysis, to identify and analyze the discourses of the various actors involved. The data will be studied using discourse analysis. This analytical tool can uncover how discursive framings shape an emerging educational market and what effects these discourses have on the experiences of young people. The target groups of our research in Zurich are young people at the two thresholds to Gymnasium (12–13 & 14–16 year olds) and their parents, representatives of educational institutions and politics, private entrepreneurs, and people running nonprofit initiatives.

The results are expected to contribute new insights for both academic and wider readerships (9-11 scientific papers) into the structures, arguments, and discourses that set the frame for a booming educational market developing around the transition to Gymnasium. A particular focus is on the perspectives and experiences of the young people who are using such services. The insights of the case study in Zurich show how educational policies and marketization in education are interacting. This study intends to produce a rich database which is necessary to critically encounter and actively shape educational transitions to the benefit of future generations of students in Switzerland.