

THEMATIC PROBE. Primary Education: an International Perspective

Country Description: Switzerland

This country description was compiled from the *INCA* Archive (www.inca.org.uk).

Readers should note that Switzerland is a confederation of 26 cantons, which have devolved responsibility for education. The data which follows aims to provide a general indication of provision, but there are likely to be significant regional and institutional differences.

1. Organisation of school phases=

<i>How are the early years and primary phases organised? (3-5yrs? 5-11yrs?)</i>
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Primary phase education

Education is compulsory in both the primary and lower secondary phases, usually for a period of around nine years for children between the ages of six or seven and 15/16 years.

According to the all-Switzerland *Agreement on the Coordination of Education* (see below), children who have reached the age of six by 30th June of a given year are eligible to enter compulsory education in the autumn of that year (when the school year begins). The individual cantons may vary this date by four months in either direction.

Although compulsory primary education commences at around age six, the length of the primary phase varies from canton to canton. In some it lasts for four years, in some for five and in others six. The average age of children at the end of their primary education is 12 years and 7 months. In Zürich, for example, compulsory education lasts for nine years from the age of seven. The primary school accounts for six of these years. In Berne, six-year primary school education commences at age six.

Primary schools are often part of a complex which also includes early years provision and/or lower secondary school facilities. Some primary school classes may also be attached to a teacher training college for the purposes of practical training for students.

Early years provision

Pre-compulsory early years provision is available in nursery schools or classes, known as *Kindergärten*, *écoles enfantines* or *scuole dell'infanzia*, dependent on whether they are located in German- French- or Italian-speaking cantons respectively. In all cantons, children have the right to receive publicly-funded early years education for at least one year, sometimes two, before they start their compulsory education. It

is generally recommended that children should attend early years institutions. On average, around 99 per cent of all children throughout Switzerland receive early years education during the year before they start school. 60 per cent attend for two years and a small percentage attends for three years. The average length of attendance at pre-school is 1.8 years, although there are notable differences in enrolment between urban and rural regions. Nationwide, the enrolment rate appears to be steadily increasing.

What are the points of transfer between phases?

	Age range - possible permutations, dependent on canton			
Early years (pre-compulsory)	4/5-6 years	4/5-6 years	4/5-6 years	5/6-7 years
Compulsory primary	6-12 years	6-11 years	6-10 years	7-11, 12 or 13 years
Compulsory lower secondary	12-15 years	11-15 years	10-15 years	11/12 or 13 - 16 years

2. Locus of control

What degree of control over curriculum content and other aspects of primary schools exists at the national, regional, local and/or school level?

National

The Constitution grants very few specific education powers to the Confederation of the 26 cantons which make up Switzerland, and there is no national Ministry of Education. Even where legislative powers are held by the Confederation, it passes the necessary laws and delegates the corresponding executive powers to the cantons or, in rare cases, to private bodies. The Confederation supervises the provision of "a sufficient level of basic elementary education", which is compulsory, free and for which the cantons are responsible. As a result, the cantons enjoy direct and delegated power with regard to the basic organisation of the education system. Each has its own system of education, department of education and school law, and legislation varies considerably from canton to canton, even though they draw on the same traditional roots and despite a certain amount of collaboration. Indeed, in order to establish some degree of homogeneity, certain important areas are covered by federal provisions.

The Confederation does run two Federal Institutes of Technology (in Zürich and Lausanne) and is responsible for the Swiss National Fund for the promotion of scientific research. It also regulates and supervises the areas of gymnastics and sport, professional training, and access to universities across the 26 cantons (by recognising the matriculation examinations of all cantons).

Cantonal coordination

Until the Second World War, the education systems of the different cantons remained very insular. Since the 1960s, there has been more coordination of education policy via the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Education (EDK/CDIP). An important legal instrument for coordinating the education system is the *Agreement on the Coordination of Education*, drawn up by the cantons in 1970 "to develop education and harmonise cantonal legislation on education". To date, 25 cantons are signatories. These 'concordatory cantons' have agreed to coordinate their legislation on education in the following areas:

- Education is compulsory for children reaching the age of six on 30th June of a given year, although individual cantons retain the option of varying this age limit by four months in either direction.
- Compulsory education lasts for nine years, and each school year lasts for a minimum of 38 weeks.
- Students taking the upper secondary school leaving certificate (*Maturität*) must have attended school for at least twelve years, at most thirteen.
- The school year starts between mid-August and mid-October.

Cantons

In most instances, cantons mandate municipalities or communes to set up and maintain certain types of schools.

Almost all cantons have offices for statistics, research and documentation whose role is to ensure that schools function properly and to provide support for school improvement and in drawing up curricula etc. Such administrative bodies vary enormously according to the size of the canton. In most cantons, issues such as size of classes, the compulsory curriculum, official teaching materials etc are dealt with in a relatively centralised way, in particular in compulsory schooling, and schools and colleges enjoy very little autonomy. There is a much greater degree of independence at post-compulsory level.

Control at school level: school boards, headteachers, teachers

Most schools have school boards, which are community elected and employ teachers. Generally, at primary level in the German-speaking cantons, there are no headteachers. Consequently, the classroom teacher has great autonomy. Administration is carried out by the school board and the canton provides curricular material. Teachers do elect a lead teacher, but he or she is a first among equals and usually acts as chairman of school meetings.

Consultative bodies

Some cantons have an Education Council and, in most, teachers have the right to participate directly in this Council. Parents' rights of involvement are not so well established, however, despite the fact that they are well represented on school boards. At municipal level, for example, by virtue of the system of direct democracy, the whole electorate has the right to vote on questions concerning the school system, which can diminish the influence of parents as a body.

Curricular control

There is no national curriculum; the curriculum for compulsory education is determined by the individual canton and each has its own programmes for separate subjects or groups of subjects. However, in some parts of Switzerland, common curricula have been adopted (sometimes only for certain subjects, such as mathematics or foreign language teaching).

Curriculum guidelines, provided by the individual cantons and usually expressed in terms of general goals to be achieved and some subject-specific goals, are interpreted at school level by the teachers involved. As most primary schools do not have a headteacher or principal, the teachers' conference decides how to interpret the curricular guidelines provided by the canton. Teaching staff enjoy a considerable degree of freedom in deciding the actual content of the syllabus on the basis of these guidelines.

Are there any shifts in the distribution of control between these different levels? (Is it possible to assign percentages to each level, to reflect circumstances in each country?)

No specific information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

However, in future, there may be increasing control of assessment across Switzerland through the definition of national standards for mathematics, languages and science.

At what intervals is the curriculum reviewed? (eg are there established review cycles?)

As curriculum development and implementation is a responsibility of individual cantons in Switzerland, frequency of curriculum review can vary considerably. As a general rule, however, reviews tend to take place approximately every ten years, usually initiated by changes in ideology, education practice or other educational or social change.

3. Curriculum content

What does the statutory curriculum consist of?

Each canton has its own programmes for separate subjects or groups of subjects which make up the statutory curriculum. Within the prescribed aims, teachers enjoy considerable freedom regarding the content of the curriculum.

The core subjects at primary level always include:

- the mother tongue; and
- mathematics.

***What other aspects of the curriculum/teaching in schools are statutory?
Are time allocations for subjects statutory?***

A foreign language is usually introduced into the curriculum in Year 4 or 5 of compulsory education, children aged from around nine onwards. It has generally been accepted that the first compulsory foreign language to be introduced would be one of the other national languages of Switzerland (French, German, Italian or Rhaeto-Romanic [Romansch]).

Are there statutory timings for the length of the school day/week?

The 25 'concordatory cantons' (see above) have agreed to a minimum 38-week school year, commencing between mid August and mid October, with the long annual holiday - varying in length from five to nine weeks - in the summer.

Throughout Switzerland, the first year in primary school involves an average of almost four hours' teaching each day, and 20 lessons each week. This extends, in those cantons where primary education lasts until Year 6, to a total of just over five hours of teaching each day and between 34 and 36 lessons every week. Lessons are held in the morning and in the afternoon and, in some cantons, children have all day Saturday free, going to school from Monday to Friday. In others, children have lessons on Saturday mornings, but one afternoon in the week free, or lessons on Saturday mornings and one full day in the week free.

What changes have there been to the statutory/non-statutory elements of the curriculum?

What other trends are emerging in curriculum development? (eg new subjects/areas of learning being introduced)

The canton of Zürich has recently decided that, with effect from the 2003 school year, all children from Year 2 onwards, aged eight onwards, will begin to learn English as the first compulsory foreign language. Previously, a child's first foreign language was French and study began in Year 4 (aged 10+). This is a new venture; traditionally, in a country with four languages (French, German, Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic [Romansch]), one of the country's other national languages has been studied as the first compulsory foreign language. Zürich's Government is of the belief that the study of English as the first compulsory foreign language from earlier in a child's school career will, in the long term, be of more benefit to them when they enter the job market.

For some considerable time, there has been discussion between the cantons regarding a possible agreement on first foreign language study throughout Switzerland. No decision has yet been reached.

At primary level, subjects are increasingly taught in an interdisciplinary way.

What government/other initiatives have been introduced? What has been their impact?

No additional information to that provided above is available via the *INCA* Archive.

What other levers may be having an impact on curriculum content? (eg international studies: PIRLS, IEA, PISA, TIMSS)

No specific information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

However, the results of the recent PISA study may have an effect on primary education, particularly with regard to improving the reading ability of primary age children and the development of national standards for mathematics, the mother tongue, foreign languages and science.

4. Organisation of the curriculum

What are the common features of curriculum organisation in the primary phase? (single subjects? planning subjects as 'topics')?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

How are subjects labelled?

'Subjects'; 'subject areas'; 'subject groups'.

What examples are there of 'areas' rather than subjects?

What examples are there of clusters of subjects (eg Humanities, made up of geography and history) being brought together?

Each canton has its own programmes for separate subjects or groups of subjects. In Berne, for example, all children in compulsory phase education study a subject area entitled 'Nature/People/Environment'. This subject area includes a number of individual subjects which were previously taught independently of each other.

At primary level, subjects are increasingly taught in an interdisciplinary way.

What are the common features of timetabling? (eg weekly lessons in each subject, English and mathematics taught daily)

No specific information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

However, although timetables are normally organised by individual subject or subject area, in the early years of education, subjects are often organised into larger blocks of learning and taught as interdisciplinary projects.

5. Assessment

What is the purpose, nature and scale of assessment? (eg end of phase assessment, statutory, published test results, optional, national, local, timed tests, teacher-assessment)

There is no national system of assessment, but all cantons assess primary school children, usually through continuous teacher assessment throughout the school year. Such testing is usually informal, and any tests used are set by the class teacher, not externally, and implemented and marked by him or her.

In most cantons, school work is assessed using a system of marks. However, some years ago, certain cantons abandoned the marks system in the first few years of primary school, in favour of assessment meetings and periodic reports. Where a grading/marking system does exist, this is usually determined by legislation by the canton.

Children receive a report, listing marks for each subject (where a marking system is used), two or three times a year. There are also regular progress meetings involving parents, teachers and children. These are usually held at least every six months to discuss the child's attainment.

Progression

Children progress to a higher class on the basis of their work over the whole year (average marks overall, or average mark in the main subjects: mother tongue language, second language, mathematics). In most cantons, there are regulations according to which a child who does not achieve an adequate standard must repeat the year. In some cases, if, after repeating the year, a child still has limited chance of success, he or she may be transferred to a special (remedial) class. Such a decision is taken by the parents in conjunction with the teacher, the inspector and the educational psychology department. The current trend, however, is to ensure, wherever possible, that such children remain integrated in standard, mainstream classes.

Dependent on the canton, the decision on the type of lower secondary institution a child will attend is normally taken on the basis of school performance during the last year of primary education, and/or a special examination, and/or teachers' advice, and/or parental opinion; the latter two factors becoming increasingly important.

How far is the curriculum driven by assessments? (eg evidence of teacher preparation for testing, 'booster' or 'catch-up' classes in schools)

No specific information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

However, assessment generally appears to remain a matter for individual teachers at the individual class level and, as such, does not have an explicit impact on the curriculum. However, in those cantons which have introduced standardised tests - for teachers to evaluate children's achievement against standards - there are some

indications that the standardised tests are reducing the breadth of the official curriculum. That is, teaching is constrained by the test requirements.

6. Teaching profession/training

What changes can be identified in initial teacher training programmes?

No specific information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

Until recently, pre-primary and primary school teachers were trained at upper secondary level. By 2005, however, all teacher education will occur at the tertiary level in colleges/universities of teacher education. This training will link theory with practice and teaching with research. The tertiary teacher training institutions offer basic/initial training, continuing teacher education, and research and development related to occupational fields. There are two principal goals of the reforms:

- to raise the level of professional standards for teaching staff; and
- to achieve universal recognition for cantonal teaching diplomas throughout Switzerland and Europe.

In addition to classical teaching methods, training programmes for primary teachers are increasingly characterised by expanded teaching and learning forms such as group work, interdisciplinary instruction, workstation instruction and project instruction. Also, potential primary teachers are no longer trained to teach all subjects, but specialise in specific subject areas, and all now have to undertake some form of foreign language training.

What kinds of continuing professional development/on-going training are provided?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

To what degree are teachers'/schools' planning subject to scrutiny?

No specific information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

However, there appears to be almost no control of teachers' planning. The trend towards lesson planning in teaching teams, however, implies a kind of control by colleagues.

To what degree are teachers using electronic formats to plan?

No specific information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

There are no research results available. However, the availability of electronic formats for planning and evaluation is extensive.

7. Pedagogy

Which teaching approaches are dominant or developing a higher profile, and which are receding? (eg collaborative work, whole-class instruction)

The widespread belief that whole class instruction is the norm in Switzerland has recently been discredited. (Comment from probe compiler.)

There are no research results available, but both whole class instruction and collaborative work are common. The individualisation of learning is currently regarded as an increasingly important factor. Classes are usually formed in groups by age and, at the primary level, there are usually no groupings by ability.

What is the impact of ICT in teaching practice? (eg use of electronic whiteboards, intranets, managed learning environments/local grids)

No specific information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

However, in 2001, three out of every four primary schools had computers available for children, and primary schools in French-speaking Switzerland had proportionately more computers available. Of those schools with computers available, 84 per cent of computers were installed in classrooms (rather than in purpose-built or arranged computer rooms). The Internet was available in about half of all primary schools and 15 per cent of all schools had their own home page.

There has been no research into the impact of ICT on learning outcomes. However, the trend towards individualised teaching and learning is supported by ICT.

To what degree are teaching approaches focusing on developing thinking skills, creativity and building on children's learning styles?

No specific information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

Individual learning styles are increasingly regarded as the most important factor in teaching, particularly in teaching to younger children (in the first three years of primary education).

8. Resourcing

How far are resources to support teaching made available via government/central/local agencies?

Textbooks for primary level education are paid for by the canton and the municipality.

How far, and in which subjects, are resources statutory/ recommended/ subsidised? (eg textbooks, courses, lesson plans for teachers, web-based materials)

Each canton has the authority to authorise or prescribe teaching materials. Such materials are drawn up either by the canton itself, or in collaboration with other cantons or other authorities in a region. In some cases, teachers may choose the materials they use from among those recommended by the canton. Texts are generally prescribed for mathematics, foreign languages and, in particular, the mother tongue. 'Do-it-yourself' teaching-materials are illegal as the main basis for instruction.

In reality, however, the teacher usually has considerable freedom in teaching methodology and instructional materials. Apart from a few compulsory textbooks (regulations vary from canton to canton), he or she can normally choose from a wide range of optional learning materials.

In Zürich, teachers tend to use textbooks and worksheets prepared by the canton.

Textbooks for the teaching of English at the primary level are currently being developed in many cantons.=