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Crisis in schools

ISABELLE EICHENBERGER

The level of education with which Swiss children leave their obligatory schooling period is mediocre.

Increasing violence in schools is an added source of stress for teaching staff. And many parents are either resigned to the situation or lay the blame on schools. The Swiss educational system is seeking a way out of the crisis.

THE INITIAL RESULTS of the PISA study published at the beginning of this year have shaken what were previously regarded as inalienable truths. The study analysed the competence level of 15-year-olds in mathematics, French and natural sciences. Launched in 2000 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the project runs until 2006 (see SR 2/2002, p. 19). The initial evaluation shows Switzerland in the middle ranks among the 52 countries studied: 20 percent of schoolchildren have only rudimentary reading abilities on completion of their obligatory education period, while 7 percent are even rated a "risk group".

Some cantons fare better than others in the study, but overall Swiss schools appear to be incapable of "correcting socio-cultural inequalities", according to Swiss PISA experts. While this study is certainly the first of its kind and comparable statistics have still to be compiled, the results of tests conducted on young Swiss as part of their military conscription evaluation confirm that school is not as efficient as it should be for the neediest students.



Little rebels can also be lovable. The situation becomes critical when rebellion turns into violence.

Teachers under pressure

Gone are the days when the schoolmaster was accorded a privileged position in society. Nowadays the teaching profession enjoys only low social prestige, despite the increasing pressures facing teachers. The attractiveness of the job is waning. The scarcity of teaching staff as a result of "crisis measures" implemented in the 1990s is forcing many cantons at the beginning of a new school year to seek auxiliary staff, some of whom do not even boast a teaching diploma. Added to this, the very health of teachers is suffering.

This last finding was reported by a study conducted by the Zurich Institute for Labour Research and Organisational Consulting on behalf of the Department of Education of Basle City canton, according to which approximately one third of teaching staff are manifesting signs of emotional exhaustion, also known as burnout syndrome.

The author of the study, labour psychologist Eberhard Ulich, hides neither his surprise nor his concern at the extent of powerlessness and frustration uncovered. Moreover, Basle teachers feel let down by school authorities, who manage and assess them centrally and with little transparency. According to most teachers, the main sources of stress are the conduct of difficult students, the lack of respect, loss of image in the profession, the heterogeneity of school classes, and the growing number of administrative tasks on top of actual instruction. Other cantons, too, want to conduct such a study, and the assumption is that such studies will reinforce the Basle findings.

Teachers' unions for their part confirm that disciplinary problems are on the rise, as is unrest among students. Students are becoming more and more litigious, insisting on their rights while often unaware of their obligations. Teachers, on the other

hand, complain that parents often neglect their child-raising duties or overestimate their children's capacities. Frequently they put pressure on teachers to give higher marks, sometimes backed by a lawyer.

The problem of violence

Mirroring society, schools are also experiencing a deterioration in social relationships. Everyone points the finger at the increase in disrespect and violence. Teachers' unions cite the fact that the trend towards more female teachers is accompanied by an increase in certain macho behaviour patterns among students.

Then there is the problem of multiculturalism. According to official statistics, the proportion of foreigners living in Switzerland is over 20 percent, and some schools have a huge concentration of foreign children. Statistics compiled by youth authorities show that cases of criminality among young people in Switzerland have increased from 7,000 to 14,000 over the past ten years. Approximately half of these crimes are committed by young foreigners, who are often socially disadvantaged and torn between two cultures.

If unease turns into intolerance, the result may be confrontations of the type experienced in Olten, Solothurn and Yverdon, where gang fights have openly broken out. In the eyes of school psychologists, violent tendencies are primarily being manifested in the general behaviour of young people.

The school we deserve

The canton of St. Gall has introduced a CHF 1000 fine for parents who refuse to cooperate with their child's school. A couple in La Chaux-de-Fonds were fined a massive sum because they did nothing to stop their son playing truant for the entire school year. Opinions may be divided as to the appropriateness of such measures, but how else can one remind parents that they still bear prime responsibility for the education of their children?

It is necessary to act on a broader basis. Swiss cities and villages suffer from the same situation as is prevalent in the suburbs of major European cities. First, dialogue with parents must be improved. Some schools such as the Collège des Coudriers in Geneva have managed to improve the situation by using interpreters as mediators. Teachers' unions are lobbying

for an increase in educational funding and a clearly defined, universally binding code of conduct.

Not everything can be left up to the teachers, parents, judges or police. Everyone is agreed that society must support schools.

Obviously this will cost money. Our politicians must be convinced that such investments are essential to the future of our country.

Translated from the German.



The parents are key

For Anne Seydoux, President of FAPERT (umbrella organisation for parents of school-children in Western Switzerland and the Ticino), the solution to problems at school lies in a dialogue between schools and parents. But there is also a need to improve the training and assessment of teachers, and politicians also need to have a say.

ANNE SEYDOUX pulls no punches: "What surprised me about PISA was the high percentage of children with problems. And the fact that school accentuates social inequalities instead of correcting them."

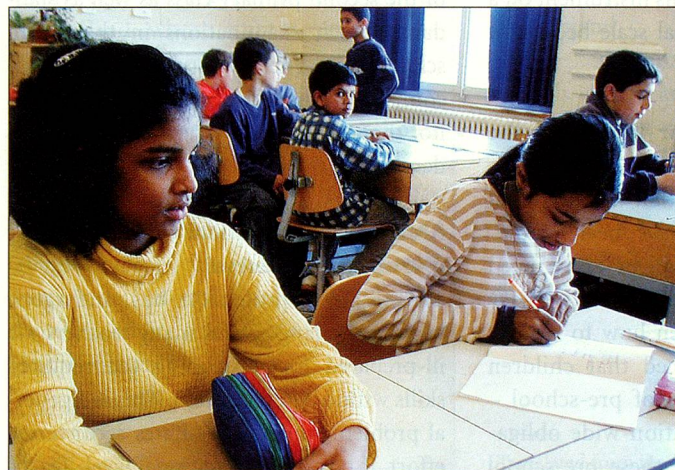
The reforms focus on students and aim to tailor teaching to the needs of the individual child. "But that's not easy in a class with an average of 20 children. Lots of teachers lack

training in conflict resolution, a parents-as-partners approach, or even interdisciplinary cooperation with their colleagues." FAPERT believes what is needed is a system of evaluating teachers, and clearly defined rules.

When it comes to "problem" children who know their rights and firmly believe that the teacher is no longer all-knowing (and hence no longer all-powerful), adaptability is the key factor. That also goes for society as a whole, of which such children are a product.

Anne Seydoux finds it normal to have to drum respect for rules into children. "The problem is that rules are too often drawn up by the school without consulting children and their parents. But children need to have limits set. It is absolutely essential to involve as many parties as possible in defining the role and mission of the school."

As far as the integration of foreign children is concerned, Anne Seydoux believes the main problem lies in the difficulties their parents encounter in integrating. "We parents have the impression that efforts to integrate foreign children are not very successful. If a child does not fit into the school's defined mould, he very soon encounters difficulties." →



Imagopress

Multiculturalism: stumbling block or asset? Anne Seydoux calls for increased dialogue with parents.