



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE FIELD OF LITERACY AND BASIC EDUCATION

State of the art in Switzerland

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Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Development of Literacy and Basic Education in Switzerland	3
2.1	General overview and data	3
2.2	A look at the situation in the Swiss Cantons	4
2.3	Literacy providers	4
2.4	Financing and participation	5
3	Concept of teaching Literacy and Basic Education	5
3.1	National strategy in the field of professionalisation of literacy teacherstraining	5
3.1.1	Background	5
3.1.2	Rationale	6
3.1.3	The project “Professionalisation in the literacy field”	6
4	Review of Literacy Teacher Competences	7
5	Good practice in the field of teacher training: New modular training course for literacy teachers (LiteratorIn)	8
6	Prevailing problems and challenges	9
7	Conclusions and recommendations	9
8	Bibliography	11
9	Links	11

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1. Introduction

The following report has been compiled as part of the project TRAIN “Professionalization of Literacy and Basic Education – Basic Modules for Teacher Training”, an EU Socrates Grundtvig funded project, in collaboration with partners from Germany, Cyprus, France, Slovenia and Ireland.

The Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB) has joined the project as a self financed partner. SVEB’s participation is funded by the Swiss government.

It is the goal of this report to detail the background to adult literacy policy and national strategy in Switzerland. It mainly focuses on the current structures in place for the professionalization of adult literacy teachers including the recently developed training for literacy teachers in the German speaking part of Switzerland.

The information contained in the report has been compiled from a number of government publications, publications from stakeholders in the adult literacy and basic skills sector and research undertaken by the Swiss Federation of Adult Education (SVEB).

Information gathering for this report took place over a five-month period from January 2007 to the end of May 2007 and involved primarily research and discussions with expert practitioners in Switzerland involved in the adult literacy and adult basic education sector.

2. Development of Literacy and Basic Education in Switzerland

2.1 General overview and data

The results of the IALS Study in 1998, and more recently in the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) Survey carried out in 2005, showed, that as many other countries in Europe Switzerland faces a major literacy problem: 800'000 Swiss, i.e. 16 percent of Adult population, have literacy skills at a most rudimentary level (level 1). Low literacy skills are not only a problem of immigrants: The ALL Survey revealed that a fraction of 11 percent of the Swiss natives have literacy problems. Research undertaken by SVEB in 2005 showed that a total amount of only 3'000 learners attend literacy classes within the period of a year.

Several reports carried out by the Swiss government and various stakeholders¹ analysed the problem of low basic skills thoroughly over the past few years and many measures were proposed to fight the problem. For example, a very recent analysis based on ALL-data published by the Federal ministry of Statistics showed that “illiteracy”² costs the Swiss economy approximately 600'000 Euros every year. As a consequence, the need for a broad and learner-oriented supply in the field of basic skills tuition is today undisputed among most stakeholders in Switzerland.

However, unlike in other European countries the fight against illiteracy never became a priority on the national political agenda. Even though the Federal Ministry of Culture was mandated by the Swiss government to constitute an Network to fight illiteracy in 2004 (see chapter 3), on the national level there has not existed the political will to develop (and fund) an overarching strategy to promote basic skills learning. Today there are no commonly agreed national basic qualification standards, no national binding targets to promote participation and no strategy to develop a sufficient supply of courses across the country.

As a result of the lack of a national strategy and the federal Swiss system, the situation in the field of basic skills tuition varies substantially from one Swiss Canton to the other. While in

¹ Results of the IALS survey (BFS, 1994, 1998), Trendreport „Illetrismus – Wenn Lesen ein Problem ist (SKBF im Auftrag des BAK, 2002), the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (BFS, 2006)

² In Switzerland the deficit term „Illetrismus“ (German for „illiteracy“) is commonly used

some Cantons there are publicly funded offers for courses in reading and writing (e.g. the Canton of Berne), there are some Cantons (especially in the eastern part of Switzerland) where there exists not a single course offer for the group of lower skilled learners. Where offers exist in the field of basic skills learning, they vary concerning content, methods used and quality: common standards are lacking.

To give a clearer picture of the general situation in Switzerland regarding the fight against illiteracy we subsequently look at the situation in the Cantons (funding, legal basis) and the nature and structure of providers of basic Adult Education.

2.2 A look at the situation in the Swiss Cantons

A study³ carried out by the Swiss Federation of Adult Learning SVEB in 2006 researched the situation in the 26 Swiss Cantons regarding responsibilities, available budget and measures in place to fight illiteracy. The study came to the following results:

- In 5 of the 21 responding Cantons there exist no legal basis to foster basic adult education
- The total budget available to fight illiteracy in all Cantons amounts to 0.8 million Euros a year. However, the budget available varies from one Canton to the other very much. In some Cantons there is no budget available at all.
- Not in all the Cantons the responsible body to take care of the problem of illiteracy is clearly defined. In big Cantons the responsibility is often delegated to a provider of basic Adult Education, such as the EB Zürich⁴ in the Canton of Zurich.
- Lump sum subsidies for providers of courses in reading and writing are the most common measure of the Cantonal bodies. There is hardly any direct funding of demand.

2.3 Literacy providers

The structure of the market of providers in the field of reading and writing can be characterized as follows⁵:

- In sum, there are about 30 providers of literacy tuition across Switzerland. Most providers in the field of basic education are today gathered in an umbrella organisation called "Schweizer Dachverband Lesen und Schreiben"⁶. About 15 providers belong to this association.
- There are no profit-oriented providers in the field of literacy tuition. Many providers are organised as non-profit associations, which are specialized on the tuition of literacy. Other providers are Adult Education centres, vocational education centres or NGOs. Compared to the overall volume of the Adult Education market in Switzerland, which is mostly private, the fraction of engagement in the literacy field is very small. As there are no "financial incentives, the private Adult Education sector does not take part in the promotion of literacy.
- About one half of the providers receive direct public grants to fund their supply
- Not in all parts of Switzerland exists a sufficient supply of literacy courses. While in the Canton of Berne in the year 2005 37 courses were run, in the whole Eastern part

³ „Auswertung der Befragung der Kantone betreffend der aktuellen Situation in der Bekämpfung des Illettrismus“, SVEB 2005

⁴ www.eb-zuerich.ch

⁵ „Marktstruktur im Bereich Lesen und Schreiben“, unpublished working paper, SVEB 2005

⁶ www.lesen-schreiben-schweiz.ch

of Switzerland it was only two. Thus the supply is very unevenly shared across Switzerland.

2.4 Financing and participation

After looking at the situation in the Cantons and the structure of providers it is not surprising that also in relation to the financing of courses there are very diverse conditions. In general, we can state that except for people involved in programs for unemployed, participants do have to pay for literacy courses: There are no free literacy courses in Switzerland.

But as most providers do get funds from public bodies, costs and thus the charges are rather low: participation in a literacy class costs around 200 Euros per semester.

As stated above, it is estimated that only 3'000 learners participate in literacy courses every year in Switzerland. This means that not even 1 percent of those people in Switzerland that have low literacy skills, do participate in respective courses.⁷ As the example of Ireland shows, participation can be raised if demand is largely subsidized. The political will to go in a similar direction in Switzerland is lacking.

3. Concept of teaching Literacy and Basic Education

In this section we will look at the efforts made in Switzerland to develop a professional system in the field of literacy teaching. First we will look at the background and the rationale behind these efforts, then we look at the present situation of literacy teachers in Switzerland. We will then turn to describe the new modular teacher-training course, which today sets a standard in the field.

3.1 National strategy in the field of professionalisation of literacy teachers training

3.1.1 Background

As result of an intervention in the Swiss parliament in 2001, the Swiss government commissioned an expert to write a report⁸ on the problem of low literacy skills in Switzerland. The report published by the Swiss government in 2003, established the basis for the constitution of a national network to fight illiteracy in 2005. The constitution of the network remains until today the only national initiative taken by the Swiss government to contribute to the fight against illiteracy.

The activities of the network are coordinated and funded by the Federal ministry of Culture. The goals of the network are twofold:

1. Increasing the exchange and sharing of knowledge among all those institutions involved in the fight against illiteracy (networking)⁹
2. Improvement of the quality of the services provided to Adults with low literacy skills.

Discussions in Switzerland showed that the second goal could only be attained through a process of professionalisation of the literacy field, in particular through a professionalisation

⁷ The ALL-Study showed that people with low literacy skills generally do participate very rarely in general Adult Education

⁸ Bericht „Illetrismus - Wenn Lesen ein Problem ist“, SKBF, 2003

⁹ This goal and subsequent measures will not be discussed in this report.

of literacy teachers. As a consequence, in 2004 the Swiss Ministry of Culture initiated and financed a 4-year-project to foster professionalisation in the literacy field.

3.1.2 Rationale

In the first place, the rationale behind the intention to increase the level of professionalisation in the literacy field was to improve the quality of teaching and, as a consequence, to improve the quality of services provided to learners. Research undertaken by SVEB in 2005 showed that in the German speaking part of Switzerland no standardized or formal teacher training to acquire the specific competences needed to teach Adults with literacy problems was available¹⁰. Moreover, no standardized and generally accepted qualification framework for literacy teachers in Switzerland was in place. Prior to the development of the literacy teacher course there was a lack of clarity on appropriate qualifications for literacy practitioners.

Another rationale for the project was the believe that a professional system would strengthen the economical and social situation of today's practitioners working in the field - and that it would facilitate the recruitment of new staff in the short and medium term.

Most literacy teachers in Switzerland today are primary school teachers (pedagogues), speech therapists or dyslexia specialists. Most of them have an additional qualification in Adult education¹¹. They come from various backgrounds and thus had to acquire the competences needed to work with illiterates from diverse resources. Those working in the field today work highly professional.

As funding for literacy work is very limited in general, there are no full time permanent positions for adult literacy teachers. Literacy teachers in Switzerland are part-timers and there is no career progression for them at all. Salaries vary from provider to provider and some practitioners work even on a volunteer (unpaid) basis. This is especially true for the western part of Switzerland.

3.1.3 The project "Professionalisation in the literacy field"

According to the second goal of the constituted network to fight illiteracy, the Swiss Federation of Adult Learning (SVEB) was mandated in 2004 to develop a (national) system to professionalize the field of literacy teacher training in Switzerland. The project was funded by a total amount of 120'000 Euros.

The project was divided in several steps:

1. Collection and analysis of the field in of good practice in the field of literacy teacher training across Europe
2. Definition of a qualification framework for literacy teachers in cooperation with national and international experts (see chapter 4)
3. Development of a respective modular training courses for literacy teachers (see chapter 5)
4. Development of methods and instruments to assess and validate literacy teachers competences

¹⁰ The situation in the French part of Switzerland is different. The main provider of literacy classes in the "Romandie", the Association Lire et Ecrire, has developed and runs an internal literacy teacher training course. The course is designed to train new staff.

¹¹ There exists a well developed „Train-the-Trainer“-System in Switzerland through which general competences methodology and didactics in Adult Education can be acquired

We subsequently look at the results of the second and third step in this project.¹²

4. Review of Literacy Teachers Competences

The expert group, constituted in 2004 in order to develop the new modular training course for literacy teachers, reflected intensely on competences and skills thought to be fundamental for the work with illiterates. The result of the working group was the development of a set of competences which then formed the basis for the development of a modular training course for future "Literatoren".¹³

Generally it was acknowledged that the work with illiterates requires a rather large set of special know-how and competences. Literacy teachers should have professional competences, methodical skills, social competences and cultural competences. We here list the competencies considered to be fundamental (The list is not closing):¹⁴

Professional competences

- Ability to teach reading and writing to Adults with adequate methods and didactics
- Ability to understand the target group, i.e. the cultural and social background of the learner
- Ability to understand the broader social and economical context of literacy
- Experience in the adult learning area
- Ability to initiate common learning processes with heterogeneous learner groups
- Knowledge of intercultural strategies
- Experience in preparing learner-oriented course and lesson plans

Methodical skills

- Ability to recognize, to use and to manage diversity among learner groups in order to strengthen the particular learner and to improve the mutual acceptance of the learners
- Ability to organize a learning environment that is suitable and supportive of the learners' needs
- Knowledge of different approaches and methods of literacy language acquisition
- Knowledge of and the ability to use learner-oriented counselling models
- Knowledge of and ability to make use of suitable project work, self-directed studying, PC, learning software and the Internet

Social and personal skills

- Capability of establishing a studying climate based on respect, appreciation and partnership
- Capability of understanding the problem definitions and difficulties of the participants and advising them solution-oriented
- Ability reflect and change positively my moral concepts, strategies, cultural stereotypes as well as my attitudes regarding teaching and learning by means of self reflection

¹² The project team is currently still working on step 4 and the results are not yet ready to be published.

¹³ The term „LiteratorIn“ is today used in Switzerland to describe a literacy teacher.

¹⁴ These set of competences form the basis for a the new literacy teacher training.

5. Good practice in the field of teacher training: Modular training course for literacy teachers (LiteratorIn)

On the basis of the set of competences thought to be fundamental for literacy teachers, a modular training course for literacy teachers was developed in 2005. The course leads to the protected certificate "LiteratorIn". Unlike in other European countries the course is not on university level. It is designed for Adult Educators that have already experience in the field, but not especially with the group of low skilled learners.

The course was piloted in 2006 and runs for the second time in 2007. We subsequently look at the goal of the course, duration, target group and methods used.

Goal of the course

After having attended the course, the "Literator" should

- have a deep understanding of the causes and effects of literacy problems
- be fully able to teach literacy classes on his/her own
- have a broad understanding of the target group, i.e. adults with low basic skills

Modular structure

The course is made up of three modules:

Module 1 Literacy in the (inter-)cultural context	
Module 2a Methods for teaching natives	Module 2b Methods for teaching migrants
Module 3 Planning and steering of learning processes	

Duration and level

Each module takes 4 days, thus the whole course takes 12 days.

Target group

The target group of the literacy teacher course consists of:

- practitioners, that have already experience in teaching learners with low literacy skills and wish to deepen their knowledge
- Adult Educators that have experiences in other fields of education that want to specialize in literacy teaching

Lecturers

The course is being taught in team-teaching. One lecturer is specialized on working with natives; the other is specialized on working with migrants.

6. Prevailing problems and challenges

In the last few years, a lot has been done in the literacy field. The various actors have, on various levels, put a lot of efforts in the development of basic skills learning and the Swiss government has started a small-scale initiative to promote the exchange and sharding of knowledge and the development of a professional structure.

Moreover, thanks to quite a lot of research that has been carried out in the last few years (e.g. the ALL-Study), we do have a rather good understanding of the degree and the characteristics of the basic skills problem.

Nevertheless, there remain several problems and huge challenges to be tackled in Switzerland in the near future. We subsequently list some of them (the list is not closing):

- The demand for courses in reading and writing is too weak. Not even one percent of the Adults with low literacy skills is involved in a learning activity.
- There is not a sufficient offer of literacy courses in all regions of the country.
- The existing course offer is not coherent. An integrated basic qualification framework that serves as a basis for the tuition of basic skills is lacking.
- Efforts in the field of professionalisation are still at an early stage. An integrated quality assurance concept including standards for tuition and providers is still missing.
- On the national level and in many Cantons there is no legal basis to sufficiently fund the work of providers and to subsidise the demand for courses.
- As a consequence of low participation the demand for new literacy practitioners is very low. As long as there is no national promotion campaign to raise the level of participation, the current situation for literacy teachers will hardly improve.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

With regard to the prevailing problems and challenges, we recommend focusing on the following priorities for the next four years:

- Establishment of a sufficient legal basis on national, cantonal and community level to secure long-term financing of demand and supply.
- Development of a nation-wide, coherent, modular course supply, including a basic qualification framework, which allows the development of a context-specific and learner-oriented offer for low skilled persons.
- constitution of a course offer in all Swiss regions, especially in the eastern part of the country
- Planning and implementation of a large-scale campaign to promote demand and thus participation in literacy courses. The campaign should optimally include funding of demand.
- The professionalisation of the field of literacy teacher training in Switzerland is still at an early stage. The modular training course should just be the beginning of more efforts towards professionalisation: For example, a coherent in-service training offer for today's practitioners should be developed. Moreover, other means of professionalisation should be tested and used.
- Concepts, methods, materials and instruments used in today's tuition should be evaluated
- The communication and cooperation between providers and institutions working in the field, especially in relation to securing long-term funding, should be promoted and improved.

- The promotion of literacy and numeracy in the workplace should become a top-priority in Switzerland. Companies have to be sensitized and concepts to promote literacy in the workplace-context have to be developed, tested and implemented.

To be able to work on the goals and priorities stated above, a broad policy commitment on the national level and in the Cantons is fundamental. All stakeholders in the literacy field should therefore unite their forces to lobby for the promotion of basic skills in the new Adult Education Law, which is currently being elaborated.

Once there is a binding mandate based on a new law, it is essential for Switzerland to develop an overarching national strategy to fight illiteracy. The strategy should be well thought-out, coherent, sufficiently funded - and it should include binding targets.

sveb.bg/22.6.2007

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9. Links

www.lesenlireleggere.ch

Network to fight illiteracy

www.lesen-schreiben-schweiz.ch

Umbrella association of providers of literacy courses for Adults

www.alice.ch

Swiss Federation of Adult Learning

www.bak.admin.ch

Federal Ministry of Culture

www.unesco.ch

Swiss UNESCO-Commission