

Development of the Austrian Educational System–
From a new teaching philosophy to a new educational system

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Abstract:

Since the beginning of the new millennium a fundamental change in the Austrian school system has been going on, which is based on ideas that are not really new. At the beginning of the 20th century, Ellen Key, Maria Montessori and Helen Parkhurst set the impulse by depicting children as human beings who have to be treated individually. It took a long time until these aspects influenced the philosophy of the Austrian school system. Their impact on the primary school system is now transferred into a new model of lower secondary school. This article will provide an overview of this transformation from the first steps in the Austrian school system to the current situation at schools as well as to the impact of the aspects of progressive education on the curriculum of the New Secondary School. It will also give an outline of further developments of teacher education in Austria. The focus lies on how sustainable this system change will be, so that children and new teachers will be able to deal with living and working conditions of the future.

Keywords: school development, progressive education, individualization, differentiation, teacher education.

Historical Development of Education in Austria – General Overview

Until the 18th century most of the educational system was the responsibility of churches. The roots of the “Gymnasium” (schools for upper secondary education) are to be found in the schools of the monks and located next to the cathedrals. In the Age of Reason (roughly from 17th to 18th centuries), sovereigns recognized the importance of education also for rural people as a paradigm of agricultural success and common welfare. When the order of the Jesuits in Austria – which was mainly responsible for education – was expelled, the government had to come up with a way to support schools. Empress Maria Theresia (1740-1780) called Ignaz Felbiger, an abbot and counsellor of the Empress in educational belongings, to create a new school system. With the Common School Act (“Allgemeine Schulordnung”), the first great school law was established in 1774 (6th December). It covered three different types of primary schools: best-practice schools in urban places, where teachers were also educated (“Normalschulen”), primary schools in big cities

("Hauptschulen") and primary schools in villages with churches ("Trivialschulen") (Scheipl & Seel, 1987, p 11-15).

After the revolution of 1848 and the important defeat at the battle of Königgrätz (1866), Emperor Franz Joseph 1st had to grant more democracy to the people. A treaty guaranteed the Hungarians independence. The constitutional monarchy was created and new laws were passed, among them the Primary School Act ("Reichsvolksschulgesetz") in 1869. Different subjects had to be taught and the curricula were now the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Children had to attend school for eight years starting at the age of six (Scheipl & Seel, 1987, p 60-61).

The beginning of the 20th century – an age of pedagogical reforms and progressive education based on the ideas of Ellen Key, Maria Montessori and Helen Parkhurst – also influenced Austria. Otto Glöckel (1874-1935) can be highlighted as one of the most important Austrian reformers. This period also signified the start of the ongoing debate of different views on education between the main political parties, the social democratic and the conservative people's party. The Secondary School Act ("Hauptschulgesetz") of 1927 was created as the base for the current system (Scheipl & Seel, 1987, p. 94). Parallel to lower secondary education in Secondary Schools ("Hauptschulen") the "Gymnasium" – mostly private schools – also developed curricula for lower secondary education and offered four years of lower secondary education as a preparation for the following upper secondary education. Not everybody could afford sending the children to these private schools or had access to these schools which very often were run as boarding schools. So the existence of different school types supported the increase of social inequality. Up to now this differentiation in the educational system has been part of debates between the political parties.

After the Second World War (1939-1945), the existing laws were redesigned as school acts of 1962 and 1969 thus building the new constitutional base for the current system. Since then, children have had to attend school for 9 years; but the parents can decide whether they send their children to school or they pay for private "home-education". Under these circumstances the pupils have to pass state exams every year.

Teacher Training Colleges ("Pädagogische Akademien") were founded and primary school teachers were educated there. In order to be qualified to teach in secondary schools, they had to attend in-service courses to specialize and qualify for different main subjects like Mathematics, German or English and "side" subjects like Biology, Geography, History, Physics, Arts, Music and Physical Education. Since 1975, the Teacher Training Colleges have been divided into three branches of teacher education: for primary school teachers (2 years and later 3 years), for special-needs teachers (3 years) and for secondary school teachers (3 years). Teaching practice completes the theoretical studies. But in 2007, the Teacher Training Colleges – as part of post-secondary non-tertiary education - were transformed into University Colleges – as part of tertiary education (Scheipl & Seel, 2004, p. 202 ff.) – and with curricula corresponding to the Bologna Process. The students now graduate as Bachelors of Education

Since the 1980s, new efforts have been made to change the old educational system, which was very teacher-centred and instructive. The emphasis on individualization and the greater

focus on competences and skills (e.g. personal, social) rather than on theoretical knowledge has led to a reform of the primary school system and created different autonomous types of Lower Secondary Schools. One important difference between Lower Secondary School and “Gymnasium” was the organisational differentiation via stream within Lower Secondary Schools. It supported on the one hand the separate education of the gifted pupils apart from the weaker children, on the other hand it put a lot of pressure on parents, pupils and teachers. Children were separated into stream in Mathematics, Foreign Language Learning (mostly English) and German based on their marks in Primary School and the prediction of the teachers, whereas in the “Gymnasium” children were taught together in one class. Many people had the impression that once being settled in a stream there was – although guaranteed by law - no chance to get into a better group and it made transition into upper school education very difficult. For this reason parents found it important for their children to attend the “Gymnasium”. So the choice between these two both types of lower secondary education at the age of ten was a great challenge for everybody and it still is. There has always been a gap between rural and urban situations, between rich and poor people, between children descending from parents with higher education and parents with only secondary or only primary school education, and – as Austria has become a more and more multicultural country – between native Austrians and immigrants. In 2008, the New Secondary School was introduced and this constituted a new effort towards one common school for children between 10 and 14, which intended to guarantee the same educational conditions for each child.

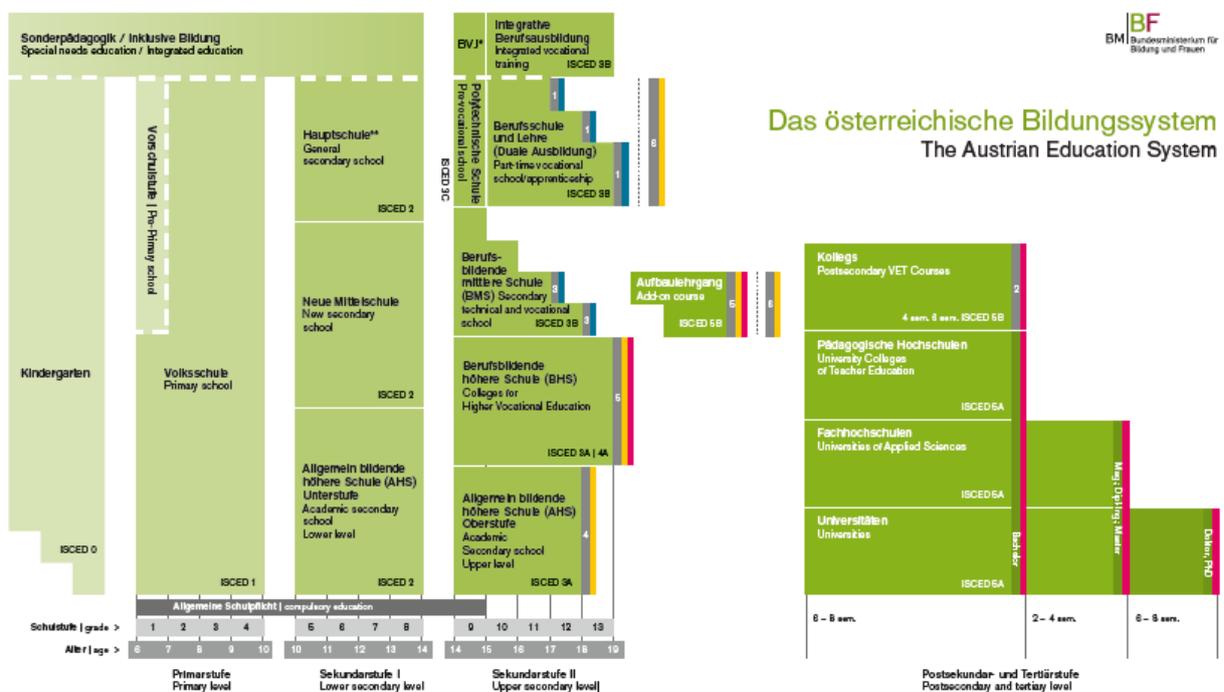


Figure 1: Overview of the current Austrian School System (Ministry for Education and Woman, BMBF, 2014).

But today it is obvious that it was only a shallow compromise between the political parties involved instead of a significant change. In fact, it should have been the moment for the introduction of a new philosophy of education: child-centred, supportive, with a focus on the interests, the gifts and the strengths of children, and the development of social and personal competences – all the characteristics of a sustainable education that children need in order to be prepared for the future. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) pointed out, in the announcement of a “Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014”, that “Education for Sustainable Development allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future” (UNESCO, 2014).

The New Secondary School – transferring the philosophy of “progressive education” into sustainable future-oriented education

Since the abolishment of streams (for either gifted or weaker pupils), coping with heterogeneous classes has become daily routine. Dealing with these different circumstances has become crucial for schools and educational quality. Schools have to prepare young learners for their future life and place in economy and society and to accomplish this function children must find out who they are and where their strengths and interests lie. They have to achieve competences to deal with all the challenges in the future and thus education has to focus on what is really sustainable. One answer to all these currently raised questions seems to be found in differentiation and individualization. Although it should have always been part of didactics and methodology, it was hardly ever practiced. Therefore, the national educational policy has created a model that is based on individualization and differentiation – the New Secondary School (NMS). After only a few experimental years, it was enshrined in law in 2012 and replaced the old form of Secondary School (BMBF, 2014). The philosophy of New Secondary School includes six main features, as represented in figure 2: diversity, competence-based learning, differentiation and individualization, new forms of assessment, “learn design backwards” and focus on learning, which shall be defined below.

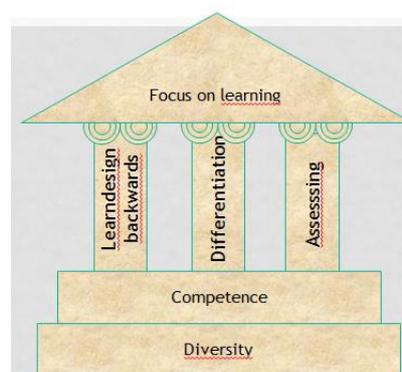


Figure 2: House of New Secondary School.

In terms of diversity, it is obvious that in each class, there are pupils with different interests, different abilities, different needs, different social and cultural backgrounds, different languages, among others. Teachers have to face this diversity and have to adapt their didactics and their methods to cater for all those different needs. It also means that education has to become inclusive and open to all pupils, whether they are impaired or not. The new teacher education follows this aspect and has integrated inclusion and integration as a main focus in the University Colleges whereas special-needs teacher education as a special type of studies is going to be abolished with the coming year 2015/16.

As far as differentiation is concerned, teachers prepare different materials according to different learning styles, multiple intelligences, interests and talents, so that pupils can choose individually from that wide range of tasks according to their interests, intelligences, learning attitudes (speed, style). Because of this, differentiation provides the highest level of individualization from the pupils' points of view.

New forms of assessments, such as portfolios, verbal descriptions, pupil-parent-teacher-conferences, are established to reflect upon and evaluate learning processes, as well as support individual development. The majority of summative forms of assessment intend to partly replace more formative forms of assessment.

Learning should be competence-based and lead to the development of stronger social competences, more personal competences, increasing methodological competences, leading to independent and autonomous learning and combining different subjects, e.g. through project work. Learning should focus on goals and not merely on content. That means that the whole planning work and all decisions on methods should start from the final objectives as the main point of view – what is called “learning design backwards”. Teaching and giving instructions has to lead to real learning in terms of transferring this into knowledge and competences, independence and self-confidence and not into rote learning for tests and marks. Learning and schools should be a natural part of life, so that learning turns into a sustainable life-long process.

This focus on the individual development is not brand-new. It first appeared at the beginning of the 20th century in the philosophy of Ellen Key with her announcement of an “Age of the Child” and led towards an important school development, which is termed progressive education through the work of people like Maria Montessori, Helen Parkhurst, Peter Petersen, Celestin Freinet, Rudolf Steiner and many more. Many of their ideas became the base of the New Secondary School philosophy and owing to this the pedagogic approach of NMS should reflect the features that all progressive education models have in common: the focus on the individual development to achieve all competences needed to live a successful life.

The following overview is given, in table 1, to introduce the most important models of progressive education and to identify their innovative potential for school development.

	Maria Montessori (1870-1952) – Italy, USA	Helen Parkhurst (1886-1973) – Daltonplan, USA	Peter Petersen (1884- 1952) – Jenaplan/ Germany	Celestin Freinet (1896-1966) – France
Objectives	Responsible, autonomous person depending on individual predispositions	Responsible, autonomous person as part of a society	Individual and socially competent people	Responsible, autonomous person as part of a society with equal opportunities
Theory of children’s evolution	Development depending on individual predispositions, marked by sensitive phases	Influenced by Maria Montessori	Children’s predispositions: Movement, socialization, action, learning; Basic needs: Love, empathy, protection, responsibility, democracy	No difference between children and adults; children’s development is provided by its autonomous activities
„education“	Indirect instruction via an appropriate, well-prepared learning environment	Democratic-oriented; main principles: freedom, responsibility, cooperation, independent learning, developing social and moral competences	Education within and throughout the community	Activating and supporting individual and independent learning
„learning“	Personal development throughout well-prepared learning environment with a large amount of appropriate material	Individual, self-conducted, cooperative learning to fulfil the assignments	Education via dialogues, games, celebrating feasts and festivals. Learning in all situations, based on moral principles.	Natural and exploring learning; experiments, „realistic“ work
Teacher	Instructor for the first use of materials, then supporter and coach	Author of learning material and learning tasks, then supporter and coach in special subject-based spaces	Organizer of individual and children’s learning processes	Organizer and coach of individual and children’s learning in cooperative form
Curricula	Focussed on the traditional curricula	Focussed on the traditional curricula	Focussed on the traditional curricula	Focussed on the traditional curricula
Methods, didactics	Age-heterogeneous work, use of appropriate learning material based on the curriculum; general theory of evolution is the main focus of learning and teaching	Self-conducted and independent work in special spaces according to individual assignments; cooperative work in free work environments	Weekly work plans as a structure of the weekly school rhythm, starting with an assembly on the first day of the week, involvement of non-school environments	Work in studios, implementing library work, democratic decisions concerning lesson plans as well as individual plans; class councils

Table 1: Overview of progressive education at the beginning of the 20th century (Eichelberger, 1997, p. 146).

Teacher Education – a Process of Deep Changes

In order to change the whole education system, one needs new ideas and the influence of a new individually-based philosophy throughout the micro-system of class and lectures, the even larger system of the individual school and the national education system including teacher education. Furthermore, individualization becomes crucial. Trainee teachers have to be aware of their strengths and talents, their personal interests and patterns and because of that, supporting systems are going to be implemented in teacher education.

An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) survey shows that, in nearly all of the participating 25 countries, induction programmes for teachers after the attendance of university colleges and during their first professional years have become part of teacher education (OECD, 2014, p. 505). These induction programmes are mostly mandatory and necessary to get a permanent contract. It is obvious that much of the knowledge, the attitude and the approach students acquire during their studies will be obsolete when they start their work as young teachers. They very quickly switch into the old role models or pick up only instruments and patterns, which are easy to use in class and assure professional success (Dangl, 2014, p. 37).

However, young teachers have the obligation to develop their professionalism. Schratz and a group of Austrian experts in education mention five domains for teachers' professionalism within a model for "developing professionalism in an international context", called EPIK, which comprehends professional awareness, reflective competences, managing diversity, cooperation and collaboration and personal mastery (Schratz, 2011, p. 25 ff). These concepts are defined as follows according to the aforementioned author:

1. Reflective competences: People must be able to reflect upon their own actions within the learning environment from an external point of view. Self-reflection has to happen during teaching (in action) and afterwards (on action). The process should combine the individual reflection and the discourse with colleagues. In a transfer process, the outcomes lead to new aspects of professionalism.

2. Professional awareness: It means the appreciation of students (and parents) as the main focus of the job and the knowledge of how to act professionally. That implies the consciousness of being an expert in education. Teachers act confidently and are aware of their competences within the educational system.

3. Managing diversity: Although teachers still dream of a homogeneous class, this will always remain fiction. Most of the instructional groups are heterogeneous, even if the differences are not obvious. Pupils differ in their gender, age, interests, gifts, multiple intelligences, social and cultural background, mother tongues, and the like. Teachers have to manage diversity by preparing different materials according to the many individuals that compose their classes. They must appreciate the high potential that diversity offers. Managing diversity is an important paradigm of school quality.

4. Cooperation and collaboration is one of the most significant outcomes of social competences. It is crucial to overcome daily routine. Cooperation between teachers leads from the focus of "I and my class" to the objective of "we and our school" and enhances

school quality. Collaboration means sharing work, sharing responsibility and sharing good moments.

5. Personal mastery (Senge, 1996): “Knowing what” and “knowing how” must be transferred into daily routine, so that teachers become masters of their own professionalism also by “knowing why” they are acting the way they do (Schratz, 2011, p. 36).

The induction programme that is to be introduced in Austria must include supporting tools for new teachers, such as the work with mentors and coaches. As teacher employment is a federal issue, there are different programmes in the different federal states of Austria. The University College of Teacher Education of Christian Churches, Wien/Krems (KPH), has recently created a special master’s programme for the qualification of mentors. Mentoring must develop the self-autonomy of the newly qualified teachers (NQTs) according to the ideas of Deci & Ryan (2002). Therefore, mentors have to support NQTs based on the EPIK-concepts by observing them in their lessons, conducting meetings in small groups to exchange experiences and giving ideas but not solutions. They support NQTs’ reflections and sometimes help to manage the daily routine of the job, especially in matters of dealing with parents and administrative work. The programme was evaluated during the school year of 2012-2013 on the base of a model of “offers and needs” (Beer, 2014, p. 17). The main question was how a NQT could be successful in the job during the first years, which provisions are required and what has to be provided.

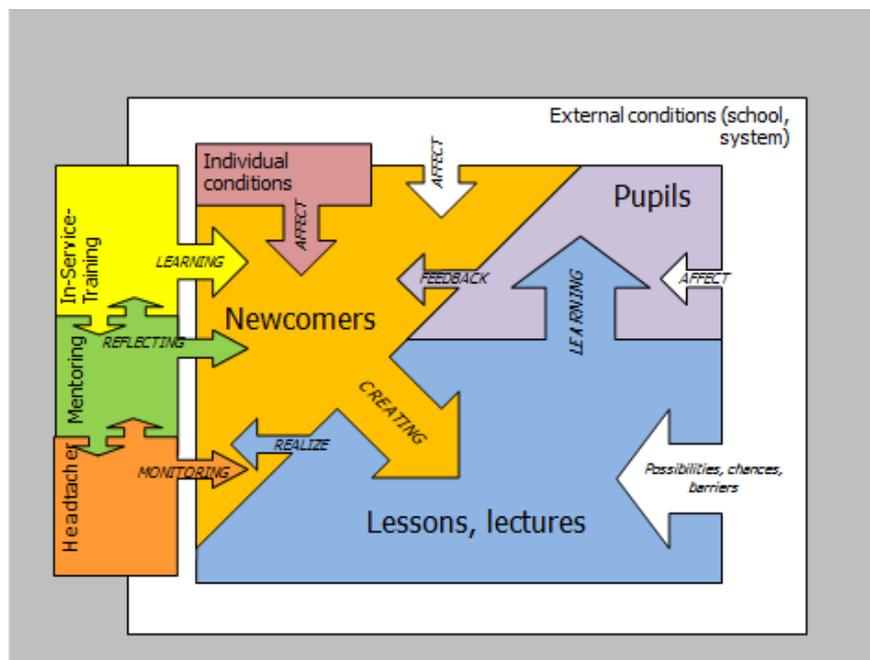


Figure 3: Modified model of offers and needs (Beer, 2014, p. 20).

The 2012-2013 study used qualitative interviews with the NQTs and the mentors, mentors’ journals and a questionnaire for the NQTs as methodological instruments. One of the results showed that mentoring in the first years is crucial for a successful start. Although the project

was run with external mentors (people that are not part of the school of the mentee), it is not evident that there can't be internal mentors (people as members of the school-staff), too. Each of them offers different advantages: External mentors act from an outside point of view, whereas mentors from inside use their knowledge of the local system and all its needs, and thus can build bridges among the colleagues. Head teachers, who are the people in charge of the classes of the NQTs, also play a significant role in this period of time. Economists have created "onboarding" strategies (Ebenberger, 2014, p. 223), which can be transferred into school, too. The executive director, the head teacher in the case of the school, has to empower the novice teachers by using well-considered strategies of placing NQTs and providing feedback. Work with the other colleagues becomes fundamental: They often act like coaches and mentors, too; they support NQTs in their daily life. Mentoring is even more successful if it is based on interpersonal relationships, mentoring work in bigger groups is not supposed to be as efficient as the research of BEER (2014) pointed out. In small groups (two or three NQTs with their mentor) NQTs feel more secure to open up and have more chances to get in a close contact to their mentor.

The outcomes of the research show that the combination of mentoring, monitoring and assessing as intended by the future law can diminish the success of mentoring. Mentoring is successful when the relationship between both mentor and mentee is trustful, independent and based on an open mind. Apart from the implemented mentoring procedure regular in-service-courses will be mandatory in the future. The courses will combine the latest perceptions in educational theory with the NQTs' experiences in practice. The EPIK concept will be the basis for all competences, which are to be achieved. As a result, all the steps should lead NQTs towards a successful and meaningful professional life.

Concluding remarks

The phrase "School Changes slower than Churches" by Haenisch (1991) can unfortunately still be applied. In Austrian schools, it has taken nearly a century for new ideas to become part of the educational programmes by law. The main focus on both children and teacher education is set on the individual. The age of progressive education with its protagonists Maria Montessori, Helen Parkhurst, Peter Peterson and Celestin Freinet realized the importance of freedom, autonomy and individualization, cooperation and democracy in education hundred years ago. Education has to prepare people sustainably for the future in a sustainable manner. Cooperation, individual strengths, gifts and interests, an open mind, flexibility and the motivation for life-long learning have become crucial for managing teachers' daily life, which includes their job, too. The implementation of the New Secondary School in 2012 marks this point in children's education. Children are no longer separated into streams, they should have access to courses and different material appropriate to their interests and their giftedness. Each child should benefit from the same educational conditions in one common school. Each child should feel empowered and should have the chance to develop its talents in a supportive learning environment. But as long as there are more types of schools for lower secondary education (New Secondary School and Gymnasium) there is still a political discussion going on. The focus on inclusive classes and

the appreciation of the benefit of heterogeneous classes need flexible and motivated teachers as well as an open minded society.

New tracks are laid in teacher education, too. Induction programmes focus on the individual development towards autonomy and independently acting people. Novice teachers are accompanied by mentors. The relationship between both mentor and mentee is part of a security net for the NQTs that also includes the support of the head teacher and a number of in-service courses. So according to the EPIK-concept the novice teachers develop professionalism, reflective manners, personal mastery, competences in collaborating with colleagues and parents and most important they are able to manage the diversity of a heterogeneous classroom

The success of all these which are not really new ideas will depend on how many personal and financial resources are provided and how much autonomy will be possible at schools. But in an era dominated by a lack of budget in every ministry public evaluations get very significant. On the one hand, system changes need time to be implemented and to be successful whereas on the other hand the public very carefully studies the outcomes. But the more it is in the focus of public discussion, the more controlling the system becomes, the less progressive will it act because their promoters – the teachers – lose motivation and get insecure. Learning and teaching organizations need self-confidence, freedom and time to develop, and so do people. Therefore, it has to be seriously considered how much assessing and mentoring learning systems – both personal and organizational – need and how much controlling determines the opposite effects, and last but not least how much time will be conceded for overcoming the challenge of this system change.

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