

Check against delivery

## Importance of the "Eiger Climate Schools" project

*Bernhard Pulver*

*Canton of Berne Councillor and Education Director, Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Education representative, Berne*

This evening we find ourselves at the foot of a place steeped in legend, which has ever held an iconic place in our Bernese, Swiss and international consciousness. Wherever you find yourself in the canton of Berne – on the hills above Bienne, in the Bernese Jura, in Berne, on the hills of the Emmental or on Frienisberg – you can see the three peaks of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau. And even it's misty; you always know they're there.

Basically speaking, we have a twofold relationship with them.

Their rock-solid presence gives us a sense of security. They represent an unmistakable point of reference which more or less indirectly influences the way we view the world around us. Thanks to the trio of peaks, we think of ourselves as alpine experts whenever we are able to recite the names of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau to visitors in the right order (things get a little trickier when we try to name other mountains ... though usually we manage to remember the Finsteraarhorn). And visitors, who are in any case fascinated by the legendary North Face of the Eiger, admire us for our instant recall.

But the mountains are also a source of concern, particularly the North Face on which so many mountaineers have lost their lives and whose achievements and tragedies visitors can follow in real time from Kleine Scheidegg: the North Face which can also be visited by tourists or rail passengers on the way up to the Jungfrauoch if you decide to stop off at a dizzying altitude.

An enduring and awe-inspiring yet eternal point of reference.

Yet recently people have begun to question just how stable and solid the three mountains are. The Bernese Oberland's most famous three peaks are losing their permanence and glamour; the trio is beginning to crumble like the most commonplace object in our day-to-day lives. The three mountains are crumbling away, losing their aura and showing a weather-beaten face; but they also trigger in us other types of anxieties. A mountaineer decides to take a conscious risk when climbing the North Face of the Eiger. The risk of crumbling away is different: People are at its mercy. And faced with the incredible dimensions of the reality – the formation of an enormous lake following a rock fall that even threatened unwitting Interlaken – we very quickly gain a feeling of impotence. People feel they are at the mercy of a rare, evil, bold, blind and unpredictable power. It's like the beginnings of the human race, when the first humans were at the mercy of dangers and risks which civilisation gradually conquered. It's akin to how prehistoric man must have felt.

The situation throws up lots of questions. We ask ourselves whether we are capable of tackling such a challenge, whether we can understand the underlying causes, whether we are condemned to stand by powerless to stop natural disasters unfolding.

I belong to a generation that saw for itself the weaknesses and absurdities of exponential, aggressive growth increasingly revealed. A generation that gained more and more insight into the limits and vulnerability of our ecosystem. A generation that has laid the foundations of a movement that must be guided by sustainability benchmarks and that calls for a radical change in attitude and lifestyle if we want to continue believing in mankind and its abilities to create a humane and rational world.

For the past four years I have presided over the Education Office, and will do so for at least another four years. It was with a mixture of passion and curiosity, coupled of course with my own expectations, that I immersed myself in the world of education and culture. In the course of my activities, encounters and visits (like this one) over the past four years, I have deliberated long and hard on this key resource for the future. We must make sustainable development a cornerstone of education – a main subject that must be supported by a strong state school system that is committed to open information within its own organisation, with others and with the world at large. A state school system that gives students the chance, aside from any special interests, to build a genuine society based on information exchange, dialogue and acceptance. A humane school system that leads to consensus but that also permits differences of opinion. A state school system that also has room for mistakes, experiments and trials. A school system that endeavours to make students aware that school is first and foremost about them. A public school system that turns every class into a knowledge community, committed to discovering and understanding the world in the interests of a better life.

What will happen in the home of these three mighty mountains over the next few months is also part of this living school system. For a few months, small knowledge groups will endeavour to understand what is happening to the mountains. They will try to gain a critical awareness in order to question our civilisation's outdated, dangerous habits and pave the way for a change of conduct. It would be nice to be back at school to follow these paths and perform these tasks which have been so meticulously prepared with schoolchildren in mind. Naturally the two days you spend here will not be enough to banish all preconceived ideas. And needless to say, these two days will provide fertile ground for everyday classroom activities, provided they are spent studiously under the professional guidance of all teaching staff, irrespective of the canton in which they practice their profession.

To everyone who has made the "Eiger-Climate-Schools" project possible and to all those who are here to ensure that these two days will not be just a run-of-the-mill school trip, I'd like to express my warmest thanks for their commitment and enthusiasm.