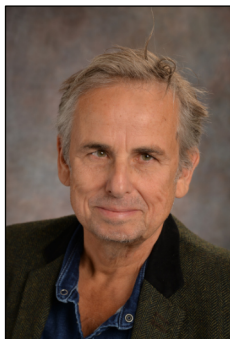


The teaching profession in transition

The remarkable transformation of the former teaching profession into a job

by Alain Pichard*



Alain Pichard.
(Picture ma)

(CH-S) The gradual change in the perception of the teaching profession is outlined using the example of an experienced teacher. Key aspects of the professional identity appear to have been lost during the "school development" of recent decades.

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Shortly before the summer holidays in 2024, a year ago, when the Swiss Seeland municipality of Pieterlen was short of 25 teachers, a new ad hoc school management team desperately set out to find people who could teach more than 300 "educationally neglected" children in a matter of weeks. Among other things, they combed through a list of retired teachers and tried to convince them to come back for another year. In the end, they were able to persuade seven retired teachers to teach in Pieterlen. One of them was *Renate B.*, 67 years old and retired for four years. She lives in Pieterlen and took over a fourth-grade class.

She didn't really get on with the assistant she was assigned. She didn't think she was reliable enough. She was responsible for the class and sharing that responsibility was out of the question for her.

She led the class with a firm hand and mostly, but not exclusively, used a teacher-centred teaching style.

The pupils were surprised that their handwriting was suddenly being criticised and that they were working less with computers. But they grew to appreciate this old lady. Perhaps because they realised that they were learning something, but certainly because the energetic pensioner did



"Being a teacher is more than just a 'job'. Despite increasing bureaucratisation, it is about taking responsibility for the fate of each individual." (Picture keystone)

crazy things with them. The school's art room was in a deplorable state, which annoyed Renate B. So, she decided to renovate the room with her class. She was able to count on the resources of the parents, and her husband also helped. They cleaned, painted, tidied up, sanded, labelled, reordered and rearranged. The final stage took place on a Saturday when there were no lessons, which turned into a real celebration. No one wanted to compensate this Saturday. Not the parents, because they also value the school as a "childcare institution", not the kids, because they enjoyed coming to school, and certainly not Renate B., who wanted to teach the children something.

Surgery is only an option during the summer holidays

She had planned a week-long school trip to the countryside with her class for the fourth quarter. She rented a small accommodation in the Emmental region. Various family members offered to help her during that week. Less than a week before the school trip, Renate B. had to be rushed to hospital. The school management was convinced that the week had to be cancelled. But for Renate B., it was clear that the week had to go ahead; her charges deserved it after such a difficult year. She told the doctors: "Give me the medication I need, I have to hold out for another eight weeks." An operation would only be possible during the summer holidays. No sooner said than done. Renate B. travelled with the fourth graders

* *Alain Pichard*, born in 1955, has been a secondary school teacher for 42 years, mainly at schools in disadvantaged areas of Biel. He is co-initiator of the memorandum '550gegen550', co-editor of 'Einspruch' and founder of the 'TheaterzoneBiel' theatre for apprentices and migrants. He is a trade unionist and member of the *Green Liberal Party* (GLP).

to the Emmental, organised competitions, night hikes, an orienteering course and forest games, and the children came back with shining eyes. In the penultimate week of school, she wanted to give her class a nice end to the school year. It turned out that the parents of one of the pupils owned a piece of land by the lake. So, the fourth graders enjoyed a bike ride with swimming and an overnight stay in tents at Lake Biel.

Never before had they experienced a school trip, a theatre or an overnight stay

A well-known education researcher recently told me that his daughters were now in second and fifth grade. The second grade had seven predominantly young female teachers. On Monday mornings, for timetable reasons, there are two sports lessons and two music lessons. In the afternoon, there is art. The “hard” subjects start on Tuesday. The two teachers have divided the week so that one works on Tuesday and Wednesday and the other on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. They share the class leadership. When asked about this teaching arrangement, the school management apologised, citing the current shortage of teachers. They said that it was currently an employee’s market. The two class teachers have a 20% and 40% workload, and that is all they are able to. The education researcher’s 11-year-old daughter has never been on a school trip, to a theatre or on a sleepover.

At the Orpund secondary school, where the author of this article worked as a class teacher for many years, it was customary for class teachers to start lessons on Monday and finish on Friday afternoon. The timetable planner was instructed to organise the timetable accordingly. This arrangement has since been quietly abolished. Part-time work, special requests and, above all, the desire for a long weekend put an end to this arrangement. Hardly any of the new teachers are willing to work full-time, and the desire for a free Monday or Friday is increasingly becoming a condition of employment.

Young teachers from teacher training colleges – hardly anyone wants to work full-time or take on additional tasks as a class teacher

The training provided by teacher training colleges, with its restrictive subject specialisation, the hierarchical structure of schools with head teachers who rigorously enforce personal competencies, the disempowerment of teachers to have a say in school policy, gagging orders im-

posed by the education authorities, the massive austerity measures of the early 2000s, the illusion of transferring learning content to digital teaching programmes, a curriculum that no one understands, and the abolition of civil servant status have all left their mark.

To counteract escaping the role of class teacher – a pay rise of 300 Swiss francs

If you treat employees like this, they will ultimately behave like normal employees in any other company. They calculate, ensure acceptable working conditions for themselves and change jobs when it no longer suits them. The Bernese Department of Education has now also recognised this. To stem the exodus from the teaching profession, it recently introduced financial incentives. Since 2024, every class teacher has received a wage supplement of CHF 300.

Left behind: responsibility for the pupils

To avoid any misunderstandings: these modern teachers generally behave in a thoroughly professional manner. They try to do their job well, start lessons more punctually than their “senior colleagues” used to and prepare their lessons thoroughly. They also dutifully apply the blessings of modern pedagogy taught at teacher training colleges: Self-organised lessons, teachers as learning coaches and the relieving model of self-monitoring by pupils are introduced with conviction but usually with moderate success.

What has fallen by the wayside is the basic principle of the teaching profession: responsibility for the learning success of the pupils entrusted to them. This is hardly achievable with part-time work and fragmented teaching hours, or the teaching methods mentioned above.

This is not about romanticising Renate B.’s commitment with words like “dedication” or “passion”. It is about the willingness to take responsibility for the learning in the classroom.

There may be people who perceive Renate B. as an old-fashioned teacher. But taking an interest in every one of her pupils and conveying to them: “I want you to be able to do this!” is not old-fashioned. She gave the class the necessary cohesion with projects that made the pupils proud, and she did not want to pick up the children entrusted to her where they were, but to show them where they could go.

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