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Autor: Guggenbühler, Mireille
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Fewer schoolchildren understand what they read

The latest PISA study has found that Swiss schoolchildren are losing the ability to read a text and understand what it means. The country's leading teacher has called it a language crisis.

MIREILLE GUGGENBÜHLER

Ivana is raising chickens. She asks the following question on an online forum related to chicken health: "Is it okay to give aspirin to my hen? She is two years old and I think she has hurt her leg. I can't get to the veterinary surgeon until Monday, and the vet isn't answering the phone. My hen seems to be in a lot of pain. I'd like to give her something to make her feel better."

Ivana's question is part of a task featured in the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) school performance study. The PISA study, which compares educational attainment around the world, is carried out every three years in the OECD member countries and in OECD partner countries. PISA assesses the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics and science.

Does the hen need an aspirin or a vet?

The latest PISA study focused mainly on reading – its "online forum on chicken health" being a prime example. Fifteen-year-olds not only had to read Ivana's question accurately but also understand what Ivana wanted to know. Did she want to know whether she could give aspirin to the injured hen or how often she could give aspirin to the injured hen? Was Ivana asking how to find a vet? Or was she asking if she could determine the pain level of an injured hen?

Students had to click on their choice to answer the question. For the first time ever, the PISA assessment included these interactive test questions in addition to the tradi-

tional paper-based reading tasks. According to the authors who summarised Switzerland's PISA results, this made sense because the test must always take societal developments into account – one of which is digitalisation. Hence, the definition of reading skills now takes the ability to use digital media into consideration.

Switzerland's latest PISA test results show a number of trends compared to the results of the 2015 assessment:

- Reading performance has declined
- The percentage of students who enjoy reading has decreased
- The percentage of students with reading difficulties has increased

Mean performance in reading in Switzerland is not much different to the average mean performance across OECD countries. However, European countries including Finland, Sweden, Germany, France and Belgium performed significantly better than Switzerland.

Films instead of books during free time

Why has Switzerland seen a decline in reading skills and reading enjoyment among young people, and why has the proportion of Swiss students with reading difficulties increased?

In her role as chair of the umbrella organisation of teachers in Switzerland, the LCH, Dagmar Rösler has to contend with education issues on a daily basis. The results of the PISA study reflect her experiences as a teacher. "I too have noticed in my work that fewer children are reading," she says. "Digital media are competing with books. Children now watch films in their free time instead of reading books."

The latest PISA results underscore this statement. Some 50 out of 100 Swiss students indicated that they did not read for enjoyment. In 2000, this applied to only 30 out of 100 students. There is, however, a very close correlation between reading enjoyment and reading skills, according to PISA, so should we be doing more to promote reading as an enjoyable activity? "We are already doing a lot. Teachers know that reading is very important," says Rösler, and she adds: "At the moment, school is probably still the place where young people read the



Dagmar Rösler believes that reading has to start at home.

Photo: donated

Fifty out of 100 Swiss students say they don't enjoy reading. She belongs to the other 50.

Photo: Keystone



most and have to think about the content of what they read.”

Is the reading crisis a language crisis?

Rösler believes that there needs to be more done at home within the family to develop the reading skills of children from a young age, given that a quarter of Swiss PISA students scored very poorly on reading. Young people from immigrant backgrounds account for a very large proportion of these bad results. Students from families in which the test language is normally spoken at home performed notably better.

So is the reading crisis essentially a language crisis? “If you start school without speaking the language, it is almost impossible to catch up,” says Rösler. “Switzerland is not doing enough when it comes to early language teaching.” But there are exceptions: the canton of Basel-Stadt leads the way in early language support. Basel’s cantonal authorities require families to fill in a questionnaire about their children’s command of German before they go to nursery school. Children who need extra help receive mandatory tuition free of charge in the year before entry. From summer, the city of Chur will also be offering mandatory language tuition to children who are still unable to speak enough German 18 months before the start of nursery school. The city of Lucerne is championing a similar scheme, after sending its first batch of Basel-style questionnaires to parents in January. One year ago, however, the education committee of the canton of Zurich rejected a parliamentary initiative to roll out the Basel scheme. According to Rösler, the PISA study ultimately reveals the need for action in one particular area: “We need to step on the gas when it comes to equal opportunity here in Switzerland.”

How Switzerland’s 15-year-olds performed

In 2018, 600,000 students from 79 countries participated in what is now the latest PISA study to have been published. They included 6,000 Swiss students born in 2002. The tests, conducted at 200 Swiss schools, delivered mean scores for Switzerland as a whole. The results of the assessment do not provide for cantonal comparisons or a breakdown of scores by language region. Switzerland’s students performed best in mathematics compared to other countries, while their mean performance in science was significantly above the OECD average. (GUM)

Switzerland in figures

Lots of plastic and loads of money

84

Demand for small, lightweight plastic bags in Swiss supermarkets has fallen by 84 per cent in the space of a year. This is because anyone who wants one must now pay an environmental charge of five centimes.

5,120

Talking of the environment, Swiss cleanliness, and plastic: according to the Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Science and Technology (EMPA), 5,120 metric tons of plastic ends up in the environment each year in Switzerland. Plastic pollution is increasing, because plastics take so long to decompose. The University of Berne estimates that around 53 metric tons of microplastics are to be found in the top five centimetres of the floodplain in Swiss nature reserves.

95,000,000,000

Now let’s talk money. Inherited wealth in Switzerland is at an all-time high, with some 95 billion francs in inheritance payments likely to change hands in 2020 – five times more than in 1990. This annual figure is set to grow in future years. Those inheriting today are also much older than the average heirs of one generation ago. This enormous flow of money remains largely untaxed in Switzerland, where politicians are nevertheless pushing for an increase in inheritance levies.

200

Dog tax, on the other hand, is not to be barked at. It can cost up to 200 francs. Many Swiss municipalities charge double if you own a second dog. Financially speaking, Switzerland is anything but canine heaven. It’s enough to make anyone howl.

551,000

And how many taxable dogs are there in Switzerland? As many as 551,000. Canine density is at its lowest in the canton of Basel-Stadt, where there is one dog per 38.4 inhabitants. The canton of Jura has the highest canine density, with one dog per 7.8 inhabitants.