

Meeting-points: Seeking consensus on essentials

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Social change, scientific development, the revolution of information technology, and growing pluralism confront the education system in a new way with the issue of curriculum making. In the federalist political system of Switzerland curriculum making starts in a situation characterized by the fact that the autonomous educational systems of the counties (*Cantons*) have developed their own curricular designs independently from each other. As a result co-ordination is lacking between the parts of the overall system.

The paper addresses the issue of curricular co-ordination in a highly fragmented educational system as it is in Switzerland. We first describe some features of the federalist educational system in this country. The second section deals with some general trends profoundly affecting curriculum making, i.e. the selection, ordering and sequencing of curriculum content. In the subsequent two sections the idea of *Meeting-points*, defined as essential elements of knowledge students should have acquired at different grades, is introduced and illustrated by the examples of history and politics. Meeting-points are conceived as an expression of a social consensus on essentials and as a common frame of reference for educational actors. The final section depicts a strategy eventually leading to the development of Meeting-points in the fragmented system of Swiss compulsory education.

1. Co-ordination of the curriculum in a federalist educational system

In the field of education Swiss counties have maintained a high degree of independence and autonomy up to the present time. Particularly at the compulsory school level they have safeguarded an essentially unlimited authority in educational matters – an authority they delegate, to varying degrees, to the communes. The national government is almost completely absent in this field. As a result of fragmentation we find a high degree of heterogeneity with respect to the development and implementation of curricula, syllabuses and textbooks. Each county periodically develops its curriculum and implements it within its borders (Bähr 1999: 8-15). This system of segmentary curriculum-making processes contributes to the affirmation and reinforcement of the county's particularities and results in a relatively high degree of heterogeneity with respect to curricula and syllabuses (Künzli 2002).

An educational system characterized by decentralization and particularism claims for harmonization and co-ordination. Given the absence of a federal regulation in most educational affairs, this task is assigned to the *Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (CCME)*. The CCME may be seen as an attempt to create a functional equivalent to central authority. Founded in 1897, the conference has significantly extended its activities since 1970 when a *Concordat on School Co-ordination*, some sort of a declaration of common intent, was agreed upon by the ministers. The Concordat firmly defines certain basic aspects of the public educational system, such as the school starting age, the duration of compulsory education, the time of schooling up to the school leaving examination at the end of higher secondary education (*Matura*). In addition, the CCME can issue to the counties, for their own independent school policy, recommendations – not binding for the county parliaments – concerning framework syllabuses, common teaching material, transfer

regulations, recognition of school leaving certificates, designation of school types and levels, and teachers education.

As mentioned above, one important provision of the Concordat aims at common principles for the content of teaching. But while structural co-ordination has proceeded in a certain way over the last three decades, the same cannot be said with regard to subject matter and content. Indeed, no national Swiss curriculum has been developed. Some co-ordination has been attained, to different degrees, in the four regional conferences of the CCME. The French-speaking, western, as well as the central counties have founded common research and development agencies, which develop syllabuses for the counties being parts of the region. In the northwestern and in the eastern regions, however, curriculum-development has remained an internal affair of each county. But even there, where there is co-operation, at the end the result is an independent county syllabus.

At the national level, in most recent years there have been some attempts to co-ordinate the curriculum for mathematics and foreign languages. This means that subject standards that should be met at given levels of compulsory schooling, so-called Meeting-points, were recommended to the cantonal actors. Harmonization could not be achieved in this way, however. It is obvious that the mechanisms of the CCME express a clear will of all counties to refer to common principles also in curricular matters. But in order to get practical significance such common principles need to become implemented independently by the cantons.

2. New challenges for the selection and co-ordination of subject matters and teaching contents

For many years, this state of affairs may have led to a waste of economic resources but did not create bigger problems as long as some implicit consensus on which topics should be selected for teaching in compulsory schools could be taken for granted. However, in recent years several developments in broader society as well as in the educational system itself have weakened this implicit consensus and accentuated the need to define some core of knowledge and competencies common to all students, and to co-ordinate its implementation.

One of the tendencies affecting the selection of contents of classroom teaching is the increased mobility of students and their families within and between countries. While movements between Swiss counties simply put the question of transfer regulations in the foreground, immigration of children with different cultural backgrounds may challenge a canon which developed in the context of European or at least western societies.

A second feature to be mentioned here is related to a general tendency towards pluralism and individualism. Concerning curriculum making these tendencies make the identification of a *core* and decisions about the selection and ordering of contents more difficult. The problem becomes further accentuated by shifts toward a student-centered approach to classroom teaching which leaves the young learners some self-direction with respect to the objects of their learning process.

Probably the most important change affecting syllabus work today is the shift in the paradigm of steering and controlling classroom teaching. For many decades political authorities stated general goals and contents of teaching, provided the necessary resources in terms of personnel, materials and rooms, and then left the educational process largely to the professional responsibility of teachers. Within this setting the curriculum played an important role as a frame of reference which oriented teachers' actions. Apparently, today this way of system-steering by controlling the inputs becomes outdated for several reasons.

To mention just one, a general tendency to emphasize students' achievements may be observed on a worldwide scale. International standardized achievement tests point to the fact that the outcomes of educational processes have become a major resource in international competition. Consequently, the focus of educational policies shifts from the control of inputs to attempts to directly control the output in terms of students' performance according to some pre-established 'standards'. Administrators of the educational system become more interested in the assessment of performances than in the equal distribution of a common culture. It is in this context that Meeting-points attempt to establish a balance between two legitimate but not necessarily congruent goals: enhancement of the educational performance of whole societies and the need to maintain common culture.

3. Steering by standards or steering by content?

Today the Swiss education systems have to propose answers in relation to both the steering of input and the steering of output in public education and instruction. On the one hand teachers call for binding guidelines and transparent orientation for the selection of content in lesson planning: Which content is essential for life-long learning? On the other hand the public discourse calls for quality control, evaluation of learning and standardized tests – that implies to define in advance the expected output. The goal of both forms of steering claim to improve the knowledge background and the competencies of young people, but under different assumptions.

Output steering deals mainly with competition. The high jumper probably jumps higher when he sets his eyes on the standard he wants to reach. However school is somehow different: Competition is attractive if a student is successful. But the situation gets critical for those who have no chance in reaching the standards. They lose interest and motivation in content and knowledge. In effect standards create two types of students: those who reach the standards and those who hardly reach them.

Exponents of input steering argue quite differently. In their understanding, the selection of content isn't primarily stimulated by achievement-oriented standards. Content itself – widely understood as *knowing how* and *knowing that* - could be considered as «standard», as teachers transform the standards in effective learning situations. In this case schools offers access to the same learning field for *all* students.

Of course schools perform in relation to input and output. Teaching aims to find a balance between today's need of students and tomorrow's social requirements.

In the German speaking part of Switzerland an attempt has been made to launch a project which aims at the development of an input-steering instrument, so-called Meeting-points. The project aims to contribute to the harmonization of the different cantonal administrations

Meeting-points are expected to describe the essential knowledge in each subject through which students should have passed when they complete grades 2, 6 and 9. Meeting-points are expected to express both a social consensus on essential knowledge and the state of the art of the disciplines. They define what compulsory school expects from students. Which experience is to be made by all students – despite their sex, nationality, social background or intelligence? Meeting-points describe content, information and knowledge to confront students with. They mark the field of knowledge in which students progress. They unlock an area of thinking which at the same time is vast and limited. Limited by the selection of content – vast in the way of dealing with content. Meeting-points mainly are not made to

evaluate the learning of students – but they might be a start point to build up evaluation procedures.

Consequently they offer, on one hand, a common frame of reference for educational actors (teachers, students and parents) and on the other, an instrument which sustains the search for higher literacy, equity, and academic performance by helping pupils to establish their knowledge base grade by grade. We assume that a curriculum like Meeting-points contributes also to harmonize the Swiss federalist school system.

4. For instance: Meeting-points for history and politics

In 2000 an German speaking working group of historians and subject experts has developed two documents with Meeting-points for history and Meeting-points for politics. The pilot project was launched and financed by one of the regional German-speaking conference of education ministers (NW EDK) in order to balance out the differences between the curricula of the cantons. The purpose was to develop a prototype of a Meeting-point, valid as example for a planned overall curriculum project of the German-speaking cantons – by that time a quite unusual– and in the mean time – no longer appropriate idea. Referring in this article nevertheless to Meeting-points emphasizes our conviction that this instrument is thought to be very convenient for regulation of input steering in a federal context.

The two Meeting-point-posters enclose six Meeting-points for history and three for politics. The colored background, the illustrations and the design attract the attention of observers. The target group are students: «You will learn how the world's goods could be divided fairly» is the quintessence of Meeting-point 5 in history about the European industrialization under the title «Does the world belong to the industrial nations?» In three short sections students find – written in clear language – summaries of the content and about what they will do and learn concerning the topic.

In the document, history is considered as an interesting and attractive subject, which makes possible that students understand historical changes and current situations. History is worthwhile to deal with – this is the main message of the poster!

As mentioned, a small working group has produced the mentioned Meeting-points for history and politics. The project didn't include any implementation of the product. It isn't surprising that probably only a small number of teachers are informed about the instrument. Moreover the Meeting-points are not official documents in any canton. They are informal instruments and that for without any steering effect.

To create an efficient regional steering instrument like Meeting-points means to seek wide-ranging consensus about the question of what is essential at school.

5. A model of making Meeting-points

An example how such consensus can be ascertained is given Donata Elschenbroich with her project that defines the «canon of world-knowledge of 7 years old children» (Elschenbroich, 2001). In a first step Elschenbroich made up a list what children should have experienced by the age of 7 years. In the second step she discussed the list with experts, teachers, parents and even children. Finally she describe the result of her inquiries and defines a second list.

A similar process was suggested by Rudolf Künzli (2000) for the development of Meeting-points: Starting point is an analysis of the content of subjects in different current curricula. As a result a group of school experts make a first selection of essentials in each subject and formulate a provisional list of Meeting-points. This list is evaluated, completed, shorted in a

first wide ranging Delphi-inquiry with teachers, politicians, pedagogues , parents and public. As a consequence the first list is revised and in a second inquiry evaluated by content experts and researchers. This result in a definite list of Meeting-points which must be implemented in all cantons.

Meeting-points have to satisfy demands at different levels. They must correspond to the state of the art. More over they have to be relevant for students. Teachers must be convinced that they are essential. Form the perspective of parents, meeting-points must give them at least an idea of that what is really important at school.

Current curricula of the cantons in Switzerland are very complex and vary enormously. They deal not only with content but also with guidelines, school types, didactics, cooperation with parents and school board and so on. Meeting-points focus only content. As the school structure differs from canton to canton it is obvious that in federalist Switzerland Meeting-points could probably be a helpful instrument for intercanton input steering.

«Society's concept of the function of public school determines the curriculum» Hilda Taba's basic conviction hasn't loose its value (1962:16ff). Looking at the Swiss curriculum situation with 26 different curricula we can ask: What might be the function of public school in relation to the national context for example? What do children and students learn by the fact, that the frame of public school is the canton and not the country? And what does such a federally organized curriculum net have to do with the growing gap between social groups? While standards underline the learning success of the single student and by that the selection meeting-points intend to highlight the essential knowledge and content for all students and by that the transmitting and change of culture.

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