Functions of Content Standards in Russia, England and the Netherlands: a Comparative Analysis

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Content standards
An educational standard formulates the goals, attitudes and skills which are aimed for in education. Educational standards can be formulated for a specific subject matter domain (content or curriculum standards) as well as for schools and school systems as educational delivery systems. The study reported here primarily focuses on content standards that are formulated for the lower secondary curriculum in three countries, viz. Russia, the Netherlands, and England and Wales.

In Russia this refers to content standards for the nine-year school, in the Netherlands this refers to core objectives for a recent implemented innovation, Basic Education, and in England and Wales this refers to the development of attainment targets in the framework of the National Curriculum.

Study
The purpose of the comparative study is to contribute to the discussion in Russia about the development and functions of content standards through comparing recently formulated (partly draft) standards of the three countries mentioned above. The study limits itself to an analysis of the documents that describe the curriculum (rationale, content and structure), the formal curriculum. Next to a general analysis, the content of Mathematics and English as a foreign language has been analyzed specifically.

For the analysis formal documents referring to core objectives for Basic Education (the Netherlands) and the National Curriculum (England & Wales) were collected. As the development of content standards in Russia took more time than was expected, for Russia only the general documents on content standards were formally approved (including the rationale and a time table for the distinguished subject matters). Content Standards focusing on specific subject matters are still being developed by different groups (sometimes competing with each other, sometimes cooperating). For the analysis of Mathematics and English therefore the draft documents of promising scientific groups were analyzed.

The analysis is based on a detailed scheme, partly derived from a more general analysis on education standards carried out by the OECD (1991). The scheme included for the general part of the analysis components such as nature and purpose of content standards, development of content standards and relation between content standards and assessment. For the specific part on Mathematics and English the scheme included the components rationale, general goals, domains covered and time allocated.
Results
Content standards are accomplishing several functions for the educational system, such as guidelines for curriculum developers and textbook authors, for examination developers, for schools to organize the teaching-learning processes and for policy makers as an instrument in monitoring quality of education etc. The results of the analysis show that countries differ in the functions that turned out to be of primary importance. Functions of content standards appear to be very much related to the definition of content standards, their level of specificity, the intrinsic value for certain target groups and their legal status.

In the paper the relation between the principal functions of content standards in the three countries involved and the formulation and structure of content standards will be discussed.

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