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SCHOOL EXPERIMENTS AND EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SWISS STATE LEGISLATION

The Swiss Federal Education Systems

Switzerland has a decentralized education system, with its 26 states each operating their own system. There are very few national laws concerning elementary education. Efforts to harmonize these systems across the states are minimal, focusing only on the most essential areas.

While this federal structure has its drawbacks including challenges with internal migration, inconsistent quality standards, and curriculum alignment, it also allows each state to experiment with, modify, and redefine its own educational policies and practices.

School Experiments in Theory and Practice

School experiments are a cornerstone for educational innovation in Switzerland. They entail the temporary suspension of existing state law, allowing for the testing of new teaching or organizational methods within the education system (Winands, 2018). This approach provides a practical way to provisionally implement new ideas and evaluate their effects.

Many innovations in the Swiss education system have emerged from school experiments: mixed-age learning (Vogt, 2009), team teaching (Stebler, 2008), standardized teaching hours (Jutzi at al., 2024), integrative school models (Oelkers, 2011) or education for gifted students (Schulthess-Singeisen, 2002).

By creating a real-world testing ground, these experiments bridge the gap between theory and practice and build a strong, evidence-based foundation that helps to determine whether to permanently change laws that currently restrict school practices in a specific area. This paper focuses on the legal framework provided by the states and compares them in an exploratory manner.

Methods

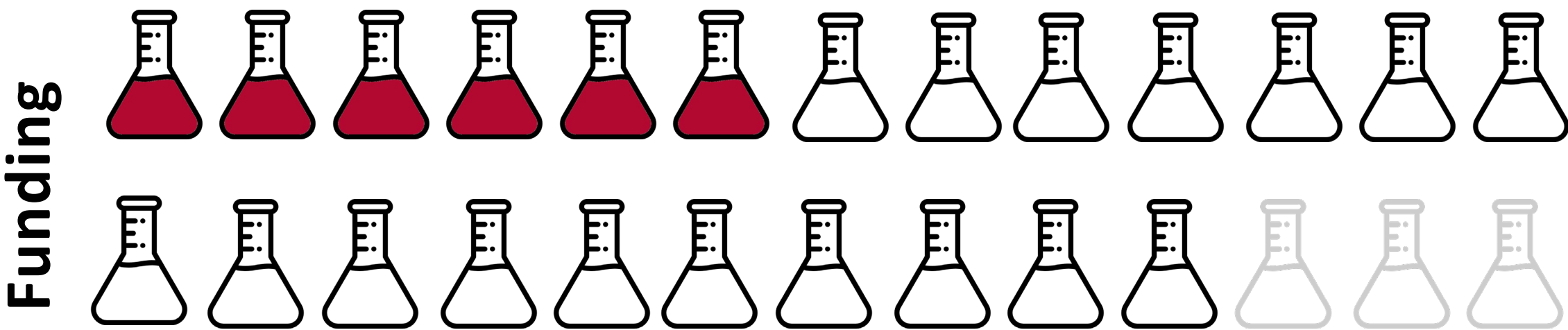
Our study is part of a larger project that used a comprehensive document analysis of state legislation to examine laws and regulations related to primary and secondary education. We systematically collected laws and regulations (total 176) for each state. After collection, we translated the documents as needed and then coded them using a specially developed category system within the MAXQDA software.

Following this, we performed a thematic analysis on the coded data, guided by the principles of qualitative content analysis as described by Kuckartz (2016). The goal was to identify and interpret recurring themes and patterns in the legislation. To make our findings more accessible and easier to understand, we used graphical displays to present the key results.

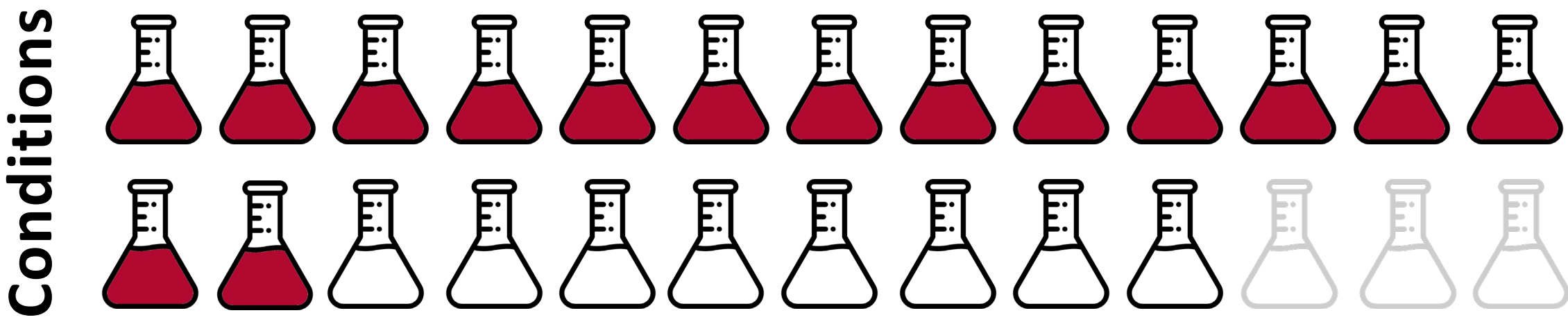
Literature
Jutzi, M., Stampfli, B., Wicki, T., & Hostettler, U. (2024). Schulversuch Spitalacker: Fünf Lektionen am Vormittag.
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Schulthess-Singeisen, L. (2002). Die Förderung besonders begabter Kinder: Evaluation des Schulversuchs. Erziehungsdirektion des Kantons Bern.
Stebler, R. (2008). Unterricht in altersdurchmischten Grundstufenklassen. In J. Ramseger & M. Wagener (Eds.), Chancenungleichheit in der Grundschule (pp. 279–282). VS Verlag.
Vogt, F. (2009). Altersdurchmischung, Teamteaching und Differenzierung. In C. Röhner, C. Henrichwark, & M. Hopf (Eds.), Europäisierung der Bildung (pp. 226–230). VS Verlag.
Winands, G. (2018). Der Schulversuch in Geschichte und Gegenwart. In H. Barz (Ed.), Handbuch Bildungsreform und Reformpädagogik. Springer VS.

Results

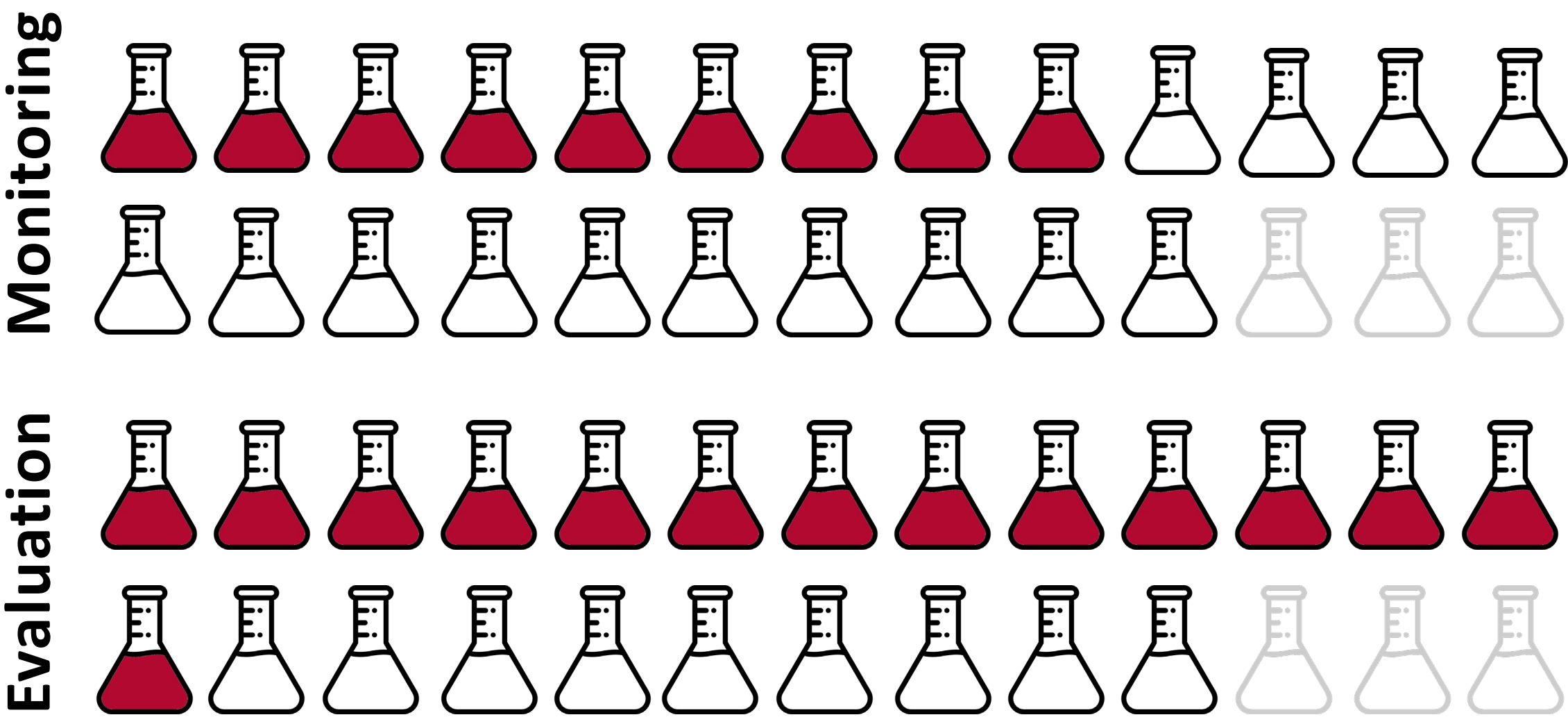
State authorities in six states provide partial or full funding for approved school experiment projects. In most of these states, municipalities also contribute additional funds and are fiscally responsible for school infrastructure.



The framework for the experiments is defined by a range of conditions. Fifteen states set a temporal limit, while seven states establish a spatial one. Fifteen states also limit the experimental content to predetermined topics or fields of action.



Evaluation and monitoring of the experiment are crucial for political decision-making. Fourteen states require an official evaluation, while nine states also demand expert monitoring. The specific format for both the evaluation and monitoring is determined by the authorities.



Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates that a decentralized education system allows for tailored educational practices at the state level and facilitates the adoption of best practices. We conclude that the initiative for improvements and innovations often lies with both the states and local communities. While local communities address issues in legislation by funding school experiments, states define guardrails and monitor and/or evaluate the process and outcome. This dynamic highlights that evidence-based decision-making at the state level often relies on community-driven innovation and funding. Therefore, to change the education system within this federal context, it's crucial to consider the leverage points at the local level as well as the legal frameworks on state level.

