

The school choice of South Tyrolean young people

After finishing middle school, young people are faced with what is probably the first important decision in their lives, which forms the cornerstone of their future career: the choice of upper secondary school or vocational school. A choice of school that does not correspond to one's own interests and abilities is problematic both for the young person concerned and for society as a whole. A choice of school and education that does not correspond to one's own interests, strengths and abilities leads, for example, to lower productivity and fewer skilled workers and thus ultimately to a lower competitiveness of an economy. For this reason, the IER – Institute for Economic Research of the Chamber of Commerce of Bolzano/Bozen has examined the factors influencing the school and career choices of South Tyrol's young people in more detail. On the one hand, the correlations of school choice with characteristics of young people such as gender or socio-economic background are analysed, on the other hand, the motives for school choice and the role of reference persons are also shown.

In South Tyrol, after middle school, slightly more than one third of the students choose a grammar school (Gymnasium) or a vocational school (Berufsschule). In contrast, 29.9 % of the students choose a technical secondary school (Fachoberschule), whereby the share of the economic technical secondary school (WFO) is somewhat higher than that of the technological specialisation (TFO).

South Tyrol's young people often choose upper secondary school or vocational school on the basis of their own strengths and

interests, but not always. For example, around 7 out of 10 students state that the subjects offered at the chosen school interest them, that they have the skills for the chosen school or that they learn many interesting things for life. Every third young person (34.6%) also chooses the school because other family members or friends are doing or have done the same education. Conversations or recommendations from parents, teachers or vocational guidance (Berufsberatung) also play a role in the choice of school. For students of technical secondary schools and vocational schools, the fact that they will soon be able to go to work after school is also very important. For students of grammar schools, the obvious motive of wanting to go to university later is often decisive.

In addition, the choice of school is also influenced by other factors such as gender. Girls, for example, are more likely to choose a grammar school after middle school, while boys are more likely to choose the TFO. Thus, two-thirds of the grammar school students in the first classes are female, while conversely, four out of five first-year students at the TFO are male. Male students also predominate at vocational schools, although the gender-specific differences are expressed here above all in the subjects chosen: While boys choose crafts and agriculture, girls choose social and health services as well as accommodation and food service activities. These differences between the genders continue in the desired professions of the young people: boys most often name the professions of carpenter, electrician, cook and mechanic, while for girls it is kindergarten teacher, beautician, teacher, hairdresser and doctor.

Other influencing factors are the socio-economic background or the educational level of the parents. Children from families with a higher socio-economic status as well as those pupils whose father or mother has completed university are significantly more likely to attend a grammar school or a WFO, while children from families with a lower socio-economic status or those whose parents have at most completed a vocational or compulsory school are more likely to go to a vocational school. This is especially true for young people with a migration background, as they often come from families with a low socio-economic status or their parents often have at most completed a compulsory school. Interestingly, the results also show a correlation between the educational level of the parents and the motives for the child's choice of school: While more than three quarters of the children of parents with a university or high school degree decide on the basis of their abilities and interests, this only applies to half of the children whose parents have at most completed a compulsory school.

The school choice of South Tyrolean pupils is also influenced by the mother tongue and the place of residence of the young people: young people of Italian mother tongue and those who live in urban communities are more likely to choose a technical secondary school or a grammar school than pupils of German mother tongue or young people from rural communities, who more often choose a vocational school.

Finally, the choice of school shows a strong correlation with the final grade of the middle school. The higher the grade, the more likely the student is to choose a grammar school. Conversely, those young people with a low final grade are more likely to choose a

vocational school. In this context, it is important to consider that the final grade of the secondary school itself is in turn related to many other factors. For example, girls, young people of German mother tongue and those whose parents have a university or high school degree have a higher final grade on average.

Based on the results of the study, the following measures and recommendations for action can be derived for the actors in economic and educational policy, for schools and also for enterprises:

> **Counteracting gender stereotypes and clichés**

Both the choice of school and the desired professions of young people differ significantly between the two genders, with clichés still prevailing, especially in the case of the career aspirations surveyed. In order to counteract these career perceptions shaped by gender stereotypes and to inspire girls even more for technical professions or STEM subjects, awareness-raising measures should be intensified at all educational levels, starting with kindergarten.

> **Improve integration of young people with a special linguistic, cultural or socio-economic background**

Young people whose parents have a higher level of education achieve higher grades on average than students from educationally disadvantaged or low-income households and are more likely to choose an upper secondary school, especially a grammar school. In order to offer all young people equal opportunities and to avoid segregation of those from low-income households or those with a migration background at school and in the labour market in the long term, the integra-

tion of pupils with a special linguistic, cultural or socio-economic background must be further improved.

> **Expansion of awareness-raising measures for vocational education and training**

Italian-speaking young people and those from urban communities are significantly less likely to opt for a vocational school than German-speaking young people or those from rural areas. To counteract this imbalance, targeted awareness-raising measures for vocational education and training are needed for all language groups in general and the Italian language group in particular. Here, both parents and teachers need to be made aware of the many professional opportunities and advantages of vocational education and training.

> **Expanding insights into the professional world**

For a reflected career choice, personal role models such as parents and friends, conversations with reference persons as well as concrete insights into the working and professional world are decisive. In addition to family, teachers and institutions such as vocational guidance, enterprises as well as business and professional associations are also needed and should be involved.