

## Standards and Citizens' Role

### What are the Basic Goals of the Development of Standards for Political Education\* in Germany?

*Wolfgang Sander*

#### 1. National Standards of Education – a Novelty in German Educational Policy

The decision by the German Ministers of Education and the Arts to introduce national standards of education is a direct reaction to the results of the first PISA-study from the year 2000. The results of this international comparison of students' performance, which were rather disappointing for Germany, produced kind of a shock in the German public and resulted in the most intensive debate on education policy for the last 30 years.

Among the practical results of this debate there counts a decision by the Conference of German Ministers for Education and the Arts from June, 2002, to develop national standards of education for German schools. This decision, which at first sight is rather less exciting, becomes more understandable regarding its possible effects if it is viewed at against the background of the traditional educational system in Germany and its possible effects on reforming this system. For the current educational system in Germany a number of basic structures are typical, which at first sight are contradictious. E. g. it is both federal and centralist. Educational policy counts among the competences of the Bundesländer (federal states). The Bundesregierung (federal government) has no decision-making powers at all in the field of educational policy; for the time being, a national educational policy does only exist within the bounds of a Permanent Conference of the Ministers of Education and the Arts of the Bundesländer, but which can only come to unanimous decisions. This at first sight decentralized system, however, is contrasted by a centralist tradition *within* the Bundesländer. Traditionally, schools are included into a hierarchical system of school administration which leaves them only a very small formal leeway for decisions. Rightly so, in the context of the German debate this traditional control model is mostly called an input-control: the single federal governments try to control the educational system by stipulating the schools what to do and which funds they have at hand for this. In contrast to this, for the time being the results of the schools' work, the "output", have hardly been controlled. Tests of performance like in the USA are completely unusual for German schools. Although the teachers are public officials, as already mentioned, this status at the same time protects them from dismissal, so that it is hardly possible for schools to get rid of teachers due to bad performance. Accordingly weak are also the state's supervision possibilities. In practice, a system has developed where on the one hand there is dense bureaucratic regulation but where on the other hand for their daily practical work teachers enjoy a high degree of freedom and independence behind the closed door of the classroom. This, however, leads to the fact that despite many regulations there is hardly any Germany-wide consensus on what schools should really achieve in certain fields of learning as a result of their work.

---

\* The term "political education" is common in Germany for the subjects of civic education and social studies.

Here there is the approach of the intended reform of “national standards of education”. However, the Ministers of Education and the Arts have more in mind than some additional agreement which would only complete the existing system of schools-control. Although for the time being there is no perceptible masterplan for re-structuring the German school system, there are indications of further steps to be made towards reforming the educational system in the context of introducing national standards of education. Which developments become apparent?

Firstly, the Ministers of Education and the Arts started this project with remarkable pace. In June, 2002, there was the political decision of introducing national standards; in February, 2003, a detailed expert’s report was presented, where conceptual basic ideas for such standards were developed; in April, 2003, the first drafts of standards for the subjects of German language, first foreign language, and mathematics were put up for discussion; in December, 2003, these drafts, partly revised due to experts’ contributions, were passed and the next steps towards introducing standards for further subjects were decided on. At first, political education was not affected by this development.

Secondly, by setting educational standards the Ministries enter unknown territory in respect of content matter. The previous curricula determine first and foremost which *topics* shall be taught in each school subject and in which year. One could say that they are “content standards”, if not in the strict sense of the word, as although they determine what shall be topic of lessons, in most cases they do not determine the students’ knowledge in the end. Educational standards, however, determine the *competences* which shall be achieved by the students for certain periods of the educational system. Regarding their focus, they may be understood to be performance standards, if less in the sense of describing the knowledge which the students are supposed to achieve but more in the sense of describing the skills which they are supposed to learn. These competences, however, are understood to be subject-related. Furthermore, they are supposed to be evaluable in principle.

This regards the third aspect. The project of national standards of education tries to shift the system of schools control from the existing input-control towards increased output-control. By way of evaluation, schools are supposed to receive national standards-orientated response regarding their performance. For those educational standards as being passed so far, the Conference of the Ministers of Education and the Arts intends an evaluation by way of Germany-wide standardized tests. The development of such tests – if really referred to the development of learning abilities and thus not simply trying to test knowledge – is a very demanding task. For this purpose, the Ministers of Education and the Arts of the Bundesländer have for the first time founded a common, scientific “Institut für Qualitätsentwicklung im Bildungswesen (Institute for the Development of Quality in the Field of Education)” at the Humboldt-University, Berlin. After 2006 this institute is supposed to start the standardization of test-instruments. Apart from such national, standardized tests, several Bundesländer intend to introduce also a more intensive evaluation of schools by school inspectors.

Fourthly, such an output-control requires the schools to receive much more autonomy and self-responsibility than it is currently the case in Germany.

## 2. Drafts of National Standards of Education in Political Education

At first, our discipline was rather under the lee of the post-PISA-debate in Germany. But the scientific society of our subject, the Gesellschaft für Politikdidaktik und politische Jugend- und Erwachsenenbildung (GPJE) (Society for the Didactics of Political Science and the for Political Education of Youths and Adults), on its own initiative presented a draft of national standards of education for teaching political education at the end of 2003 (GPJE 2004). This draft follows very closely the guidelines and features valid for the educational standards of other subjects. Political education was the first subject not to wait for decisions by the Ministers of Education and the Arts regarding this point but to present its own, readily worked out draft to the ministers.

The GPJE's decision to actively contribute to the debate on educational standards in Germany by way of such a draft was made a time when it was still completely unclear if the Conference of the Ministers of Education and the Arts – just as on other minor subjects – would plan standards at all for political education. Now, from our discipline's point of view both possible answers to this question meant a severe risk for the subject. The first risk is due to the very different provision of lessons for political education in the single Bundesländer: should the Ministers of Education and the Arts decide for developing standards for our subject and for employing a team of experts for this, it had to be feared that a kind of a minimum-concept would result from this, which might be orientated towards the possibilities of those Bundesländer offering the worst conditions. Should on the other hand the Ministers decide not to strive for standards for political education it had to be feared that at schools a kind of two-classes society might develop, with subjects with and without standards, and that for the medium term public attention, educational policy, and thus finally resources would be concentrated even more than anyhow on a few core subjects at school. Thus, this draft of national standards of education was intended to be an *educational-political* initiative.

Of course, a draft of national standards of education does not only address the outside, the public, and educational policy, but also the inside, the internal experts' debate, the authors of curricula and school books as well as the teachers of the subject. The text is based on a broad consensus within the didactics of political science and this way documents in what way science understands the tasks of political education today. It formulates these tasks by a new linguistic form, that of compromises, i. e. performance standards; this way it is at the same time supposed to open up the subject to external evaluations. In the end, both of this shall serve for professionalizing and quality-development within political education.

Now, what is typical for this draft of national standards?

The German draft starts out from three fields of competences:

- formation of political judgment
- ability to act politically
- finally, methodical skills.

For these three fields the competences are described by the educational standards which students are supposed to have achieved in political education at the different levels of the school system. In this context, the draft starts out from the idea that in the course of school education these competences shall become more complex and differentiated. Thus, the development of competences in political education is understood to be basically an *increase of complexity* of political judgement, of the ability to act politically, as well as of methodical competences.

### 3. Educational Standards and Citizens' Role

Now, does the German draft of a standard start out from a clearly defined role of the citizen for these descriptions of competences? Does it even want to standardize the democratic role of the citizen, shall a certain model of a citizen be spread in society by way of political education at school? To me it seems that this is not the case. Indeed, the draft emphasizes the democratic nature of political education. Also, the text makes definitely clear that political education is supposed to support the understanding of democratic principles and that it starts out from the validity of basic rights and human rights. E. g. the guidelines towards which value judgements are orientated are supposed to be generalized in the course of learning in political education in such a way that "according to their claim, they can be valid for all humans and do not only support the interests of single groups". As explicitly said, this universalist perspective is in accordance with "the basic ideas of the values of modern, free constitutional states" (GPJE 2004, 15). Thus, these educational standards are not value neutral. But they want to describe competences as communicated by the subject in a way "which does not restrict the students' basic right of freedom of speech" (ibid.). The difficulty of competence models in political education is thus just in developing competences with young people without standardizing their use. The draft by the GPJE tries to do just this. In so far, the standards do not start out from the ideal of a democratic citizen. Rather they suppose – even if this is not explicitly said – that in democracies there are different legitimate ways of living as a citizen. Also in democracies role models of citizens may change. But the idea of one's own role as a citizen may also change in the course of the individual biography. As we all know, there are people who stay life-long observers of politics and maybe voters, others become professional politicians, and others again become politically committed for a limited time in certain periods of their lives, to certain topics or for a concrete type of reason. The German draft of standards implicitly starts out from the idea that such possibilities of choosing a citizen's role are legitimate – but also from the idea that in practice this choice is only possible for those who have competences by help of which they are really able to live out different variants of a citizen's role. Communicating these competences is the task of political education.

### 4. Controversies and Open Questions

It is hardly surprising that an ambitious reform project like the introduction of national standards of education also results in controversies. Accordingly, there is a number of fears which recently were expressed by several authors towards educational standards in general. Often, there is critically asking if education can be standardized at all and if by the concept of national standards rather a kind of technocratic organizing of school is pursued, possibly according to economic interests. Often, the background of this criticism is pronounced keeping to a certain way of understanding the German term "Bildung", a term which cannot be directly translated and in any case means more than "education". Critics who argumentate in this way understand the intended introduction of national standards to be a reduction of learning at school to measurable results. The idea of standards, as this criticism says, starts out from a pragmatic way of understanding literacy, which is orientated towards the usefulness of that what was learned. In contrast to this, they say, the idea of "Bildung" focuses on developing personality, on the independence and unavailability of learning, and on the intrinsic value of the *processes* of discussing cultural goods, as a contrast to possible output. Their fear is that this might be lost at a standards-orientated school.

Now, we may object to this criticism that its arguments do not meet the concrete intentions of the concrete project of educational standards in Germany. As a matter of fact, neither by the experts' report, on which the project is based, nor by the decisions of the Ministers of Education and the Arts it is claimed that all important tasks of school could be dealt with by way of educational standards. However, a more concrete warning must be taken seriously, which can refer to appropriate experience with standardized performance-tests from other states, also from the USA: the warning that such tests might have problematic effects on practical work in the sense of "teaching to the test". Here, much will depend on how national tests are concretely planned and which value they are supposed to have within the overall system of a new way of controlling school. But for the time being these are open questions.

As already mentioned, for political education standardized national tests are not intended by the Ministers. But of course for national standards of education there is the problem of their evaluability, also for political education. Accordingly, for the didactics of political sciences there are first attempts at developing standardized tests. But already now it seems to be clear that such tests could at best refer to one of the three fields of competences, to that of the ability of political judgement. Competences to act and methodical competences do not seem to be evaluable by standardized tests but only by qualitative methods. In other words, who wants to assess if a school successfully communicates the intended competences in political education will have to go to this school and into contact to its students. Not only for our discipline the success of the standards will decisively depend on succeeding with combining them with a system of school-evaluation which will be understood to be helpful and thus will be accepted by schools.

## References

- Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (2003). *Zur Entwicklung nationaler Bildungsstandards: Eine Expertise*. Bonn
- GPJE (2004). *Nationale Bildungsstandards für den Fachunterricht in der Politischen Bildung an Schulen: Ein Entwurf*. Schwalbach
- KMK (2004). *Bildungsstandards der Kultusministerkonferenz: Argumentationspapier vom 16.12.2004*, [www.kultusministerkonferenz.de](http://www.kultusministerkonferenz.de)
- Oelkers, J. (2005). *Was sollen Bildungsstandards in der Schule? Festvortrag im Georg-Eckert-Institut für internationale Schulbuchforschung am 24.6.2005* (manuscript, [www.gei.de](http://www.gei.de))
- Redaktionen Politische Bildung & kursiv – Journal für politische Bildung (ed.) (2005). *Bildungsstandards: Evaluation in der politischen Bildung*. Schwalbach