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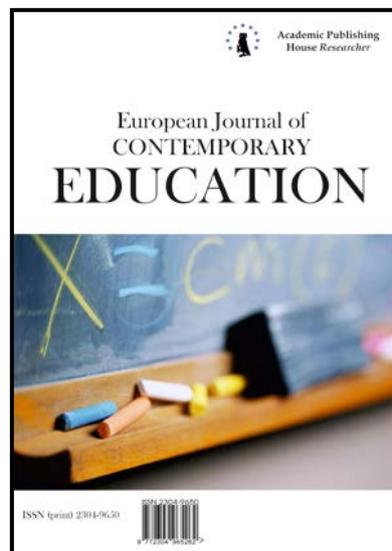
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## Standardization of Primary Education in Great Britain

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### Abstract

The article examines the standardization of primary education as one of the development trends of the British school at the present moment in the context of improving its efficiency and quality. It analyses the positive results of the standard-based reforms (modernization of primary education content, improvement of younger students' outcomes, expansion of school autonomy, professional growth of a primary school teacher) as well as negative ones (increased load for students and teachers, inadequate assessment system).

**Keywords:** primary education, educational standards, standardization, standard-based reforms, quality of education, National Curriculum, key stage, content and attainment standards, assessment, performance descriptors.

### Introduction

The standard-based educational reforms of the 1990s and at beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were caused by the necessity to ensure efficiency, equity and quality of education in order to solve economic and social problems in the world and Europe in particular. The tendency of school autonomy expansion and desire to control the results of educational institutions also contributed to the introduction of educational standards which became the basis for internal and external evaluation of national education systems.

Being in constant development educational standards reflect the social ideal of education, educational requirements as the basis of social and cultural forming of younger generations, fulfilling stabilizing and regulatory functions with respect to the preservation of unified educational

space in the state. This multidimensional nature of standardization in education raises a number of specific pedagogical tasks and challenges not only for the European countries, but also at the global level.

### **Materials and methods**

In the context of the European education the concept of 'a single standard' is directly related to basic education which in most countries is carried out at primary and basic secondary school, mandatory and mass, and in most cases unified.

The main ideas on the creation of a common European standard in the field of education were presented in 'Council of Europe Resolution 1 on the European Dimension of Education: Teaching and Curriculum Content' (1991) which became a guide for the implementation of a unified policy in developing and implementing content standards in Europe [1].

The process of standardization was gaining momentum in the 1980-90s, when the dominant idea in developing school education in most European countries was to improve its quality and effectiveness. To achieve these goals the West European states were taking steps towards optimizing the school management, introducing content standards, establishing national systems for monitoring the quality of education, and implementing new educational technologies.

The main characteristics of the general concept of standardization of compulsory education are based on such fundamental pedagogical ideas as the theory of curriculum (K. Anderson-Levitt, B. Blum, J. Cohen, R. Gordon, B. Gudem, P. Hopman, J. McNeill, V. Pinar, V. Reynalds, P. Slattery, P. Taubman), the theory of lifelong education (G. Dave, P. Lengrand, D. Tenne), and the theory of key competencies (J. Gordon, G. Halasz, A. Hutorskoy, V. Kalney, N. Nikandrov, D. Pepper, S. Shishov, I. Zimnyaya).

Russian comparatist Vladimir Zagvozdkin, analyzing the examples of European national standards, concludes that the term *standard* primarily suggests the rate that can be obtained at different levels:

- at the level of common educational goals and values;
- at the level of competencies related to the specific subject area;
- at the level of learning objectives and content of education (content standards);
- at the level of performance that can be measured by testing (performance standards) [2, p. 286].

To formulate the mandatory educational objectives and determine the level of students' competence the best educational standards must possess such characteristics as objectivity (a particular subject training), focus (a focus on the key areas of study), being cumulative (a forming of competence over time), being obligatory for all (minimal results expected from each student), differentiation (determining the degree of competence above and below the minimum level), clarity (a clear definition of standards), and feasibility (realistic requirements for students and teachers) [2, p. 292].

European experts also point to the correlation between the concepts of 'quality' and 'standard'. The key elements covering the broad notion of 'quality of education' and constantly interacting are entrance conditions, context, process (organization), and standards [3, p. 74].

Speaking about the standardization in today's education researchers are operating with such terms as content and performance standards, learning and teaching standards, minimum standards and standard norm, competence standard, and learning environment standards.

Content standards and standards of achievement are increasingly considered to be the elements of 'from above' standardization, which has negative impact on standardization in primary education: early selection of students and neglect of dependence of learning outcomes on external factors (social, cultural, economic status of parents). In this context 'alternative standards' are becoming of particular interest. Their developers believe that the modern tendency to measure the quality of school results only by centralized tests is pedagogically and didactically counterproductive: the level of achievement in the 'performance standard' is determined without taking into account the significant differences in children's abilities. As a consequence, students who do not correspond to the measured parameters are out of position. Schools are beginning to work for the measured result, their educational objectives are narrowed, so the official standards

are opposed to 'process standards, conditions, and training opportunities' (opportunity-to-learn standards) [4, c. 152].

### **Discussion**

We are going to consider the peculiarities of introduction and results of standard-based reforms at primary school on the example of the system of education in Great Britain.

In the British system of education the concept 'standard' is used to denote the level attained by students, but not the expected level set by the curriculum.

The 1988 Education Reform Act led to the introduction of a national curriculum and a statutory assessment framework what happened for the first time in the history of the United Kingdom. The task of these papers was to standardize the basic education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. National Curriculum was called to provide a wide, balanced and coordinated curriculum for children aged between 5 and 16, introducing such key stages in educating junior schoolchildren as KS 1 for children aged 5-7 years and KS 2 for children aged 7-11 years.

Developing the national educational standards the Ministry of Education and Science has set the following goals:

- to guarantee the right to education for all students regardless of their social status, culture, race, gender, disability, and differences in abilities;
- to set standards of achievement that are clear to students, parents, teachers, politicians, employers, and the public;
- to implement the principles of continuity and succession in the education system by introducing a national framework that promotes consistency of training programs and is flexible enough to ensure progress in the training of students;
- to promote public understanding and confidence in the performance of schools and compulsory education [5, c. 26].

The standard identified the list of mandatory subjects that should be studied by all students – 'core' subjects (English language and literature, mathematics, science) and basic subjects (art and design, technology, geography, history, ICT, music, physical education) [6, p. 25].

Each subject and KS has a content standard (programs of study) defining the knowledge and skills that student should acquire as well as standards of achievement (attainment targets), containing the assessment criteria for 8 levels of difficulty (level descriptions). Thus, at the end of KS 1 (7 years) the productivity of the majority of pupils should be within the range of 1 – 3 levels, and at the end of KS 2 (11 years), it should be within the range of 2 – 5 levels.

At the end of each key stage assessment of students' educational achievements is introduced (summative assessment). Its purpose is to provide teachers with summary data on the levels of students' achievements and diagnostic information for improving the planning and subsequent organization of training.

In 1997 after the victory of the Labor Party *'White Paper: Excellence in schools'* focused on raising the standards of language and mathematical literacy. By 2002 it was planned in the document to reduce the number of pupils (aged 5-6-7 years) in a class up to 30 persons, to introduce effective entrance testing for admission of children to primary school (baseline assessment), to ensure minimum 1 hour of literacy and numeracy during training at ISCED 1, to develop national guidelines and establish a system of teacher training for best practice of literacy and numeracy, and to considerably improve students' academic results at the end of primary education in accordance with the national objectives [7, p. 22].

A concrete step towards the realization of the announced in the 'White Book' goals was the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (1998) and the National Numeracy Strategy Framework (1999) in primary schools. These programs provided teachers with a clear set of descriptors for measuring students' progress in language and mathematics.

The introduction of the national standards allowed the British primary school to make an educational breakthrough. For English, mainly reading, the results indicated that the percentage of children gaining a level 4 between 1995 and 2000 rose from 48 to 75 per cent. For mathematics the rise was from 44 to 72 per cent [8, p. 9].

After reviewing the National Curriculum in August 2000 all publicly funded primary schools in England introduced a framework for personal, social and health education (PSHE).

The framework described the expected skills and knowledge of younger students in these optional subjects leaving the details of the content and the choice of educational technology to schools [9, p. 7].

The chosen course of reforming primary education towards raising standards was continued by the publication of *'Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics'* in 2006. The document set the objectives to identify ways of ensuring the quality of education at ISCED 1, to guarantee the achievement of high standards of literacy and numeracy by all primary school students, to coordinate the content of teaching, and to promote continuity within the educational stages and between them.

Taking into account the results of scientific research over the 1990s and national policies in the field of school education, the updated 'Framework' offered teachers the descriptors of results for each phase as a tool for planning individualized language (speaking, listening, reading) and mathematics learning [10].

As the next step in improving the curriculum educationalists suggest a new 'core' in which it is recommended to include, in addition to the traditional English language (and literature) and mathematics, information and communication technology [5, p. 22].

The 2014 new National Curriculum differs from the previous version (1999) by the lack of 8-level assessment scale of students' achievements. In the 2014 National Curriculum performance standard is directly determined in study programs as something that 'students must know, use and understand'. The cancellation of levels was caused by the lack of specific information as to the achievement of a certain level, namely what a student can do, and recommendations for progress. On the other hand, the use of levels as targets had a negative impact on students who failed to achieve the target levels, causing a problem of 'labeling' the underachieving children.

To replace the levels reporting on students' productivity at the end of key stages British experts have worked out new performance descriptors for assessing students by teachers. Performance descriptors in the core subjects identify what pupils are able to do if they meet certain standards. For KS1 teachers assess students in mathematics, reading and writing as meeting one of four standards: mastery standard; national standard; working towards national standard; below national standard. The descriptor for each standard comprises a number of statements of what students should be able to do in each aspect of the subject, the total comprising 50 or so such elements. Using professional judgement and evidence from class work and a range of activities, teachers decide which standard most closely matches a student's overall attainment. Students must demonstrate a majority of the elements described for working at a standard. For science at KS1 and KS2 there is a single descriptor – 'working towards national standard' [12, p. 11].

Because of the preparation for a national test at the end of KS 2 and the new requirements of the Ministry of Education (85% of primary school students have to fulfill the standard in comparison with the previously 65%) educationalists point to the increase in learning load of younger students. Besides, the standard must be achieved in reading, writing and math, while earlier it involved any *one* or more of these three aspects.

## Results

The British experience in developing educational standards, their implementation and regular review characterizes the standard as a concept that is constantly changing under the influence of requirements for public education. The standard of the British primary education covers:

- the structure of primary education at key stages;
- the primary school curriculum;
- the structure of the content of primary education in its invariant and variant parts;
- the compulsory minimum content for each educational area included into the invariant part;
- the compulsory learning outcomes at each stage;
- the norms of academic load for primary school students to provide a quality training.

In Britain, as in other EU countries, standardization of primary education has caused an increase in educational requirements, improvement of assessment system, search of common criteria for the selection and implementation of curriculum content, textbooks, and manuals.

Political requirements to set high standards of students' educational achievements are supported by appealing to a higher level of education in such countries as Japan and Korea.

A positive aspect of the standard-based reforms was the fact that the standards allowed to correlate educational goals and objectives stated in the curricula with the available indicators of the productivity of students and school groups, to identify ways of improving classroom activities and teacher professionalism. However, the studies of comparativists state that the reforms have increased the load on the teachers: there have appeared new forms of work related to the practical implementation of standards and assessment of students' educational achievements.

Among the negative results of educational standardization at ISCED 1 teachers' most concern is the system of testing students' knowledge, which affected the quality of interaction between a teacher and students significantly reducing the number of educational technologies and techniques that are used by a primary school teacher.

### **Conclusions**

To sum up we should note that:

- the trend of content standardization on the level of basic education in the UK has become an active factor in the curriculum reform of primary education, modernization of its content and introduction of new disciplines;
- the British educational standards have become a practical implementation of new philosophical views on education which in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is developing under the slogan 'equal access to quality education';
- the standardization of primary education in the UK has allowed politicians and educators to solve the problem of continuity between preschool education and primary education and between primary education and secondary one;
- the framework of modernized curriculum of British primary school is favorable for widening school and teacher autonomy;
- the main approach of designing primary school curricula is around subjects or learning areas;
- the standard-based reforms in Britain at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> centuries caused the narrowing of the primary curriculum (with the main focus on linguistic and mathematical literacy) and reorientation of the educational process to preparing younger students for specific assessment procedures (mostly testing);
- reforms to improve educational standards have found their practical implementation in the provision of professional development opportunities for teachers, creation of modern learning materials and organization of teachers' professional organizations;
- the unified state requirements for all schools allow to provide students with knowledge and skills set by educational standards, check the level of implementation of educational standards, and conduct national testing.

Thus, among the priorities of standardization of primary education is to find the appropriate principles of the organization and selection of content. Raising standards and development of assessment criteria of the national system are considered as important factors of social progress and the country's competitiveness in the context of globalization processes.

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