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THE AUSTRIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM FOR ETHNIC GROUPS*

The following presentation contains a brief survey of the aims, legal basis and practical experiences concerning the educational system for ethnic groups in Austria.

Aims

The aim of this educational system is to offer instruction in the respective languages of the ethnic groups as well as to provide sufficient knowledge in the official language (German). The learning of the German language is considered highly important by the ethnic groups in that it secures their members' social and professional career opportunities. Instruction, particularly in elementary schools, is conducted, however, exclusively in the language of the ethnic group.

Another characteristic of the Austrian ethnic groups' educational system is its easy access for practically everybody (as long as the basic requirements of age and level of education are fulfilled) without, e.g. any investigation of whether the pupil belongs to an ethnic group or not. In Carinthia, for example, it is possible and not unusual that German-speaking parents have their children enrolled for instruction in Slovene. Though the differences in the children's basic linguistic knowledge pose pedagogic problems for the teachers, this system also provides the possibility for the majority of the population to find access to the language and culture of the ethnic group. On the other hand, nobody is forced to participate in the instruction in the language of the ethnic group.

The Different Levels of Education and Their Legal Basis

Kindergartens have been established for all ethnic groups on a private level (by associations and religious societies). In these kindergartens the children are educated in the respective languages of their ethnic groups as well. A large number of these kindergartens are subsidized by the State.

The legal basis for the school system of ethnic groups at the elementary school level varies: in Burgenland (Croatian ethnic group and Hungarian ethnic group) and in Carinthia (Slovene ethnic group) there are public bilingual elementary schools which have their legal basis in specific federal laws (for Carinthia the Minority School Law of 1959). For the Czech ethnic group in Vienna there is a private school.

* Original: German

According to the Minority School Law for Carinthia the characteristic of the bilingual elementary school is that the entire instruction (including, e.g., religious instruction) during the first 3 years is provided in both the German and the Slovene languages to about the same extent (from the 4th grade onwards, Slovene is only a compulsory subject of instruction. Only those children take part in the instruction in Slovene who have been enrolled by their parents or their legal guardians. Children who have been enrolled for this instruction, and those who have not, remain within the same class-formation and are taught (simultaneously) in the same classroom. This principle of enrollment corresponds to the above-mentioned legal rule, i.e., not to force anybody to take part in the instruction in a language of an ethnic group. During the school year 1984/85 there were 81 elementary schools within the area of application of the Minority School Law for Carinthia. Among these enrollment for bilingual instruction was registered in 67 elementary schools. Out of a total of approximately 5,000 pupils in bilingual elementary schools of Carinthia, about 1,000 were enrolled for instruction in Slovene.

With regard to *Hauptschulen* (secondary schools) the Minority School Law for Carinthia stipulates that Slovene has to be taught as a compulsory subject on all levels. The Slovene ethnic group organizations are not interested in the establishment of a school of that type with Slovene as the language of instruction, as would be permitted by the Minority School Law (as well as concerning an elementary school with Slovene as the language of instruction).

At the *Bundesgymnasium für Slowenen* (Federal High School for Slovenes) in Klagenfurt, which is also based on the Minority School Law, the language of all courses is Slovene; German is taught as a compulsory subject. The number of pupils in this high school has considerably increased since its foundation in 1957. Other minority languages can be studied in most high schools in Austria, in most cases as optional subjects, with the possibility, however to take A-level exams in them.

Experiences

Most of the criticism levelled at this educational system in the past was mainly concerned with its further expansion (e.g., regarding kindergartens). Recently, the question has been raised in relation to the quality of the existing educational institutions whether these bilingual elementary schools in Carinthia were successful in providing sufficient education also for those children who have not been enrolled for bilingual instruction. In fact, in a class which comprises (as explained above) pupils enrolled for bilingual instruction as well as pupils not enrolled for it, there are many different methods for a teacher to maximize the results of instruction for both of these groups. A statistical survey of specific cases has shown that the attendance of a bilingual school does not at all impede the children's further secondary education. Nevertheless, the school authorities pay close attention to modern pedagogic developments concerning bilingual education, so that they might give support, in case of need, to teachers of bilingual classes.