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Covid-19 pandemic in Switzerland

The "extremely risky gamble" of reopening schools in Switzerland

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The Swiss Federal Council reopened the country's schools on 11 May 2020, in a context of great uncertainty about health and educational conditions. Solidarit S spoke to Rapha l Ramuz, head of the education sector of the Public Services Union (SSP) in the canton of Vaud.

What is your assessment of the methods implemented by the Confederation and the Cantons for distance education?

We can discuss the details of such and such concrete choices, but the most instructive in this process is what it reveals. On the one hand, distance education cannot be equivalent to the educational institution. With its qualities and its faults, the school is not reduced to the transmission of a stock of knowledge, it includes a set of social ties which go far beyond the teacher-pupil relationship and participate in the education of children.

On the other hand, it is a powerful indicator of and multiplier of inequalities. First, it presupposes a material infrastructure: computer, software, connection, possibility of isolation and so on. However, this infrastructure is very unevenly distributed. In this regard, an assessment will have to be made, but the situation is even more problematic than what could have been predicted. Second, it involves a technical knowledge base that neither teachers nor students (nor their parents) are supposed to have and which further exacerbates inequalities.

What do you think of the Federal Council's decision to reopen schools on 11 May?

In order to avoid false debates, it should be recalled that the SSP is in favour of reopening as quickly as possible. We have emphasized sufficiently all the limits and socio-educational dangers of confinement and distance education for this to be clear. But the central question is not so much that of the resumption date as that of the health and educational conditions thereof. The position of the Federal Council on the health issue is very worrying.

Currently the only elements formulated by the Federal Council are that children are neither carriers nor transmitters of the virus and that the wearing of masks is not useful. These claims are clearly abusive in the state of scientific knowledge on the issue. On the other hand, they are functional with a rapid and extensive resumption of production and consumption activities. Indeed, the main obstacle to the resumption of economic activity is childcare. If they are not affected by the virus, they can go back to school and parents can work. The current position of the Federal Council is an extremely risky health gamble, far removed from the precautionary principle necessary in such cases.

In terms of health, what are the prerequisites for resuming classroom teaching?

Without going into details (the SSP made detailed demands on its website), these conditions must be based on a clear and objective analysis of the medical situation, the specifics of the school as a meeting place (age of children, size of classes and common areas, type of contacts and staff and so on) and on the application of the precautionary principle when there are doubts.

It should not be forgotten that the school involves not only teachers and students, but a multitude of other professionals. For all these people (children and adults), the health rules defined on robust scientific criteria must apply.

And on the educational level?

The stakes are very high. Emphasis should be placed on reconnecting with the students, allowing everyone to connect to the group and work together again, starting from very different social and psychological situations. This socio-educational effort must accompany immediate recovery, but it will also guide the following school year and will require additional resources.

What could be the impact of this period on the development and education of students?

On the positive side, this could make it possible to reconsider the "digital mode" and underline the importance of the social bond in all its dimensions. This could also help overcome the confusion between, on the one hand, the omnipresence of digital "leisure", which is an end in itself promoted by the industry of the sector and, on the other hand, the mastery of digital as professional and educational tool. We have experienced all the problems posed by turnkey solutions in this industry in terms of data protection, property rights and so on. And this shows the need, for schools and public services in general, to acquire their own digital tools independent of the digital giants.

Of course, as in any process of this kind, there will be a struggle for the interpretation of what this experience and his been and what should be concluded from it. We have to prepare for this from now on.

30 April 2020

PS:

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