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Hesitant Institutionalisation Of The Specialised School – A Hybrid Track Of Vocational And Academic Training On Upper Secondary Education In Switzerland

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Topic

The post-compulsory educational systems in countries like Germany, Switzerland and Austria have faced criticism regarding the educational schism between vocational and academic education (Baethge 2006). It hinders access to higher education, lifelong learning and social mobility and is not appropriate to meet the needs of a knowledge-based and democratic society (Ebner et al. 2013). To dissolve the institutional divide between vocational education and training (VET) and general/academic education, *hybrid qualification systems* are of special interest for educational policy and research in Europe (Deissinger et al. 2013).

Aim

The aim of our paper is to present first results of a study that investigates the process of institutionalisation of such a hybrid educational track on upper secondary level in Switzerland – the *specialised school* – that links vocational and academic training. In the late 1980ies different cantonal schools – founded in the 19th century for young women and preparing for professions like nursing, kindergarten teacher or social work – had been merged into the specialised school with national regulations and recognition of diploma.

During the 1990ies in the context of ongoing transformation on upper secondary and tertiary level, the specialised school attempted to position itself as a distinct educational track and to raise its own profile besides the well-established tracks of VET and general baccalaureate school. Regarding the number of students today and the grade of institutionalisation we have to state that its position has remained rather weak. Only 4% of all students on upper secondary level attend a specialised school. Moreover, actors in administration and politics repeatedly have claimed to abolish it.

In our paper we are going to present first results of our analyses that reconstruct the hesitant process of institutionalisation of this school.

Research Questions

We examine two questions:

1. What are the means and strategies taken by the representatives of the specialised school to establish, ensure and legitimize its status, identity and profile?
2. Which institutional conditions and beliefs of relevant actors and stakeholders hinder a successful establishment of the specialised school?

With regard to the second question the current state of research points to several problems (ED Bern 2012, Capaul, Keller 2014, Kiener 2004). Actors of the VET track criticise that the specialised school has a vocational orientation and is preparing for professions, what conflicts with the division of tasks in the qualification system and leads to undesirable competition. Compared to the general baccalaureate school the specialised school is to some extent devaluated by students and parents, is of second choice and a solution for students who fail in general baccalaureate school.

Theory

To analyse the endeavours of establishing the specialised school besides VET and general baccalaureate school we refer to the theoretical framework of the *sociology of conventions* (respectively *economics of conventions*), a pragmatic and transdisciplinary institutional approach (Boltanski, Thévenot 1999, Diaz-Bone 2011, 2015). *Conventions* are collectively and culturally established principles of orientation and action (orders of worth and justification) on the basis of which actors evaluate and coordinate in social situations and justify their actions and decisions.

By *investing in forms* (objects, standards, symbolic representations, and cognitive schemata) conventions reach temporal, social and spatial stability as well as general validity (Thévenot 1984). However these orders of worth are contradictory. In situations where established routines and other taken-for-granted assumptions are questioned and actors have to renegotiate, discussions and disputes are evolving on the valid order of worth (Knoll 2013). In order to come to an agreement, compromises between different orders of worth are made, in which case two or more measures of worth may stand side by side in a relation of equivalence (Boltanski, Thévenot 1999, 374).

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

Regarding our first research question we have to search for the means and strategies with which the representatives of the specialised school invest into the forms of this school track. On which institutionally established forms do they fall back? Which new forms do they try to bring into being? On which conventions do they rely while trying to establish this new category of school – also considering the critique and resistance of other actors?

The social world comprises a plurality but finite number of conventions whereby the conventions of market, domestic, civic, industrial, fame, inspiration and project are relevant to understand the dynamics in educational systems (e.g. Derouet 1989, Leemann, Imdorf 2015, Berner et. al. 2016). Regarding our second research question, disputes on the valid conventions between different groups of actors are of interest. To which conventions they refer when they do not support this educational track and claim to abolish it? What compromises are made, how are they stabilised?

Educational transformation has to be understood in the context of the particular political and cultural system. In Switzerland, the consociational democracy and the federalistic educational system are important issues. This means that different actors and groups (also minorities) are involved in political processes where common solutions and compromises have to be found. Furthermore, cantonal traditions and expectations play a crucial role in the process of institutionalisation of the specialised school. For this reason, consultational processes and other spaces and forms of negotiation are a very important feature in Swiss educational politics.

To investigate the process of institutionalisation in a historical-diachronic perspective from the 1990ies upwards (Diaz-Bone 2015, 325),

we refer on divers data and rely besides a focus on the federal level on a case study design (selected cantons). On the one hand we include documents e.g. concepts of the specialised schools, reports of consultational processes where all cantons have been involved. On the other hand we conduct expert interviews with (former) representatives of the board of headmasters, with members of institutions and boards in educational and VET administration and with members of professional and teacher associations who played a crucial role in the process of institutionalisation. Based on this data we work out the different orders of worth and justification for further establishing the specialised school, the investments in forms to stabilise them as well as the orders of justification that rationalise the abolishment of the school.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

First results document that in the 1990ies disparate and controversial opinions and judgements regarding the future of the school existed. A common and shared comprehension of its position within the education system is hardly observable. The specialised school was not an established category.

Some of the actors mentioned that the specialised school is a reasonable supplement of VET and general baccalaureate school. Referring to the industrial convention they stress e.g. that it supports the efficiency and quality of the qualification system and therefore should get its legitimised place. Others point to the fact that it offers a chance for social upward-mobility, what is an argument of the civic convention.

Other actors in contrast judged its profile as unnecessary and redundant. They reject e.g. the market convention by inhibiting any competition for students between the track of VET and of the specialised school. The latter should only be allowed to train for professions that are not trained in the VET system.

The concepts of the specialised school at the beginning of the 1990ies show which aims are pursued, which identity should be reached, which competencies should be produced and what sort of students should be attracted. We can see that the representatives try to establish it as a new, state-approved category with its own and distinct quality by two strategies that promise to have a stabilising effect.

1) They link it in a vertical perspective with existing and upcoming forms of formal education within the education system by emphasizing coherence between the (new founded) universities of applied sciences on the higher-education level and the specialised school. 2) They stress the differences to VET and general baccalaureate school in a horizontal perspective by referring to the educational schism and identifying a gap in between that could be filled by the specialised school.

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