Commissioning Systematic Reviews
A Swiss Perspective

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Overview

1. Governance in educational research
2. Systematic Review on University dropout
3. Systematic Review on Foreign language teaching
4. Conclusion
Governance in educational research

- Cantons (federal member states) responsible for education
- Federal state responsible for upper secondary and part of higher education, and for research funding
- Cantons and Federal government jointly responsible for quality and system monitoring
- Joint institution since 1974: SCCRE Knowledge Centre
- Standing committee with high officials from all stakeholders dealing with the system monitoring
Mandate of a systematic review

- Proposal: initiate SR in relevant areas with little or heterogeneous research on national and international level
- Commission to the Danish Clearinghouse: knowhow and capacity lacking in Switzerland; external view welcomed; SR covering national languages German and French
2013: SR on dropout at University

- Starting point: High dropout at Universities in Switzerland (30%) despite highly selective high schools; little research (of low quality) in this field
- Lack of interest in the topic by the Universities
- Systematic review: Larsen et al. 2013: Dropout phenomena at Universities: What is Dropout? Why does Dropout occur? What can be done to prevent or reduce it? Copenhagen: DCH.
- Follow-up: International conference; Decision-makers’ seminar; Dropout as a new focus area for education policy
SR on dropout at University: Key findings

- Dropout as complex phenomenon with factors prior to and within university
- Voluntary dropout vs. involuntary dropout (formal dropout)
- Formal dropout predicted by pre-university factors (SES, prior academic achievement)
- Voluntary dropout rather affected by within-university factors (motivation, academic and social integration)
- Most of dropout occurs at the beginning of the study course
Follow-up

- *International Conference* to reflect the findings from the SR among researchers in the field
- *Decision makers‘ Seminar*: Policy makers (Cantonal ministers, University governors, and high level officials) discuss findings of the SR in a closed setting under the Chatham House Rule
- Universities agree putting the issue high on the agenda and defining it as *new policy goal*
- *Research* mandate for a new study on Swiss data
2015: SR on multiple language learning

- **Starting point:** highly controversial discussions on foreign language learning at primary school; Different actors cite various “research” or “literature reviews” on the topic; Popular referenda in several cantons planned

- **Systematic review:** Dyssegaard et al. 2015: A systematic review of the impact of multiple language teaching, prior language experience and acquisition order on students’ language proficiency in primary and secondary education, Copenhagen: DCH
Foreign language teaching in Switzerland

8 years: national language
10 years: English

8 years: English
10 years: national language
Scientific evidence for the ineffectiveness of early language acquisition in School?

- 2 studies of a young post-doc in English linguistics (University of Zurich), based on 200 high school students finds that late starters (same age, but 5 years later) catch-up to the early starters within six month.

- Broad media attention: “scientific proof” that early language teaching is useless

- But: These 2 studies are not included in the SR due to quality concerns
Press articles: stop foreign language teaching in primary school because it’s useless!

Ein Flop, den niemand sofort stoppen will
Trotz negativer Studien halten die Kantone an den zwei Fremdsprachen in der Primarschule fest

Früher ist nicht besser
Sprachenkonzept gescheitert

Ansichten

Frühenglisch – ein schulischer Leerlauf
SR on multiple language learning: key findings

- Proficiency in L1 and L2 has a positive impact on L3 acquisition
- Bilinguals might have an advantage in L3 acquisition
- There is no evidence of overburdening pupils with multiple foreign language learning
- Findings show tendency of late L3-starters performing better than early starters (but: problematic comparison: age vs. hours of instruction, L1-proficiency, sampling)
SR for policy briefing

- SR feeds in Policy makers’ arguments why the linguist’s studies are not taken into consideration and why language policy will not be altered.
- SR does not provide scientific support to postpone language teaching to the secondary level, nor to limit teaching to one single language.
- But SR does not provide scientific support in favour of the actual language teaching policy either.
- Scientific evidence on language acquisition is scarce.
Lessons learnt

- Systematic reviews are well suited to generate an evidence base within a narrow field.
- Quality issues are discussed
- Better acceptance of review due to external institution
- High flexibility (as to time, personnel, resources) with external mandates
- Public perception: Concurrence between evidence from SR and evidence from single studies