

Federalist and chaotic: homeschooling during the Swiss lockdown : equality of opportunity compromised

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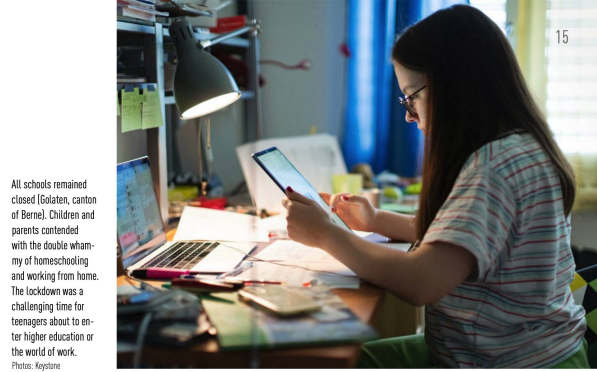
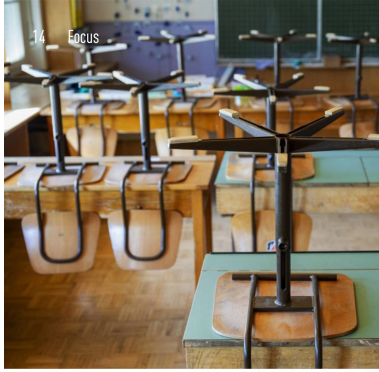
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All schools remained closed (Solaten, canton of Berne). Children and parents contended with the double whammy of homeschooling and working from home. The lockdown was a challenging time for teenagers about to enter higher education or the world of work. Photos: Keystone

Federalist and chaotic: homeschooling during the Swiss lockdown

Equality of opportunity compromised

Around a million Swiss elementary school pupils had to do lessons from home during the lockdown. The same applied to 400,000 secondary and vocational school students. Distance learning was a challenge for all concerned. Many benefited from it. But not everyone.

MIRELLE GUIGENBÜHLER

In the days immediately after 16 March, many parents' mailboxes suddenly filled up with emails from their children's teachers. All schools had closed on 16 March, and hurried preparations for homeschooling were under way. However, the academic material and work schedules sent to parents and their children not only differed from canton to canton, but from school to school and class to class.

Some teachers wanted to link up via video with their students every day. Others expected their classes to work through extensive multisubject material on their own. Some schools focused heavily on the traditional main subjects. Others preferred creative and artistic areas during this

challenging time. Every teacher more or less did their own thing. It was almost a caricature of Swiss federalism.

Unclear from the start

Parents going through COVID-related upheaval in their own jobs found it hard to follow what their children were doing. Homeschooling objectives, priorities and rules appeared anything but consistent. Even the question of whether and how students would be assessed and marked during the lockdown generated different answers depending on whom you asked. For example, it was initially uncertain as to whether school-leaving examinations would take place at all. Basically, things were unclear from the start.

In normal circumstances, there are often advantages to the decentralised, highly federalist nature of Switzerland's school system. But now, some of its weaknesses were coming to the fore. The gap between schools has widened – and the effects of this have become more severe. This is the conclusion reached by the authors of the "School Barometer" study at the University of Teacher Education Zug (PH Zug). Based on a series of questionnaires, the School Barometer assesses and evaluates the current school situation in Switzerland, Germany and Austria. Its findings over recent months suggest that homeschooling during the lockdown could have been detrimental for equality of opportunity among students. Specifically, the authors of the study fear that students

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from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds will be among

Many teenagers are worried about not finding the apprenticeship they want

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it harder for Swiss teenagers to enter the world of work in Switzerland. After completing elementary school, 60 per cent normally start an apprenticeship. However, all trial apprenticeships had to be cancelled because of the lockdown. Interviews were also virtually impossible. Furthermore, many businesses put their employees on furlough while suspending recruitment. Consequently, fewer apprenticeship contracts were signed. New apprenticeships in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland by early summer were a mere 30 per cent of what they were in 2019, while the corresponding figure in German-speaking Switzerland was also down on the previous year. "Our biggest concern is that businesses will suddenly no longer offer apprenticeships or terminate existing ones," says Theo Nünck, member of the government task force on vocational and professional education and training. Nevertheless, the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs is optimistic, saying in June that the apprenticeship market is more or less stable. (GJM)

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those who lose out academically due to COVID-19. Children who live in cramped housing, receive no support from parents or siblings, or lack the necessary technology, risk falling behind with distance learning. The study revealed a 'scissor effect', whereby one sixth of students reported an alarmingly low level of effort consisting of less than nine hours a week spent doing school work, while almost a third of students reported doing school work for 25 hours or more per week – and in some cases for even longer than they would have done in a normal school week before the pandemic.

"The nationwide school closure has exacerbated the differences between students," says Dagmar Rösler, who chairs the umbrella organisation representing teachers in Switzerland, the LCH. What will Switzerland's publicly run schools now do as a result? The commitment to equality of opportunity across the board remains an important priority, given that the vast majority of Swiss children and teenagers attend publicly funded schools during compulsory education. Only 4.6 per cent go to private school.

Equality of opportunity as well as digitalisation are themes that tie in with distance learning and the effect that it is having on children's educational prospects. "For example, is it up to the state to ensure that all schoolchildren have access to the necessary digital infrastructure at home?" asks Rösler. There also needs to be a debate on the future of homework in her opinion, because the circumstances are similar. "Well educated parents can help their children. Less well educated parents cannot."

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on future schooling are of little interest to the current generation of schoolchildren, whose perspective is a different one. Now back at school after weeks spent at home, many will be pleased to reacquire themselves with the classroom, because interaction with their peers was one of the things that they sorely missed. Ultimately, only the future will tell how the coronavirus home-schooling experience has affected them.