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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."

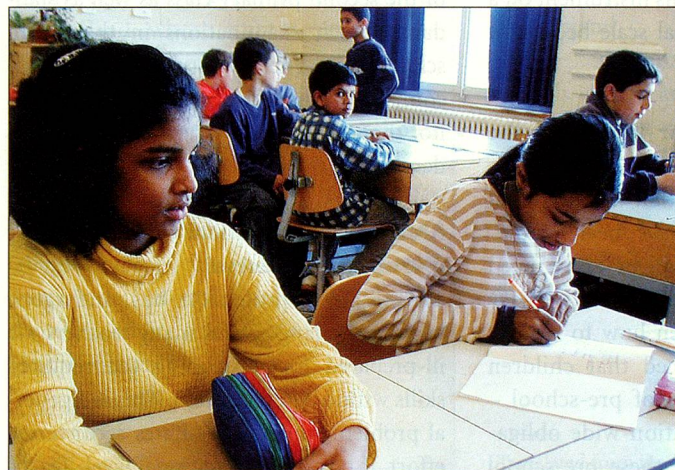
The reforms focus on students and aim to tailor teaching to the needs of the individual child. "But that's not easy in a class with an average of 20 children. Lots of teachers lack

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.

What can be done to combat this? "One should examine the school critically and pay more attention to the parents, who are often isolated." According to the president of FAPERT, "parents are often poorly informed about the system."

If parents are unaware of what is going on, trust is soon lost. That is also true of certain business sectors which define their own appraisal criteria for apprentices. For Anne Seydoux "it's normal for parents to feel lost in these times of general uncer-

tainty, and there is no use in pillorying them."

"Whether parents give up or set demands, one should always listen to them," says Anne Seydoux. "Of course everyone has a special task to perform, but parents must be well-informed if they want to help their children." And the rules of conduct? "Children at school are preparing for life in society. So the school's role is more than the mere provision of educational materials. Instruction and personal development complement each

other. So it is important to create an open atmosphere where discussion is encouraged."

Then there is the political dimension, concludes the president of FAPERT: "With 26 different school systems, federalism has definite limitations. The systems, curricula and tools must be harmonised by linguistic region or even at a national level. We should also think about creating a federal department for public education." IE

Translated from the German.



„Facing reality“

According to Martine Brunschwig Graf, President of the Geneva Department of Education and Vice President of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Education, the problems identified by the PISA report are nothing new.

Swiss Review: Did the findings of the PISA report on the average reading skills of children at state school surprise you?

Martine Brunschwig Graf: Yes and no, because the problems were already recognised before the report was published. We expect more detailed information on maths and science in the PISA reports of 2003 and 2006. I believe we need this instrument on a national and international scale because it forces us to face reality.

What is your recipe for improving the situation?

First I must point out that a number of nationwide measures have been implemented whose results will be announced at the end of the year. In Geneva we have decided to teach children how to read at age four. I am convinced that children should attend two years of pre-school – although there is no nation-wide obligation to do so, I believe these pre-school



years should be integrated in the obligatory number of school years. The sooner problems are identified, the sooner they can be corrected.

On the other hand we have carried out sweeping educational reforms based on a differentiated form of teaching which takes the learning difficulties of students into account. We have also introduced cantonal examinations in French and maths at the end of the second primary class as well as standard French examinations in the eighth school year. These instruments of cross-comparison should allow us to better monitor the way children's knowledge and skills develop.

Are there any indications that teachers are overworked in Geneva?

The teaching profession has undergone profound changes, and many teachers are ill-prepared for developing the required skills within a new concept. This is a general problem which necessitates a concerted effort, if possible at a national level. Teach-

ers for their part must exhibit mobility and flexibility in line with the trend in modern society. Their training should provide them with access to other careers if they wish one day to switch.

How can we combat the increase in poor performance and violence in the school?

Besides the many measures already initiated, I would remind you that schools, even if they are obligatory, do not simply have to put up with everything. If the rules are not respected there are sanctions to ensure an acceptable working climate for all.

So do we need to educate parents?

Some parents have a tendency to over-protect their children, sometimes even with the aid of lawyers. This is a dangerous attitude which questions the educational competences of the school. Other parents tend to delegate their own educational obligations to the school. I think schools should involve parents more, but within the limits of each individual's competence, profession and responsibility. IE

Translated from the German



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