

Strategies and Perspectives of School Actors During a Reform of Vocational Training in Luxembourg

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Abstract

Since 2008, a reform of vocational training is being implemented in the upper level of secondary education in Luxembourg. The new method consists of: (1) teaching through competencies; (2) modular training where modules can be repeated until they are achieved; and (3) evaluation which has been changed from quantitative to qualitative. The reform continues to face ongoing challenges and resistance from the different actors involved in vocational training. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the relevant actors in order to analyse their strategies and perspectives during and after the reform: representatives of the Ministry of Education, teaching staff, school administrations, enterprises, parents, and pupils. A heuristic model of resistance to change in education was constructed, based on these interviews. A general fatigue with the reform has spread; and this is at a moment when the Ministry wants to implement new changes to the aforementioned law. In order to make the reform viable, a new negotiated agreement based on the interests of the different players should be achieved.

Keywords

Vocational training, secondary education, competencies, interviews

Since 2008, a reform of vocational training is being implemented in the upper level of secondary education in Luxembourg (MENFP 2011a; 2011b). The new method consists of: (1) teaching through competencies instead of through a knowledge transfer as it was the case before; (2) modular training, where modules not accomplished can be repeated until they are achieved, inside of the framework of the legal time period; and (3) the change of evaluation from a quantitative, i.e. a point system based on a maximum of 60 points, to a qualitative one (MENFP 2008). The reform continues to face ongoing challenges, criticisms, and resistance from the different actors involved in vocational training. In 2014, due to the many difficulties encountered, changes were planned

in order to revise the former reform, leading to a new bill submitted to Parliament in the beginning of the year 2015 (MENJE 2015).

Vocational education is a very complex matter in Luxembourg (Noesen 2005; Refernet 2013), due to the multitude of actors involved (mainly schools, enterprises, professional Chambers with their apprenticeship advisers) and the difficult student population concerned. Parts of professional

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qualifications are prepared through a school-based model with an internship; other professional qualifications are obtained via a dual system with a three to four days on-the-job training in companies.

OBJECTIVES

This study used a qualitative interview methodology in line with the assumptions of interpretive social science (Neuman 1997). Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the relevant actors in order to analyse their strategies and perspectives during and after the reform up until today. The authors interviewed the professional Chambers who represent employees and business owners, school heads, teachers, apprenticeship advisers, parents, and students.

RESULTS

A heuristic model of resistance to change in an educational reform is presented hereafter, based on these interviews.

Ministry of Education

The Ministry took a top-down approach and implemented the reform quite quickly despite resistance from teachers and school heads. The reform was also based on a modernist pedagogical ideology (Tyack and Cuban 1995) assuming that most pupils would succeed at school if a flexible modular system would be implemented.

The planning was minimal and no training and preparation of the teachers was undertaken. Information addressed to the relevant actors was poor, and piloting of the whole reform was incoherent and more often than not absent. The new law (MENFP 2008) and regulations were long, complex, partially contradictory, and unreadable even for experts in the field. In addition, many details were not finalised at the time of the launch of the reform. Most professions had no or only partial training programmes written in

the new competence-based format at the beginning of the reform, several training programmes were progressively finalised at the same time as the reform was launched, some still had no programme at this juncture. No preliminary pilot project was done to test the new way of teaching and evaluating the outcomes.

Teachers

The majority of teaching staff was against training through competencies as it was considered a more difficult, less enforceable approach than previous knowledge-based methods. Teachers in Luxembourg are concerned about their classroom based on autonomy. They see interventions from outside, especially concerning pedagogical methods prescribed by the Ministry, as an intrusion into their domain of expertise. During their training at university, future teachers are not well prepared for work at vocational schools as they are not taught to handle difficult populations of pupils. They are trained in knowledge-based contents like literature, mathematics, or physics rather than delivering content in an on-the-job design.

Often, teachers adapted at a superficial level to the new competence-based approach, but continued to teach in a similar way as before. They also often implicitly kept the 60-point evaluation system in their heads, translating it into competence-based evaluation on the paper.

School Administrations

School management was opposed to modular training where there was the possibility for students to repeat modules in the following semesters after failing. In their view, it was too complicated to implement. It was actually shown in practice that these repetitions involved complex, nearly individualised timetables. A lot of pupils also accumulated a high number of non-finished modules, which made it increasingly difficult to succeed in the units necessary to get the final diploma. In addition, often in series of successive

modules of growing complexity, the first ones were failed and the following modules were already being taught to pupils, which made no sense either from a logical or a pedagogical point of view.

School administrations often had to create their own computer tool to manage the progression of pupils, as the one provided by the Ministry was unclear and ineffective. A lot of energy had to be put in the management of the many failed modules and their repetitions.

Enterprises

Businesses were in favour of a curriculum based on competencies, as they are more suited to the practical work carried out in the professional domain. Moreover, new skills and competences were necessary in a changing economic environment. Hence, businesses were looking for an increased range of skills from a low-achieving pupil population. Enterprises and their representatives, the Chambers, also ask for a better orientation and a better level of lower secondary education, which would allow them to recruit more motivated and more skilled pupils at the entry of vocational training, especially of apprenticeships.

While enterprises were, in principle, positive towards the reform, they also had difficulties with the abstract and systematic formulation of training modules, which was asked for by the reform. The new competence-based evaluation, especially the “integrated” evaluations taking place at mid-term and at the end of the training period, is perceived as difficult to organise.

Transversal Actors: Curriculum Teams

The new curricula were supposed to be written by multi-actor teams comprising representatives of teachers, employees, entrepreneurs, and professional Chambers of both employees and business owners. When the reform was first launched, most of the competence-based modules were not complete, and some remained so today. These modules were

produced, often very late, and with very different levels of quality depending on the profession or the module. The whole architecture of the training modules is also very poorly constructed. Modules appear more often than not as independent and not as articulated building blocks of a whole, which is particularly problematic from a competence-based training perspective.

Additionally, the teams did not work together easily due to differences in the professional profiles of their members. Teachers were perceived as too intellectual and not practical enough; whereas representatives of the businesses often found it difficult to contribute to discussions about formulating teaching objectives which they perceived to be very abstract. The teams were also left to their own devices, except for some scant follow-up by foreign educational experts who were perceived to be inefficient and too theoretical. There was no general work plan and no follow-up of the teams which could have contributed towards a coherence and homogeneity in the design of training modules, at least for professions of similar complexity.

Pupils

Students who join vocational education seldom do this by choice, rather because they are not able to access general or technical education, as these strands require more school preparation in the traditional branches. These pupils not only have the impression that they are in second class schools, but also they are often perceived by teachers as not having the required educational level to learn a profession.

Confronted with the new flexible system, pupils in vocational education tended to postpone their efforts in achieving training modules, especially as the majority of students were at a relatively low level. Their accumulated uncompleted work contributed to administrative overload, as schools had to organise repeat training in the following semester after failures. The reform of vocational training overestimated the

capacity of these youngsters to regulate and organise their training paths. Pupils have no influence on the implementation of the reform and are more spectators than actors.

Parents

Parents often had the same reaction as pupils, finding it difficult to understand the new terminology and evaluation system. Being used to an assessment system based on points, they were confused about the new qualitative assessments, which were less precise and less understandable. However, parents had no influence on the discussion and the implementation of the reform.

DISCUSSIONS

The dynamics of resistance and difficulties of a school reform can be best modelled through a systemic framework (Crozier and Friedberg 1977). Actors adopt semi-autonomous strategies in response to and in interaction with all other players in the field. The system can be dysfunctional even if all the actors believe they are adopting a rational strategy from their point of view. One important issue for the actors is to maintain their autonomy, which gives them a zone of power, and therefore they develop strategies to circumvent the rules. This is particularly evident in the behaviours of teachers and school principals.

The strategies of the actors can be analysed through the lens of a bureaucratic reform (Crozier and Friedberg 1977; Dupuy 2004). The main three actors to be considered for the present reform are the Ministry, participating enterprises, and teachers including school principals. The other actors had to adopt a more passive perspective due to their lack of power in the implementation.

The Ministry of Education adopted a top-down approach to the change. The reform was intended to solve the problems of vocational training, i.e. large numbers of failures and ineffective teaching and

learning strategies. The reform was not negotiated and fully discussed with schools. The transition from a knowledge-based to a competence-based training system should have been prepared over time and facilitated through training and persuasion, which was not the case and generated much opposition. At the same time, objective difficulties in the implementation of the reform, like the difficulty of organizing the repeats of the numerous unsuccessful modules and more generally to adjust a flexible individualized modular system to a classroom-planned school system, were underestimated.

Objective difficulties and subjective resistance in the schools combined in a way to block the reform through two mechanisms. First, the new rules were undermined through an as-if behaviour in which old contents were presented in the new language of modules without changing them in a fundamental way. Secondly, school-based or teacher-based adaptations were locally invented, often in contradiction with the official law, but were justified by the over-complexities of the new rules and regulations.

Enterprises, despite the fact that they were in favour of a curriculum based on competencies, took a position of withdrawal due to the abstract formulation of training contents and their distance to the school-based regulations and thinking. They favoured a more pragmatic approach, and hence did not contribute significantly to curriculum teams which they considered were a loss of time and an unnecessary economic cost.

The Ministry of Education responded to these manifestations of uncontrollability with either passivity or imposing additional regulations. These became increasingly complex and non-transparent, thereby reinforcing the vicious circle of opposition and regulation.

CONCLUSIONS

The reform of initial vocational training in

Luxembourg was very ambitious. Its aim was to replace knowledge-based education by a generalised competence-based curriculum, and to make progression through training modules very flexible and individualised in order to promote the success of students as well as to improve the quality of training. Six years after the implementation of the reform, it has not reached its objectives. A general fatigue with the reform has spread, even if most of the actors agree at least verbally with its general philosophy; and this is at a moment when the Ministry wants to implement new changes to the aforementioned law (MENJE 2015).

In order to make the reform viable, a new negotiated agreement based on the interests of the different players should be elaborated if the reform efforts were to have a chance of being viable. It would be a big risk to adopt once again a top-down approach combined with new complexities. Some over-naïve regulations like the automatic advancement of pupils despite the failing of individual modules will be taken back and will be adopted with satisfaction by school principals and teachers. But the main issue, the replacement of a knowledge-based educational system with competence-based training, is unlikely to be solved by the ongoing “reform of the reform” (MENJE 2015).

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