

Development of Education in Switzerland

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Today we see in retrospect that modern education in Switzerland originated in the 19th Century, as an idea, primarily in the Helvetic Period (1798-1803), institutionally primarily in the period after the political upheavals of 1830 (liberalism) and 1848 (formation of the federal state). These origins explain two things that are important to an understanding of educational policy today:

1. *strong federalism in education*: Then, as now, every Swiss canton legislates its own school regulations, has its own school authority, school system and curricula (with some exceptions) and often its own teaching aids. National control of education would have been out of the question in the 19th Century owing to Switzerland's linguistic, religious and cultural multiplicity. The first mention of public school ("*Volksschule*") appears in the Constitution of 1874 (still in effect), and that mention was only minimal. Article 27 of the Constitution merely states that the cantons must provide "adequate elementary instruction subject to government control which must be compulsory, non-denominational and free at the public schools". Swiss regulation of *gymnasial* education came only in 1880 by the indirect way of the "Federal Decree for Medical Examination", and until 1995, the Decree was still the technical legal basis (oddly enough) for the decree on recognition of maturity (through the *Matura* exam). There was no federal vocational training until the 20th Century (1930).

2. *democratic will in educational development*: The fact that 26 parliaments and 26 governments deal with education, that canton-level parties, authorities and teacher organisations discuss education issues, makes for participation by a wide circle of the population in the design of schools. The *Volksschule* especially was and continues to be regarded as truly the people's school. Even today, there is a strong political will to solve problems involving the schools by direct democratic participation at a local level whenever possible.

The pedagogic-didactic approach in the 19th Century was based on fundamental works from the beginning of the century (Pestalozzi, Girard), but after 1870, there was a growing adherence to the Herbartianism of Prussia. Toward the end of the century, what was later to be polemically called, the "Study School" ("*Lernschule*") took hold.

In retrospect, the 20th Century was more than anything a period of reform. As indicated, the course laid in the 19th Century -- while not abandoned in principle -- has been greatly modified and improved. At the beginning of the century, efforts were primarily devoted to improving vocational training. The signal event came finally in 1930 with the creation of the "Federal Law on Vocational Training", which satisfied both traditions of apprentice training (dual-track system) and of all-day school (Latin Switzerland). Geneva, the birthplace of J.J. Rousseau, stands out in the reform pedagogy of the *Volksschule* during the first third of the century. Edouard Claparède, Adolph Ferrière, Pierre Bovet and Jean Piaget, among others, all practised there. The "Bureau International d'Education" (BIE) was created in Geneva in 1926; today it is a division of UNESCO. The reform pedagogy halted in the late 1930's, even though Switzerland was largely spared by fascism, Nazism and World War I.

The pedagogic world came to life -- as in other countries in the so-called "Western Hemisphere" -- as a reaction to the Sputnik shock in 1957. There was pressure to get ahead in scientific, technological and industrial development. The *Gymnasien* opened their doors, the new math entered the discussion, the new grammar made its way in, language laboratories and programmed instruction were applied . . .

The student unrest of 1968 was quite mild in Switzerland. And yet, the next few years brought changes in pedagogic orientation. There was a refocussing on the needs of the pupils, and an "anti-authoritarian"

movement that sought to give the child more freedom, motivation and initiative. The parallels to reform pedagogy in the first third of the century were unmistakable. A.S. Neills' book about his private school (founded in 1921!) in Summerhill became a best-seller.

The 1970's were also characterised by renewed democratic will. Certain socio-cultural groups were found to be disadvantaged in school and in need of equal opportunity measures. Social instruction was also discovered to be deficient and here too steps were taken. 'Participation', 'consultation' and 'having a say in things' became the buzz words. The social-integrative pedagogy set up shop in the primary school and changed the teaching environment. New things were tried, e.g. introduction of French instruction already in the 4th or 5th year of schooling.

At the Secondary Level I, many pinned their hopes on an integrated-differentiated *Gesamtschule*. The Intercanton Commission's Report, "The Middle School of Tomorrow", foresaw the *Gesamtschule* by 1972. But it did not happen. In German-speaking Switzerland, there was only one model *Gesamtschule* (Dullkien/Solothurn Canton, 1970-1980).

There were also interesting ideas for the general education schools at the Secondary Level II. The only result was the creation of new forms of the *Matura* (1972). Efforts to improve teacher education were more successful. The report, "Teacher Education of Tomorrow" (1975), offered appealing avenues for expansion, both for the cantons, with traditional teacher training seminars at the Secondary Level II, and for those offering teacher education leading to the *Matura* (tertiary level). Noteworthy here is the gradual creation of continuing education for teachers in all cantons. By 1968, *Gymnasium* teachers had already got their "Swiss Center for Continuing Middle School Teacher Education" in Lucerne.

Never before in Switzerland were so many schools built and opened as in the 70's. This was the result in part of the "baby-boom" (peak years: 1963/64), but also of extension of the term of schooling in many schools. Education was a focus of public interest, and more was expected of schools than ever before. There was also more funding for education.

Because of the great hopes attached to education, 1970 saw the "School Co-ordination Accord" which all 26 cantons eventually signed. In so doing, the cantons agreed to the standard age for starting school, the length of the school term (at least 38 weeks of instruction), the term of compulsory school attendance (at least 9 years), the number of years required for the *Matura* (a minimum of 12, maximum of 13) and date for commencement (between mid-August and mid-October). There was also a list of recommendations (model curricula, uniform terminology for schooling levels and types of schools etc.) Owing to the strong federalist mindset, only a portion of the Accord's provisions have been put into practice so far. The common commencement date in late summer is not the result of the Accord, but rather, of a federal referendum in 1985. It should be added that, by virtue of various commissions (especially pedagogic commissions) set up by the Conference of Education Commissioners across the country, there is a network which informally contributed a good deal to improving co-ordination among the canton school systems.

In retrospect, the years after 1986 are often labelled a period of "education euphoria". It is certain that we wanted a lot all at once and that many reform plans were abandoned along the way. Economic recession (from 1974 on) and the huge drop in pupil population have contributed their part to a certain "redimensioning" and renewed pragmatism.

In the early 80's, influential industrialised countries demanded "restoration" of the good, old school: a return to "basics" (reading, writing, arithmetic, fundamental skills) and to more "quality". This call was voiced in Switzerland as well. Nonetheless, the attitude prevailed that the challenges of our time cannot be met with mere arithmetic and improved reading and writing skills. Economic developments (the Third World phenomenon, world-wide mergers, high technology), social changes (equal rights for men and women, urbanisation) and other things made it evident that the school is called upon to consider the whole

person. For example, the many canton *Volksschule* curricula which arose out of the 80's to become the standard are responses to this call. They contain, among other things (and with exceptions) the offer of foreign language instruction (typically French in German-speaking Switzerland) already in the 4th or 5th primary school year. Relevant here is the major project SIRPI (Situation of the Primary School), sponsored by the Education Commissioners' Conference in the 80's.

"Internal School Reform" was the focus of efforts in the schools in the 80's. To support these, the canton could use the departmental offices for educational development and research which had been set up in the 70's. The "external school reform" was not very focal to discussions about education. Yet, it may be said that co-operative upper level centres were set up all over (in particular in the cantons of Zurich and Bern). The "scuola media" (*Gesamtschule* with levelled courses) was introduced in Tessin. The comparable "cycle d'orientation" was established in Wallis Canton and elsewhere. Now (1994), just a few years later, the same type of *Gesamtschule* is being introduced in Jura Canton and the Canton Basel City is designing a "new school" so that students are not assigned to tracks until the 8th year of schooling.

It would be premature at this point to attempt to label the education efforts of the 90's. With the end of the world-wide "Cold War" and the challenges of the European Union after 1989, we have turned a corner in educational policy and pedagogic thinking which may not be reversible. It is best labelled an "opening".

An "opening" first in the (school) policy sense. For many decades, the Swiss educational system had lived in a "splendid isolation". But this changed almost precipitously. In 1990, Switzerland signed the European treaties regarding education (1953-1990), subjected its educational system to OECD assessment for the first time in 1989/90, participated in international comparative studies of school performance for the first time, and took part in OECD educational programs of the European Union (Erasmus and Comett). Class instruction now has a more European orientation and international education is being forcefully encouraged in view of the presence of nearly 20% foreign children in the schools. The insight is that Switzerland cannot isolate itself educationally in the middle of Europe -- even if Switzerland never joins the European Economic Space or the European Union.

The *Bund* and the Swiss Conference of Canton Education Commissioners (EDK) have therefore taken initiatives in the area of school structure: autonomy is coming to teachers in Switzerland; the higher technical schools will become technical high schools; for apprentices an opportunity will be created to sit for the vocational college entrance exam ("*Berufsmatura*"). An effort is also being made to shorten the length of schooling leading to the *Matura* and the length of study courses at universities as well. This is all in keeping with the idea of harmonisation with the "European" surroundings.

There is also an "opening" in a pedagogic sense. The schools (especially the *Volksschulen*) are receptive to expanded forms of learning. In Northwest Switzerland there is a project under just this name, "ELF" ("*Erweiterte Lernformen*"). Teaching forms such as weekly plan, project instruction, and workshop instruction are making headway. This is made possible by relatively small classes (19.4 children in primary school classes, 18.4 in the Secondary Level I). And "opening" also means that local teachers will be encouraged to join the team and will be trained to carry on an on-going dialogue with parents and local school authorities. Thus, the way is clear for what is now called communal educational development, despite economic crisis and financial need -- or precisely because of them -- to increasingly become the *Leitmotiv* for the school of the 90's.