

Educational Research in Switzerland

Issues and challenges

The Swiss educational system is highly complex. Its roots go back to 1848 when the Swiss Confederation was established as a federal republic of 26 cantons.



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THE CONSTITUTION creates a subsidiary system that delegates to the federal level those matters that cannot be handled by the cantons. At the same time, it maintains the cantons' sovereignty as long as this does not impinge on competencies or domains attributed to the federal government. Vocational education became a federal matter, whereas academic education remained cantonal. As a consequence, technical colleges (ISCED 3A-C), as well as two federal universities (Ecoles polytechniques fédérales) (ISCED 5A), universities of applied sciences (ISCED 5A), and superior vocational schools (ISCED 5B), are legislated for at, and financed by, the federal government, sometimes in collaboration with professional associations. Compulsory schools, high schools, universities and universities of teacher education remained under cantonal sovereignty.

Consequently, it is quite difficult to talk about a unified Swiss school system. There are four linguistic regions, each one influenced by its neighbouring country. The cantonal differences

can also be enormous. A canton might be rural, urban, or both, and the population ranges between 15,000 (Appenzell Innerrhoden) and 1.25 million (Zürich) inhabitants.

However, over the decades, the cantons have set up structures for inter-cantonal collaboration. In 1874, the ministers of the French-speaking part of Switzerland created a ministerial Conference of education that became, 23 years later, a regional sub-conference of the newly formed National Conference (CDIP). Not until 1970 was a legal base created, in the form of an inter-cantonal treaty called *concordat*. This new national level of education lies somewhere in-between the cantonal and the federal structures. A Secretary General, who is the executive body of the Conference, administers it. Except in certain domains, in the French-speaking Conference there is no parliamentary control of this level. In addition, the federal government has no ministry of education.

Given the fact that educational statistics are also a cantonal matter, the overall statistical data is not very abundant and comparisons among the cantons are not easy to establish, especially in the realm of cost-analysis. Each canton has its own calculation mode. According to the available data, the overall expenditure on

education for the year 2008 was 5.1% of the GDP. The share of education in public spending was 16.7%, of which 15% was allocated by the confederation.

We do not have precise figures in regard to resources and funding devoted to educational research and development. In 2006 the OECD published a *National Review of Educational R&D in Switzerland*. They constructed comparative indicators showing the amount of funding devoted to educational R&D (including % of GDP, total educational expenditure, and public expenditure on R&D) and the level of human resources dedicated to educational R&D. The paper concluded that Switzerland invested very little in educational research (a quarter of England's expenditure, and even less on human resources).

Two decades of educational reform

Public esteem of the educational system is very high and there is almost no competition between public and private schools. Nevertheless, over the last two decades, Switzerland has faced important challenges, each with important implications for educational research. A reform of vocational education took place in the early 1990's, in order to make the Swiss system Europe-compatible. In the higher education sector, Switzerland implemented the Bologna

reform and redefined the financing mechanisms of universities, which led to a process of institutional rationalisation. Furthermore, new universities of teacher education at the tertiary level were created, some of which are inter-cantonal. These developments are ongoing, particularly in regard to research, which is expected to play an important role in teacher training.

Another important reform concerns pupils with special needs. In 2004, when the Confederation and the cantons examined the distribution of tasks between the two decision-levels, the cantons became responsible for this educational group. Again in a concordat, the cantons agreed on a common framework aiming at the integration of these pupils in regular classes. This policy will have a direct impact on teaching and learning arrangements as well as the diversification of educational staff, a perspective that challenges educational research as it will threaten strongly the traditional model of classroom learning and of the generalist teacher.

At the same time, in the compulsory school sector, an important restructuring is on its way. An initiative demanding enhanced co-ordination of the cantonal systems gave rise to a Constitutional amendment in 2006 that redefined the power balance between the cantons and the Confederation. In order to maintain cantonal sovereignty in education, the cantons reacted by proposing a concordat called *HarmoS*. The main objectives are the harmonisation of cantonal structures and an ongoing quality assurance of the system, based, among other elements, on: national performance standards in first and second languages, mathematics and science; the definition of national goals; and the elaboration of regional curricula. These elements represent a major shift from input- to output-oriented governance of the system. The changes should also to be considered in the light of the first and quite unsatisfactory PISA results in 2000. Indeed, the Constitutional amendment obliges cantons and the Confederation to report regularly on their performance. This reporting was

carried out twice, in 2006 (as a pilot report) and in 2010 (in the form of a regular national monitoring report). The 2010 report compiled existing research into an overall description of each level of the system by applying the criteria of effectiveness, efficiency and equity.

Today, a majority of cantons (15 out of 26), representing 76% of the population, have accepted the *concordat HarmoS*. This means that, sooner or later, all the cantons will have to comply, because, according to the Constitutional amendment,

The dialogue between research and policy is not always easy

the Confederation has the possibility to impose this concordat on all the cantons. The national standards are to be approved in June 2011 by the CDIP. The French-speaking cantons have already adopted a new and common curriculum that will be introduced in August 2011. The German-speaking cantons have only recently launched their standard based curriculum. In any case, important reforms are going to be introduced and supported by the performance standards mentioned above, such as the integration of a compulsory pre-school level (ISCED 0), the generalised transition from primary school (ISCED 1) to lower secondary (ISCED 2A), a skill (competence)-oriented curriculum, the introduction of a second foreign language at primary level, and a redefinition of the subjects.

With its direct democracy, it is not certain that Swiss public opinion will follow these decisions. The *concordat HarmoS* was rejected in several cantons and threatened severely in others, mainly because of the integration of pre-school in the compulsory system, which is deemed unacceptable in the light of a traditional family-oriented society. It seems that reforms have to be in the “zone of proximal development” of an overall rather conservative Swiss population, otherwise public opinion will stop the reforms by political initiatives. This has happened in different cantons, notably in Geneva,

where a very selective assessment got reintroduced by initiative. The rather technocratic approach underlying the elaboration of performance standards as the cornerstone of regional curricula has also led to strong reactions in the German-speaking part of the country. The national conservative party has launched a campaign against the skill-oriented future curriculum, proposing an alternative traditional one, emphasising a clearly identifiable canon of knowledge.

It is therefore not surprising that educational ministers, especially outside the big urban cantons, do not invest in, nor expect much of, educational research. The general tendency is rather to avoid the production of research data or evidence that could threaten the local political homeostasis. The publication of comparative data is avoided as much as possible, also because cantons try to avoid rankings. In addition, the power struggle between CDIP and the cantons is not over. Having been forced by the Constitutional amendment to accept a certain harmonisation, the cantons now defend their independence even more strongly on any matter that is not explicitly mentioned in the concordats.

The current landscape of educational research

Educational research reflects the political structure described above. In the field of vocational education, a Federal law was passed in 2003, allowing the elaboration of a national strategy for educational research in this sector that resulted in the creation and funding of special programs for research networks attached to cantonal universities or to the federal polytechnic schools. They rely on international networks and half of them are situated, partially or entirely, in economics faculties. In all the other educational sectors ruled by the cantons, the research actors are widely scattered across cantonal universities, universities for teacher education, and some dedicated research institutes run by the cantonal or regional educational administrations.

Several reports (Poglia, 1993; Hofstetter and Schneuwly, 2001; OECD,

2006) criticised the weakness of the discipline and the difficulty of educational research to deliver policy- and practice-relevant research evidence. Except in the research centres, the utility of research has not been valued sufficiently (Hutin and Weiss, 1994). In addition, politically as well as practically relevant research is expected to have a strong empirical orientation. But, according to the OECD (2006) report, university research in Switzerland is considered to be unbalanced in this regard. Yet, the situation seems to have improved rapidly over the last few years.

According to Pagnossin (2010), in the French-speaking part of Switzerland the most common fields of research are: assessment; teaching methods; disciplinary didactics (the latter would probably be considered as curriculum research in the English subdivision of the field); educational policy analyses; and learning. The major part of this work concerns compulsory education.

The French-speaking part of Switzerland, with 1.6 million inhabitants, is too small for real research competition. There is a de facto distribution of research fields among the French-speaking research institutions. Most universities' research is in disciplinary didactics, the study of learning processes at any age, and some policy analyses. The universities of teacher education have progressed quite remarkably over the last few years, but are still building up their research capacity, mainly in the fields of teacher training and learning and teaching processes.

The research institutes created in the 1960's had another role. Initially created as experimental centres for pedagogical innovation and policy support, they have by now almost disappeared. In the German-speaking part of the country

they have all been dissolved, being either integrated into a university of teacher education, or transformed into planning units or development centres, which became completely integrated into cantonal administrations.

In the French-speaking part, three research institutes still exist. Their main fields of research have become the evaluation of education systems and teaching material, as well as assessment.

Educational research and policy-making

There is widespread agreement, nowadays, that research results are extremely important, given the need for scientifically-based policy. However, the dialogue between research and policy is not always easy. Because of public financing, funding for research projects by the authorities is limited, the calls are very narrowly designed, tackling mainly structural issues, and the results are strongly controlled. Unfortunately, the few remaining research units attached to cantonal administration are more and more tightly aligned to the political issues of the moment and are gradually losing the independence they had before. As reforms are quite often a response to shortage of public financing, development work in the cantons takes place with little reference to educational research, or if a research review is commissioned, it is done *a posteriori*. It seems that evidence is tolerated, as long as it conforms to political options.

This creates a paradoxical situation. On one hand, there is a strong attempt to rely on research results for accountability reasons and in order to establish a rational and evidence-informed educational policy, in which research could play a key role. For example, the monitoring process based on the production of a quadrennial

national report on education in Switzerland produces an interesting compilation that allows a global view of the system. However, the report is based on statistical elements that are rather poor as well as on research that is strongly controlled by the authorities and carried out irregularly. Some statistical developments as well as the standard verification are to be expected in the next few years. But so far, the CDIP has made only little attempt to systemise the data production or to develop supplementary research in order to fill up missing data or to better understand certain issues. It looks as if the shift from cantonal to inter-cantonal level is difficult. The following questions remain unanswered: Who has the decision-making power, at what level, and over what issues? What power does the canton have to prevent general change? How are decisions taken?

On the other hand, given this complex educational structure, evidence-informed educational policy seems to be not really wanted by some politicians, especially those in smaller cantons. In the best case, it focuses on data that the cantons are obliged to deliver. This tension has a big impact on the evolution of the educational system and on the production of educational research. Evidence-based policy relying on educational research production is not yet generalized all over the country. Furthermore, it looks as if research facilities are being dismantled, except in the field of practitioner research, where a slight improvement can be observed. If one considers the fact that in Switzerland a reform takes about 30 years from conceptualisation to full implementation, then the transformation of the educational system to a key element in the knowledge society has still a long way to go. ■

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