Organizing School Work differently:
Necessity and Complexity of Innovation [1]

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*In contrast to order which at best is changing gradually,
organization is a continuous process.*
Marcel Gauchet

International comparisons show that equitable and effective schools are generally organized in order to support students' schooling and teachers' work: they introduce single track up to the age of 15 or 16 years; explicit and interactive teaching; evaluation in function of schooling; cooperation with parents; flexible groups; well-aimed and intensive interventions for pupils with special needs; multi-year learning cycles and curriculums allowing the gradual development of knowledge and key-competencies (Demeuse, Crahay & Monseur, 2001; Hanushek & Wossman, 2005; OECD, 2006).

The same studies suggest that educational variables are not independent and that the historical and cultural context not only determines school results but how to improve them as well (Simola, 2005). The more heterogeneous a students population is - for instance in a context of urban concentration, social and economic inequalities and a divided community – the more national or regional school systems seem to be driven to maintain or introduce methods of regulation which are supposed to recreate homogeneous subgroups: school-year repetition, early tracking and streaming, selection by options and/or level groups. These instruments tend to amplify differences, whereas an alternative organization would be a better way to cope with heterogeneity. This alternative, however, is both more complex and thus less likely to be accepted by the population, and more difficult to install by political decision makers and teachers.

A study conducted in Geneva on school work organization, for instance, shows that local school was criticized at first because of a greater and relatively increasing failure rate than the ones in rural cantons (Hutmacher, 1993). During the following years, public debate brought about the restoration of numeric scales and averages, year repetition policy and three to six hierarchical tracks for 12 year-old pupils – although research evidence has long since shown up their significant impact on inequalities (Gather & Maulini, 2007). Experience not only shows that this double constraint (1- achieving better results, while 2- maintaining working modalities which are known to be ineffective) is perceived as discouraging and disqualifying by teachers; moreover it makes us question school's ability to renew its work organization and to convince people and politics that this way of quality development will not only offer some consistency, but guarantee valid outcomes at a medium-term horizon.

I will examine this paradox of a change that could be useful to fight against exclusion, but that seems easier to introduce in socially integrated societies. I will do so in three stages:

1. I will explain what I mean by *school work organization*, and show why this variable – whose function is essentially not to change – is pertinent to be analyzed.

2. I will then analyze the reform and counter-reform movement lived by Geneva's school between 1993 and 2008, to illustrate how work organization may be two sorts of things at once: a ground for confrontation in discourse and, at the same time, an objective and unanimously acknowledged problem in reality.

3. Finally, I will show - through a collective research conducted in this context – which sort of problems teachers trying to organize work differently may face within their schools, as well as in their contacts with the rest of the institution, parents, community, political decision makers and the media, who are all concerned about educational issues.

1. The organization of work: a variable difficult to change

Schools are organizations where teachers' work is teaching, where these teachers are trying to make their students work in a certain order: the one that must conduct to learn the curriculum contents. Comenius (1657/1952) already saw the "universal and perfect order of instruction" as the best means to teach without trouble, *i.e.* in a way that "no class can fail to reach the necessary standard at the end of the session". *Perfection of organization = impossible failure*. No doubt we no longer believe in this kind of equation, but schools have always had to organize pupils' work by searching, if not an ideal order, at least a short term acceptable modus operandi: a structuring of knowledge, time and space favorable to teaching.

The *Ratio Studiorum* (1599) or the *Conduct of the Christian Schools* (De La Salle, 1720), for instance, have attempted to embody this intention by laying the foundations for a practical and systematic school organization – like Jean-Baptist de la Salle dividing his students into three levels: *beginners* ("who make a lot of mistakes in reading"), *mediocre* ("who make one or two mistakes each time"), *advanced and perfect* ("who read well"). Homogeneous classes, promotion at the end of the year, annual (and full) school-year repetition in case of difficulty are directly inherited from this founding principle of simultaneous teaching: "Each of these levels for the various lessons will have its assigned place in the classroom. In this manner, the students of one level will not be mixed with those of another level of the same lesson" (ibid.).

Nowadays, school work still is organized within the boundaries of classroom while teachers practice direct instruction or pedagogy of project, group work or lectures, cooperative or differentiated learning. But this local activity itself depends on a background organization, an older and steadier order, inherited from the religious tradition, recycled and perfected by secular schools: an order that brings students together precisely into classes and grades, that splits time for learning into lessons and degrees, that divides the text of knowledge into subjects and chapters of the syllabus to deal with.

Time-schedule, class and degree are drawing both space and limits of teachers' activity, of their personal responsibility. They predetermine their action, they come before it in history, they influence school work without this influence being questioned every day. Since taylorist organization defines the framework of working, it is indeed *taken for granted* as long as each worker assumes the tasks assigned to him and the organization, as a whole, seems to work

(Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Lortie, 2002). It takes external critics (of the job being done) or inside protests (by those who are doing the job) to make a problem of what seemed evident so far.

No wonder, finally, if easier to introduce e-learning or a new language course in the existing cellular structure than to modify the latter in order to take better care of students failing to master basic skills - despite Comenius - over the years. Reforms of the first level (asking more to school) do not affect the foundations of the organization. Those of second level (schooling differently) ask for a hierarchization of objectives, an adaptation of action to the problems encountered, an opening up classes to create special need groups, a different coordination of shared tasks in the school and in each team responsible for a multi-year learning cycle. Second level reforms thus change the common conditions of previous work, what made this work possible, understandable, recognizable and more or less rewarding. They ask of schools and teachers to solve three superposed problems: to imagine a different order; to implement it gradually; and to make it socially acceptable. I would now like to come to this point by briefly analyzing fifteen years of debates, conflicts or perhaps misunderstandings about an attempt to reform primary school in the little Swiss canton of Geneva.

2. The case of Geneva: virulent debates, constant confusion

The canton of Geneva is a republic which population is 450'000 people: 90% of them live in urban areas, 38% are foreign-born inhabitants, 6% are unemployed, 84% enroll their children in public schools. PISA rankings regularly put the city at the end of Swiss cantons positions (20% of students reading with great difficulty, against 5% in rural cantons). The curriculum includes four years of elementary school (-2 to +2 degrees), an other four years of primary school (+3 to +6) and three years of lower secondary education structured in hierarchical tracks (+7 to + 9). Its legislation on Public Education states that public school must "attempt to correct inequalities in students' chances of academic success, as from the beginning of schooling" (translation: o.m.). It thus sets a goal, but does neither explain the way to reduce disparity, nor how to serenely discuss objectives and organization of education.

2.1. A challenged reform

In 1993, a statistical inquiry showed that a compensation policy trying to support students in difficulty did not seem to bring about the expected benefits. School-year repetition rates tended to increase, especially at the end of elementary school. The proportion of workers' children repeating a year was 8 times greater than the one of executives' children (respectively 8% and 1% at +1 degree). The report concluded that inequality had doubled in twelve years, even though "no external social risk factor of school failure has significantly worsened" (Hutmacher, 1993, p. 85 – tr.o.m.). On the other hand, among the internal variables held responsible stand cultural distance between lower class families and some new teaching approaches, increased human resources in charge of the report (and therefore of the visibility) of learning difficulties, the tendency of school to externalize problems attribution, a lack of teachers' collective responsibility, all of them expecting from the previous level (or transmitting to the next one) a more or less uniform class, disposed of its weakest students.

Altogether, trying to correct this trend would require "moving from looking at students to looking at professional actions systems" (ibid., p. 89). In other words, we should think about work and division of work between too often isolated teachers. Managing schooling through learning cycles, following students' careers and development over several years, collectively setting and solving problems within the school, sharing teaching and assessment practices: all of this requires *changing of change*, "rethinking teachers' and students' work organization more than simply increasing measures of individualization and remediation of students learning difficulties" (ibid., p. 114).

A reform was initiated on this basis in 1994 (Brunschwig Graf, 1997; Lessard, 1999; Allal, 2007), first in an exploratory form by fifteen voluntary teams, then as a gradual expansion to the 200 Geneva primary schools. It tried to "individualize training trails" (by building multi-year learning cycles), "learn to work better together" (by strengthening cooperation between teachers), "put children at the heart of teaching process" (by developing formative assessment and differentiated pedagogy) (DEP, 1994 – tr.o.m.). It soon became a controversial subject within the institution, but also outside, at the parliament, in the press and the public opinion. It was supported by primary teachers' professional association and the federation of parents, but disapproved by a group of opponents and political forces who blamed it for pushing forward the deadlines, disconcerting families, fighting less against discriminations than endorsing them or even making them worse by lack of ambition.

The point at issue was the concept of "learning cycle," space-time of several years within students should progress in a flexible and differentiated way, regularly filling gaps rather than repeating one or two degrees entirely. Passing from eight annual levels (fully repeatable) to two four-year cycles (one of them adding a fifth year if necessary) was not supposed to intensify and improve pedagogical work, but, on the contrary, to postpone untreated learning problems "always to a later time" (in fact: at the end of the cycle) (GCG, 2006 – tr.o.m.). A popular referendum was launched in 2003: in the name of tradition's thoroughness and clarity, it called for the return of school-year repetition and numeric scales which should signify it.

2.2. A return to the problem

In a context of economic competition, social and moral tensions, crises of authority and anxiety about future, innovation is not only suspected of establishing a contentious organization. In most French-speaking countries, it is also accused of weakening the inherited order, the transmission of knowledge, emulation by selection, respect due to teachers, social ties, basic civility, why not the whole civilization if we really want to be frightening… The better public school attempts to do, the more it is suspected of "lowering its ambitions", "leveling-down", "venerate the child as a king": from this point of view, renovation truly means resignation. Ultimately, school no longer contributes to instruct and pacify society. It produces itself the young "idiots", "barbarians" and "buffoons" who, in time, will turn against their teachers (Brighelli, 2008).

In Geneva, the obligation to respond with "yes" or "no" to the referendum induced polarizing positions, dramatizing issues, demonizing opponents – *themselves* always responsible for drawing up "a school against an other" (Kambouchner, 2000). In 2006, 76% of voters approved the referendum, choosing apparently between two world views, two incompatible ways of organizing education, of regulating and sustaining students' progress. Public school formally returned to numeric scales and annual degrees, even though national

authorities, the French-speaking cantons' curriculum and the local school booklet still refer to elementary and primary four-year cycles.

The virulence of debates is in fact hiding a single and constant confusion: learning cycles supporters wanted to delay annual decision because it forces most vulnerable students to return to the start, too late, in a poorly targeted way and without continuity; opponents accused reformers of waiting too long, destroying the structure of education, depriving students and parents of well known and reassuring benchmarks. But at the time of writing the final bylaw – *i.e.* of finding an agreement between reformers and opponents who had fought each other – it was necessary to establish formal and at the same time realistic organization principles. For example:

1. Admitting one single year repetition through all primary levels, so that schooling time would not increase improperly.

2. Demanding a numeric average of 4 of 6 at the end of each year, but allowing 3 of 6 for a promotion "through tolerance", 2 of 6 in one subject matter for a promotion "through exemption".

3. If some students were still to repeat a year, putting in place "accompanying measures" defined "in reference to learning targets and depending on student's personal needs and development" (DEP, 2007 – tr.o.m.).

Everything seems to happen as if official bylaw introduces a *8 years learning cycle*, extendable by one year, where teachers are *collectively* responsible for supporting each student, depending on *his* needs, *i.e.* the gap between what he knows and official standards. Differentiated teaching, teamwork, individual trails: these three pillars of the reform lie between the lines of the text supposed to replace it. Even assessment – apparently inflexible since being numeric again – includes tolerances and exemptions that can question thoroughness and clarity of delivered messages. Annual averages are now calculated by tenths, but promotion limit (4.0, 3.0 or 2.0) varies between two numbers depending on circumstances. These calculations are no longer significant after the first year repetition, because students then automatically go through the rest of degrees. Maybe the way to penalize failure has been restored, but the one to reduce it remains to be invented.

What exactly can these advocated 'accompanying measures' consist in? Why should we wait to calculate an average before intervening? And what shall we do with students having repeated a school year, but still in trouble? Research often shows a virtuous circle between school quality and the credits accorded to it by its environment. Here, treatment of failure remains dependent on teachers, but work to be done is embodied in legislation and regulation.[3] Perhaps political division came less from the basic problem than from the way to be or not to be confident in an institution increasingly expected (1) to be reliable, and 2) to give explicit guarantees of the trust it is asking for itself (Dubet, 2002; Rosanvallon, 2008). Texts prescribe measures that teachers are somehow suspected not to take spontaneously, or to take alone, in their own way, without consistency nor equality in treating students. We can interpret this counter-innovation as a form of disqualification, but also as a confirmation that

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[3] Guidelines for teachers (DEP, 2008) emphasize flexible and modular nature of the new organization: "Accompanying measures are under responsibility of autonomous schools and subject of a particular chapter of their school's project. It is therefore each teaching team's duty to establish an organization based on locally identified needs. (…) Teachers will also assess, as a team, effectiveness of accompanying measures introduced in classes and/or school. (…) Such groupings shall never become rigid, permanent and definitive structures, whose existence is not justified by actual identified, objectives and regularly reassessed needs. Therefore, no student should ideally attend a same modeled support structure throughout school year without questioning or regular assessment of students, pedagogical device, its outcomes and goals." (tr.o.m.)

changing work organization requires from school additional skills in explaining and defending its pedagogical choices.

3. Organization of work: a crossroads of diverse developments

The fate of a school reform may depend on at least three levels: a more or less optimistic, consensual socio-political context, encouraging or not innovations; the reform strategies, more or less skillful, finding the right mix between management and negotiation of projects; finally the actors' competences, sufficient or not to produce a new organization and have it accepted by public opinion. The case of Geneva shows that these three variables are interdependent, but I am going to concentrate on the third because it directly involves teachers: their function as agents of front office, regularly in contact with students and their parents, themselves directly involved in the relation between the population and public schools.

3.1. Six key components

Whatever the impact of strategic management, political agreements or collective state of mind, why not take advantage of reform and counter-reform movements to study how professionals of education themselves reflect on the organization of schoolwork, the usefulness of innovation, its feasibility, the admissibility of change for schools and their environment? This is what our laboratory Innovation-Formation-Education (LIFE) tried to do by bringing together about 20 researchers and practitioners from Switzerland, France, Luxembourg and Canada. Research data were collected in three forms: participative observation in institutions and departments involved in the establishment of multi-year learning cycles; interviews with teachers, staff and parents; memos on new structures and practices, their design, their reception and their adjustment over time. This material was collectively condensed and analyzed to identify – by successive categorizations:

- the aspects of school work organization that teachers *imagine* necessary and possible to revise in order to improve effectiveness and fairness of their action (looking for creativity);

- the obstacles they face and manage (or not) to remove in implementing collective and gradual change (looking for efficiency);

- the tensions between professional autonomy and *acceptability* of innovation by partners of primary schools, political authorities and, in a context of direct democracy, the whole population (looking for reliability).

What has to be imagined, implemented and made acceptable – first thing to do, as such an approval is *a priori* refused – is a new work organization, which does not make a clean sweep of the past, but which, in contrast, oversees a chain of problems and issues that might otherwise seem scattered. We have identified six main components:

1. An improvement of curricula towards objectives of integration, thus organizing and hierarchizing the subjects to be taught. The way teachers work and put students to work partly depends on their representations of knowledge and competences expected at the end of school, but on their beliefs of what has to be acquired to take full

advantage of the provided teaching as well. If knowledge is a sum of single proposals to memorize or itself a complexly organized matter – with every single, important learning module being based on and modifying what is known at the same time – one cannot regard steps, paths, itineraries, progress by cycles or by degrees in the same way. Considering learning as a staircase (to climb step by step) or as a construction (where putting the roof may precede finishes) implies different ideas of the order in which training must happen, of student's and teacher's role in the process, of the right way to alternate simplicity and complexity, analysis and synthesis, asking and answering questions through interaction. In a contentious context, constructivism is less presented as a convincing way to explain culture transmission, than as a complacent invite no longer to teach anything to the children. To teach or to urge learning: this kind of alternative may make professionals smile, but it does not facilitate their work, nor its recognition by the population (Hargreaves, 2003).

2. The development of so-called teaching-learning situations, enabling every student to access – straightforwardly or not – to the core of the intended knowledge. Lessons, observations, researches, exercises, recitations, lectures, writings or projects: integrating these resources is necessary to make teacher's speech and students' intellect meet. Making education a sum of lectures only profits to the part of the audience following what is said. Immersing class in activities penalizes students missing the knowledge that is implicitly required. No teacher selects these kinds of extremes. Everyone mixes in his own way (1) structured and explicit teaching of instrumental knowledge and (2) its mobilization – more or less frequent, a priori or post formal presentation – in authentic situations. Once again, actual work seems more stable and temperate than what controversies over teaching methods and their validation by science might suggest (Gauthier, 2008).

3. The creation of modular groupings, treating special needs in an ad hoc and accurate way. Some first degrees pupils may have trouble in connecting letters with sounds. Others in representing what they read, accessing to understanding. To associate written words and meaning, they could benefit from hearing adults reading or dictate sentences. If each teacher were almighty, he would organize his classroom work to respond to all of these necessities at the same time. Precisely because the collective competence of a team is greater than sum of its parts, some schools set up modules gathering students outside their classroom and according to their difficulties. The hardest is to provide immediate and focused support, correcting disparities at the time, rather than strengthening them in permanent level groups and/or separate tracks. The goal is less "mixing for mixing" than finding time and competences to help students at risk of dropping out. It forces teachers to balance between two difficulties: recognizing their own limits and attributing management of heterogeneity not only to support services (Perrenoud, 2002).

4. The emergence of a formative evaluation, concerned by learning rather than sanctioning and legitimating failures. The conflict in Geneva has made numeric scaling a symbol of the reorganization of schooling in annual degrees. The function of averages seems less to quantify learning (which would require standardized tests) than to classify students into hierarchical groups as they were in lasallian schools. In a city where schools sociology is full of contrasts, a same Gauss curve (6, 4, 2…) can mean higher or lower absolute performance levels. Hence a reformist intention to introduce an assessment indicating distance to the targets, suggesting regulations and informing parents through graduate criteria ("Objective achieved, nearly achieved, not achieved"), written comments, a portfolio of student's works, individual interviews and

collective meetings. The comeback of averages does not exclude the maintenance or development of some of these innovations, but ambiguities in new regulation raise once more substantive questions: how can we assess to prevent failures rather than take note of them? How can we fight against misfiled students' feelings of incompetence and discouragement? How can we make our diagnosis more accurate in order to avoid repeating a whole and unique year? How should we distinguish between a teachers' perception and its transcription to parents? Tolerances and exemptions show that arithmetic evaluation is secondary to professional judgment, and that this judgment ultimately has to be wise, fair and understandable by others. In a world where judges are themselves increasingly required to justify, public school is trapped between two obligations: clarifying assessments, to involve parents in children's schooling; and protecting its autonomy, without favouring better informed families (McMillan, 2000).

5. A coordination of efforts by a pragmatic professional cooperation, setting up school project and teamwork to serve students progress. The history of reform has shown that early activism started gradually to focus on methodical research of efficiency: objectives were better identified, modular groups stabilized, assessment files simplified, teamwork lightened. The autonomy of schools was one of the reform axes: it has moved on through experiences and logically composed between local initiatives and authority's requirements. It was never unanimous, but is embodied today in the new Minister's priorities: setting up directors of establishments, advisory councils including students and parents, school projects decentralizing organization of work, a Priority Teaching Network ("Réseau d'enseignement prioritaire") receiving increased resources and establishing partnerships in popular districts. A redistribution of powers is well underway in the wake of the reform: remains to measure whether school directions will strengthen the autonomy of teachers and/or the control over their practices through guidelines and top-down assessment of their performances (Osborn, McNess & Broadfoot, 2000; Ball, 2006).

6. A reinforced communication with partners, distinguishing between an internally used language and a language that brings about a better understanding in the outside world and an alliance with parents. We saw how important and difficult it is for schools to find the right balance between sovereignty and transparency, claiming teachers' competences and getting the support of people. Perhaps this is the reform and reform meanders' main lesson: schools involved in the change have intensified contacts with families, what has driven them to support teachers. But as soon as we leave this close relationship, as soon as the new organization should become widespread, school must manage to convince other spheres, through discourse or factual accomplishments. The ambiguity of school's success is that it has made modern citizen better informed and thus less subject to its authority. This may set at least two strategic problems: moving on without breaking up, assuming weight of increasingly strong, changing, sometimes conflicting expectations; informing discussions without ignoring common sense, but confronting it to research results and teachers' collective expertise. Without it, regulation by public debate could soon be replaced by market regulation, each family freely choosing his school, rather than conversing with others to define a common ideal (Maroy, 2004).

This last point must not mislead us: it may soon occupy first ranks in change management. If organizing work differently requires a coordinated series of innovations – transforming education's framework, putting dominant criteria of justice and performance into question – we should not expect that passing from annual degrees to multi-year learning cycles will be a formality which teachers alone could decide for. As the Geneva case demonstrates, if this

kind of reform seems to be a revolution, public debate deteriorates and provokes a reaction; but if the school calms the game down by restoring emblems of strictness and tradition, it finds itself helpless in front of a problem less solved than pushed a notch further. As the work organization is both condition and consequence of other changes, it can help us to reflect on the tension between the stability of school and its evolution.

3.2. An observation post

I said at the beginning that some countries are not in a hurry to make a selection among students; that the economic, social and cultural context seems all the more conducive to integration because it has a lesser need to fight against exclusion. It does not mean that we have nothing to learn – in Central Europe – from, for example, Scandinavian or Far East countries (Välijärvi, Linnakylä, Kupari, Reinikainen & Arffman, 2002; Tsuneyoshi, 2001). It is at first difficult to reform primary level if secondary school still divides students into hierarchical sections on the basis of their numeric performances: the competition is too stressing for families, this stress too cumbersome for teachers; back-door selection can only ricochet on previous levels. Useless, secondly, to try to force destiny in lack of a political project prevailing for a while upon partisan divisions: public school becomes the hostage of ideological debates and circumstantial alliances which discredit necessarily any call for his "sanctuarization", "respect for teachers" or "good of the children".

Educational research says that a rigorous but flexible school work organization can reduce two major risks of inequality: 1. isolation of students with lowest performances by whole-year repetition and/or implementation of separate tracks; 2. segregation between schools recruiting their own public on a fully deregulated education market (Chappelle & Meuret, 2006). Schools can not do everything, especially in a world that often places power above knowledge, images and sounds upon texts, running for success before ethics of discussion. But if they want to do their part of the job in preserving culture and the common good, they can also try to improve, *i.e.* to become "more welcoming to students, less harsh for the weakest ones, more effective and equitable" in their ways of training (ibid., p. 19 – tr.o.m.). In other words, they can always try to work better, including (re)thinking how their work is organized (Altrichter, Gather Thurler & Heinrich, 2005).

The real challenge lies at the crossroads of the deepest political quarrels and best-established research results. We can not imagine a better observation post to estimate how French-speaking countries develop education, do (or do not) credit their schools, see teachers (and help them to see themselves) as a trustworthy profession, owning strong knowledge, able to progress, to speak and act in a sufficiently consistent manner to obtain the public confidence it is asking for. The question is ultimately to revise the bureaucratic model inherited from the past without weakening school and teachers. It requires (1) admitting the fact that school-year repetition is problematic for research but a solution for actors (Drealants, 2006), and (2) therefore, gradually instituting ways of grouping students, managing progression and regulation of learning both renewed and acceptable for parents, high school teachers and the rest (or at least the larger part) of the society. The problem is simple to set, though difficult to resolve, as I tried to show. That leaves work to do and to organize, maybe.

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