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From Segregation to Inclusion: Special Needs Education and the Transformation of the Swiss Welfare State

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Abstract • This article examines the evolution of special needs education in Switzerland, focusing on the transition from segregation to inclusion within the context of welfare state formation. The authors hypothesise that both segregated and inclusive education systems are inextricably linked to the logic of the Swiss welfare state, which aims to integrate individuals into society while reducing the financial burden on the state. Historical analysis reveals that, from the end of the nineteenth century, early welfare measures, driven by statistical thinking and medico-educational classifications, led to the establishment of special educational facilities for "abnormal" children. In the twentieth century, it became apparent that educational segregation led to social separation, not integration. However, despite the political commitment to the new paradigm of inclusive education, its practical implementation remains challenging, with significant variations among Swiss cantons and ongoing debates about resource allocation and meritocracy.

Keywords • special needs education, social inclusion, welfare state, Switzerland

In recent decades, social inclusion in all life domains – education in particular – has become a prominent political issue.[1] Accordingly, it has received much attention in international educational discourse as well as in educational research.[2] Proponents of inclusive education see the exclusion of children from mainstream education as a social injustice that prevents society from being more just, fair, and equal. Inclusive education is thus meant to right the historical injustice of separating the so-called disabled children from their so-called normal peers. Although the inclusion narrative emphasises equal access to education for every child – regardless of their dis/ability – with the view of allowing each individual to become a useful and productive citizen, the practical implementation of inclusive measures remains challenging. As Tobias Colling Larsen and his co-authors pointed out, "there has been a great discrepancy between inclusion as a political ideal and inclusion as practice."[3]

1 Tobias Peter and Anne Waldschmidt called inclusion a "central concept in contemporary discourse" (*Leitbegriff der Gegenwart*). See Tobias Peter and Anne Waldschmidt, "Inklusion: Genealogie und Dispositivanalyse eines Leitbegriffs der Gegenwart," *Sport und Gesellschaft* 14, no. 1 (2017), 29–52.

2 For a global view on the issue of inclusion in education, see Christopher Boyle et al., eds., *Inclusive Education: Global Issues and Controversies* (Leiden: Brill Sense, 2020).

3 Tobias Colling Larsen, Jessica Holloway, and Bjørn Hamre, "How is an Inclusive Agenda Possible in an Excluding Education System? Revisiting the Danish Dilemma," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 23, no. 10 (2019), 1049. For the specific case of Switzerland see for instance Inclusion Handicap, *Schattenbericht: Bericht der Zivilgesellschaft anlässlich des ersten Staatsberichtsverfahren vor dem UN-Ausschuss für die Rechte von Menschen mit Behinderungen* (Bern: n.p., 2017).

In Switzerland, the school system has become more inclusive over the last few decades, albeit slowly and with significant cantonal variations.[4] Like many other countries, Switzerland is a signatory to the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policies, and Practice in Special Needs Education of 1994, thereby implicitly adhering to the perspective that children "with special education needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs," which is best achieved in a fully inclusive school system.[5] Switzerland also ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2006,[6] the aim of which – among many other objectives – is to ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively participate in a free society. To uphold this directive, the ratifying states "shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels."[7] Adherence to this philosophy is reflected in the paragraph added to the Swiss Federal Constitution in 2008, stipulating that the Swiss cantons shall provide sufficient special needs education for all children with disabilities.[8] More conducive guidance is given by the Federal Act on the Elimination of Discrimination against People with Disabilities (*Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz*), stating that the cantons should promote the inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream schools.[9]

Compared to the Nordic countries, Switzerland is a latecomer to inclusive education. Nevertheless, the Swiss school system provides an effective case study for elucidating the dramatic change in the treatment of pupils with special needs in the welfare-state era.[10] During this period, "the management of children with cognitive and physical disabilities underwent radical transformations." At the turn of the twentieth century, children with disabilities "were tested and assessed and placed in special schools or special classes." In the second half of the century, "the official policies concerning

4 Justin Powell and Andreas Hadjar, "Schulische Inklusion in Deutschland, in Luxemburg und der Schweiz: Aktuelle Bedingungen und Herausforderungen," in *Leistung und Wohlbefinden in der Schule: Herausforderung Inklusion*, ed. Kathrin Rathmann and Klaus Hurrelmann (Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 2018), 46–64. See also Bundesamt für Statistik, *Statistik der Sonderpädagogik: Schuljahr 2018/2019* (Bern: Bundesamt für Statistik, 2022).

5 UNESCO, *Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policies, and Practice in Special Needs Education* (Salamanca: UNESCO, 1994), viii.

6 Switzerland ratified this convention in 2013.

7 United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and Optional Protocol* (New York: United Nations, 2006), 16.

8 https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1999/404/en#art_62. The paragraph does not specify in which schools this education shall be provided.

9 https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2003/667/en#sec_5. See also Niels Anderegg, "Auf die Schulleitung kommt es an!," in *Ist inklusive Schule möglich? Nationale und internationale Perspektiven*, ed. Jasmin Donlic, Elisabeth Jaksche-Hoffman, and Hans Karl Peterlini (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 111–32; Urs Strasser, "Eine Schule für alle: Integration und Inklusion auch in der Schweiz? Eine Standortbestimmung," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Heilpädaogigik* 3, no. 3 (2006), 6.

10 For the organisation and structure of the Swiss school system see Lukas Boser, Michèle Hofmann, and Ingrid Brühwiler, "E Pluribus Unum: One Swiss School System Based on Many Cantonal School Acts," in *School Acts and the Rise of Mass Schooling: Education Policy in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Johannes Westberg, Lukas Boser, and Ingrid Brühwiler (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 67–92.

disabled children and youth moved towards integration and inclusion," and "[e]qual access to education became the overall goal."[11]

The existing research literature on the history of educational exclusion and inclusion in the Nordic countries has traced this transformation from the mid-twentieth century. We learn from these studies that the segregated school system, which had developed extensively by the middle of the century, fell into disrepute as a part of the general social critique in the 1960s. The aim was to replace the exclusionary school system with an inclusive one.[12] We also learn from existing research that inclusive education became associated with the idea of the welfare state and with "notions of equality, equity and democracy."[13]

It is the link between special needs education and welfare state formation that we find intriguing and want to explore in more historical detail in our article. Taking Switzerland as an example, we hypothesise that, just as inclusive education can be attributed to the modern (i.e. post-World War II) welfare state, the preceding paradigm of segregated education was closely linked to the early (i.e. late nineteenth and early twentieth century) welfare state and its logic. We will argue that segregated education – the system the modern Swiss welfare state (*Sozialstaat*)[14] intended to remedy – was introduced by what we call the early welfare state.

Our analysis begins in the late nineteenth century when children considered to be intellectually "abnormal" were identified and labelled as "idiots" in order to subject them to welfare state measures. The source material on which our case study is based was produced in the context of the statistical recording and categorisation of "idiotic" children for the purpose of allocating them to special education facilities. We use the history of knowledge as a theoretical lens to interpret and analyse these sources to answer the question of how, in the early stages of the Swiss welfare state, knowledge gained by applying mathematics, statistics, and medicine influenced the creation of a segregated school system, where children with disabilities were separated from their "normal" peers.[15]

11 Call for Papers "Exploring the History of Disabled Pupils in the Welfare State" (Special Issue of the *Nordic Journal of the History of Education*).

12 See, e.g., Bjørn F. Hamre, "Inclusion and the Management of Diversity in the Danish Welfare State," in *Who's In? Who's Out? What to Do about Inclusive Education*, ed. Marnie Best, Tim Corcoran, and Roger Slee (Leiden: Brill Sense, 2018), 33–46; Peter Haug, "Words Without Deeds: Between Special Schools and Inclusive Education in Norway," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 8, no. 3 (2000), 291–303; Rune Sarromaa Hausstätter and Markku Jahnukainen, "From Integration to Inclusion and the Role of Special Education," in *Inclusive Education Twenty Years After Salamanca*, ed. Florian Kiuppis and Rune Sarromaa Hausstätter (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 119–31.

13 Larsen, Holloway, and Hamre (2019), 1049. See also Anne-Lise Arnesen and Lisbeth Lundahl, "Still Social and Democratic? Inclusive Education Policies in the Nordic Welfare States," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 50, no. 3 (2006), 285–300.

14 In German-speaking regions, the literal translation of the term "welfare state" (*Wohlfahrtsstaat*) has a pejorative connotation. See Bernhard Degen, "Sozialstaat," *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* 2013, https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/009932/2013-01-08 (accessed April 15, 2025). The idea of a welfare state, as we know it from the Nordic countries, is better captured by the word *Sozialstaat*, which literally translates to "social state." In this article, the latter translation is adopted.

15 See Martin Lengwiler, "Expertise als Vertrauenstechnologie: Wissenschaft, Politik und die Konstitution der Sozialversicherungen (1880–1914)," in *Von der Barmherzigkeit zur Sozialversicherung: Umbrüche und Kontinuitäten vom Spätmittelalter bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hans-Jörg Gilomen, Sébastien Guex, and Brigitte Studer (Zürich: Chronos, 2002), 260.

We proceed in five steps. First, we provide an overview of the historical context in which the first welfare-state measures emerged in late nineteenth century Switzerland. Second, we focus on the arguments put forward by a late nineteenth century proponent for the establishment of a segregated school system. Third, we elaborate on how "abnormal" children were statistically recorded and categorised in order to assign them to special educational measures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fourth, we leap forward in time and discuss the transformation from a segregated to a more inclusive school system in Switzerland that took place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the fifth and final section, we revisit our hypothesis that inclusive and segregated education are both closely linked to the Swiss welfare state and its logic.

The dawn and early dusk of the liberal-democratic Swiss welfare state

The Swiss welfare state can be considered a latecomer when compared to Germany, France, or the Nordic countries.[16] According to Swiss historian Bernard Degen, a Swiss welfare state in the true sense of the word did not exist until the second half of the twentieth century.[17] Its relatively late establishment is attributed to the previous absence of the key pillars of a welfare state, such as compulsory health insurance, a tax-funded old-age pension system, or public unemployment insurance.[18] Moreover, while in other welfare-state countries, most or all of these pillars are provided by a single entity (the state), in Switzerland, the federal state, the cantons, and charitable organisations share these tasks. However, Switzerland has not always lagged behind other countries in adopting social-security and welfare-state measures. In fact, at the end of the nineteenth century, Switzerland was a "pioneer" in Europe when it came to the protection of workers (including child workers).[19] Other measures, which a welfare state is supposed to provide – public transport, health insurance, old-age and survivors' pensions, and public education – were also either introduced or discussed between the 1870s and the 1900s, a time period during which the Liberal Democratic Party ruled almost supreme over the federal state. Although, with regard to voter support, the Social Democratic Party has been a political force to reckon with throughout the twentieth century, it never became the ruling party. Thus, for a long time, the Swiss welfare state was based on a liberal instead of a social democratic framework.[20]

In 1874, the new constitution provided the federal state with the right to pass laws regarding industrial safety.[21] The federal administration acted upon this right by passing federal regulations of industrial factories (the so-called *Fabrikgesetz*) in 1877, which, among other provisions, restricted child labour in industrial production.[22] The *Fabrik-*

16 Herbert Obinger et al., *Transformations of the Welfare State: Small States, Big Lessons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 193–94.

17 Degen (2013).

18 Ibid.

19 Obinger et al. (2010), 193.

20 Ibid., 191.

21 Brigitte Studer, "Arbeiterschutz," *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* 2016, https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/016583/2016-03-31 (accessed April 15, 2025).

22 Brigitte Studer, "Fabrikgesetze," *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* 2021, https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/013804/2021-08-06 (accessed April 15, 2025).

gesetz and other legislation restricting children's work in factories in the nineteenth century are considered the first child-protection measures.[23]

The new federal constitution also stipulated that elementary schools should be state-run and provide "sufficient" education.[24] It is noteworthy that "state-run" did not refer to the Swiss federal state, but to its member states, the cantons, meaning that elementary education in Switzerland was the sole responsibility of the cantons. Although the regulations set by the 1874 constitution were by no means revolutionary, most Swiss cantons had state-run, compulsory school systems in place well before 1874.[25] The authority of the federal constitution underscored the importance of the principle that the state – not the church or private institutions – had to provide sufficient education. The other important principle conveyed by the 1874 constitution was the compulsory provision of elementary schooling for all children, meaning that no one could or should be excluded from public education. Accordingly, while an obligation to provide elementary education for all was assumed by the cantons, it became a fundamental right for children throughout Switzerland.

In 1890, the federal government amended the constitution with a new section mandating that the federal state introduce insurance covering both illness and injury (the so-called *Kranken- und Unfallversicherungsgesetz*).[26] In the same year, the federal administration hired an actuary named Christian Moser (1861–1935), a specialist in insurance mathematics.[27] Moser was a member of a committee tasked with drafting a law that would establish national health and accident insurance.[28] The commission consisted of forty-two men, including another mathematician by the name of Hermann Kinkelin (1832–1913), who had made his academic career at the University of Basel, where he taught various subfields of mathematics, including statistics and actuarial mathematics.[29] Kinkelin, however, was not just an insurance mathematics and statistics expert, he also pursued a career in politics. He was a member of the Education Council (*Erziehungsrat*) in Basel, and in 1890 he began what would become a ten-year Swiss National Council membership. The committee was chaired by another National Council member, Ludwig Forrer (1854–1921). Forrer was not a trained scientist or mathematician, but rather a lawyer. Still, he had a keen interest in these matters and took private lessons in mathematics, trigonometry, and algebra from Kinkelin. The committee proposed a draft law, the so-called Lex Forrer,[30] which for various reasons

23 Meike Sophia Baader, "Die Kindheit der sozialen Bewegungen," in *Kindheiten in der Moderne: Eine Geschichte der Sorge*, ed. Meike S. Baader, Florian Eßer, and Wolfgang Schröer (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2014), 162.

24 See Lucien Criblez and Christina Huber, "Der Bildungsartikel in der Bundesverfassung von 1874 und die Diskussion über den eidgenössischen 'Schulvogt,'" in *Bildungsraum Schweiz: Historische Entwicklung und aktuelle Herausforderung,* ed. Lucien Criblez (Bern: Haupt, 2008), 87–129; Boser, Hofmann, and Brühwiler (2019), 67–92.

25 Boser, Hofmann, and Brühwiler (2019), 79.

26 Bernard Degen, "Entstehung und Entwicklung des schweizerischen Sozialstaates," in *Geschichte der Sozialversicherungen*, ed. Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv (Zürich: Chronos, 2006), 25.

27 Josef Kupper, "Versicherungsmathematik und schweizerische Hochschulen," *Mitteilungen der Schweizerischen Aktuarvereinigung* 98, no. 1 (1998), 41–42.

28 See Lengwiler (2002), 263–66.

29 Kupper (1998), 39.

30 Lengwiler (2002), 263–66.

failed to garner the approval of the Swiss people. Following an unsuccessful public vote on its adoption in 1900, the implementation of further social-security measures in Switzerland stalled. It would take a full century before the welfare-state measures discussed during this period were finally introduced.[31]

Although the *avant-garde* days of the Swiss welfare state were over at the turn of the twentieth century, those in philanthropic and political circles remained ardent advocates for state support when it came to education. The belief in scientific, statistical, and actuarial knowledge as the grounds for rational decision-making and better governing persisted, as we will show in the following sections of this article. This perspective traced its roots to the Enlightenment period and became known as "political arithmetic." In the *Encyclopédie* by Diderot and D'Alembert, Denis Diderot provided support for this concept, positing that "the political world, just like the physical world, in many respects may be regulated by weights, number and measure."[32] But Diderot also recognised that the mathematical tools required to meet these objectives had not yet been developed. This changed in the following decades. By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of data-driven government became a reality, not least thanks to men like Moser and Kinkelin, as we will show in the next section when discussing how the state was called to action regarding children with special educational needs.

The call for special education for the "imbecile" and the "feeble-minded"

In 1889, Pastor Adolf Ritter (1850–1906), a man with a keen interest in the religio-moral wellbeing as well as the social welfare of his parishioners,[33] gave the opening address to the first Swiss Conference on Idiocy in Zurich.[34] In his speech, Ritter argued that statistical data would show a severe lack of care for "idiotic" children in Switzerland. At the time, there were only six small institutions in the entire country providing education and care for roughly 180 "imbecile" children. In addition, a few special school classes catered to "feeble-minded" children. Ritter explained that this was inadequate, given "that on average for every 200 normally gifted children there is at least one stupid or imbecile or 2–4 feeble-minded children."[35] By extrapolating those

31 Obinger et al. (2010), 232. Unemployment insurance became compulsory in 1982, health insurance in 1994, and federal guidelines for family allowances were introduced in 2006. Matthieu Leimgruber, *Solidarity without the State? Business and the Shaping of the Swiss Welfare State, 1890–2000* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2008), 5. Thus, we can say that the Swiss welfare state entered a second phase about a century after introducing welfare-state measures as a part of phase one. This second phase, however, did not radically transform Switzerland into a full-fledged welfare state. The current Swiss welfare scheme still has important gaps and omissions as Obinger et al. explain in *Transformations of the Welfare State*: "[f]or example with regard to childcare facilities, paternal leave schemes, sick pay insurance, long-term care insurance, and coverage of dental treatments," 232.

32 Denis Diderot, "Political Arithmetic (1751)," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot and d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Matthew D'Auria (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2008), 678.

33 D.V., "† Kirchenrat Adolf Ritter," *Zürcher Wochen-Chronik* 43 (1906), s.p.

34 Michèle Hofmann, "Ein schwacher Geist in einem schwachen Körper? Popularisierung medizinischen Wissens über geistige Schwäche im ausgehenden 19. und beginnenden 20. Jahrhundert in der Schweiz," *Spurensuche: Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Erwachsenenbildung und Wissenschaftspopularisierung* 27 (2018), 4–13.

35 Adolf Ritter, "Eröffnungsworte des Präsidenten," in *Verhandlungen der I. Schweizerischen Konferenz für das Idiotenwesen in Zürich am 3. und 4. Juni 1889*, ed. Adolf Ritter (Zürich: S. Höhr, 1889), 7.

estimates to the entire Swiss population, he came to "the truly sad result that there are about 30,000 idiots in Switzerland, of course taking the term in the broader sense, which includes the imbecile and the feeble-minded."[36] In other words, according to Ritter, there were thousands of children in need of special education and other forms of care who were not receiving the support they needed. Although Ritter presented those numbers to prove a point, he knew that they were mere estimates based on regional surveys, a census conducted under the rule of Napoleon almost a century earlier, and a knowledge test administered to conscripts entering Swiss military service.[37] Nonetheless, the existing statistical knowledge still served to demonstrate that the number of children in need of help was too large to leave their wellbeing and care to chance or private charity. According to Ritter, the vast number of "imbeciles" and "feeble-minded" made it imperative for the state to take appropriate measures. He closed his address by expressing the hope that the state would come to the same conclusion and would thus feel compelled to establish special school classes for "feeble-minded" and educational institutions for "imbecile" children.

Based on their stance regarding the care and education for Swiss children with special needs, Ritter and other attendees at the first Swiss Conference on Idiocy can be called pioneers. Therefore, it is worthwhile to dissect and contextualise Ritter's opening address. First, it is noteworthy that Ritter was a Protestant minister from Zurich who also presided over a charitable organisation, the Swiss Institution for Epileptics, which had run a home for epileptic children since 1886. Thus, Ritter was a representative of the traditional, well-established providers of charity in Switzerland – the church and private organisations. Why then did this man call for the state to provide more extensive and better care for "imbecile" and "feeble-minded" children? Why didn't he call for the church to step up or appeal to the public to contribute more to private initiatives? Moreover, why did he advocate for specialised (i.e. segregative) educational measures such as special schools and institutions instead of proposing that those children should be cared for within the existing educational system?

A first answer to those questions lies in the organisation of public schooling in Switzerland during this period. As already mentioned, the federal constitution of 1874 stated that elementary schools should be state-run and provide "sufficient" education for all. Furthermore, the constitution declared elementary education compulsory for all children. The relevant paragraph of the constitution made no mention of "imbecile" or "feeble-minded" children; indeed, it did not specify who was required to attend elementary school. Proponents of special education, however, interpreted the constitutional paragraph to mean that compulsory schooling also applied to "abnormal" children, as long as they were educable.[38] Coincidentally, after the mid-nineteenth century, medical experts had come up with a classification that differentiated educable from non-educable children. Under the umbrella term of "idiocy," three different degrees of intellectual "abnormality" were identified: intellectually disabled to a lesser extent (*schwachbegabt*,

36 Ibid.

37 The Swiss military ran and marked those tests between 1875 and 1914. The test results were then sent to the Federal Statistical Office where the data were edited and eventually published. See Boser, Hofmann, and Brühwiler (2019), 81–84.

38 Michèle Hofmann, "'Schwachsinnige' Schulkinder als zukünftige BürgerInnen," *Traverse: Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 24, no. 1 (2017b), 42–51.

"feeble-minded"), intellectually disabled to a greater extent (*schwachsinnig*, "imbecile"), and profoundly intellectually disabled (*blödsinnig*, "stupid"). This classification drew a line between "stupid" children who were not educable and "imbecile" and "feeble-minded" children who needed help and special care but were nonetheless educable.[39] According to this medico-educational understanding of who is educable and who is not, "imbecile" and "feeble-minded" were also afforded the right to be educated within the state school system. This constitutional obligation was exactly Ritter's line of argumentation.[40]

However, although Ritter could tell roughly how many "imbecile" and "feeble-minded" children lived in Switzerland based on his statistical estimates, he did not know if they went to school or not, because he lacked the relevant statistical data. Some scattered numbers from individual Swiss cantons did exist,[41] but a holistic statistical overview of the situation was still to come, as we will show later in this article. In the absence of comprehensive evidence, Ritter could only assume that many of the intellectually "abnormal" children were not enrolled in school. He was also likely of view that, even if they were to go to school, they would fail to catch up with their "normal" peers, as they would struggle with comprehending what they were taught. Consequently, they would have to repeat years and would eventually fail to attain the primary educational goal of becoming moral, self-sufficient, and responsible citizens of the Swiss democracy.[42] If the state were to remedy this situation and follow through with the idea of providing a "decent existence" for every citizen,[43] the state would have to take special measures for those who needed special attention and specialised care. According to Ritter, the state could do this either by "financially and morally" supporting private initiatives or by establishing state-run special schools and institutions.[44]

Accordingly, in his opening address, Ritter drew upon the political will for a comprehensive, compulsory educational system serving the Swiss nation, as stated in the constitution. He also based his arguments on a medico-educational system of knowledge and reasoning that explains to which children the obligations mandated by the constitution do or do not apply. Since the state called for the establishment of this comprehensive, compulsory school system, its realisation was the state's responsibility.

A second answer to the above questions can be found by looking more closely at Ritter's speech. If we do so, we can find traces of what we might call actuarial thinking. At its core, this line of reasoning revolves around the notion that if we do not invest now, we will have to pay a much higher price in the future. In the context of educa-

39 Hofmann (2018); Michèle Hofmann, "A Weak Mind in a Weak Body? Categorising Intellectually Disabled Children in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries in Switzerland," *History of Education* 48, no. 4 (2019), 452–65.

40 Ritter (1889), 5.

41 In the canton of Bern, for instance, a superintendent by the name of Antenen estimated that approximately 480 children would not go to school in 1863 because they were not educable. See "Zur Schulstatistik," *Neue Berner Schul-Zeitung* 6, no. 38 (1863), 149.

42 See Nathalie Dahn and Lukas Boser, "Learning to See the Nation-State: Geography, History and Public Schooling in Late 19th-Century Switzerland," *Bildungsgeschichte: International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 5, no. 1 (2015), 41–56.

43 Ritter (1889), 12.

44 Ibid.

tion, this means that if a society or a state does not ensure that all children receive an adequate education, that society or state will have to pay a high price for this omission in the future, as they will lack the means to support themselves once they reach adulthood. While this perspective might have been novel in Switzerland, in the 1880s, this was neither a new nor a revolutionary idea. In Scotland, for example, in 1833 the Education Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland published a report on the state of public education in the Scottish Highlands and Islands of Scotland.[45] In this report, the Education Committee stated that there were approximately 28,000 people in the Highlands and Islands who could not read. It further proposed that the problem could be solved by investing £7,680 into the building of new schools.[46] Investment in public education was intended to prevent future disasters. In this case, the anticipated future catastrophe was the moral decay that would result from an uneducated populace. To understand this line of thinking, it is important to remember that Scotland was a Protestant country and that, in Protestantism, reading the Bible is the only way to access the divine revelation. "Reading," wrote the Scottish Society for the Education of the Poor in the Highlands in 1826, is "the most effective instrument of moral improvement."[47]

Ritter could have made a similar argument in his speech. After all, he was a pastor in Zurich, one of the cradles of Swiss Protestantism. Denying thousands of "imbeciles" and "feeble-minded" the opportunity to learn how to read would also mean limiting their access to God's Word and thus hindering their moral improvement. In the long run, this could be problematic for the Swiss society as a whole, so it would be wise to invest in the education of these children. However, since Ritter did not explicitly link education to moral improvement in his address, we do not know if he really thought this way. He stated that education is a way to improve "personal happiness"[48] but did not elaborate on what that entails. What we do know is that he was no stranger to actuarial thinking, for he also said the following: "Switzerland would gain two to three million [Swiss francs] a year if the idiots were rationally educated."[49] What he meant was that educated people – even the "imbeciles" and "feeble-minded" – have a better chance of providing for themselves and are therefore less likely to become dependent on charity and welfare. Investing in education can thus be understood as a kind of insurance premium that reduces the risk of having to spend much more money in the future. For the present analysis, it is less important whether Ritter's numbers are correct than the fact that he used this line of reasoning to support his case for state intervention in the education of children with disabilities. He relied on the power of knowledge grounded

45 See Rebekka Horlacher, Sébastien A. Alix, and Lukas Boser Hofmann, "Nation-building by Education Statistics and Data: A Comparative Perspective on School Surveys in Switzerland, France, and Scotland," in *Education, Curriculum and Nation-Building: Contributions of Comparative Education to the Understanding of Nations and Nationalism*, ed. Daniel Tröhler (New York: Routledge, 2023), 66–71.

46 Education Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, *Educational Statistics of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Edinburgh: J. and D. Collie, 1833), 22–23.

47 Society for the Education of the Poor in the Highlands, *Moral Statistics of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Inverness: Education Society, 1826), 32.

48 Ritter (1889), 9.

49 Ibid.

in numbers and rational data – what Theodore Porter calls a "technology of trust" – to make a political demand.[50]

Statistical surveys and the categorisation of "abnormal" children

As already mentioned, based on existing surveys, Ritter roughly calculated the number of intellectually "abnormal" children in Switzerland and used this statistical evidence to call for urgent action. On behalf of the Conference on Idiocy, Ritter demanded that the state establish more school classes for "feeble-minded" children, support existing institutions, and create new ones. According to Ritter, the basis for these state welfare measures was statistical data unequivocally demonstrating the need for state intervention. However, as discussed above, the existing data was both narrow in scope and partly outdated, only allowing for rough estimations. To remedy these shortcomings, Ritter called for an accurate, nationwide statistical survey.[51] Such a survey was initiated in 1897. But before we turn to that survey, let us look at the initiatives that preceded it.

Censuses have been conducted in Switzerland since the seventeenth century, initially at the cantonal level. The first census covering the entire territory of what was then Switzerland took place during the Helvetic period in 1798.[52] Over time, these surveys became increasingly sophisticated, capturing additional characteristics such as gender, age group, position in the household, citizenship, occupation, religion, and sometimes information on health status.[53]

Statistics focusing exclusively on health issues or disabilities were first introduced in the nineteenth century. Among the best-known are the so-called insanity statistics (*Irrenstatistiken*). These statistics were derived from comprehensive surveys aimed at ascertaining the number of people with a mental disorder in a particular canton or at the national level. The findings yielded by these initiatives served as a tool to shape society's perception of mental disorders as a serious social challenge and to promote the development of psychiatry as a science. In the second half of the nineteenth century, these statistics also accelerated the emergence of many "lunatic asylums."[54]

From the late 1860s, school statistics in Switzerland became a project of national importance.[55] For the World Exhibition in Vienna in 1873, the Federal Department of Home Affairs commissioned the already mentioned statistician and mathematician

50 Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). See also Lengwiler (2002), 266.

51 Ritter (1889), 12.

52 See Thomas Busset, *Zur Geschichte der eidgenössischen Volkszählung* (Bern: Bundesamt für Statistik, 1993); Martin Schuler, *Volkszählungen in der Schweiz vor 1850: Die Bevölkerungszahlen auf lokaler Ebene* (Bern: Bundesamt für Statistik, 2023).

53 Schuler (2023), 47.

54 See Hans Rudolf Wilhelm, "Irrenzählung und Gründung psychiatrischer Kliniken im 19. Jahrhundert: Bern als Wegbereiter für andere Schweizer Kantone," *Gesnerus: Swiss Journal of the History of Medicine and Sciences* 48, no. 2 (1991), 185–99; Hans Jakob Ritter, "Von den Irrenstatistiken zur 'erblichen Belastung' der Bevölkerung: Die Entwicklung der schweizerischen Irrenstatistiken zwischen 1850 und 1914," *Traverse: Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 10, no. 1 (2003), 59–70; Silas Gusset, Loretta Seglias, and Martin Lengwiler, *Versorgen, behandeln, pflegen: Geschichte der Psychiatrie in Graubünden* (Basel: Schwabe, 2021), 45–55.

55 See Thomas Ruoss, *Zahlen, Zählen und Erzählen in der Bildungspolitik: Lokale Statistik, politische Praxis und die Entwicklung städtischer Schulen zwischen 1890 und 1930* (Zürich: Chronos, 2018), 32–34.

Hermann Kinkelin to compile comprehensive school statistics based on the dataset he had collected. Comprehensive school statistics for the whole of Switzerland were published regularly from the late nineteenth century onwards, from 1889 in the *Yearbook of Education in Switzerland* (*Jahrbuch des Unterrichtswesens in der Schweiz*) and from 1891 as a part of the *Statistical Yearbook of Switzerland* (*Statistisches Jahrbuch der Schweiz*). Whereas the life stage of childhood or age played at most a marginal role as a survey category in censuses and health statistics, children were the primary focus of school statistics. During this time, schools and schoolchildren became the objects of scientific (i.e. statistical) analysis as well and were thus inevitably entangled in what Theodore Porter calls "the rise of statistical thinking."[56]

In the late 1880s, at the time when Ritter delivered his opening address at the first Swiss Conference on Idiocy, cantonal-level surveys were being conducted with the aim of identifying intellectually "abnormal" children. Such a survey was conducted in the canton of Bern in 1888.[57] The Department of Education was interested in the number of pupils who were "not in the school year they should be in according to their age," as it informed school inspectors and teachers in a circular letter. The letter went on to say that it was apparent that a striking number of pupils never progressed beyond the middle school years (six through nine) or even to the upper elementary school years (three through five). To find out the reasons "contributing to this dire phenomenon" so that it could "remedy the situation,"[58] the Department of Education issued pre-printed forms to teachers requesting that they record the number of children who were falling behind. Seven possible answers were listed on the form as reasons for underperformance. First on the list was "feeble-mindedness." The other choices were "insufficient school attendance," "neglected education," "frequent change of residence," "overcrowded school class," "lack of language skills," "inadequate nutrition," and "other reasons." For each choice, teachers were asked to indicate the number of children in their class to which it applied. They were also instructed to report the total number of their pupils. The school inspectors compiled the teachers' responses for their school district and created charts showing the number of children who were falling behind, sorted by reason.

In 1892, the Bernese Department of Education carried out another survey.[59] This time, as the focus extended beyond the mere number of children falling behind, the forms teachers received were in two parts. The first part concerned those children who were completely exempt from attending school. Teachers were required to record the children's names, dates of birth, length of exemption, reason for exemption, and whether a transfer to a special education facility would be advisable. The reasons for the exemption were not predetermined, but the explanation in a footnote makes it clear that the Department of Education assumed "idiocy" to be the main factor. This also made it clear that the term "special education facilities" meant those for intellectually

56 Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

57 See State Archives of the Canton of Bern, BB IIIb 3378.

58 State Archives of the Canton of Bern, BB IIIb 3378, n.p.: December 11, 1888 – *Kreisschreiben der Direktion des Unterrichtswesens an die Primarlehrerschaft*.

59 See State Archives of the Canton of Bern, BB IIIb 3381.

"abnormal" children. The second part of the form concerned children who attended school but were falling behind. Teachers had to provide the children's names, dates of birth, the school year they were supposed to attend, the school year they actually attended, the reason for falling behind, and whether attending a special education facility for intellectually "abnormal" children would be helpful.

In 1897, the first nationwide survey aiming to establish the number of intellectually "abnormal" children in Switzerland was conducted.[60] Between 1899 and 1911, the survey was administered annually. Pastor Ritter and the Swiss Idiocy Conference attendees were not alone in calling for such a survey. In particular, the Swiss Teachers Association had advocated for its establishment.[61] As the survey was conducted by the federal state, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office was responsible for its organisation as well as for processing and publishing the data.[62]

The Bernese statistics for 1888 and 1892 dealt mainly, but not exclusively, with intellectually "abnormal" children. In these two surveys, the various degrees of "idiocy" were treated rather implicitly. In contrast, in the national survey, the different levels of intellectual "disability" – distinguished according to the medical classification of "idiocy" – were explicitly mentioned in the pre-printed forms.[63] To ensure that the required information was obtained, those who were supposed to fill out the forms (mostly teachers) were given written instructions. A multi-page leaflet was distributed to thousands of Swiss elementary school teachers each year for this purpose.[64] The leaflet was written by Karl Kölle (1859–1959), director of the Institution for Imbecile Children in Regensberg (Zurich) and member of the Swiss Conference on Idiocy's permanent committee. Despite lacking medical training, Kölle was considered an "expert on idiocy" due to his long-term teaching experience at institutions for "imbecile" children.[65] In his instructions, Kölle drew on medical knowledge to describe the three different forms of "idiocy," which shows that by the turn of the twentieth century the medical classification of "idiocy" was so widely accepted that there seemed to be no alternative. At the same time, special school classes for "feeble-minded" pupils and educational institutions for "imbecile" pupils had been established (albeit in small numbers), which corresponded to this classification.

Owing to the national survey, the medical classification of "idiocy" started to permeate everyday school life. However, statistics did not simply reproduce medical categories of intellectual "abnormality" as they became instrumental in creating specific

60 See also Hofmann (2019).

61 "Der Lehrertag von Luzern," *Schweizerische Lehrerzeitung* 41, no. 24 (1896), 195.

62 In 1897, the results of the first survey were published in an extensive report. See *Die Zählung der schwachsinnigen Kinder im schulpflichtigen Alter mit Einschluss der körperlich gebrechlichen und sittlich verwahrlosten, durchgeführt im Monat Mai 1897*. I. Teil (Bern: Schmid & Francke, 1897). In the subsequent years, the surveys were conducted regularly, and the key findings were published in the *Journal for Swiss Statistics*.

63 *Die Zählung der schwachsinnigen Kinder* (1897), VIII–IX.

64 The leaflet was available in all Swiss national languages and was sent to the cantons each year along with the forms.

65 *Anleitungen für das Lehrpersonal, um die in das Alter der Schulpflichtigkeit getretenen Kinder auf das Vorhandensein geistiger und körperlicher Gebrechen zu untersuchen* (Bern: Neukomm & Zimmermann, 1899), 16.

notions of "abnormal" children.[66] Although "feeble-mindedness" and "imbecility" were medical terms, there existed no precise medical criteria for determining whether a child belonged in one of these categories. It was therefore up to the elementary school teachers to decide, or rather to define, who was "normal" and who was not. Each year, teachers had to fill out a form for their class, noting the children they identified as "feeble-minded" or "imbecile." As a part of their professional activities, teachers observed many children of the same age over a long time. As a result, they grasped a notion of "normal" child development, which in turn provided the basis for assessing an individual child's intellectual ability.[67] In other words, the teachers' professional experience served as a background against which the characteristics of an intellectually "abnormal" child were outlined. In filling out the form, teachers aligned the medical knowledge provided in the leaflet with their professional knowledge.

Although the forms were not filled out for all Swiss elementary school classes,[68] teachers identified thousands of "feeble-minded" and "imbecile" pupils each year. As a result, in the context of the annual statistical surveys, the medical categories of "idiocy" were linked to thousands of flesh-and-blood children. For Pastor Ritter and his comrades-in-arms, the large-scale nationwide surveys provided definitive proof that their initial calculations were correct and that there were many neglected "abnormal" children in mainstream schools. They used this statistical evidence to bolster their demand for the creation of special classes and institutions to separate these "poor souls" from their "normal" peers while keeping them within the state school system and thereby adhering to the prevailing educational goals.[69] At the regular meetings of the Swiss Conference on Idiocy and its successor associations,[70] members not only presented and discussed the most recent national statistics but also reported on the

66 See also Michèle Hofmann, "Schwachbegabt, schwachsinnig, blödsinnig – Kategorisierung geistig beeinträchtigter Kinder um 1900," *Bildungsgeschichte: International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 7, no. 2 (2017a), 142–56.

67 Florian Eßer, "Die verwissenschaftliche Kindheit," in *Kindheiten in der Moderne: Eine Geschichte der Sorge*, ed. Meike S. Baader, Florian Eßer, and Wolfgang Schröer (Frankfurt: Campus, 2014), 126.

68 The cantons were responsible for compiling the data and submitting it to the Federal Statistical Office. As the example of the canton of Bern shows, the Department of Education repeatedly complained in the *Official School Gazette* (*Amtliches Schulblatt*) that teachers were not sending the forms to the school inspectors on time or not at all. See, e.g., "Bekanntmachung betreffend die Untersuchung der ins schulpflichtige Alter tretenden Kinder," *Amtliches Schulblatt des Kantons Bern* 4, no. 7 (1900), 1. As some cantons did not send any data to the Federal Statistical Office, those that did (which were in the majority) are listed in the periodic overviews published in the *Journal for Swiss Statistics* (*Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Statistik*).

69 Michèle Hofmann, "Same but Different: Notions of 'Feebleminded' and 'Imbecile' Future Citizens in German-Speaking Countries at the Turn of the 20th Century," in *National Literacies in Education: Historical Reflections on the Nexus of Nations, National Identity, and Education*, ed. Stephanie Fox and Lukas Boser (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 81–94.

70 The association changed its name several times over the years, not least because the terminology used to describe intellectually "abnormal" children also changed.

development of special educational measures for intellectually "abnormal" children.[71] Members of the Swiss Conference on Idiocy thus hailed the expansion of the state-funded separate school system as progress.

From integration through separation to inclusion

Well into the twentieth century, the Swiss cantonal school systems followed the principle of integration through separation.[72] Due to this, children with disabilities or learning difficulties, as well as children from immigrant backgrounds, were either temporarily or permanently separated from their peers and were schooled in special settings with the goal of reintegrating them into the society once their (special) education was completed.[73] The idea was that, by identifying the children with special needs and giving them education tailored to their specific dis/abilities, those children – and the society as a whole – would be best served.

However, at the same time, Switzerland "was a pioneering nation in the implementation and development of eugenic thinking."[74] While the scientific data gathered and analysed by doctors and teachers could be used to identify and then help those in need, the very same data could also be used to pinpoint and then remove those who were considered to be a threat to society. For eugenicists, the separation and segregation of the "abnormal" was about safeguarding the "quality" of the Swiss people and protecting them from "degeneration,"[75] not about helping the "poor idiotic souls." Without going further into details of the history of eugenics in Switzerland, it is important to note that, in this context, labels such as "idiotic" or "abnormal" were associated with "inferiority," "degeneration," and "deficiency" and therewith changed their qualities from medical

71 See, e.g., Conrad Auer, "Gegenwärtiger Stand der Sorge für geistesschwache Kinder in der Schweiz, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der in den letzten beiden Jahren erzielten Fortschritte," in *Verhandlungen der V. Schweizerischen Konferenz für das Idiotenwesen in St. Gallen am 5. und 6. Juni 1905*, ed. Conrad Auer, Karl Kölle, and Hermann Graf (Glarus: Buchdruck Glarner Nachrichten, 1905), 27–49; Conrad Auer, "Gegenwärtiger Stand der Fürsorge für Geistesschwache in der Schweiz, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der in den letzten zwei Jahren erzielten Fortschritte," in *Verhandlungen der VIII. Schweiz. Konferenz für Erziehung und Pflege Geistesschwacher am 26. und 27. Mai 1911 in Bern*, ed. Conrad Auer (Glarus: Buchdruck Glarner Nachrichten, 1911), 25–64; Heinrich Plüer, "Bemerkungen zu den statistischen Tabellen," in *Verhandlungen der XII. Schweizerischen Konferenz für Erziehung und Pflege Geistesschwacher am 8. und 9. Oktober 1921 in Genf*, ed. Karl Jauch (Zürich: Gesellschaft für Erziehung und Pflege Geistesschwacher, 1921), 68–74.

72 See Martin Lengwiler, "Der strafende Sozialstaat: Konzeptuelle Überlegungen zur Geschichte fürsorgerischer Zwangsmassnahmen," *Traverse: Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 25, no. 1 (2018), 183.

73 See Cristina Allemann-Ghionda, *Schule, Bildung und Pluralität: Sechs Fallstudien im europäischen Vergleich* (Bern: Lang, 1999), 262–479; Carlo Wolfisberg, "Der institutionelle Umgang mit der Heterogenität der Schulkinder," in *Zukunft bilden: Die Geschichte der modernen Zürcher Volksschule*, ed. Daniel Tröhler and Urs Hardegger (Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2008), 189–99; Philipp Eigenmann and Tamara Deluigi, "Bildungsgerechtigkeit und Chancengleichheit: Ideen, Aushandlungen und Reformen in der Schweiz nach 1950," in *Bildungsgeschichte: Systementwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert in der deutschsprachigen Schweiz*, ed. Ingrid Brühwiler et al. (Zürich: Chronos, forthcoming).

74 Natalia Gerodetti, "From Science to Social Technology: Eugenics and Politics in Twentieth-Century Switzerland," *Social Politics* 13, no. 1 (2006), 60; Véronique Mottier, "Eugenics, Politics and the State: Social Democracy and the Swiss 'Gardening State,'" *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 39, no. 2 (2008), 263–69.

75 Regina Wecker, "Eugenics in Switzerland Before and After 1945 – a Continuum?" *Journal of Modern European History* 10, no. 2 (2012), 522.

(and pedagogical) diagnoses to social stigmata. Welfare-state measures and eugenics also shared the goal of cost-saving by reducing the number of individuals who needed financial support from the state.[76] Social insurance and special needs education could provide the desired cost reduction, as could sterilisation and other eugenic measures.

As the decades passed, it was slowly but surely becoming clear that some of the segregative welfare-state measures, even when taken with the best of intentions, were not working as planned. In many cases, children who were taken from their homes (often against their parents' will) and placed in special institutions were mistreated, exploited, and abused, leaving them with physical and mental scars and long-lasting trauma. This dark chapter of Swiss social history has been the subject of academic research in recent years.[77] In retrospect, historian Martin Lengwiler writes that the Swiss welfare state had developed in part into a "punitive welfare state" (*strafender Sozialstaat*).[78]

Although not all children who were labelled "abnormal" and were educated separately from their "normal" peers had to endure mistreatment and abuse, they nonetheless often suffered due to the negative connotations that such a label entailed.[79] The stigma of being placed in a special school class or a special institution lasted beyond the school years, shaping their entire life trajectory. For these children, educational segregation led to social separation, not integration. Most cantonal school systems were semi-permeable, allowing mobility from mainstream schools to special classes or special institutions but not the other way around. In the end, many children who ended up in special classes or special institutions struggled to achieve independence later in life, not least because it was difficult for them to find jobs or apprenticeships. Moreover, in the Swiss understanding of meritocracy, a school diploma is generally accepted as a measure of merit and thus of social status.[80] In this context, graduating

76 Mottier (2008), 265.

77 See, e.g., Markus Furrer et al., eds., *Fürsorge und Zwang: Fremdplatzierung von Kindern und Jugendlichen in der Schweiz 1850–1980* (Basel: Schwabe, 2014); Sara Galle, *Kindswegnahmen: Das "Hilfswerk für die Kinder der Landstrasse" der Stiftung Pro Juventute im Kontext der schweizerischen Jugendfürsorge* (Zürich: Chronos, 2016); Christoph Häfeli, Martin Lengwiler, and Margot Vogel Campanello, eds., *Zwischen Schutz und Zwang: Normen und Praktiken im Wandel der Zeit* (Basel: Schwabe, 2024); Urs Hafner, *Heimkinder: Eine Geschichte des Aufwachsens in der Anstalt* (Baden: hier + jetzt, 2011); Gisela Hauss, Thomas Gabriel, and Martin Lengwiler, eds., *Fremdplatziert: Heimerziehung in der Schweiz, 1940–1990* (Zürich: Chronos, 2018); Marco Leuenberger and Loretta Seglias, *Geprägt fürs Leben: Lebenswelten fremdplatzierter Kinder in der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert* (Zürich: Chronos, 2015); Nadja Ramsauer, *"Verwahrlost:" Kindswegnahmen und die Entstehung der Jugendfürsorge im schweizerischen Sozialstaat, 1900–1945* (Zürich: Chronos, 2000); Mirjam Janett, *Verwaltete Familien: Vormundschaft und Fremdplatzierung in der Deutschschweiz, 1945–1980* (Zürich: Chronos, 2022).

78 Lengwiler (2018).

79 See Clara Bombach, Thomas Gabriel, and Samuel Keller, "'Die wussten einfach, woher ich komme:' Staatliche Eingriffe und ihre Auswirkungen auf das Leben ehemaliger Heimkinder," in *Fürsorge und Zwang: Fremdplatzierung von Kindern und Jugendlichen in der Schweiz 1850–1980*, ed. Markus Furrer et al. (Basel: Schwabe, 2014), 117–37; René Knüsel, Alexander Grob, and Véronique Mottier, eds., *Schicksale der Fremdplatzierung: Behördenentscheidungen und Auswirkungen auf den Lebenslauf* (Basel: Schwabe, 2024).

80 For a discussion on the topic of inclusion and meritocracy, see Anja Gibson et al., "Mehr als Meritokratie? Über die Prozessierung von Inklusivität und Exklusivität in Schulkulturen," in *Inklusion und Grenzen: Soziale, politische und pädagogische Verhältnisse*, ed. Kathrin Blaha et al. (Bielefeld: transcript, 2024), 297–327.

from a special class or a special institution meant that one had only climbed the first and lowest rung of the social ladder.

The late twentieth century saw the rise of various social movements, such as the women's rights movement (remember that Switzerland did not have universal suffrage until 1971!), the gay and lesbian rights movement, and the disability rights movement.[81] As children's rights were also discussed in this context, it is fitting that Switzerland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1997.[82] Although, as shown earlier in this article, children's right to education was part of the argument for the introduction of special classes and special institutions for "abnormal" children at the end of the nineteenth century, by the late 1990s, this practice of segregation was recognised as ineffective, for it was restricting these children's right to an equal education. History had shown that a segregated school system would not give children with special needs equal opportunities in life. To remedy this issue, the Swiss federal state committed to transforming its school system from a segregated one to an inclusive one, as discussed in the introduction to this article. However, as the Swiss public schools are still run by the cantons, this process is proving to be slow and has also been criticised, especially in the recent past. Political initiatives in several Swiss cantons are currently calling for the introduction of more special classes and thus a return to a more segregated school system.[83]

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to revisit the hypothesis we put forward at the beginning of this article. We suggest that not only inclusive education but also the previous paradigm – segregated education – are closely linked to the Swiss welfare state and its logic. This hypothesis forms the background to the following reflections on the process of transformation from a segregated to a more inclusive Swiss school system. In the first phase of this transformation (i.e. the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) as well as in its second phase (i.e. the late twentieth and early twentyfirst centuries), politicians and other actors interested in children's wellbeing have advocated for welfare-state measures aimed at the education of children with disabilities. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these welfare-state policies focused on identifying, segregating, and then educating "abnormal" children in special classes and special schools. The production of knowledge about children was crucial to these processes. Statistical knowledge gathered through cantonal and national surveys on intellectually "abnormal" children, together with medical knowledge and the professional knowledge of teachers, shaped the notions of "idiotic" children and their educability. Educability

81 See, e.g., Ute Gerhard, *Frauenbewegung und Feminismus: Eine Geschichte seit 1789* (München: Beck, 2020); Vern L. Bullough, ed., *Before Stonewall: Activists for Gay and Lesbian Rights in Historical Context* (Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 2002); Doris Fleischer Zames and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

82 See Louisette Hurni-Caille, *Kinderrechte in der Schweiz: Das Schweizer Recht und die Konvention der Vereinten Nationen über die Rechte des Kindes im Vergleich* (Grand-Lancy: Die Rechte des Kindes-International, 2001).

83 Such an initiative has, for example, been approved by the parliament of the most populous canton (Zurich). See, e.g., Giorgio Scherrer, "Zürich führt wieder Förderklassen ein," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 25, 2025, 13.

was the keyword in this context. "Idiotic" children were separated from their "normal" peers with the intent to provide them with an adequate education.

As the processes of identification, segregation, and special education proved to be highly stigmatising for the children concerned, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, inclusion became the policy of choice. However, at least in Switzerland, this transformation is complicated, not least by the fact that the school system is still supposed to uphold the principle of meritocracy.[84] This principle states that social inequalities are acceptable as long as they can be explained by merit, i.e. the efforts made to achieve a certain social status. Since the early 1800s, the main measure of merit in Switzerland has been educational attainment.[85] While the segregated school system, with its distinct tracks and trajectories, is seemingly well suited to marking differences based on merit, the inclusive school system, where all children attend the same class, is less so.

The issue at hand can be examined from yet another angle. Welfare-state measures were not only taken for the benefit of the individual but also for the good of the state. As discussed above, the early Swiss welfare state was concerned with cost reduction, which led its proponents to think in terms of insurance policies, but this reduction also could be achieved by implementing eugenic measures.[86] Gathering large corpora of scientific data was meant to provide policymakers with the knowledge that could be used to implement social measures, which would be more cost-effective in the long run. When Pastor Ritter promised yearly savings of two to three million Swiss francs, this was a strong incentive for realising his proposed welfare-state measures. As Ritter and his colleagues were well aware that an integration-through-separation scheme required considerable resources, they asked for financial support from the state. However, they also understood that the investment in special schools and special classes would pay dividends by eliminating the need for charity in the future.

The same hope for cost reductions is also inherent in the current welfare-state policies with regard to inclusion. In fact, the fourth bullet point in paragraph 2 of the Salamanca Statement reads as follows:

> [R]egular schools within this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficacy and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.[87]

84 See Andreas Hadjar and Rolf Becker, "Education Systems and Meritocracy: Social Origin, Educational and Status Attainment," in *Education Systems and Inequalities: International Comparisons*, ed. Andreas Hadjar and Christiane Gross (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016), 231–58; Barbara Zimmermann and Rolf Becker, "Die Sozialstruktur der Bildungsvorstellungen in der Schweiz," *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 1 (2023), 153–77.

85 See Anna Bütikofer, "Der Preis der Gleichheit: Die Aristokratie der Besten," in *Lehrbuch Pädagogik. Eine Einführung in grundlegende Themenfelder*, ed. Michèle Hofmann et al. (Bern: hep, 2015), 177–90.

86 See Mottier (2008), 256.

87 UNESCO (1994), viii.

This last assumption resonated well with the views held by the Swiss policymakers. As the Swiss education system has been under pressure to cut costs in recent decades, the promise of cost-effectiveness sounded too good to miss. In reality, however, inclusion comes at a price. Inclusive education requires specific resources, such as adequate classrooms, a maximum number of children with special needs per school class, and additional special education teachers, whose training also comes at a cost.[88] Inclusive education will remain controversial as long as neither the cantons nor the Confederation are fully committed to paying this price.

Comparing welfare-state policies for children with special needs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with those in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it seems that they are not so dissimilar after all. The differences in methods are evident, but the goals remain the same: to help individuals find their place in society while lessening the financial burden on the state.

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88 See, e.g., Jürg Rüedi, "Editorial," *Zeitschrift für Individualpsychologie* 39, no. 4 (2014), 278.

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