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Title

The hesitant process of institutionalisation of the upper-secondary specialised school (Fachmittelschule, Écoles de culture générale) in Switzerland

Topic

2, Education policies (transformation of educational organisations and programmes)

Key-Words

upper-secondary specialised school, institutional transformation, upper secondary education, sociology of convention; hybrid qualification

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The *aim* of our paper is to present a study that investigates the hesitant process of institutionalisation of an educational track on upper secondary level in Switzerland that links vocational and academic training. During the 1990ies in the context of ongoing transformation on upper secondary and tertiary level, the *upper-secondary 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. Nevertheless, its position has remained rather weak and actors in administration and politics repeatedly have claimed to abolish it.

We examine *two questions*: What are the means and strategies taken by the representatives of the school to establish, ensure and legitimize its status, identity and profile? Which institutional conditions and beliefs of relevant actors and stakeholders hinder an assured establishment of the school?

To analyse the endeavours of establishing the specialised school we refer to the *theory* of the *sociology of conventions*, a pragmatic and transdisciplinary institutional approach (Boltanski/Thévenot 1999, Diaz-Bone 2011). *Conventions* are 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 conventions are contradictory. In order to come to an agreement, compromises between different orders of worth are made (Boltanski/Thévenot 1999).

Design: To investigate the process of institutionalisation from the 1990ies upwards, we focus on the federal as well as on the cantonal level (the latter with a case study design of selected cantons) and refer on divers *data*: documents (e.g. concepts of the schools, reports of consultational processes); expert interviews (e.g. with (former) representatives of the board of headmasters, Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education).

First *results* document that in the 1990ies disparate and controversial opinions and judgements regarding the future of the specialised 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 where compromises of different conventions had already been institutionalised. The concepts of the school at this time show which aims are pursued, which identity should be reached, which competencies should be produced and what sort of students should be attracted. 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 school. 2) They stress the differences to VET and general baccalaureate school in a horizontal perspective by referring to the educational schism (Baethge 2006) and identifying a gap in between that could be filled by the specialised school.

References

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