

## Once upon a time there was a country without occupational education ... or Swiss, don't even think about it!

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*As kind of a 'warm up' or 'preview' for the topic of occupational education in the US, Robert Egloff describes the educational scene in the USA, outlining by means of an analogy what could happen in Switzerland if the Swiss were to adopt a more 'academified' educational system.*

Imagine the following, *strictly fictional* newspaper article in a Swiss newspaper:

### Government wants more high school graduates

sda. The situation on the apprenticeship market is tense: more and more young people leaving school do not find an apprenticeship position. In neighboring countries, boys and girls stay in school longer: in France nearly seven out of every ten young people pass the exam leading to higher education, and the government is aiming to bring the figure to 80%. The figure in Germany is 36% - but in Switzerland it is only 17%.<sup>1</sup> Finally, economists are stressing the point that all jobs of the future will demand more general education.

Based on these facts, the Swiss government, along with the Federal Office for Industry and Labor (FOIL), recommends a drastic increase of high school students in Switzerland. The objective is 100% by the middle of the next century; the natural completion of schooling should be a high school diploma (*Maturität*) at age 18 for everybody.

Complete nonsense? The figure in Germany has moved up during the last years; previously, it was similar to ours. Since, however, it is possible in Germany to appeal

a teacher's recommendation of what level middle school a student should go to, more and more parents are deciding that their children should be heading for university and therefore send them to *Gymnasium*. A German career counselor has even told me that Germany is thinking about merging the two lower levels of middle school (*Hauptschule* and *Realschule*), since fewer and fewer students choose these two types of school. And an increasing number of young people in Germany start an apprenticeship after receiving their high school diploma (*Abitur*).

In the following I'd like to show what impact this government decision could have in Switzerland.

### 1. The first wave: Schools change

With the objective of having 100% of students be high school graduates, it makes no sense to have a middle school with three tracks: so, gradually, all lower levels are abolished. After completing elementary school, all students move on to a comprehensive school which is equal to the former highest level (Canton of Zurich: *Sekundarschule*). The different high school graduation majors are abolished: there is a generic diploma for everybody.

Apprenticeship training schools, now no longer needed, are changed to high schools by the hundreds. The young people who enter these generic schools do not change, however. As always, there are - very much according to Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi - about a third of them more head smart, a third more heart smart and a third more hand smart. Accordingly, those students who would have striven for a university entrance degree in the earlier system are fine. Four fifths are overwhelmed and unhappy. Sometime during junior high school, or at the latest in their high school years, they drop out of school without a diploma. Since at the same time the number of apprenticeship positions has dropped drastically, and the apprenticeship system is about to break apart, they find no alternative educational opportunity; the vicious circle of jobbing and unemployment begins.

A school system can not produce a four fifths failure rate for long, however. What measures can be taken against this problem? Some demand methodically better trained teachers and better instruction, others suggest just plainly and simply a reduction of the standards. Since the many new schools suffer from a shortage of teachers anyhow, the second

solution wins the upper hand. The path to the high school diploma is changed until approximately two thirds of the students actually graduate after twelve to fourteen school years and are declared ready for college. Under this system, the more practically gifted (the former apprentices) can also get credit for certain vocational courses; this, however, is considered academically 'uncool' and, therefore, is gradually abolished. The fact that it is exceedingly difficult for schools to keep their vocational equipment up to date accelerates this development.

Among the subjects that are kept in the catalog are extracurricular activities that have been added in the course of the reorganization: Theater, school newspaper and yearbook, different sports with sometimes quite impressive performances, choir, several orchestras, drill teams, cheerleaders, debate team etc. Mainly for those two thirds of the students who are not only mentally gifted, but who are also heart and hand smart, these courses have proven to be a welcome change to the watered down and, therefore, rather boring traditional subjects.

As a result of the many new teaching positions, there are drastic pay cuts for teachers for economic reasons. This fact and the generally lowered standards in the school systems create a situation where more and more the weaker students, who would have little chances in other professions, choose to become teachers. The social

standing of the teaching profession sinks. A gap appears between the academically strong and the weaker teachers. Mainly those who are teaching the job-related subjects find themselves at the lower end of the list. Endless discussions about the right teaching methods follow: should teaching be rather academically abstract or applied and practical?

The large number of people who don't want to accept the diluted public school system find, in some cases, outstanding private schools and universities. The best teachers and professors flock to these private schools by the hundreds, since there they can teach the most talented students again. And, by the way, are also better paid since these schools charge outrageous tuition fees. Meanwhile, the Swiss school system in international comparison has slipped from a top to a lower midfield position.

Career counselors must refocus, too. Since their traditional clientele, the 15 to 20 year-olds, don't have to make a career decision anymore, their activity is limited to the recommendation of the right university and how most likely to be accepted there. However, there is a new task for them: since in the course of the general educationalization the career counseling offices (renamed in college counseling offices) have been moved into the high schools, the psychologically trained career counselors often are consulting and coaching

students who are about to drop out. They are becoming more and more like social workers.

## **2. The second wave: Employers react**

In the first place, all business apprenticeships are abolished. The short-term focus on shareholder value and the take-over of the computer make it possible that less and less commercial personnel is needed. Then, many other apprenticeships in the technical field are gradually abolished and replaced by vocational education courses at the schools. Finally, there remain some opportunities in the skilled crafts (mason, welder, electrician, cook etc.). The dual occupational education system has collapsed. The social standing of vocational education evaporates: everybody goes to university. The word 'Apprenticeship' is an epithet.

Then, selection criteria of the employers change: if an apprenticeship graduation certificate was required before, now they require a high school diploma and soon a university degree for an entry level position. Promotions are tied to degrees. Entry into career bound jobs happens later and later. Employers begin to accuse schools of producing employees who are not work ready. Their graduates have problems with punctuality, with absences, with teamwork- in short, with the world of work.

For all those people who have somewhere left the academified school system, a

kind of secondary labor market emerges in which they compete with all the students who need a job to finance their studies. The connection between the working world and schools gets completely lost. Occupations disappear and are replaced by job descriptions. When the job disappears, the employee disappears. Gradually, the middle class vanishes and is replaced by a big gap: either you're one of the 30% lucky people who are successful and become richer and richer, or you're part of the 70% who get poorer and poorer until they become welfare recipients or criminals. Switzerland is a social powder-keg.

### **3. The third wave: Youth and their parents adjust to the new situation**

As a result of this new reality, parents do everything in order for their children to go to university. Accordingly, the private schools which prepare students better for an academic career are booming. Parents of foreign children and in working-class families in particular vehemently oppose everything that looks or sounds like vocational education for their children. One doesn't prepare oneself for an occupation, one goes to university! For those youths who cannot imagine going to university both for intellectual and for financial reasons, there are no alternatives to make a successful transition into the world of work. The path into the underworld or into welfare is wide open.

The circle or, even better, the spiral is closed. The population demands passionately that still more schools be built for still more students for still more school years. In international comparison, the level of the schools is declining further. The last apprenticeships, sponsored by unions for their members who are, on average, 28 years old, are ridiculed. The level of services - particularly maintenance and repair work - reaches an all time low. Switzerland is a nation of dropouts.

A nightmare? The USA of 1996 lives with this nightmare! In the second part of this article (#12 at the end of the series) I will try to look at possible solutions. I believe that only radical changes will bring results. So I think, for example, that high school in its present form can be abolished in favor of an extended middle school. And that community colleges would have to take over the leading role in the US occupational education system.

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<sup>1</sup>.Swiss REVIEW, #. 5/96 (17.10.1996),  
Editorial: Pierre-André Tschanz, page 3