

## Teaching in Vocational Schools: Educational Alignment versus the Promotion of Talents

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching and learning has fundamentally changed in the last thirty years. In this period, a wide range of novel teaching theories has been established. Recent research states that a teacher's professional identity consists of a cognitive, psychological and also a social perspective. The identity of a teacher emerges when s/he interacts with his/her students or other people. As a result of these interactions, teachers treat the questions "who are they?" and "who do they want to become?". These questions pose different views on educational methodologies today. On the one side some professionals argue for learning in a community which supports establishing an average basis of knowledge among all pupils. This approach especially helps the struggling pupils, since a key component is that pupils learn from each other and align their knowledge. On the other side, however, others vote for an individual learning program. Here, in particular talents are promoted. The question is, what approach is more promising for the society of tomorrow. This work deals with the underlying theories, discusses the advantages and disadvantages of these learning theories and, as an example, additionally incorporates a focused view on the Austrian education system.

### General Terms

Teaching methodology, Vocational Schools

### Indexing terms

Educational alignment, promotion of talents, professional identity

### Academic Discipline And Sub-Disciplines

Educational Science

### SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION

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### COVERAGE

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### TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)

Comparative Study, Experience Report

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning has fundamentally changed in the last thirty years. In this period a wide range of novel teaching theories has been established. Bejaard (2006) says that a teacher's professional identity consists of a cognitive, psychological and also a social perspective. The identity of a teacher emerges when s/he interacts with his/her students or other people. As a result of these interactions, teachers treat the questions "who are they?" and "who do they want to become?". These questions pose different views on educational methodologies today. Richard Defour (2004) argues for learning in a community which supports establishing an average basis of knowledge among all pupils. This approach especially helps the struggling pupils, since a key component is that pupils learn from each other and align their knowledge. Friedrich Oswald (2005) and Walburga Maria Weilguny (2005) vote for an individual learning program. Here, in particular talents are promoted. The question is, what approach is more promising for the society of tomorrow. This work deals with the underlying theories, discusses the advantages and disadvantages of these learning theories and additionally incorporates a focused view on the Austrian education system.

## ON THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATIONAL ALIGNMENT

Defour (2004) explains that one of his basic ideas is "ensuring that students learn". In this case all teachers have to work together in order to coordinate teaching efforts. As the school moves forward the mentors have to ask themselves three questions:

- What do we want each student to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

The third question distinguishes one school from another. Usually the teachers instruct the pupils in units from workbooks. The pupils work out exercises for listening, writing and reading in the textbook or on worksheets with some help from their teachers.. An average student is able to follow the lectures without problems. However, some of them have learning issues. These struggling students should get more information and more help. In regular schools they often will not get specific help from a few tutors or conveying courses. As a consequence they might fail and need to repeat the class.

The basic idea of Defour (2004) is to help such struggling students. They receive additional time and support from their teacher. In Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, they offer a special program for all students. Every student gets a progress report every three weeks. If students do not do well in a class, the teachers organize for them an immediate intervention-programme. First, the teacher and specialists from the school talk to the pupil individually. Then they inform his or her parents. After that the school offers a tutoring center. Also an older student, a so called buddy, helps the struggling student with homework and provides advices and recommendations. If all these measures are not successful and do not assist the student to pass the class, the school will organize a larger meeting with the student, the parents, the counselor and the classroom teacher. The purpose of this meeting is to set up a dedicated contract which settles everybody's responsibilities in order to help the student with learning the basics required to pass the class.

Another fundamental idea from Defour (2004) is "a focus on results". He explains that usually in schools teachers develop a certain routine of work which often causes them to loose focus on the pupils. This means, for instance, they do not promote their students well, but are satisfied when they even reach a below-average level. This is known as the DRIP-

syndrome (Data Rich/Information Poor) which afflicts the schools. The idea of Defour (2004) is to create a system where the focus is on results. When the whole class knows more than the average standard then the school or their teachers are rewarded, for example they receive additional budget for new labs for their science courses or library extensions. In Freeport Intermediate School, located fifty miles south of Houston, Texas, teachers have a daily meeting to declare standard outcomes for their grade levels and courses. Furthermore every teacher has access to all teaching materials of the whole team. The teachers make an assessment at least once a week to guarantee that all students have reached a similar knowledge on the same grade level. Four times a year, a team of teachers arranges a cumulative exam which spans all relevant knowledge areas. Each spring, the team develops and manages practice tests for the state exam. Once a year the teachers evaluate the results of his or her students. The results identify lacks of knowledge of every student. Using this, the teacher knows the issues of his or her pupils and can individually support the struggling students. This enables the teacher to improve the aggregated class result.

### **ON THE PROMOTION OF TALENTS**

While Defour (2004) focuses on the hard learning students to integrate them into the standard learning system, on the other hand, Oswald (2005) and Weilguny (2005) are focusing on the easily learning students and vote to promote them.

In Austria, there are about 2000 children every year which are highly gifted. This number is 2.5% of the annual birthrate. When we talk about highly gifted then the intelligence quotient is equal or above 130. Every kid needs attention to find out if he or she is gifted and in which talent. It is also indispensable to have skilled teachers who know how to treat these young persons. A team of teachers creates concepts for didactic methodologies with the aim for individual talent promotion of every student. These students should learn individually but it is essential to ensure the performance standard.

In regular schools pupils are divided by accounting for their age and not according to their performance. Thus, every ten-year-old boy or girl will learn the same in school in Austria. It is easy to repeat the same class if the student is not able to learn the whole study material for a particular school level but it is very hard to skip a class when you are a highly gifted child.

In case a school has a class dedicated for gifted children, it means not to give up the traditional teaching lessons but put in extended didactics. That means that teachers have different methods to teach. Joyce Weil and Calhoun (2000) identified four major families of teaching systems, that are the behaviour system, the information-processing, the personal or individual family, and social family system. It is essential for teachers to master numerous different types of learning strategies to reach all students by using different ways of knowledge transfer, for example, hearing, writing and reading. There is also no perfect form of teaching gifted students. The teachers have to be flexible in their lessons. A substantial objective is the promotion of the individual skills and interests of the students. The mentors teach them from the factual knowledge to understanding of theories and concepts, to use research methods, to analyze problems, structures and problem-solving approaches. The students prepare in the lessons with aid of their teachers a reflection, a motivation and a statement on their own. It is also important for these students to have practically applicable learning goals in order to be able to cope with everyday's situations. Teachers need to be flexible regarding room-, time-, role- and content structures. Regarding the room structure, the school needs to provide appropriate facilities for example some small group rooms for different role-plays. Regarding the time structure, the teachers

should not stick to fifty-minutes-lessons because it is difficult for students to do a project in fixed time frames. With respect to the role structure the teachers do not always act as teachers but also as coaches and advisors. Finally, the content structure says that the students should learn within open end projects with the aim of facilitating creativity. These schools for gifted students usually offer bilingual classes, hire professionals to promote students, offer training, project weeks, language weeks, habitations in abroad countries, contests, and workshops. The teachers of the gifted students also have to discover the areas of their intellectual talents. These could be in the domains of logics-mathematics, languages, visual-spatial perception, music, naturalism, and so on. Equally to regular students, gifted students also get grades in their schools. The bases for these grades are, for example, portfolios, letter of interests, tests and exams.

### **DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: THE SITUATION IN AUSTRIA**

In every school in Austria, each student has to do tests or exams to determine their learning success. Nevertheless, a teacher can – with additional support – undertake a number of further efforts to develop an individual professional identity; last but not least by applying concepts explained before.

When teachers start their career, it is mostly really challenging for them to develop their professional identity, i.e., to find their way to become a successful teacher. Usually a new teacher gets a mentor assigned, a colleague who helps in any teaching questions. They assist new teachers with plenty of knowledge, for instance, how to handle with struggled students or also with the computer system. They also support the new teachers to plan their teaching lessons, and observe lessons to give feedback and advices to handle challenging situations. Also teaching remedial lessons is a valuable experience to see that some struggling students have fun when they learn in groups at their speed. Teachers might further offer to all pupils some social activities off the classroom, such as wine tastings, creative cooking, doing gymnastics, rhetoric classes, excursions to different museums, and trips to various locations in and around Vienna. Knowledge gathered from these lessons may also be useful for the pupil's later jobs.

Pupils in a vocational school in Austria typically hold different degrees. Thus, someone having an A-level could sit next to one who has just a high school degree. So it has been proven challenging to teach such diverse groups because those of them who have an A-level are bored with simple exercises and disturb their classmates. For that reason, it is often more successful to teach individually. For instance, the usage of customized worksheets instead of standardized books is an effective way to fit exercises to the varying knowledge levels of different classrooms.

### **CONCLUSION**

Defour (2004) avowed in his paper that it is important to hold the learning standard in the classes. Teachers should care about each student, especially the hard learning ones. They benefit from participation in the community (e.g., through group work) while the highly gifted stick to an average level. In contrast to that, Oswald (2005) and Weilguny (2005) explain in their paper that it is of utmost importance for teachers to promote the gifted children individually. However, both approaches cannot be applied together, since group learning and individual support are two conflicting measures. The schools should offer different learning programs for both, hard and easy learning students.

I argue, as a teacher, that it is essential for each student to pass the class and get him or her on the way. Young people should get as much help and advice as he or she will need

from teachers and parents. It is further necessary to teach gifted students individually to unleash their full potential.

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Tina Koppitz is teaching at the Vocational School for the Hotel and Catering Industry Vienna since autumn 2009. The main subjects she is responsible for are accounting, working at the reception, German and Business English. Currently, she is a student at the college of education, Vienna. In course of her studies, she spent one term abroad at the University of Iceland - School of Education, where she specialized in the field "Professionalism in Education".