Social mobility:
The challenge of valuing meritocracy in schools.

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The relationship between meritocracy and equality in the field of education has always been perceived as problematic, and reconciliation between the two is traditionally considered as difficult to achieve. This has been the case in many European countries and, to a certain extent, in the United States. However, we believe that valuing meritocracy is the best way to foster social mobility in society and this, in turn, can have a powerful catalytic effect on equality.

Two things are certain, in our opinion: first, the efficacy of a system of education should also be measured in terms of the amount of social and occupational mobility that it can generate. Schools work effectively when they enable students to achieve occupational and educational goals regardless of family background. Within this framework, the efforts to promote meritocracy and foster equality can compenetrate. In the case of Italy, this mutual compenetration is far from being achieved. According to OSCE data, levels of social mobility in Italy are among the lowest in Europe. Along with the United States, Italy is the country with the lowest social mobility in the western world. In both countries, the sort of educational and occupational paths for young people still greatly depends on the kind of family into which they were born. Secondly, both fostering meritocracy and promoting equality are primary values within modern societies, ranking very highly in political agendas. Therefore, they can only be reconciled by means of mutual mitigation and tempering. It is not easy to create proposals that both abide by this ideal and take specific country characteristics into account.

In the case of Italy, we have found that an effective solution might be to delay the selection of high school. This is a choice that, given the qualitative difference among educational institutions, is bound to have a significant impact on future educational achievements. Whereas "licei" (tailored on more classical and scientific studies) are supposed to equip students to successfully start a university career, technical and professional schools ("istituti tecnici" and "istituti professionali") are normally chosen by those who would like to start working at an earlier age.
In many European countries, generally speaking, the modalities of this choice have negative impacts on social mobility. In the case of Italy, for instance, students choose what sort of schools they will enroll in at age 13, and their decision is therefore greatly influenced by the family of origin. Children of people who hold a university degree stand a significantly greater chance (around 30% higher) to study in a "liceo" than do children from less educated backgrounds.

Many studies demonstrate that the sooner the choice of high school is made, the higher the risk that the socio-economic background of origin may have an impact on it. These educational systems perpetuate the *status quo* of social structures and do little to level the playing field, at least in terms of equality of opportunity. Why not postpone the moment of the above-mentioned choice until, for example, age 16? At that age, it would be a more informed, meritocratic and, all in all, fair choice. In Finland, a recent reform has introduced a uniform curriculum for all students until the age of 16. Only at that point can they opt for more specific educational choices. The increase in social mobility spurred by this system was higher than 20%. Similarly, students who realize that their chosen school does not actually match their desires and aspirations should be able to change their type of school more easily.

In conclusion, the common aim, to which all countries should aspire, is reducing the negative impact of family background on educational choices of children. This can be done either by enhancing the degree of meritocracy at the moment of choice of high schools (the so-called German model) or, alternatively, eliminating differences in high school curricula, like in England. As another option, limit the transitional barriers between one educational path and another. The German model might be risky, in as much as the early choice it contemplates might not always be well-informed. The English model may postpone the choice too much (to 18-19 years of age). We believe that allowing students to choose when they are 16 enables more self-conscious and more informed choice, and allows the educational system to offset the inevitable differences in backgrounds of origins.

It is only by generating more social mobility, through meritocracy, that can our schools be considered fair, just and equal for all.

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