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On the Dominance of the Apprenticeship-System in Switzerland. Insights into Governance Mechanisms in the Institutionalisation of Upper-Secondary-Education

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct governance mechanisms that are responsible for the fact that, despite international trends towards the academisation of education, in Switzerland the apprenticeship-system has remained dominant in comparison to a more general school-based pathway. To this end, we analyse how, in the process of institutionalisation of upper secondary education from 1970 onwards representatives and advocates of dual VET intervened against the institutionalisation of the Specialised School – a more general education-oriented and school-based education – as a third federally recognised educational pathway. To analyse the governance processes that underlie these educational policy debates, we apply the social mechanisms and logics described by Mahoney (2000) that can explain both reproduction and path-dependent development as well as institutional change and reconstruct them for two situations of central historical importance.

Keywords

apprenticeship; general education; specialised school; governance mechanisms; path dependency

1 Introduction

Upper secondary education in Switzerland is characterised today by three federally recognised educational pathways: VET mostly organised as apprenticeships, baccalaureate school and specialised school (SpS). Despite international trends towards the academisation of education (Harwood, 2010), two third of young people begin a VET programme what is high compared to the situation in other countries (OECD, 2015).



In order to understand this dominance of VET, this paper examines governance processes in the institutionalisation of an upper secondary education system. We reconstruct social mechanisms of the coordination of action between actors in general education and VET in these political processes beginning in the late 1960s.

VET has been the dominant post-compulsory educational pathway since as early as the end of the 1960s. Around 46% of 19-year-olds at that time completed an apprenticeship, 6% a baccalaureate school and 2% a SpS. However, VET and SpS were not yet integrated into the federal education system. VET fell within the purview of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs. Specialised schools were a very heterogeneous type of schools in larger cities and not yet recognised by the federal government. They took on an important bridging function by providing young women with an extended general education for two to three years to prepare them for PET college courses in the fields of health, social work, and pre-school education.

Triggered by the expansion of the education system and international pressure to clarify and coordinate the various educational pathways (Rosenmund, 2011), there now began a process of implementing a post-compulsory school level, which lasted for the following four decades (Criblez, 2001; Zulauf et al., 2000).

This situation led to a new demand for cooperation between the responsible actors. However, they represented two different systems embedded in different institutional contexts (Harney & Zymek, 1994; Baethge, 2006) — general education, whose organisation was school-based and governed by the cantons, and VET, which was primarily organised as apprenticeships and governed jointly by the Confederation, employers' organisations and the cantons. As a result, the representatives of the two educational pathways pursued different interests and were guided by different values and logics.

This paper focuses on governance processes in the institutionalisation of upper secondary education. The aim is to analyse the *social mechanisms of the coordination of action that are responsible for the fact that, despite international trends towards the academisation of education, in Switzerland the apprenticeship system has remained dominant compared to a more general school-based pathway.*

To this end, we analyse how, in the disputes over the positioning of the various post-compulsory educational pathways, representatives and advocates of dual VET intervened against the institutionalisation of the SpS as a third federally recognised educational pathway and attempted to limit its significance.

To analyse the social mechanisms of the coordination of action that underlie these educational policy debates, we make reference to neo-institutionalism and the path dependency theorem (Edelstein, 2016). Specifically, we apply the social mechanisms and logics described by Mahoney (2000) — utilitarian, functional, power and legitimation, which can explain both reproduction and path-dependent development as well as institutional change — to the analysis of governance processes. With respect to our object of investigation, we analyse the process of institutionalisation of the SpS in order to answer the following questions:

1. Which social mechanisms of the coordination of action explain the persistence of the dominance of the apprenticeship system?
2. What were the driving forces that enabled, despite the resistance of representatives of VET, that ultimately led to the institutionalisation of the SpS?

We will reconstruct, for two situations of central historical importance, the social mechanisms and logics that underlay the coordination and negotiation processes between VET and

general education around the institutionalisation of SpS as a third educational pathway.¹ The first situation concerns the 1970s, when the implementation of the SpS was initiated by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK). The second situation concerns the 1990s and 2000s, when the function of the SpS was again under discussion in the context of major reforms in VET and the higher education system.

In order to reconstruct these social mechanisms, we consulted the literature and analysed documents such as the minutes of meetings and conferences, reports from panels of experts including surveys, models and recommendations, as well as political statements, the results of legislative consultation processes and decrees of the cantonal council. In addition, interviews were conducted with experts who were involved in this process as educational policy observers or functionaries. The data were evaluated according to the theory-driven qualitative content analysis.

2 Insights from the policy debates on the position of VET and specialised schools (SpS)

2.1 Beginning institutionalisation of the SpS in the early 1970s

At the beginning of the 1970s, on the VET side a commission of experts drew up proposals for improvements in apprenticeship training (Expertenkommission, 1972a). The most important measure proposed was to expand school-based general education within apprenticeship training by establishing a vocational upper secondary school, “so that apprenticeship training can be considered a real alternative to attending baccalaureate school” (ibid.) and become more attractive for gifted young people. The vocational upper secondary school was intended to recruit qualified young people for management positions in companies. It explicitly did not pursue the goal of obtaining university entrance qualifications. Nor was its main purpose to provide a pathway to PET or to engineering colleges in particular.

At the same time a commission of experts tasked by the EDK also drew up a proposal for the reform of general education at the upper secondary level along with a first outline of the possible future position and function of the upper secondary SpS (Expertenkommission SpS, 1972b). Contrary to the previous tradition of preparing students for paramedical, social and early-childhood education training programmes, the SpS diploma was now also supposed to qualify students to transfer to PET colleges in the fields of technology, economics and the natural sciences. The EDK set up an SpS commission to look more closely at the future position and profile of the SpS within the overall education system.

The following section reconstructs for 1973-1977 alongside the four social mechanisms the central logics underlying the coordination of action between the actors from general education and VET in the negotiations on the future position of the SpS, which can explain both the persistence and change in the relationship between the two systems.

The perspective of the *power-based mechanism* makes it clear that each group of actors tried to secure the continued existence of its own institution and did everything it could to maintain its power of definition for its own area. On the one hand, the representatives of VET categorically rejected the suggestions for the further development of VET made by actors from general education. On the other hand, the various expert groups and commissions were almost exclusively staffed by representatives of their own institution.

The common thread running through the negotiations of the two groups of actors is the question of the quantitative allocation of young people to the two institutions, as the following quotation illustrates.

¹ All data were collected as part of the research project “The Upper-Secondary Specialised School as an Independent Educational Pathway alongside VET and Baccalaureate School – Processes and Outcomes of Its Positioning and Profile Development”, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF-100019_162987)3/2016–8/2019.

The harmonious balance between the three post-compulsory education paths — apprenticeship, SpS and baccalaureate school — is of the utmost importance for the economic and social development of our country. If this balance is disturbed, for example, in favour of the baccalaureate school, there could be a surplus of university graduates but a shortage of qualified people in the other sectors. In Switzerland, there is currently an increased demand for graduates of PET colleges ... (Expertenkommission SpS, 1972b, p. 40).

The argument that complementarities between the individual educational pathways and various positions in working life could fall out of balance is based on *functional logics*. Various votes advocating for reform through the establishment of SpS to maintain this balance explicitly referred to the potential of the SpS to redress a currently emerging imbalance. The school, it was supposed, would fill a “gap” in the overall institutional structure. It was intended for PET that, while not requiring a baccalaureate, it would require a high level of general education and a minimum starting age of 18.

The SpS commission justified the plan to reposition the SpS as a new pathway to the engineering colleges on the basis of the requirements of permeability and gender equality, which can be attributed to the *legitimising mechanism*. The idea had been that there must also be an educational path subsequent to the SpS open to boys if the SpS was now being introduced for both genders. To support their argument about the dysfunctionality of the SpS, the VET actors criticised that young people were increasingly fleeing the workplace and migrating to the middle schools, with “devastating consequences for the economy” and emphasised VET’s thus far proven track record. Playing a central role in this were the deeply rooted cultural convictions that breathing “workshop air”, i.e. company-based practical experience as opposed to “schoolroom air” was an indispensable prerequisite for the future exercise of a company management function.

The repeatedly voiced objections of “schoolification” and “upward pressure” in the training of young people were based on the fear that “intellectuals are regarded with more interest” than graduates of apprenticeships and that this would lead to their increasing social devaluation. As the following statement by an actor representing VET shows, the issue of the social value of the various educational pathways is closely linked to the social structure of society and to the question of which educational pathway is capable of recruiting which learners, and of how the social elite and the middle class reproduce themselves.

Therefore, the longer it goes on, the less acceptable it is that [the apprenticeship] should have to content itself with being second tier, while on the other hand, one is stubbornly trying to hoist the first [tier] onto the conveyor belt to the university. (VET representative in EDK 1974, p. 3).

The *power-based mechanism* in the coordination of action thus comes full circle. From this perspective, the social elite was interested in protecting the baccalaureate path for its own intergenerational reproduction by keeping it narrow. This is supported by the introduction of the SpS as a means of reducing the number of students that would be opting for the baccalaureate pathway. In the eyes of the representative of VET quoted above, however, this would mean that gifted young people (“first tier”), who previously would have chosen VET, would now prefer the SpS and thus also take this less strenuous path into the academic world. As a result, VET would be left with only the less gifted young people (“second tier”). This fuelled the fear that VET as an institution would in the long run lose its importance, power and influence in society.

Accordingly, the representatives of VET were intent on preventing a competitive relationship between VET and SpS. In particular, they feared that the implementation of the SpS as a preparation for PET colleges could mean the end of the vocational upper secondary school and

a waste of the investments made in it. Within this *utilitarian logic*, the VET actors pointed to the five times higher cost of the SpS compared to the existing vocational upper secondary school. The members of the SpS expert commission attempted to counter these concerns and resistance by means of information, dialogue and persuasive elucidation of the benefits of the SpS.

The next section is devoted to a second historical stage in the implementation of the SpS, in which the school came under fire once again in the context of major VET reform.

2.2 Reform of apprenticeships in the health sector (1990s–2000s)

In 1988, the SpS was officially recognised in Switzerland (EDK 1989) after a process that took nearly two decades and involved ongoing disputes over the status and profile of this third pathway. Only a few years later, a major reform process began at the upper secondary level and in the tertiary system, which lasted until the mid-2010s. Among other things, the new Vocational Training Act of 2002 transferred the professions in health care, which had previously been regulated at the cantonal level, into the regular VET system and introduced a corresponding apprenticeship. It was also at this time that the first universities of applied sciences (UAS) for health care were founded.

During these reform years, it was completely unclear and open what the introduction of this apprenticeship in health care would mean for the traditional training function of the SpS and whether the SpS would also be recognised as a path to the newly created UAS for health. Below we describe the social mechanisms underlying the coordination of action between representatives and advocates of general education and VET by focusing on the occupational field of health care.

With the integration of the health care professions into the Vocational Training Act, VET was able to expand and strengthen its position within the *power-based logic*. With the newly attained power to define the structure and content of health care training, the VET actors were able to revoke basic training principles of the traditional health care training programmes, which were predominantly school-based: The minimum age of entry was reduced to 16 years, and the hitherto central importance of general education was reduced to a level customary for apprenticeships. The justifications that were relevant can be assigned to the perspective of the *legitimation-based reproductive mechanism*. They tie in with the culturally anchored convictions regarding the importance of hands-on professional practice, which is considered the actual “school of life”, in contrast to the school where one learns “only from the textbook”. The apprenticeship is a form of vocational training of whose quality a large part of the population is firmly convinced, and which guides the coordination of action as an unquestioned standard.

With the decision to integrate the health care professions into the uniform framework for all VET courses, the new apprenticeship was embedded in an existing overall institutional structure. Together with the already existing vocational baccalaureate, a coherent educational offering was created that also permitted advancement to the tertiary level. Due to its on-the-job training structure, the new apprenticeship was from the very beginning also considered well integrated with the professional world. In keeping with the *functionalist explanatory context*, the actors in VET were able to strengthen the apprenticeship as a training concept and thus continue on the previous path of development. With regard to the *raison d'être* of the SpS, the actors in VET henceforth took the firm stand that,

we no longer need the SpS, at the latest from now on if we ever really needed it at all. Precisely because we have now rounded out vocational training, we have sorted it out, what is the point of having some SpS in between? ... That at least was the tenor of the reaction on the vocational side. (EDK representative)

From the point of view of the VET representatives, competition between the two educational pathways, which possibly could have led to an erosion of VET's path-dependent position of strength, should be prevented. Important actors in the health care sector, on the other hand, advocated for maintaining the school-based general education path via the SpS as an alternative to VET. Their justifications were based on *utilitarian motives* regarding the institution's benefit and its *functionality* for the health care professions in view of the demand for skilled workers. The more in-depth general education offered by the SpS, they argued, made it an optimal preparation for tertiary health training. Encouraged by these arguments, the advocates of the SpS pursued the goal of extending the development path of the SpS and consolidating the institution.

As the in-depth analyses in two cantons show, at the beginning of the 2000s there were concerted efforts on the part of the advocates of VET within the cantonal government and parliament to abolish the SpS. However, this *power-based reproduction mechanism*, which would have strengthened the VET path enormously, was prevented by considerable resistance from the teaching staff, the student body and civil society through political instruments such as demonstrations and petitions. It was partly thanks to these actions that the planned abolishment was averted. The forces for the retention of the SpS based their arguments on societal expectations of equality and integration, which fall into the realm of the *legitimising mechanism*.

However, the representatives of VET continued to take action against the SpS in order to prevent a competitive situation. They succeeded in hindering the expansion of the school by greatly reducing the number of classes allowed and by directing it to abstain from drawing too much media attention to their offerings. In return, the government promoted the new apprenticeship, for example by requiring state hospitals to offer apprenticeships (Maurer, 2013). Today, it is the second most frequently chosen apprenticeship in Switzerland (SERI, 2019), and with more than 4000 graduates annually, it awards around four times as many degrees as the SpS in the occupational field of health care.

The dispute concerning the implementation of the SpS came to a head over the question of whether the school should be recognised as a formal path to the UAS. For the continued existence of the SpS, it was essential that it could, in the educational paths that were being established to the higher education system, award a qualification *functionally* equivalent to the vocational baccalaureate. In this key question, too, the SpS representatives based their justifications on the need for skilled workers. Furthermore, they referred to the transnational proliferation of ideas of equality and European compatibility (*legitimising mechanism*) and to the long-standing experience and expertise of the SpS in preparing young people for higher education (*utilitarian mechanism*).

Yet in the eyes of VET actors, experience-based learning in on-the-job practice remained the uncircumventable paradigm that could *legitimise* access to higher education. An apprenticeship coupled with the vocational baccalaureate was the "royal road" to the UAS (Gonon, 2012, p. 136). As a central actor in general education, the EDK has taken up these expectations of the SpS in the direction of practical training and called in its recommendations for the further development of the SpS for "increased integration in VET" (EDK, 1991, p. 1) to be a central educational goal for the SpS. It can be assumed that some concessions and compromises had to be made to the *power-based* demands of VET because the UAS fall within its purview. The 2004 reform of the SpS introduced various occupational fields (including health care) and, with the specialised baccalaureate, an SpS curriculum that involved initial work experience in order to legitimise admission to the UAS in specific occupational fields.

3 Summary

Along the four mechanisms we were able to show that social mechanisms of reproduction led to the fact that VET and especially the apprenticeship system was able to maintain its strong position. At the same time, however, the representatives and advocates of VET have not

succeeded in hindering the institutionalisation of a third educational pathway that combines both vocational preparation for PET in the health sector and general education.

In the context of the new demands for coordination of action between the two historically established systems, VET and general education, each group of actors was keen to reproduce its own institution along the lines of the *power-based mechanism*. While they did not want to lose their influence on its design, they also sought to shore up the established ways of reproducing the social classes they represented.

Both groups of actors based their efforts on the *legitimising mechanism*. The consistent leit-motif of the actors in VET was the conviction that practical on-the-job experience is decisive for soundly training future professionals. In these decades, however, new values such as academic education, equality and permeability spread through the international framework. The advocates of the SpS were able to profit from these and demand their implementation on moral grounds.

From a *functionalist perspective*, the representatives of VET referred back to its integration with the world of work. The creation of apprenticeships in areas for which the SpS had traditionally prepared learners, further strengthened the function of apprenticeships at the beginning of the new millennium. The representatives of general education advocated a change in the structure of the post-compulsory school system by pointing out a gap that the SpS would fill. The need to close the gap before the age of 18 and the shortage of skilled workers were important arguments justifying the function of the SpS.

In the 1970s, VET actors saw the investments just made in vocational upper secondary schools at risk if the SpS were implemented and pointed to its higher costs. Within this *utilitarian logic* they wanted to prevent a competitive situation that might have led to a change in the relationship between general education and VET. This plunged the SpS into one crisis after the other. However, it has at the same time given the representatives of the SpS the opportunity to prove its usefulness and demonstrate its potential for training and integration. However, the school had to supplement its training profile with key vocational training components and reduce its costs by limiting the number of classes.

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