



Book Review

Patrick Bühler

*Schule als Sanatorium: Pädagogik,
Psychiatrie und Psychoanalyse,
1880–1940*

Chronos: Zürich
2023, 220 pp.

The book's title in English would be: *School as Sanatorium: Pedagogy, Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis, 1880-1940*. It is written in German (with some quotations in the original French and English) and published as part of the series *Historische Bildungsforschung* (vol. 12) edited by the author himself, together with Lucien Criblez, Claudia Crotti and Andreas Hoffmann-Ocon. The aim is to explore the “therapeutization” of education (or “medicalization” as some historians of medicine call it) which took place between 1880 and 1940. The book's main contribution lies in offering the first detailed description of how psychopathology expanded in Switzerland, and revealing the pedagogical and institutional changes such a “clinical connection” brought with it (p. 13).

The book is rich in sources, presenting detailed information on the Swiss case. It has two main parts, each divided into four sections. The first part, entitled *Pedagogics and Psychopathology*, contains an overview. Here, Bühler recalls the new maladies that were observed in the classroom, starting with hygienic deficiencies and somatic troubles, and leading up to psychological conditions. While madness and idiocy were easily detected and often children deemed to suffer from them did not even arrive at school,

children with mental issues such as low intelligence, neurasthenia or “moral aberration” could be hidden away within a class. After 1900, physicians and pedagogues were approaching teachers to make them aware of the highly problematic nature of such mental “abnormalities”, which required clinical diagnosis and special care in order to prevent the affected children from getting worse.

“Misbehaviours” like, for example, restlessness, stubbornness or idleness, which traditionally had been judged as “naughtiness” in need of correction, were seen in the early twentieth century as the potential expression of an illness. Psychiatrists such as Kraepelin, pedagogues such as Descoeurdes and psychologists such as Binet were urging teachers and parents to be more careful with their judgements and punishments. Only a clinician can assess the child's responsibility; that is, whether the cause is the child's unwillingness or whether the “bad behaviour” is due to some health problem, be that a mental deficiency, the first stage of a terrible illness or a result of trauma.

Citing a vast amount of literature, Bühler shows how “abnormality” (especially in the form of nervousness) became a hot topic, moving medicine (and within medicine, mainly hygiene, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and eugenics) closer to pedagogics. Within that area of contact, new pedagogical strands arose, such as “special education” (*Heilpädagogik / Sonderpädagogik*) and “psychoanalytical pedagogics”. The final section of the first part ends with pedagogues presenting and commenting on psychoanalysis in a local teacher's journal.

The second part, entitled *Psychopathological pedagogical Infrastructures*, revolves around the question of how psychopathology and psychoanalysis influenced everyday schooling and education. The interest in mental diagnosis led to the establishment of “special classes” (*Hilfsklassen* and *Förderungsklassen*) and “observation classes” (*Beobachtungsklassen*). Such additional classes were kept small so that teachers could observe and “treat” undisciplined or troubled children. This part of the book contains several tables and illustrations showing variations in the number of classes or teachers and gender differences for Switzerland for the period between 1903 and 1961. Without much discussion of these figures, the author moves on to examine the way children were selected. Bühler concludes (p. 96) that the normal classes were used as a baseline for selecting children who stood out, because only in school classes could students be compared to their peers and their “abnormalities” detected.

In the final sections of the book, Bühler offers interesting information from teachers’ files that describes cases of children who were temporarily transferred to an observation class. Via transcriptions of the conversations, the reader gets an idea of the reasons for the transfers, the family backgrounds and the resistance of many parents towards such changes. Moreover, the reports provide insight into teacher–pupil relationships and even a couple of children’s own personal experiences. However, analysis of the cases is in very short supply; not even the most heart-breaking report of a girl’s sexual abuse is commented on.

Bühler’s main interest in this part of the book lies more in documenting the rise of a new controversial kind of

“psychoanalytical pedagogy” than in reflecting on the children’s experiences. The historical sources, on the one hand, reveal how some pedagogues and psychoanalysts warned of the possible misfit and dangers when applying psychoanalysis in schools. On the other hand, educators such as Pfister, Zulliger, Aichhorn expected benefits from psychoanalytically informed interventions in the classroom.

Despite the interest shown by educators in psychoanalysis, the reports by witnesses and teachers indicate the eclectic way in which psychoanalytical concepts were used in schools. The initiative did not lead to any change in educational methods as such; but children’s behaviour and class dynamics were now being interpreted in psychoanalytical terms. Moreover, despite attempts to promote psychoanalytical pedagogy in the nineteen twenties, the impetus would soon lose strength. In this way, both parts of the book end with a similar message about the rather selective and contradictory reception of psychoanalysis among reform pedagogues and the fact that they adopted certain aspects in rather unorthodox ways.

Overall, the main contribution of Bühler’s book can be found in his use of an impressive variety of archival sources. He employed material from the Basel city archive, as well as numerous journal articles and books on pedagogical, medical and psychoanalytical topics, together with texts from newspapers, proceedings (*Jahrbücher*), the local pedagogical press (*Schulblätter*), dictionaries, encyclopaedias, textbooks and other published and unpublished material. Despite such breadth, the author decided to base his research mainly on the case of Basel. He

argues that the pioneering city of Basel is well suited to this, as it was the place where the first “special classes” were established (in 1888), then (in 1913) the first full-time school physician was hired and 15 years later a school psychologist. Such developments would only arrive in most other locations after the Second World War.

Despite the value of this study, it also has some limitations. The text is not always easy to follow; more guidance and summaries would have been helpful. What I missed the most were conclusions that would guide the reader and discuss in depth the novelty and the implications of Bühler’s research. There is also some very loaded terminology that appears from time to time, for example, concerning pedagogy being “infected” by psychopathology (p. 13) and psychiatry “growing neurotically” (p. 30), without further reflection or discussion. Nowadays, most historians agree with such a critical view, considering the way pedagogy became connected to clinical areas in what can be seen as a problematic “colonization” process. Nevertheless, the reader would benefit from learning precisely how the rich sources offered in this book enable us to reassess and problematize such general assumptions.

These comments aside, the book does a good job of presenting the Swiss case to a readership interested in the history of psychology, psychoanalysis, education and school medicine and psychiatry. It definitively enriches our knowledge of the entanglement between these areas.

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