

## «Freinet Chimneys»: Experimenting with Emancipatory Public Education (Geneva in the 60s to 80s). Piaget's Dream of an Active School?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The emancipatory potential of the 1960s had a particular resonance in Swiss education in the French-speaking part of the country. Teachers, parents and unionists, all advocating Freinet pedagogy, demanded that the demonised public education be reformed. Retracing the main steps of their successes and setbacks in the sector of Geneva public education, this article enquires into the rhetorical strategies and tactical alliances the reformists mobilised in order to promote «schools open to life», respectful of the natural longing to learn thanks to educational streams in primary schools dedicated to their cause (the «Freinet chimneys» implemented for a while at the turn of the 1980s). Inputs address the way the leaders of the reform historicised their initiatives so as to establish rightful filiation, calling upon some major figures whilst neglecting others. The scientific approval of Jean Piaget and Élise Freinet, as well as part of the left-wing party in power, might have endorsed the project; nonetheless, the leading figures of Geneva New Education were rarely invoked. How should we interpret these twists and turns? How were the narratives being scripted, and by whom? How were the innovations tested by others and integrated elsewhere so as to support the public education reform? Analysis of the underlying dynamics of this experiment reveal how «everyday» people rose up in a crisis and seized the opportunity to open up a world of possibilities; this can be highlighted through the lenses of the notion of «protagonism», which brings together «ordinary» people and their «extraordinary» politicisation (Bantigny, 2018; Deluermoz & Gobille, 2015).

**Keywords:** Protagonism in the 1960s; Piagetian endorsement; Geneva Freinet Group; alternatives in public education; controversial democratisation.

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## 1. Introduction. Recording live a reformist activity

The 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1966, the biologist and psychologist Jean Piaget was on the air enthusiastically presenting the methods experimented in a small public school in Geneva. These methods, Piaget claimed, provide evidence of «the potentialities that are present in children's natural development and that education does not sufficiently support. [...] I was delighted to see in this film and in this particular context *an implementation of what we have been dreaming about*».<sup>2</sup> Piaget is on the TV show of the first channel of the French-speaking Swiss television (*Télévision Suisse Romande* TSR) that had just broadcasted a documentary recording the daily life of a primary school produced by *Continents sans Visa*<sup>3</sup>, a featured show of the TSR advocating *cinéma vérité* for grasping social and political issues from a human approach. Piaget thinks it is remarkable that this class should promote 1) an inquisitive mind, 2) oral and written expression, 3) individual and mostly collective work. Piaget advocated spreading these methods everywhere, but he also added that implementation required that teachers received a solid academic training in psychology, since a teacher can only be a creator and innovator if he knows about the «laws of natural development of children» (Piaget, 1966).

As from 1973, dozens of teachers, gradually gained the support of the trade unions and the approval of the government in order to create teaching teams and to experiment with active pedagogical methods in the official school system, as conducts of a democratic school system. With several other key figures, Piaget put his seal on this project. Would the Geneva public school system thereby embody the vision of a laboratory for pedagogical renewal supporting emancipation? Would people seize the opportunity to invest in this in order to voice their protests? Indeed a wave of reforms and rebellions triggered the Geneva education system as testified by the numerous initiatives and realisations both in the public and private sector that reached the Parliament. In 1986, there were dozens of teaching teams bringing together each year more than 200 teachers and 3000 pupils in the public sector. The commemoration of the tenth anniversary of these cooperatives can also be considered, as we will see later, as a form of swansong.

This article sheds light on this threshold period that enabled a short-lived recognition (from the 1970s to the 1980s) of educational cooperatives operating in Geneva public education. The focus will be on understanding the context in which a small group of teachers, all members of the *Groupe Genevois d'École Moderne*<sup>4</sup> (hereinafter GGEM), implemented their idea of «Freinet chimneys» designed as launch pads for reshaping society. The three dimensions emphasised by Piaget were also the backbone of their programme. Referring to the terms the teachers

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Piaget, *Télévision Suisse Romande, Continent Sans Visa*, 1st of December 1966. <http://www.rts.ch/archives/tv/information/continents-sans-visa/3443761-jean-piaget.html> The underlying is ours.

<sup>3</sup> Continents without a visa.

<sup>4</sup> The Geneva Group for Modern Schools. For purpose of clarity we have chosen to use the French denominations in the text with the translation in footnote. We will be using the better known French abbreviations for the main entities and players casted in the narrative.

used themselves it was all about trial and error, free expression and autonomous cooperative work. If the leaders claimed to be of a Piagetian theoretical framework their intentions were to democratise demonised public education so that it could serve popular culture and promote a community-based management of society. As a result new frameworks would be needed to validate such an endeavour as well as innovative alliances to expand the effects on a large scale.

Whilst retracing the important steps of their conquests and defeats, this article looks into the way these innovators historicised their initiatives, moulded their filiation, calling upon some great figures and dismissing others, in order to shape their programme assimilating frameworks successfully implemented elsewhere. It will be crucial to provide some background information on this particular experiment since it was fully inserted in the public education system, a key aspect that the protagonists would then use to circumvent «from the heart» the «abuses of the system».

Along the inquiry we will be paying attention to the granularity of the archives since we have had access not only to the official documents but also to the archives of this alternative group: bundles of drafts, crossed correspondence, bulletins and manifestos, educational journals, press articles, grey literature and theoretical references, often abundantly annotated.<sup>5</sup> These traces are both hybrid and incandescent; in many aspects they mirror the nature of the movement. Phrasings reflect the eloquence and the fever of the rebellion as well as the surprise and the influence of the powers under scrutiny. Headings and signatures express the patterns of conjunctions and cohesions, sometimes conquered, sometimes lost. The syncopated pace of pamphlets and negotiations becomes entangled with the dreamt horizon of a deep and sustainable reform of society. The local scene is offered as a mirror of events occurring in the surrounding world, where internationalisation became the political compass of the designers of a school open to life.

Albeit being pushed around by events and removals these archives have nonetheless been preserved foremost by the pioneers of the GGEM, who needed to justify the rationale of their pursuit, claim their originality and were anxious to provide a valid framework. Did they want to step out of anonymity to become history? Echoing the approach supported by *Continents sans Visa* (the TV show where Piaget took position in 1966), our aim is to portray the daily life of these activists, listening to their anger and the utopias enlivening the energies of all the anonymous people who wanted to state their cause. We have followed them in those moments when they became actors of events. In order to get a deeper understanding, we ourselves dived into the turbulent and joyful 1960s and 1970s, ploughing through the abundant and richly textured literature and the innovative approaches available in the world and the French-speaking world (Bantigny, 2018; Gobille, 2008; Klimke & Scharloth, 2008; Marvick, 2011; Payà Rico & al, 2018; Sherman & al. 2013) but also in Switzerland (Batou, 2018; Heinen, 2018). This bottom-up approach looks at the way everyday people take position in times of crises and seize these opportunities to open up to a

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<sup>5</sup> They are all currently deposited at the Archives of Institute J.-J. Rousseau (AIJRR). We will be referring more specifically to the AGATHA deposits (GGEM, GREM, UCE), in particular the files (including cross correspondences) carefully compiled by Olivier Coste, grouping together the «Important Documents since 1968». AIJRR, 2012/1/E/1, 2.

world of possibilities, thereby setting themselves up as valid protagonists of events. This issue can be addressed through the lenses of «protagonism», which highlights the tension between «ordinary» people and their «extraordinary» politicisation (Deluermoz & Gobille, 2015)<sup>6</sup>. Bantigny's (2018) implementation of this approach validates the heuristic qualities that we have been able to appreciate ourselves. We are aware that if Geneva pulsates to the beat of the world and that it is consistently related to France, revolutions carried out in this small city remain far more contained and confined (despite representing a symbol for other Swiss cities).

## 2. Light and shadow on the Swiss congress of the Freinet movement

Reform schools in order to reform society! This is the mission that a small group of Swiss teachers took on just after World War II convinced that they were by the emancipatory power of education. In as much they joined up with other worldwide communities (Bantigny, 2018; Klimke & Scharloth, 2008; Marvick, 2011; Payà Rico & al, 2018; Todaro, 2018) that were rebelling against all forms of authoritarianism and imperialism, vilifying state school systems and so-called traditional pedagogies all qualified as being fixated and mind-numbing. Emancipating children from the coercion enforced on them through un-natural education was already the project of the pioneers of New Education in the interwar years, i.e. Pierre Bovet, Edouard Claparède, Adolphe Ferrière, and then Robert Dottrens, Jean Piaget just to name those who were deeply involved in the Institut Rousseau (Hofstetter, 2010). Their work stills shapes the educational institutions of the French-speaking part of Switzerland where they stand out as absolutely fundamental references in terms of teacher training programmes.

### 2.1. *The Groupe Romand d'École moderne patronised by Freinet*

As from 1947, these teachers liaised in order to share their experiences and beliefs and to launch a Work Guild established in 1952 at the time they were receiving Célestin Freinet in their classrooms. As a result of these meetings, in 1954, they established the *Groupe Romand d'École Moderne*<sup>7</sup> (hereinafter GREM) that claimed its filiation to the *Institut Coopératif de l'École Moderne*<sup>8</sup> (hereinafter ICEM) founded by Freinet<sup>9</sup>. The latter's encouragements were instrumental in designing and improving their newsletter.

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<sup>6</sup> True to this approach, but mostly in order to respect the request of some of the protagonists of this story, due also to their numbers, we will only quote by name those peoples whose official role are important in order to fully understand the phenomena. In a previous inquiry we have been able to interview several protagonists at the time and we will be drawing on these interviews (Hofstetter, Vellas, & Barras, 1996; Hofstetter, Ratcliff & Schnewly, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> French-speaking Switzerland Group of Modern Schools.

<sup>8</sup> Cooperative Institute of Modern Schools.

<sup>9</sup> For more background information on the Freinet movements see Beattie (2002), Clanché, Debarbieux & Testanière (1994), Hernández Huerta (2011), Ueberschlag (2015), Peyronie (2013); and Go and Riondet's work on an update on Freinet pedagogy (Go, 2007, Go & Riondet, 2018).

Admittedly, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, actions of the members of the GREM were mostly individual and sporadic, often confined to the walls of their classrooms and struggled to achieve a larger recognition in the official school network.

Archives available indicate that the reformist excitement of the 1960s enabled these activists to congregate more powerfully. After Célestin Freinet's death in 1966 they expressed themselves publically in their union newspaper (*L'Éducateur*) and in the media (television, radio, press). Also renowned personalities echoed their affirmations as shown in the broadcasted documentary that Piaget commented on the air. In Geneva, a wind of reforms blew over many circles and communities, all strongly related, belonging to this same shift. Established in 1968, the GGEM easily found its first partners. Its claims resonated strongly with a wide variety of activist associations whose mottos bear witness to their time: a school «open up to life», based on cooperation and self-government, prone to pacifism and internationalism and, even for some, to ecology (Hofstetter, Vellas & Barras, 1996, pp. 18-20). Amongst the most lively of these associations with whom the founders of the GGEM maintained strong contacts there are the *Groupe d'Action pour la Réforme de l'enseignement*<sup>10</sup> (hereinafter GAR), the Group School and Life, School Instrument of Peace, School and Class Warfare, and also the Popular Movement for Families, since the promises are greeted by parents who wanted to be true partners in a school that supported multiculturalism<sup>11</sup>.

This pedagogy is tolerated in the public sector where official representatives such as school managers and academics are carefully listening<sup>12</sup>. Nonetheless the passion of some of the spokesmen immediately stirred up some questioning that further activated their enthusiasm more than it contained their passion. In their will to push back barriers and boundaries, convinced of the virtues of sharing and cooperating, and eager to demonstrate their solidarity with similar causes upheld in other parts of the world (Bantigny, 2018; Frei, 2008; Klimke & Scharloth, 2008; Kornetis, 2009; Payà Rico & al, 2018), these groups expanded their networks beyond the national frontiers. As far as pedagogical innovation was concerned, they clearly favoured contacts with the French movements for modern schools, *Groupe Français d'Éducation Nouvelle*<sup>13</sup> and the ICEM. The chart established by the latter in Pau in April 1968 became a reference for French-speaking Switzerland<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Action group for the reform of teaching.

<sup>11</sup> See in particular AIJJR AGATHA 2012, 1/E/1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9.

<sup>12</sup> In 1969, for instance, the head of the Department of Public Education supported these methods and internships in alternative schools, explicitly quoting the Freinet classes (*Mémorial du Grand Conseil de Genève [MGC]*, 21 February 1969, pp. 493-495; 28 March 1969, pp. 1089-1093). More generally, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many questions were addressed in parliamentary precincts either for promoting innovations or for demonising them (Berthoud, 2006; Hofstetter, 2010; Magnin, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> French Group of New Education.

<sup>14</sup> AIJJR AGATHA 2012, 1/E/5, 6, 9. C. Freinet, *L'Éducateur, Revue de l'ICEM*, 1968, pp. 293-295.

## 2.2. *The reformist motions of the Groupe Romand d'École Moderne (GREM)*

Bringing together their strengths and conviction, parents and teachers multiplied pedagogical debates and activist actions from the end of the 1960s. Information campaigns, demonstrations and exhibitions poured forth supported both by the GREM and its cantonal chapters (Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Neuchatel and Vaud). In Geneva, in March 1970, an exhibition «A modern school for a modern world» presented to the general public the foundations and tools of a pedagogy aligned with societal transformations (*Le Peuple*, 19 mars, 1970; *La Voix Ouvrière*, 20 mars 1970). The experiment was renewed in February 1971 with the title «Creative children». The success of these initiatives encouraged the enthusiastic reformists to hold the first Freinet congress in French-speaking Switzerland in April 1971 the bedrock for all those who recognised themselves in the emancipatory project. (*Bulletin du GREM*, N°90, December 1970; N°91, June 1971).

The congress in Lausanne brought together more than 600 protagonists whose origins and profiles were highly contrasted. Most of them were teachers, educators, students, teacher students, teacher trainers, scholars, school authorities, journalists, parents and their children. The congress concluded with motions aiming to obtain that school authorities supported educational continuity for children schooled in classrooms promoting active methods and teacher teamwork. The delegates called for recognition of their rights to turn their classrooms into spaces «open up to life», where the freedom of speech of the three key partners of education (parents, children and teachers) is guaranteed. They demanded that comprehensive information on modern schools (also called Freinet pedagogy) should be made available in teacher training programmes and that student teachers should be able to choose where they wanted to do their internships. (*Bulletin du GREM*, N°91 juin 1971; *Antidote*, N°10, 1971, p. 2).

The movement was launched and was met with a huge resonance. It became increasingly difficult to break the ardours of all those who were convinced they would benefit from these alliances and manifestations for implementing their project on a large scale.

## 2.3. *Destroying the myth of cooperation before it was even practised*

Available sources bear witness that, even at an early stage, contradictions were rampant within the *Groupe Romand d'École Moderne* (GREM). On the foreground the congress proved the scope and breadth of the gathering and the proposals of the GREM. It also provided a forum for voicing individual positions, often critical towards the authorities. Voices condemned the confiscation by the hierarchy of the student newspaper issued by the Teacher Training College of Lausanne that was criticising the absence of information on New Education in their programme. Standing in solidarity, the Geneva teachers, members of the GREM, protested: «Does free speech exist in Switzerland?» (*Antidote*, N°10, 1971, p. 1). They seized this opportunity to demonstrate that traditional education had failed and that a radical transformation was needed extending to all levels of the educational system so that schools could become open spaces and truly democratic. The leaders of the GREM,

more moderate elders, then accused the Geneva teachers of being agitators and feared that their mob justice would impair the movement causing mistrust within the ranks of educational authorities and maybe also in civil society.

The concerns of the spearheads of the GREM were most likely reinforced by the altercations that were shaking up the Republic of Geneva at the time, i.e. the «cases» of Calvin, Rousseau and Voltaire, the names of the high schools facing student uprisings<sup>15</sup>. Advocates of active methods were blamed and even displaced for having, to some extent, intensely defended positions intermingled with pedagogical, societal and political claims. Disagreements within the associations and their Geneva representatives amplified and were voiced in the educational press. Amongst them issues concerning the recruitment of new teachers were addressed; some voices rebelled against the «formatting» they had to go through and the work conditions of the deputy teachers said to be exploited. They might have declared, «The division of workers has always benefitted the managers» (*Éducateur*, 4 February 1972, p. 83), nonetheless it is within these alternative movements that the disagreements and the attacks were the most violent and painful.

At La Gradelle school (where the film commented by Piaget in 1966 was shot) the issue festered and intensified in 1971: a petition called that one of its teacher should be displaced for addressing his pupils curious questions about the virtues of the mysterious granules that were hitting the headlines after a load of contraceptive pills had been stolen in Geneva. Eager to calm down spirits the school authorities gave way to the petitioners (both parents and colleagues) and displaced the teacher who, then, publically declared that he was proud to address current issues (the contraceptive pill, Vietnam, Biafra)<sup>16</sup> and blamed his colleagues for being too straight jacket. Despite the compromise the Department of Public Education was suspected of bargaining with the subversive and dissident troops<sup>17</sup>.

#### 2.4. A generational gap? Strategic and political disagreements

More than one year of meditations were spent explaining, pacifying and conciliating the contrasts in which the most intimate and highest ranks of the *Fédération internationale des mouvements d'École moderne*<sup>18</sup> (hereinafter FIMEM) took part<sup>19</sup>. Their spokesmen seem to have been very embarrassed judging by some of the correspondence available: «the FIMEM is not an appeal body but an agency of federation and conciliation» (Letter from R. Ueberschlag to A. Linarès,

<sup>15</sup> AIJRR AGATHA 2012/1/E1, 2, 9.

<sup>16</sup> All over Switzerland people were voicing their solidarity with the disruptions in Vietnam, the Chinese revolutions and the Cuban experiences as well as with the trade union and student movements from Berlin to Rome, from London to Madrid, from San Francisco and Paris (Bantigny, 2018; Heinen, 2018; Payà Rico & al, 2018; Skenderovic & Späti, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> The president of the Union publically defended the Head of Department. *Éducateur*, 4 February 1972, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> International Federation of the Movements for Modern Schools.

<sup>19</sup> These paragraphs are based on the documentation gathered in the «GGEM-GREM File», typed, which brings together the main correspondences relating to this conflict. AIJRR AGATHA 2012/1/E/1, 2.

15 October 1972). Barely six months before, at the Lille congress the president of the FIMEM had clearly validated the claim of the Geneva teachers in his analysis in terms of «Generational gap». In April 1972, he stated that the post-war generation had substituted the revolutionary trend of the pioneers (1924-1936) with an attitude of conciliation and reform, although «prepared to reproduce the system». Only, as Ueberschlag bemoaned, this second generation (1945-1968) – the elders now in power – could no longer recognise themselves in the more radical claims of the younger teachers whereas the third generation (exemplified by the Geneva teachers) «brings in the most vitality to the movement» preventing the Freinet pedagogy of becoming «static», «concerned by its sole survival».<sup>20</sup>

Correspondence shed a harsh light on this confrontation, perceived as a clash of clans between the Vaud and Geneva teachers, between seniors and juniors, between reformists and revolutionists. These sources also help grasp the more fundamental issues at stake around (highly politicised) differences where everyone claims to state their positions honestly and is also called upon to do so. Alas, all in vain. A series of accusations, denials and clarifications all led to a divide and the subsequent empowering of the GREM initiatives so that they could go ahead with their endeavour which claimed to be definitely emancipatory (albeit denying being revolutionary).

### **3. Everything is political in Geneva! A plead for self-managed modern school «chimneys»**

From then on the GGEM became an independent association affiliated to the *Fédération internationale des mouvements d'École moderne* (FIMEM) who recognised the group as a valid interlocutor. The statutes of the GGEM were approved in 1972 promoting cooperation amongst all partners for implementing an educational framework that meets children's needs by supporting freedom of speech, initiatives, solidarity and a critical mind. They advocated for innovative teaching and learning methods and Freinet pedagogy. Resonating with the above-mentioned conflicts, article 7 was intensely discussed and the final phrasing even got the official seal of the FIMEM: «the group is neither politically nor religiously committed; it acknowledges nonetheless the political implications of its pedagogical ideas»<sup>21</sup>. The assumption defended then was that all educational action contains a political dimension. To deny this is, in itself, also a political stance, blind to issues of power and colluding with the system.

#### *3.1. The Geneva Antidote: «all educational actions are political»*

The official texts of the GGEM remained discrete on these political issues. All the same the correspondence and the associations the leaders are interacting with were conveying messages, bulletins, and manifestos that were all clearly liberal and

<sup>20</sup> Interview record of the FIMEM at the Lille congress, April 1972. AIJRR AGATHA 2012/1/E/1, 2.

<sup>21</sup> AIJRR AGATHA 2012, 1/E/1, 9.



rebellious<sup>22</sup>. In particular, the *Groupe d'Action pour la Réforme de l'enseignement* (GAR), founded in 1968 by young students and teachers, condemned the divide between school and life. They argued that social issues should be addressed in the classroom and that young people should be encouraged to express themselves on core topics in order to start practising active citizenship. The columns of their journal *Antidote*<sup>23</sup> bear witness to the feverish protests of its leaders that can also be found in other communities. Declaring the failure of traditional education invested by the elites in order to «gag» even «indoctrinate» the «masses», they wrote a manifesto (November 1970, *Antidote N°9*, pp. 2-4) and decided to experiment in their classrooms with methods empowering everyone – from primary classes to upper secondary classes – to develop their personality and to become full citizens taking on all their responsibilities. Their reflections and commitments go well beyond the pedagogical frame claiming that education is by essence political and has social, economical and ecological implications<sup>24</sup>.

The *Groupe d'Action pour la Réforme de l'enseignement* (GAR) is different from the *Groupes d'École moderne* in that it brought together representatives of all school levels as well as other personalities engaged in other causes (i.e. protection of migrants and minorities, ecology, peace education, internationalism). This larger deployment also came with a more affirmed theoretical framework and radical political and sociological interpellations. In the wake of the 1968 driving forces opposed to all forms of imperialism and authoritarianism, voices rebelled against the fact that the bourgeois elite and the dominant classes had invested the whole of the educational system, and in particular the public sector, in order to reproduce social, cultural, sexual, ethnic, discriminations, thereby supporting and reinforcing them. Educators teaching in programmes for adolescents (middle school, high school, vocational schools) were the most passionate instigating or supporting the ardours of their students. The press relayed their demonstrations and demands, and even the Parliament intervened when the right-wing parties tried to subjugate the movement.

A meticulous analysis of the sources (crossed correspondence, comparing arguments, profiles of signatories) shows that it was always the same people who commanded or curved these task forces. It is in these networks that the avant-gardist core of the GGEM found their inspirations for voicing their call to arms and their programme, traces of which can even be found in the parliamentary precincts. The GGEM claimed that politics play an important part and educators cannot be defined without referring to the political dimension: «We understand and claim that all educational actions [...] are political and that the political commitment that has the strongest impact might precisely be the so-called neutrality of the teacher in his classroom or the refusal of groups of teachers to take on any political action» (Fundamental documents, GGEM)<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> See in particular the archives: AIJJR AGATHA 2012, 1/E/1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Subtitled *The journal of the New Pedagogy*.

<sup>24</sup> AIJJR AGATHA 2012, 1/E/1, 11.

<sup>25</sup> AIJJR AGATHA 2012/1/E. Here too, we base ourselves on the interviews with the protagonists of the time and the history traced by *NOUS, Revue des équipes pédagogiques*, N° 1-4.

### 3.2. «What do we want?» *The pedagogical motto of the GGEM*

Between 1971 and 1973, in close consultation with other associations, the leaders of the GGEM meticulously crafted their project: self-managed *Unités coopératives d'enseignement* (hereinafter UCE)<sup>26</sup> in service of popular education democratising society by democratising education<sup>27</sup>. The purpose is to create schools «that empower people», «educate without constraining» and where the «natural impulse to learn that is alive in each child» is not smothered. The ambition was to establish for the whole of the public sector a curriculum ensuring educational continuity starting first at the primary level and then moving on to the secondary level and the upper secondary level. A provocative pun led to the expression «Freinet chimeys», which was then used to outline the continuity grounded mainly in cooperation. *What do we want?*<sup>28</sup> explains this clearly:

A school that practises, in an on-going way from kindergarten to primary level [children aged from 4 to 12], a teaching that is aligned with life and provided by stable and independent teaching teams set up in each neighbourhood. Children, parents, teachers are intimately connected in a shared educational purpose. We want education to be a shared effort: a children-parent-teacher cooperation inspired by life and children's need, and their natural appetite for knowledge and action (p. 1).

These documents are directly sourced from the protests and demands of the popular movements whose theories were spilling over the borders. In Geneva, the GGEM co-opted them and translated them into general principles that were then applied to pedagogical principles and methods.

The popular culture that the UCEs serve aims to create and enhance a sense of responsibility and democracy in order to promote participatory management and even a community-based management of society. We want to democratise education by modifying the teacher-student relationship so that children can escape the dilemma of dominant-dominated relationships. Popular education therefore opposes authoritarianism in all its aspects as it also does with laissez-faire attitudes, both being anti-educational. [...] The main purpose of a popular education is to acquire the knowledge that will enable students to effectively take responsibility for and within society (p. 1).

These principles bear witness to the social political framework that hosts these cooperatives: teachers, children, parents and local communities are united in the

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<sup>26</sup> Cooperative Teaching Units. The acronym UCE corresponding to the French *Unités coopératives d'enseignement* is well-spread in the French-speaking region of Switzerland. For clarity sake, we will hereinafter be using the more familiar UCE acronym.

<sup>27</sup> This notion has been conceptualized, on the basis of a large documentation, by Braster, Simon & Grosvenor (2011). The Genevans defend this expression also in order to highlight the sociopolitical dimension of their project.

<sup>28</sup> AIJRR AGATHA 2012/1/E.

fight, meant to be community-based and emancipatory. Parent participation is supposed to enable shared understanding in order for «education to be integrated into Life and Life into education». And Piaget (1972)<sup>29</sup> is invoked to validate this assumption:

In bringing the school closer to the life or the professional concerns of the parents and by giving the parents an interest in school affairs, a certain division of responsibilities is reached. In some countries parents' and teachers' associations together constitute the true source of inspiration for the new pedagogy, and in this way they carry out the hoped-for synthesis between the family and the school (*What do we want?* p. 1).

The methods chosen reflected those supported by the international associations of modern school and the Freinet movements.

In the classroom the child talks to the teacher and his classmates about the events of his daily life, the other classmates, classroom management, current issues: he talks, reports, debates, converses, records topics that interest him. They write open texts, they create a classroom journal, and they keep a correspondence (p. 1).

This pedagogy «inspired by the facts of life and children's needs, their natural appetite for knowledge and action» (p. 1) is considered appropriate for providing children with the skills needed for learning school subjects, languages and awareness matters (ecology, history, geography, sciences) that support artistic and bodily expression and enhance the logical cognitive development. Based on an annual programme, the child organised his weekly and daily schedule, which he would then work with in small groups, individually or in large groups. A flexible organisation of activities and workshops was supposed to help him live and work at his pace: by being active, interested and happy, he could become independent and responsible.

#### **4. A Piagetian seal of approval and Freinet's «brilliant insights»**

The brief presentation of the GGEM's manifest shows how much their programme was grounded in the works and practises of the Freinet couple (Elise Freinet acknowledged it and supported them<sup>30</sup>, and movements that were advocating them in the 1970s.

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<sup>29</sup> It is a reprint of Piaget (1948), *The right to education in today's world*, published by UNESCO (reprinted 1972/1988, p. 74), where Piaget also sits (see also Robert, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Élise Freinet to GGEM members, July 2, 1968. Archives O. Coste. Reproduced in Hofstetter, Vellas, Barras, 1976, p. 19.

#### 4.1. *Validating figures and rhetorical discourse*

Not once in the *Fundamental documents* is Freinet's name mentioned whilst, at the same time, strong partnerships with other educational organisations are declared. Also the Chart for Modern Schools and references to it are not excluded. References to the Geneva forerunners of Active Education and the first pioneers of New Education, such as Bovet, Claparède, Dottrens, and Ferrière are elusive. Only Piaget (1972)<sup>31</sup> and his work are mentioned for affirming the added value of «active methods»:

Moreover, do the so-called active methods, which are alone capable of developing the intellectual personality, necessarily require a collective milieu that is the molding element of the ethical personality as well as the source of organized intellectual exchanges? No real intellectual activity could be carried on in the form of experimental actions and spontaneous investigations without free collaboration among individuals—that is to say, among the students themselves, and not only between the teacher and the student. Using the intelligence assumes not only continual mutual stimulation, but also and more importantly mutual control and exercise of the critical spirit, which alone can lead the individual to objectivity and to a need for conclusive evidence (*What do we want?* p. 2).

How should we appreciate the twists and turns within the commemorative narratives? In order to grasp the rhetorical discourse and the theoretical frameworks aiming to validate a pedagogical enterprise of this size, we have compared different sources and put them back into their context. We infer that the authors of these *Fundamental documents* written for a large audience – families, authorities, and colleagues – decided to meticulously describe their programme based on what made sense for them specifically in their classroom: the methods were tested by their «comrades», also affiliated to the French and international modern school movements (Freinet) who were strong references due to their driving forces and recognition. Only when they need to academically defend their programme, do they refer to the theoretical works of leading educators in Geneva and on the international stage, in particular Piaget whose audience in Geneva and international circles is unique. The teachers also invoked Piaget in order to validate the originality of their programme, giving it a Geneva seal of which they claimed to be of. The order of one of the mentors of the GGEM is clear on this and was met: the project will only be sustainable if it is firmly backed up theoretically, inviting everyone to read and re-read Piaget.

#### 4.2. *Translating the psycho-educational theories into an innovative programme*

When came the time to sum up, the leaders of the GGEM discreetly mentioned other references in texts that historicise their endeavour. An article written for their

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<sup>31</sup> Page 90 of the 1988 reprint [1st edition 1948], to which we refer (see also Robert, 1973).

comrades of the French and international modern school movements (Freinet) relies heavily on the *Fundamental documents* of the GGEM for providing further background and theoretical foundations to the programme in order to enhance and support its originality.

Our programme is the result of prolonged discussions, solid links between teachers at primary level and in kindergartens, regular exchanges about techniques, attitudes and outcomes. It is part of the educational renewal that we have all been following: Freinet, Montessori, Ferrière, the Geneva school of educational psychology, etc. [...]

Intrigued by the continual relationships between Freinet and the big Geneva names, Claparède, Ferrière, Piaget, struck by the similarities of expressions between the practitioner and the scientists, we decided to take a deeper look at this. We can assert that the scientific foundations of the Freinet's brilliant educational insights can be found in the constructivist perspectives of Piaget (*L'Éducateur, Revue de l'ICEM*, January 10, 1978, p. 26).

This is followed by an extensive development of Piaget's theories leading to a conclusion that instates them as researchers: «Our researches in the classroom have led us to use the educational methods that stem from scientific conclusions». By linking «Freinet's trial and error approach, the right to make mistakes, Piaget's approximating, balancing and interacting, the concrete manipulations in active education» the article claims that «the long and patient researches on the psycho-educational basis of teaching are the foundations of "Our purposes"» (p. 26). Aware that the critique of traditional education is banal and somewhat obsolete, the leaders of the GGEM claimed that their originality lies in having translated these psycho-educational issues into a programme that they declare is «unprecedented» (p. 27): a teaching team set up as a cooperative (children-parents-teachers) focussing on pedagogical continuity over several years (8 years) and all this within the public sector of education.

Nevertheless, in the background, we notice their efforts in trying to reduce the gap between opinions held on one side by Freinet and on the other by Piaget, and mainly of their respective followers. It is when they had to take position on these different «schools» and define the specifics of their own programme (learning outcomes, assessment, teaching subjects, educational purposes, etc.) that the core group of the GGEM referred to a wider range of figures and works amongst which the «famous pioneers» of New Education in Geneva. They even claimed to be their legitimate descendants entitled, as educators of the people, to implement the big principles of their forerunners in the public sector of education. In other words, they boasted that they did not need to set themselves apart from their illustrious predecessors to turn «intentions into action» (p. 27).

The most astonishing aspect at this point is the wide variety of references invoked without this hybridity being truly questioned. The main focus was the relevance of the principles of the general programme, its argumentative authority, its inspirational power, and its potential for action. Any reference likely to contribute

to this was therefore welcome<sup>32</sup>, of course scrutinised by the mentors of the group in order to extract the most meaningful quotes that were jotted down on loose sheets of paper then used as links and sustenance for their debates. It is noteworthy that although they advocated for popular culture, and they detested theoretical jargon and condemned the ivory towers of academia, several of these teachers were diligent readers, commentators and letter writers, that never ceased to comment the world current events, to ensure that they were well informed and to educate themselves. Many of them met just as much on the streets, in associative circles, as on the benches of university to widen their perspectives. The links between teachers and academics were extremely strong.

Indeed, in Geneva, since the interwar period, the theoretical education of primary school teachers was delivered by the Rousseau Institute/The School of educational sciences (Piaget was co-director from 1932 to 1971). It is here that several pioneers of the GGEM, its enlightened avant-garde, defined the theoretical principles of their programme.

#### *4.3. A Faculty responding to the pulse of the world, the legacy of the Rousseau Institute*

The Institute of educational sciences (the former Rousseau Institute) vibrated to the events of 1968 and a planetary awareness emerged from within this specific microcosm that had always been a resonance chamber for reformist educational internationalism. From there on it was in self-managed general assemblies that daily life matters and the future of the Institute were debated. Amongst the students, there were several (future) teachers standing close on the cobbles with their university professors striking and demonstrating, demanding more resources and recognition, as they intertwined social, economical, educational and political issues.

An avalanche of proposals, negotiations, resignations followed by a series of appointments and restructuring led, not without difficulty, to the transformation of the Institute into the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (1974-1975) (Hofstetter, Ratcliff & Schneuwly, 2012, pp. 78-101). Reconfiguration first started under the aegis of Piaget at the summit of his empire; his aura and level-headedness supported academic growth, much more than the rebellion. Piaget was supported and then later relayed by an enthusiastic young American, a UNESCO and OECD expert at the time, Michael Huberman, who was encouraged by his colleagues and authorities to try out innovative research methods and training programmes (action research, participatory forums, group dynamics, field work) a way of valuing contents related to social and political current events: literacy training, continuous education, awareness of women's, anti-globalization and anti-colonialist movements, alternative, cooperative and self-managed pedagogies.

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<sup>32</sup> Interpretations of rapports on the relationship between theories and practises evolve significantly according to the context in which they were written (their date, purpose, intentions, the signatories, and recipients) enabling to establish connections with other regions (i.e. De Coster, Simon, Depaepe, 2009; Pintassilgo & Raquel, 2014).

Attracting students from around the world as well as meeting the new needs for qualifications of educators, the student audience of the institution exploded (going from 200 to 2000 in less than a decade). On the same level as the faculties of Arts and Humanities, Science and Medicine, the new Faculty believed that it could play in the big league, noting at the same time its deep connection with the lively spirits of Social Sciences. Growth and convergence enabled the members of the institution to become aware of their power.

In this new Faculty professors and students – some of them candidate teachers, as well as being tenors of the GGEM – started to address social and political issues in order to discuss pedagogy. They were advocating for reforms so that the university and the active schools could vibrate to the pulse of the surrounding reality. As a matter of fact there is no professor nor lecturer whose names is not mentioned in the activist and insurrectional excitement of those days (1968-1978). Here is some evidence. The president of the institution, Huberman, opened up an active school in 1972-1973 with Adolphe Ferrière's son, a patron and committed member of the GAR and key interlocutor of the GGEM with whom he shared his reformist passion<sup>33</sup>. The success of the experiment led to extending the experience of an active school at the secondary level with the *Unités d'enseignement secondaire* [Secondary teaching units] and the *Mutuelle d'enseignement supérieur* [Mutual company of higher education] – all initiatives supported by the professors of the Faculty -, units that rejected the very principle of school and classrooms, of programmes and assessment in order to stamp out power relationships and selection, and to provide a nurturing space for emancipatory popular culture (Poussière, 1984)<sup>34</sup>.

More unknown aspects of these scholars were then revealed. Many of them acquired an international status for their originality, their thoroughness and the breadth of their scientific outputs. Cross-readings of works of that period (including both students and professors) show that behind a seemingly disorganised wrath, there was consistency and determination. Although the references are heterogeneous, the written pieces of work were remarkable in the sharpness of their analyses and the mastery of various theoretical threads that were nurturing alternative movements at the time. Robert and Garnier (2015) established theoretical teaching critique by scrutinising various «discursive proposals» – who in fact were educational and political – through «the sieve of the discriminating reason» (p. 12), whilst teachers and academics emerged as the rightful protagonists to voice the cause.

When came the time to seek approval from the authorities, they found their most legitimate allies in the academics with whom the leaders of the GGEM shaped and tested their arguments. The expertise and the informed recommendations of Huberman, Piaget, Samuel Roller were particularly appreciated by all concerned.

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<sup>33</sup> AIJJR. Fonds EAM École Active de Malagnou; Fondem Fondation Robert Hacco pour une éducation moderne.

<sup>34</sup> See also their archives: AIJJR. Fonds Unité d'Enseignement Secondaire.

## 5. Conquering the official stamp for the «subversive project» of teaching cooperatives

Support became crucial for seeking official approval of the programme despite the fact that the activists condemned the official system and the established power, ascertaining themselves as emancipators of demonised «traditional education».

### 5.1. Support from the trade unions and defenders of public services

Having conquered the parents (*Mouvement populaire des familles*<sup>35</sup>, *Groupement genevois des associations de parents*<sup>36</sup>), the GGEM connected to the unions of public services and various professional associations. Swiss French-speaking and Geneva pedagogical societies had been advocating for active and innovative pedagogies for a long time as attested in the resolutions of their congresses during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Durand, Hofstetter & Pasquier, 2015). The spokesmen of the GGEM first obtained a straphanger and then a seat so that they could take part in the negotiations with the representatives of the Parliament. With this support, the petition they launched together collected, in two-stages (1973, 1975), more than 2000 signatures in favour of the UCEs. The political authorities had their backs against the wall. They could no longer by-pass the demands emerging from the people. Not only was the freedom of speech requested but also that the clockworks of direct democracy should be respected<sup>37</sup>. The left-wing parties and a fringe of the right-wing parties started to listen carefully to the project since the Head of the Department of Public Education was a socialist. André Chavanne, since taking office in 1961, stood out for a sequence of democratic reforms at the origin of his popularity (Berthoud, 2006; Nicole, 1991).

The cause even inspired the network of private education eager to shift the educational system at its core, i.e. public education. A manifest explaining parent's withdrawal from the active school (initiated by Huberman) bears witness to this: «The active school plays into the hands of the dominant class», the private sector suggested, since the teachers belonging to the bourgeoisie would inevitably spread to the children the ideology of the dominant class. Referring to Freinet, the parents demanded a school for the people and not a school for the elite disconnected from the social context. They insisted that it is through addressing injustices, each time they show up, that actions can be taken so that public education ceases to produce «compliant and docile beings» and becomes a liberating experience. And then they concluded, «What is the purpose of a life other than to contribute to the growth of a better, more fair and free humanity (rather than the building of a bungalow!)»<sup>38</sup>. Cohesion with the GGEM was thereby reinforced<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> People's movement for families.

<sup>36</sup> Geneva grouping of parental associations.

<sup>37</sup> Société pédagogique genevoise, Resolution of 4 February 1975. AIJJR AGATHA 2012/1/E (which brings together documentation developed by GGEM and the union). See also: *Nous*, N°1, pp. 6-9; Hofstetter, Vellas, Barras, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> AIJJR, AGATHA 2012, GGEM, 1/E/12, May 1974.

<sup>39</sup> AIJJR EAM.



Thanks to the momentum of the Swiss French-speaking congress of primary school teachers in November 1974 (the theme being «New perspectives for Education»), the GGEM gained the precious support of the *Société Pédagogique Genevoise*<sup>40</sup> (SPG), whose concerns were basically convergent. In a general assembly in February 1975 the members of this Union endorsed the project and adopted two resolutions forwarded to the State Council (the executive power of the Republic and Canton of Geneva) requesting, on one hand, the implementation of innovative curricula and, on the other hand, the creation of teaching teams (SPG, Resolution of 4<sup>th</sup> February 1975). From then on the UCE<sup>41</sup> project was a central piece of all the negotiations the unions had with political authorities.

## 5.2. *The patronage of the executive power, claiming the Geneva School*

Support was important, influential and determined; alongside, the resistances did not lose any of their forcefulness and pugnacity. The most glaring came from the Director of Primary Education who claimed that the movement was more ideological than educational since its advocates were proposing to transform society. The Director even publically voiced his concerns, in March 1975, in front of the cantonal gathering of parent's associations and was unfavourable to the project. The GGEM immediately responded by lobbying the political parties and talking to the parliamentarian Commission for Education. The project unfolded in a surprisingly creative way after having gone through an amazing number of hands all eager to support or to oppose the proposal<sup>42</sup>.

The Parliament discussed the proposal in May 1975 at the request of a conservative member who chastised the social political motives and was concerned about the quality of teacher training and supervision. He wondered if parents, whose passionate reactions were feared, had access to the right information and, most of all, if the learning outcomes of children in the so-called Freinet classes were up to standards since the official curriculum was not scrupulously followed. These concerns fuelled all prior and future resistances regarding the methods as well as suspicions concerning the promoters, those «Freinetist revolutionaries» (*Mémorial du Grand Conseil de Genève*<sup>43</sup> [hereinafter *MGC*], 1975, pp. 1562-1567). The Labour Party immediately riposted interceding in favour of the creations of the UCEs and the teaching teams (p. 2405).

At this point the Head of the Department of Public Education, André Chavanne, officially came on stage to address the double inquiry. After investigating the case and consulting with experts (namely Huberman, Piaget and Roller), the socialist strongly supported the GGEM's proposals and accepted the prospects. He gave tribute to the emanation of Geneva education linked according to him to the prestigious figures

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<sup>40</sup> Geneva Pedagogical Society.

<sup>41</sup> For specific aspects related to the history of the UCEs, see Hofstetter, Vellas & Barras (1996). It is also in the context of the preparation of this three-part publication that we carried out the first groupings and compilation of archives and interviews that led to the drafting of this article.

<sup>42</sup> See in particular AIJUR AGATHA 2012/1/E/1, 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Geneva Grand Council Memorial*.

and contributions to New Education (Claparède, Bovet, Ferrière, Dottrens, Piaget) the lineage of the teachers. Chavanne added that active pedagogies yield promising results and did not seem to threaten the children who were benefitting from the learning outcomes. The Head of Department was also sensitive to the arguments in favour of the UCEs provided by Ueberschlag, the French inspector who was at the head of 350 primary classes in Paris as well as being the president of the FIMEM (to which the GGEM belongs) (MGC, 1975, pp. 2345-2351).

The subversive dimension of the project, so often castigated by its detractors, was subtly disarmed. In an intervention during the Spring 1975, the left-wing party, inspired by educational experiences elsewhere and in the private sector, demonstrated that the innovation was in no way revolutionary since it did not imply overthrowing democratic institutions but more was likely to lead to reinforcing them. Democracy requires independent and enlightened citizens, used to taking part in defining the ruling institutions and the laws, and these were the goals of the teachers of the GGEM.

The debate finally led to appointing a committee for the UCE project in charge of a feasibility study. It brought together representatives of educational authorities, the University, the Union and the GGEM. Their conclusions (March 1976) were clear: an experimental UCE would be launched the following autumn and further teaching teams would be created on the same basis.

## **6. Geneva Schools, experimenting with democratic public education**

In the 1970s, the wind of reform was blowing over all Geneva educational institutions enabling the implementation and expansion of pedagogical cooperatives within the sector of public education.

### *6.1. Special licences for the first cooperative unit, a stormy journey*

A suburb commune, Onex, was chosen, one of the first of the satellite cities in French-speaking Switzerland where the ethnical population had exploded. Onex-Bosson school hosted the UCE: several GGEM teachers were already working there and new positions were opened to take in others. Also the size of the school made it possible to have side by side a cooperative programme and a «traditional» programme. The parent's association were in favour of it, so as several members of the municipal council. The teachers obtained special licences: co-optation and self-management of the team, parents associated with the innovation and the cooperative management of the classroom, relaxation of rules about repeating a year and abolition of grades, free choice of pedagogical methods all enabling to redefine the space, the choice of furniture and school supplies. However, the teachers failed to select themselves their inspector and were expected to follow the French-speaking Swiss curriculum and to prepare the pupils for their admission into the orientation level of secondary school. End of August 1976, the UCE opened up as an experiment, supervised by a committee of experts. Six teachers welcomed 140 children into this first «Freinet chimney» (Hofstetter, Vellas, Barras, 1996, pp. 27ss).

The first steps were very lively and turbulent! From the beginning, a cluster of parents who unknowingly suddenly found that their children had been enrolled in a UCE class rebelled. A major adjustment was necessary that would then become a key feature of the UCE. Parents from the commune could choose between the two programmes, the traditional programme and the UCE programme. Slowly, new pupils took the remaining places, children who were coming not only from the whole circumscription but also from all over the Canton since several families in favour of the pedagogy claimed their rights to benefit from it.

Abolition of grades in the UCE, one of the major special licences of the project, required a huge amount of work in deciding the best and most relevant way of assessing the children. The curriculum was painstakingly transposed into learning outcomes and their achievement appreciated through formative assessment. The teaching team, supported by several parents, had to wage a struggle on several levels and its commitment was twofold, political and educational. The enthusiasm of this small community embodying and carrying out change was often challenged all throughout the experimental phase. Nonetheless it was fruitful. The experimentation was successful and in 1977 it was prolonged and two classes were added on for older children.

## 6.2. *A canvass of teaching teams in Geneva*

Despite the successes resistances remained tenacious and required many precautions. Granting other teaching teams with the same special licences was seen as well beyond the field of what was imaginable. Therefore, representatives of the Union and of the GGEM provided themselves with the rhetorical, theoretical and statistical tools needed to support another cause. Waiving aside the special licences, these astute tacticians made use of the plethora of teachers to demand a reduction of the number of pupils per class and the appointment of supplementary teachers who would be available to the teachers in the canton who wanted to be part of a teaching team. The authorities accepted, convinced by the GGEM's proposal thereby also avoiding contentious redundancies. As from 1977, new teaching teams were set up all over the canton and the supplementary teacher became the brand of the Geneva teaching teams. This additional teacher facilitated cooperative management of the team, differentiation and diversity of teaching and learning practises and supported wide breadth programmes extending beyond the walls of the schools. He stood out as the emblem of a successful alternative pedagogy within the public sector of education, acknowledged since financed by the authorities. In 1977, nine teams were recognised and the following year eleven (the UCE included, representing thirty teachers and 600 pupils each year). The teaching teams then took initiatives for promoting their work and bringing to the awareness of the public the outcomes of such alternative solutions, the basis of a democratic popular culture. In 1986 there were 37 teaching teams bringing together 200 teachers and more the 3000 children!

The spirit of reforms was also blowing over secondary education where cooperative teaching teams were created whose mottos echoed those of the GGEM and the UCE: «learning to learn», «departmentalising subject matters and promoting multidisciplinary», «opening up classrooms to real life», «associative management

of schools». This reinforced and expanded the «Freinet chimneys» alleviating parent's anxieties about their children's future schooling and admission into the higher levels of compulsory education.

Did this mean that the spirit of active schools was about to gain respectability and credibility? Many people believed so, and even imagined turning the private Active School into an experimental research laboratory for the University. Referring to the Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and socialist models, whilst claiming to be pioneers of the Rousseau Institute, the advantages on both sides were meticulously documented by Huberman who is no less than the coordinator of the Active School and the President of the Department of Educational Sciences at the University: longitudinal researches and experimental manipulation in the «naturalistic conditions»; rapid spread of active methods; expansion and worldwide dissemination of relevant theoretical frameworks; recognition, dissemination and formalisation of the Active School that could then become free of charge. With all this, it could then become both a laboratory and a relay.<sup>44</sup> The strong convictions of the President of Educational Sciences and the representatives of the Active School would not overcome the reluctance and resistances. Within, people were concerned that the formalisation would curb the alternative spirit. Without, people wanted to dampen the innovations and vindications of the reformist movement seen as revolutionary. There were also fears that public education would become the «testing ground of theoreticians», «turning the pupils into guinea-pigs»<sup>45</sup>.

Although the project was inspiring many, other issues became priorities as the whole of the Geneva educational system was facing important challenges. On-going debates in the Parliament seem to confirm this. Surprisingly, many voices advocated for the reforms the GAR and the GGEM had elaborated over the past ten years. The purpose of public education was under scrutiny.

### 6.3. *From repression to democratisation*

Spring 1970, the conservative party put forward a governmental motion requesting an inquiry to verify if the teaching staff of Geneva was respecting the goals of public education (article 4 of the law of 1940<sup>46</sup>). The propose was to punish acts and teachers suspected of breaking the principle of neutrality of public education and the code of ethics of the state employees (loyalty). Relating to the issues covered in this article<sup>47</sup>, the conservative parliamentarian representatives were concerned by the «continual agitation» (*Mémorial du Grand Conseil de Genève [MGC]*, 1970, p. 3123) that prevailed in schools and blamed the politicisation (films,

<sup>44</sup> Huberman, Active School Attachment to the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, March 7, 1977. AIJRR EAM/C/8 - Attachment to the University.

<sup>45</sup> AIJRR EAM/C/8 - Attachment to the University. Interviews conducted between 2015 and 2016 by B. Haenggeli-Jenni and E. Gobet with promoters of the institution (J.-C. Brès, A. Ferrière, L. Huberman), complete this documentation.

<sup>46</sup> «The purpose of public education is to a) prepare young people for useful employment and service to their country, b) to cultivate their love for their country and respect for its institutions».

<sup>47</sup> For more on these issues, see Berthoud (2016) and Magnin (1997).

tracts, debates on social political events elsewhere). It was clearly an attack against the innovations carried out by left-wing teachers, reviving the «68 spirit», and the Head of the Department of Public Education himself as a socialist. The motion was strongly contested and debates were extremely lively, nonetheless it was accepted. The inquiry took place listing the incriminating facts. The report of the State Council rejected any intention of politicising education and confirmed its absolute faith in the teaching staff, thereby ascertaining that the rare excesses had been contained and sanctioned (MGC, 1971, pp. 1557-1563).

Through a cunning tour de force the executive seized the opportunity to ask that the patriotic and policed goals of article 4 be revised, the belligerent and suspicious context in which it had been drafted (World War 2) no longer being relevant. Education should «prepare to analyze the rights and duties of the citizen». Most certainly, but in order to be able to assume these responsibilities. The pupils will henceforth be associated, informed and invited to express themselves (MGC, 1971, pp. 1557-1573).

It took six years to come up with an agreement on the new purposes of public education. This took place precisely when the reformist movements were amplifying, honing their arguments thereby reinforcing the GGEM and its alliance with the Union. If the events related to 1968 had faded out on the streets the spirit which drove them had changed the mind-sets. This was certainly the case for alternative pedagogies. Let's have a look at what happened in the Geneva Parliament.

The 30<sup>th</sup> of May 1975, two socialists (Cristin and Longet) presented the *Projet de loi modifiant la loi sur l'instruction publique*<sup>48</sup> whose purposes (article 4) were to develop the children's personalities, their creativity, and to enable young people to address the new issues of an ever-evolving society with critical skills, to make them more independent and aware of their responsibilities, encouraging also family participation. Here were, very clearly resembling, the principles defended by the alternative movements, the GGEM and the unions, principles that had been officially and successfully put to test in their schools. As a matter of fact the authors of this bill were both deeply involved in these networks. And for a good reason! The feverish pen of the rapporteur (Longet) was the same that, in 1968 already, was signing the manifests of the GAR (*Antidote, École lutte de classe*) and Cristin was one of the most active members of the parents' association of the UCE at the Onex-Bosson School, the first innovative school implemented by the GGEM.

The report accompanying this bill (1975) provoked a shock wave in the ranks of some parliamentarians, but all agreed that education needed to take into consideration society's evolution. Most parliamentarians considered it of utmost importance to develop children's personalities, their creativity and their sense of responsibilities. More appeased, the debates that carried on for two years confirmed these convergences, and all the parent teacher associations consulted endorsed it (MGC, 1975, pp. 1625-1640). Researchers in educational sciences were also heard and in particular the directors of the Sociological Research Service and of the Department of Educational Sciences<sup>49</sup>. Another turn of events then occurred:

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<sup>48</sup> The bill modifying the law on Public Education.

<sup>49</sup> Both involved in these reforms and/or their monitoring whilst conceptualising them in their

at the last minute, with statistics to back it up, the experts managed to allocate the goal of promoting democratisation of education by «reducing inequalities in students' academic results» to public education.

The intention of policing reactionary voices of the 1970s therefore led to set in stone the principle that Geneva public education was a living laboratory for democratic education. Supporting the desire to learn, creativity, solidarity and cooperation, the main purpose became to prepare everybody to take part in the social, cultural, civil, political and economical life of the country by strengthening accountability, discernment and independence of judgement.

The new law on public education can be seen as the recognition, on a larger scale, of the «political» project of the alternative movements amongst which the emancipatory educational programme of the GGEM.

#### 6.4. Coda. «Ordinary» people seizing the opportunity of an «extraordinary» event to endorse an original alternative

As in other cases, the legislation supported evolutions by endorsing them, thereby enabling them to potentially grow. Nonetheless the social economical context also ferociously imprinted events when the recessions of the 80s and 90s impacted Geneva and education. As from 1991, public education was subjected to an austere reassessment of investments. Once again, it was time for manifestations and negotiations. The teachers and the GGEM protested against cuts in public finances (Hofstetter, Vellas, Barras, 1996).

Powerless, everyone watched the teaching teams gradually disappear in particular when the supplementary teachers who symbolised and guaranteed their existence were abolished. Several teams lost their momentum after being constantly challenged and contradicted; they became more and more marginalised as they challenged the demonization of the existing structure, and failed to step out of a critical attitude and to cooperate with partners holding more nuanced and consensual opinions. Part of these activists, disillusioned, gradually relented as the myth of cooperation and self-management was disfigured, and they became aware of the weaknesses of their endeavour, which if it was to continue needed adjustments so that it could land harmoniously in the existing ecosystem. But may it be that the loss of momentum was also due to the fact that their assumptions and «innovative» practices watered down as they spread? Ambivalent, even oppositional reactions of the teachers bear witness to this when they discovered the reform programme of the Department of Public Education. As from 1994<sup>50</sup>, the Geneva educational authorities supported the cause of the Active School programme and socio-constructivism, promoting school projects and team teaching, and at the same time abolishing grades at the level of primary education.

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lectures and publications (for instance, Harmeïn, Hutmacher & Perrenoud, 1979)

<sup>50</sup> See Archives of the Department of Public Education, Geneva: all the documents prepared by the Groupe de Pilotage de la Rénovation, echoed in the *Journal de l'enseignement primaire*; Brunschwig Graf (2000, 2001). For a retrospective analysis of this Renovation, see Gather Thurler (2000).

Unlike the bottom up initiatives we have been looking at in this article, the ambitious ministerial reform projects were never fully implemented. Taking advantage of the instruments of direct democracy, a group of opponents to the reforms managed to enforce school grades through a referendum. The people's vote of September 2006 put a stop to the reform programme initiated from above. Geneva public education would no longer be the living laboratory of active education. The legislation ensuring some of the core principles (in particular article 4 related to the goals and purposes of public education in the 1977 law) nevertheless preserved its spirit.

The teaching teams we have been inquiring into might have been short-lived. Nonetheless the wrath and utopias that crafted them and the energies invested are those of a whole society in transformation, and the resonances and repercussions went well beyond. The «ordinary» people who emerged as the protagonists of the events shaping them were following the compass of the fiery and explosive revolutions worldwide (Bantigny, 2018; Kornetis, 2009; Payà Rico & al, 2018). They clearly used them in order to implement their programme at their level and in their workplaces. They acknowledged their sources of inspiration as being the educational experiences tested out elsewhere (in particular the Freinet movements) whilst, at the same time, declaring the originality of their approach.

Analysing the dynamics (Deluermoz & Gobbille, 2015) of this alternative approach provides evidence that they occurred in a specific configuration which they would then take advantage of in order to stand out as the legitimate interlocutors and implement «their design». By claiming their direct lineage with the pioneers of Geneva, the capital of New Education, their promoters managed to secure Piaget's endorsement as well as the Institute Rousseau, in the meanwhile having become a Faculty – a rallying point for reformist and constructivist – and secured the support of unions and politicians for implementing the «Freinet chimneys». Indeed, the grounding of this «subversive» project is «unprecedented» in this form, in those times, in that context, within public education, with the approval of political authorities and academics, of whom Piaget. Nonetheless what made them possible were the resonances and the appropriations of emancipatory aspirations, the inspirational rebellions, the inter-union solidarity, the trans-generational alliances, the social political worldwide revolutions implemented on a large scale elsewhere (Bantigny, 2018).

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EAM École Active de Malagnou.

Fondem Fondation Robert Hacco pour une éducation moderne.

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## **12. Acronyms**

FIMEM. Fédération Internationale des Mouvements de l'École Moderne [International Federation of the Movements for Modern Schools]

GGEM . Groupe Genevois d'École Moderne [Geneva Group for Modern Schools]

GREM . Groupe Romand d'École Moderne [French-speaking Switzerland Group of Modern Schools]

ICEM. Institut Coopératif de l'École Moderne [Cooperative Institute of the Modern School]

UCE. Unités coopératives d'enseignement [Cooperative Teaching Units]

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