Curriculum, Subjects, Number of Hours

Development of curricula

The material and competences which are important to the educational process at primary school are laid down in curricula, education plans or framework plans which may be subject-related, area-related or interdisciplinary. To implement the Bildungsstandards \(^1\) (educational standards) of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder \(^2\) (Kultusministerkonferenz - KMK) for the primary sector, the subjects in the curricula are adapted accordingly. The educational standards binding for all Länder define the objective, whereas the curricula reveal concrete and binding competence expectations for specific subjects. For further information on quality assurance and quality development by means of educational standards, see the article on quality assurance in early childhood and school education \(^3\).

Curricula or education plans for the primary school as well as for other types of school are the responsibility of the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs in the Länder. The curricula or education plans are published as regulations of the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs. They take the form of instructions from a higher authority and, as such, are binding on teachers. It is the responsibility of the head teacher to ensure that the current curricula are taught at his/her school. At the same time, curricula are formulated in such a general way that the teachers can act to perform their pedagogical responsibility. Nevertheless all the teachers of a specific subject at one school hold conferences to reach a consensus on methods and assessment criteria.

A curriculum or education plan is usually drawn up as follows. Once the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs of a particular Land has reached the decision to revise or completely reorganise a curriculum, a commission is appointed usually consisting in the main of serving teachers, including heads, as well as school inspectors, representatives of the school research institute of the Land concerned and of experts in the relevant disciplines from institutions of higher education. As a rule, it is the job of the commission to devise a curriculum for a certain subject at a specific type of school, for a specific school level or for a type of school. It will then work on a draft. Experience gained with previous curricula is taken into account when it comes to devising new ones. In some Länder curricula are launched on a trial basis before being finalised and becoming universally valid. Finally, there are set procedures according to which the commission may consult associations, universities and parents' and pupils' representative bodies.

As soon as a new curriculum or education plan has been completed and is introduced on a definitive or preliminary basis at schools, the in-service training institutes for the teaching profession maintained by the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs are charged with training teachers to work with it. Textbook publishers also embark on a revision or completely new edition of their titles.
A central database with curricula or education plans for schools providing general education is accessible on the website of the Standing Conference.

**Subjects**

The primary school curriculum covers in particular

- German
- Mathematics
- General studies
- A foreign language
- Art
- Handicrafts/textile design
- Music
- Sports
- Religion or Ethics

Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work is the driving force in the context of all subjects. German, mathematics and general studies hereby form the core subjects in primary school.

The educational standards of the Standing Conference for the primary sector (grade 4) in the subjects German and mathematics are the bases for the subject-specific requirements on teaching in primary schools in all Länder. The educational standards describe the competences including defined sub-competences that a child should usually have acquired at the end of grade 4 in the core areas of the subjects German and mathematics. At the same time they provide a clear orientation for individual support.

The challenge for both lessons concentrating on a specific subject or area and cross-disciplinary classes is to find appropriate and manageable requirements for every child on different competence levels. The pedagogical diagnostics and the counselling and support for especially gifted pupils as well as for pupils with reading and spelling or calculating difficulties based on this are among the tasks of primary schools or special diagnostic centres. The primary schools receive professional support in the field of diagnostics and counselling from school psychologists, school social workers, child and youth welfare organisations, the school doctor service or special education institutions.

**Foreign language teaching**

Foreign language lessons are already provided in the primary sector in all Länder. In most Länder compulsory foreign language lessons begin in grade 3; in three Länder they already begin in grade 1. With competence-oriented foreign language lessons in primary school the Länder follow the principle of learning language using real-life situations, authentic language and action-based methods. Learning is also based on specific fields of experience, the everyday world, and the cognitive potential of the children, and initiates the first steps towards automation and linguistic reflection. These are also facilitated by bilingual lessons, which have been greatly developed in recent years. In most Länder bilingual lessons are offered at individual primary schools, sometimes in addition to regular lessons and sometimes as an integrated concept. As the Standing Conference stated in its rits Recommendations on Work in the Primary School (*Empfehlungen zur Arbeit in der Grundschule*) from June 2015, bilingual teaching and learning in primary education also form the basis for viable bilingual concepts of secondary schools.

The basis for the definition of the final qualification level in foreign language learning from primary education through to upper secondary level is the Common European Framework of Reference for
Languages (CEFR), with its defined competence levels. Foreign language lessons at primary schools are based predominantly on competence-oriented curricula (framework curricula, core curricula) or education plans which - in line with the recommendations adopted by the Standing Conference to strengthen foreign language skills (Empfehlungen zur Stärkung der Fremdsprachenkompetenz) - are oriented towards the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the recommendations for the primary sector. The target level for functional communicative competences at the end of grade 4 is geared to CEFR level A1. This competence level describes an elementary use of language. The pupils can communicate in a simple manner, understand and use everyday expressions and very simple sentences.

For compulsory foreign language lessons in primary school the Länder predominantly offer the languages English and French taught in the entry-level classes of the secondary general education schools. Lessons are also offered in the languages of the neighbouring countries (Danish, Dutch, Polish, Czech) and in the languages spoken by immigrants (e.g. Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Turkish) or in the settlement areas of minorities (e.g. Sorbian or Wendish) or regionally (Frisian, Low German).

Alongside compulsory foreign language lessons, the Länder also offer additional optional lessons to learn languages of the country of origin, languages of neighbouring countries and languages of encounter.

The report *Fremdsprachen in der Grundschule – Sachstand und Konzeptionen 2013* (foreign languages in primary school – state of play and concepts) published by the Standing Conference provides an overview of the areas of competence and expectations as regards the curricula, and the range of languages on offer, and also the organisational structures of foreign language lessons in the primary schools of the different Länder.

**Cross-curricular topics**

Apart from the subjects that have already been named, comprehensive educational areas have been adopted in the curricula or education plans of the Länder in different ways: The Standing Conference emphasises the significance of these topics in schools through resolutions and recommendations on individual lesson contents. The following overarching lesson contents play a role in teaching at primary schools: intercultural education, education for sustainable development, language education, MINT education, values education, aesthetic education, democracy education, Europe education, health education, culture education, media education, human rights education, road safety education, economic education and consumer education. More detailed information is available in the article on teaching and learning in general lower secondary education [5].

Besides, in recent years, the curricula or education plans of the Länder have increasingly taken into account the concept of lifelong learning. The acquisition of fundamental knowledge, abilities and skills, as well as the acquisition of a knowledge that will serve as an orientation aid for further learning, together with the development of key competences, have become main educational objectives.

**Teaching Methods and Materials**

Staff at primary schools face the challenge of providing high-quality teaching characterised by efficient classroom management, a supportive teaching climate and multi-variant cognitive activation. The class teacher principle as a constitutive element of work at primary schools is in a well-balanced relationship to the expertise of the teaching.
The quality standards for teaching at primary schools include on the one hand an efficient classroom management with rules and disturbance prevention that affect behaviour, a teaching climate conducive to learning with a constructive treatment of errors and cognitive activation. On the other hand, this also calls for structure and clarity with professional correctness.

The teaching staff involve their pupils in planning, carrying out and analysing lessons in a manner appropriate for their age and makes their experiences, questions, concerns, knowledge and competences the starting point for lessons. They are also allowed to participate in organising school life through project-oriented initiatives and interdisciplinary projects. This participation in lessons encourages responsibility for one's own learning process and performance motivation.

Furthermore, in order to do justice to the specific way in which primary school children think and experience things, a holistic approach is the principle of teaching in primary schools.

It is the task of the teachers' conference to select textbooks from the regularly published lists of textbooks which are, as a rule, approved by the Ministry. The use of digital media (multimedia) and the internet is becoming increasingly important, both as a teaching aid and as something to be taught and learnt. The latest information about the use of online resources in teaching and internet projects can be found on the Education Servers provided by the Länder Ministries and is also accessible via the national information portal maintained by the federal and Länder authorities, the German Education Server [6].

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