

School curricula are a reflection of society's expectations

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Credit: National Science Foundation

In a pioneering project, researchers studied the development of school curricula in Switzerland's three main language regions. This SNSF-funded project clearly showed that ever since the Swiss school system was created in 1830 the importance and content of every subject in the curriculum, whether language, history, handicraft or physical education, has been in flux.

In primary schools, history lessons in the 19th century primarily consisted of story telling. Foreign languages—French or German,

depending on the language region in which the school was located—were introduced as a school subject for economic reasons. The awareness of the importance of [foreign languages](#) in supporting national unity did not develop until many years later. German as the school subject we know today only came into being very gradually. Initially the focus was on teaching pupils the essentials of reading and writing, with grammar and literature only being added much later. Physical education was made a compulsory subject as a matter of military policy, and it is still regulated at the national level today. Handicraft for boys (i.e. technical crafts such as woodwork or metalwork) was only introduced at the end of the 19th century – considerably later than handicraft for girls – as a response to the economic crisis. Shorthand has long since vanished from the curriculum in secondary schools, and government and politics was temporarily a school subject only in the canton of Ticino, even though its introduction has been repeatedly called for since the 1870s.

These are just a few of the insights obtained from the interdisciplinary research project entitled "Transformation of school curricula since 1830", which the SNSF funded via the "Sinergia" programme (see text box below). This project illustrated for the first time how the teaching system in schools and the allocation of resources to individual subjects have changed since 1830 in the country's main language regions.

The knowledge system in schools is renegotiated continuously

"From a historical perspective we can see that what has to be taught and learnt in schools has by no means always been what we assume today to be an integral or essential part of the curriculum. The knowledge system in schools is ultimately a normative standard that can only be understood in a social and historical context," explains Lucien Criblez, the overall manager of the SNSF project and since 2008 Professor of Education at

the University of Zurich with a focus on historical education research and analysis of education policies.

Approximately 25 researchers in five teams from Switzerland's three main language regions – representing the universities of Geneva and Zurich, and the universities of teacher education in Northwest Switzerland, Zurich and Ticino – participated in the SNSF project. They reconstructed and analysed the curricula—the content of textbooks/schoolbooks, teaching aids and syllabi—from ten cantons (Aargau, Bern, Basel-Stadt, Fribourg, Geneva, Lucerne, Schwyz, Ticino, Vaud and Zurich) covering a period of around 150 years. The ten cantons selected as the focus of the work were chosen so as to reflect a balanced mix of factors including language region, religion (Catholic and Protestant cantons) and urban centres/rural areas. The analysis of curricula looked at the entire range of subjects, while the analysis of textbooks focused on history, government/politics, native language and foreign languages, i.e. subjects that are of significance in matters of national identity and national policy.

Science as reference for school subjects

The researchers found not only that the components and contents of school curricula have changed over the course of time, but also that educational reformism, which is generally regarded as the phase of major educational innovations in the first third of the twentieth century, did not have a strong influence on this development. Rather, the rise of the natural sciences in the final third of the [19th century](#) exercised a considerably greater influence. As Lucien Criblez explains, "The insights arising from the natural sciences brought new knowledge into the classroom in the 19th and 20th centuries, and this changed the knowledge system in our schools. The new lessons in natural science subjects were simply added on top of the existing subjects, thus overloading the school curriculum. One consequence of this was the

launch of a comprehensive debate on the overworking of pupils at school."

The role of the sciences in schools intensified between 1960 and 1980, when areas such as the social sciences (i.e. educational science and psychology) were added to the subjects in disciplines such as history, German, Romance languages, mathematics, etc. This also changed the roles of the various players who define education policy in the schools: "Whereas school superintendents and the directors of teachers' colleges had once decided what was to be taught in schools, the curriculum was now being influenced by scientists and as well by teachers to an ever greater extent," Criblez points out. During the same period, didactics became established as a technical field yielding scientifically grounded knowledge about teaching methods.

Parallels to the current debate on school curricula

A historical examination of what was taught and learnt at school and the legitimization of the school knowledge system shows that school performs fundamental social tasks, i.e. it is a function of society. As Criblez notes: "The school curriculum and knowledge system are subjected to a permanent process of negotiation. This is apparent in the current debate on curricula and foreign languages. Social negotiation processes on such issues are essential. There are, for example, no scientifically decisive findings telling us which foreign language we should learn first. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' here. The answer can thus only be the outcome of a negotiation process, which ultimately depends on the historical context, on the expectations placed on schools by society and on political majorities." Even the frequently voiced complaint about the "economisation" of schools is nothing new: after all, the creation of the secondary [school](#) in the 1830s was largely based on economic considerations.

Within the scope of the "Sinergia" project, nine dissertations, due to be published in the next two years, and a post-doctoral thesis are currently in preparation. Around two million Swiss francs were budgeted for the associated research.

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