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LEARNING OUTCOMES

A study of policy tools provided by the EU

Abstract: Education policy is in the 21st century having much influence upon education practice and this fact is the point of departure for a mapping of some trends in Europe. The EU is influencing the national policy making in order to change the current practices and is for this reason supporting education research. The article introduces some concepts, models, and structures which may facilitate discussions among educators wanting to understand the background for the current wave of changes.

Key words: Competences, education policy, learning outcomes, qualification frameworks

INTRODUCTION

Education systems are being restructured worldwide due to the global competition between the national economies and it is, at least in Europe, becoming an open question whether the concept of *education* is having the connotations it used to have. One argument for this statement is the growth of these systems: Education systems, big or small, public or private, are recruiting learners from all age groups, the societies are expressing new needs for learning, and the number of stakeholders within education is increasing. Another, that national as well as *transnational* policy making in relation to policies for communication, economy, employment, health, innovation, research, welfare, you name it, are influencing the policy area which is becoming more and more complex.

This short study considers the concept of *learning* because it is obvious that a thinking in learning is today appearing on the macro level (read EU level), on the meso level (read nation state level), on the micro level (read provider level), as well as on the interaction level (read practice level).

The “Lisbon Strategy” for the development of *knowledge-based economy* has pushed national as well as transnational policy making so much that almost

all countries in Europe are influenced. The national education systems will probably experience more shifts within the two first decades of the 21st century than they did in the entire 20th century.

Actually, the last century was a period where education systems in Europe expanded (vocational education, secondary education, adult education, higher education) and recruited new layers of the populations but the connotations related to the concept of education remained, and the *curricula* continued to be a favorite tool for policy makers: What kind of knowledge, skills and attitudes were schools supposed to transfer down to pupils? How could the nation states civilize their populations and make sure that the young men became good soldiers? Policy makers used to give the selection of textbooks which included “the right inputs” a high priority and all efforts done within the education systems were regarded as national *costs*. How much was the minister of finance willing to pay? The implementation of educational reforms was often slow processes which meant that traditions within the education profession remained rather stable. Educators were in most of the last century exercising top-down practices.

The effects of the globalization processes are today felt all over Europe and they have in almost all countries made it relevant to study *education policy*. The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) is in front in the search for relevant practices and policies, the EU is developing or importing policy tools (macro level), and the nation states are willing to reconsider their education policies (meso level). How are public and private providers of education (micro level) translating new education policies and what are the reactions among the educators who are exercising education practices (interaction level)? And, finally, how are the transnational policy making in the early 21st century connected to the development of new practices?

THE BOX MODEL

Many reflections about the interaction between the macro level and the interaction level are simply guess work. There are not many evidence based studies which focus on the connections between the transnational policies and the revision of practices. However, the following simple model may serve as a reference point for educators who want to think out of the box:



The model consists of four boxes where the perspective within each box is that the three other boxes appear as *black*. Educators know their own practice as well as the practice of colleagues. However, they may from their perspective have difficulties in knowing and understanding the rationality behind the revisions within the education profession (especially the education of new teachers), they may have limited access to the results of education research, and they may regard education policies as non-transparent or non-sense. Unions and associations established by educators are familiar with the current developments within the education profession and they may have difficulties in knowing and understanding the developments within the practice box, the policy box, and the research box. National policy makers trying to translate the flow of transnational policies are probably without much insight in the thinking within in the other boxes. And researchers are struggling with multi-level analyses of the activities in all boxes.

The thinking in the practice box and the profession box are of course related very much to each other. Newly educated teachers are having the traditions of the profession in their luggage when they start their interaction with learners and colleagues. But the thinking in the research box and in the policy box are having much influence in the 21st century which means that the thinking in the profession box is having limited influence. The number of researchers and policy makers on meso and macro level are expanding because a “critical mass” is becoming important.

The interactions between the thinking within the boxes were perhaps having better conditions before the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy because the influence from transnational policy making was limited and the pathways for national policy making were well known. Comparative studies of education were having a low priority in several European countries and the community of stakeholders influencing national policy making were usually easy to overview. The practices within education had in the past strong links to a top-down approach and the development of the education profession was deeply influenced by traditions within the unions and the associations of educators.

The results of empirical studies as PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS are today disturbing the traditional pathways for policy making, and educators may consider the development of national testing systems as a threat to their practice. Researchers are producing comparative studies based on empirical evidence and policy makers are no longer taking arguments coming from educators, their unions, or their associations for granted.

THE EU SCENARIO

The European Commission is after the passing of the Maastricht Treaty (1993) with due respect to the principle of subsidiarity having a legal right to formulate policies within education. However, the right implies that the Commission is only allowed to formulate policies in areas when governments in EU member states are not able to do the formulation themselves. The passing of the supra-national right may explain why a policy document on “Growth, Competiveness, Employment” (1994) included a reference to a policy tool which had been promoted by Council of Europe and UNESCO since 1965. The European Commission stated that “...lifelong education is the overall objective to which the national educational communities can make their own contributions”.

However, the Commission dropped lifelong education the following year and introduced lifelong learning. A new trendsetting policy document was called “Teaching and Learning – Towards the Learning Society” and the text included objectives to:

- *encourage the acquisition of new knowledge*
- *bring school and the business sector closer together*
- *combat exclusion*
- *develop proficiency in three European languages*
- *treat capital investments and investments in training on an equal basis.*

The objectives formulated in 1995 were afterwards included in the development of an EU agenda for education policy. The transnational policy making was explicit when the European Commission promoted 1996 as “European Year of Lifelong Learning”.

The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) were planning a similar move. The Nordic Council of Ministers had in the end of 1992 appointed a committee with representatives from many fields within the Nordic societies and the Council managed to publish a long term strategy before the European Commission took action. The policy document “Golden Riches in the Grass. Lifelong learning for all” (1995) was prepared when Denmark was the only Nordic member state in the EU. However, Finland and Sweden were soon becoming EU member states and Norway and Iceland became associated EU member states.

It seems obvious that the formulation of a transnational agenda for education policy was guided by the OECD which recommended a systematic development of knowledge-based economy implying investments in the production of *human capital*. Policy makers in EU member states studied the OECD report “The Knowledge-based Economy” (1996) and noted that the concept of *learning* had become relevant for the OECD. And the OECD were besides EU member

states having countries as Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, South Korea, Switzerland, Turkey and USA as members.

Another prerequisite for setting transnational agendas for policy making within education was a result of negotiations done within the World Trade Organization (WTO). Education was after a general agreement reached by the WTO in 1995 being categorized as a *service* as well as health and policy makers were afterwards realizing that both services are important for the production of human capital. Education (read learning outcomes) and health services can be produced by non-public providers and be sold on markets which may transcend the borders of nation states.

The EU was due to the “Erasmus Programme” (established in 1887) involved in massive funding of student exchange between universities in different countries and had for this reason promoted a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) which was supposed to make credit transfer easier within higher education. However, the “ECTS Users’ Guide” which was published by the European Commission in 1995 implied a move away from a traditional teacher-centered practice because it described common guidelines for the measurement of the work load delivered by learners.

MEMORANDUM ON LIFELONG LEARNING

The Council of the European Union adopted in 2000 a long term strategy (the Lisbon Strategy) for: 1) building knowledge infrastructures, 2) enhancing innovation and economic reform, and 3) modernizing social welfare and education systems.

Which policy tools provided by the EU may support the modernization of education systems? Several policy documents have been published but the “Memorandum on lifelong learning” (2000) is still relevant reading because the text: 1) pinpoints problems within *education systems*, 2) is based on consultations with *stakeholders*, and 3) describes policy tools as *lifelong learning and learning outcomes*.

The Memorandum argued for:

- *Guaranty universal and continuing access to learning*
- *Visibly raise levels of investments in human resources*
- *Develop effective teaching and learning methods and contexts*
- *Significantly improve the recognition and appreciation of learning outcomes*
- *Ensure easy access to information and advice about learning opportunities*
- *Provide lifelong learning opportunities as close to learners as possibly*

The European Commission did in the following decade use *soft governance* based on the “Open Method of Coordination” (OMC). Most of the activi-

ties within the policy making were now based on the OMC tool. Old EU programmes for education expired and they were merged together in a common programme. The European Commission implemented from 2007 the “Lifelong Learning Programme”.

The decisions taken by the European Commission were for a decade framed by a work programme called “Education and Training 2010”. It contained guidelines for EU actions and has been revised and evaluated several times which means that the EU has initiated the production of several reports. Much information about the effects of the work programme is accessible on the Internet. The objectives were general:

- *the education and training systems must take up the challenge of quality and efficiency*
- *they must be accessible to all in a lifelong learning perspective*
- *they must be open to society and the world*

Most of the programme activities were measured in numbers according to *indicators* selected by the European Commission and the results of “Education and Training 2010” were actually disappointing. The reasons are many and the unexpected inclusion of 14 new EU member states is one of them. Another is the continuing financial and economic crises in Europe.

A work programme for “Education and Training 2020” was adopted by the Council of the European Union in 2009. The current work programme includes a new policy tool called *mobility* and it contains specific objectives:

- *making lifelong learning and mobility a reality*
- *improving the quality and efficiency of education and training*
- *promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship*
- *encouraging creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship at all levels of education and training*

A PARADIGM SHIFT

The work programme “Education and Training 2020” implies for EU member states that their education and training systems sooner or later will include policy tools as *lifelong learning* and *mobility* and that the relevance of the national curricula will be reduced. This move is sometimes described as a shift of paradigm: The paradigm for national policies and practices is shifting from thinking in education to thinking in learning.

The two following planning models may serve as reference points for discussions about the existence of a paradigm shift as well as the consequences for practice:

	INPUT	PROCESS	PRODUCT
OLD	<i>curricula</i>	<i>teaching</i>	<i>processesexams</i>
NEW	<i>problemslearning</i>	<i>processeslearning</i>	<i>outcomes</i>

The old planning model is mainly based a top-down approach: The curricula are negotiated by national policy makers (meso level), implemented by providers (micro level), and taught by educators (interaction level). The model should be read from left to right: 1) Curricula is the point of departure, 2) the next step is a process based on efforts done by educators who define themselves as teachers and 3) the final step is exams based on assessments done by educators. The practice is teacher-centered and the curricula are linked to certain well-described academic disciplines.

The new planning model is mainly based on a bottom-up approach and the model should be read from right to left: 1) Learning outcomes is the point of departure and includes descriptors telling what learners are expected to know, to understand, and to do in a certain context, 2) the next step is the work of learners who are made responsible for their own learning processes while educators define themselves as facilitators, 3) the final step is the identification of a problem within the society which motivates learners. Studies of problems in the society are in principle not linked to a certain well-described academic discipline because self-directed learners may work in an interdisciplinary way.

We may summarize by saying that the old planning model is linked to the *supply* of specific textbooks while the new planning model is linked to the *demand* of specific learning outcomes. What are stakeholders within the national economies asking for? Actually, learning outcomes are the returns of public investments. The practice is as in the guidelines for the use of ECTS linked to the needs of the end users that are the learners and the societies.

KEY COMPETENCES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

The OECD established in 1997 a project called “DeSeCo” (Definition and Selection of Competencies) where the aim was to describe a number of *key competencies useful for a successful life for individuals and a well-functioning society*. Policy makers in the EU took over and the policy formulation ended with a recommendation of eight key competences which in 2006 was passed by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union:

- 1) Communication in the mother tongue
- 2) Communication in the foreign languages

- 3) Mathematical competence and basic competence in science and technology
- 4) Digital competence
- 5) Learning to learn
- 6) Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competences
- 7) Entrepreneurship
- 8) Cultural expression

The eight key competences are promoted by the EU which means that the concept of *competence* has been established as a policy tool. A general definition of competence is: Something that you are able to do in a certain context. We may according to the new planning model say that all competences are products of *learning processes* and one consequence of this saying is that competences cannot be categorized as a new kind of curricula: Competences are *learning outcomes*. The EU did in 2006 not argue for transnational curricula: EU member states are recommended to include the eight key competences in their long term planning of the specific learning outcomes which will be produced by the national education and training systems.

However, some countries are silently resisting the recommendations from the EU. A comparative study of strategies for lifelong learning in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden published recently by Nordic Council of Ministers has shown that inclusion of the EU recommendation of the eight key competences is having a low priority. The general argument is that these competences already are produced as learning outcomes due to the existence of older national strategies.

The European Commission is according to the principle of subsidiarity formulating policies in relation to problems which may be categorized as transnational problems. Some problems are mainly caused by the globalization processes which in fact have become concrete realities in all EU member states. National policy makers are using the EU policies as their legitimate reference points and EU member states are voluntarily coordinating their formulation of education policy and are hereby accepting the OMC tool. The OMC is based on an approach which is bottom-up in relation to stakeholders and the EU appreciates when member states invite stakeholders to participate in the formulation of national policies.

EUROPEAN QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

The European Parliament and the Council for the European Union recommended in 2008 the establishment of the “European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning” (EQF) which according to the policy document includes a description of a transnational framework consisting of eight levels where each level is defined by a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes. The following illustration is taken from the policy document published by the European Commission:

	Knowledge
	In the context of EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 1 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic general knowledge
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 2 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 3 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 4 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 5 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 6 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 7 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research • critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 8 are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields

The knowledge described on Level 1 is the kind of knowledge that the EU wants all young citizens to possess when they leave compulsory schooling and the knowledge on Level 8 is supposed to be the outcome of doctoral studies. Level 6, 7, and 8 are identical with the learning outcomes earned after academic studies on bachelors, masters and doctors levels in accordance with the Bologna Process. The thinking behind this understanding of *knowledge* was not difficult to integrate into national policy making. However, the EU understanding of *skills* and *competence* caused problems for policy makers in several EU member states:

Skills	Competence
In the context of EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).	In the context of EQF, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic skills required to carry out simple tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work or study under direct supervision in a struc-
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work or study under supervision with some autonomy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study • adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change • supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts • take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches • take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

Small countries as Denmark were able to develop a National Qualification Framework (NQF) which was almost identical with the EQF while bigger countries as Germany with the many regions had to overcome difficult negotiations with national stakeholders. The negotiations ended in the German case with a fourth column. The Germans are having one column for *social competence* and another for *autonomy*.

This study categorizes the EQF as a policy tool because it contains prescribed *learning outcomes* and it notes that attitudes are not included. A similar policy tool has in the past been implemented by countries excising a liberal market economy (Australia, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, and South Africa).

The political intention is to make learning outcomes transparent for all stakeholders and the European Commission expects that the implementation of NQFs will make the validation of *non-formal and informal learning* less complicated. The EU recommendation of a set of “Common Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning” (2004) had limited effect in several EU member states. It is hoped that a successful implementation of NQFs will make the benefits for learners, providers, workers, and employers so transparent that validation and transfer of credits within and between education and work will be met by fewer barriers. It is important to note that the EU wants the NQF tool to become relevant for the development of settings within working life.

When transnational policy tools are included in national policy making is a majority of EU member states faced with a linguistic challenge: How to translate the transnational policy tools which are expressed in a foreign language into mother tongue? Maybe a translation is not needed? Maybe policy tools as *lifelong learning, OMC, mobility, key competences, and national qualification frameworks* expressed in Euro-English can facilitate the policy formulation as well as the policy implementation?

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Apstrakt: Obrazovna politika 21. veka u mnogome utiče na obrazovnu praksu što dovodi do toga da ne mogu da se ispoštuju neki trendovi u obrazovanju u Evropi. Evropska Unija utiče na propisivanje međunarodnih propisa kako bi promenila trenutni način izvođenja prakse te zbog toga podržava istraživanje u oblasti obrazovanja. Članak govori o idejama, modelima i strukturama koje bi mogle da omogućе diskusije među edukatorima sa ciljem da se razmotri i razume pozadina trenutnih promena u ovoj oblasti.

Кljučне речи: kompetencije, obrazovna politika, ishodi učenja, okvir kvalifikacija.