

# IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN AUSTRIAN SCHOOLS

Barbara Friehs\*

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## ABSTRACT

### **Immigrant children in Austrian schools**

In connection with the Balkan crisis in the early 90's many immigrants came to Austria. 15.2 % of all pupils attending compulsory schools in 2002/03 were from foreign countries. This causes a lot of problems. Foreign pupils have worse chances than their Austrian colleagues in the educational system, there is a lack of intercultural friendships among pupils, and also conflicts between expectations of immigrant families and the Western culture can be observed. Hence, a number of measures in the field of educational policy has to be implemented. An intercultural approach, as a chance of mutual learning from all different cultures, is predominant in Austrian schools.

**KEY WORDS:** integration, immigrant cultural differences, language problems, teacher education, immigration wave, intercultural approach

## IZVLEČEK

### **Priseljenski otroci v avstrijskih šolah**

Zaradi krize na Balkanu v začetku devetdesetih let je v Avstrijo prišlo veliko priseljencev. Kar 15,9 % učencev osnovnih šol v šolskem letu 2002/2003 je bilo iz drugih držav, kar je povzročilo probleme. Tuji učenci imajo v avstrijskem izobraževalnem sistemu slabše možnosti kot njihovi avstrijski kolegi, med učenci ni razvito multikulturno prijateljstvo, opazni so tudi konflikti med pričakovanji priseljenjskih družin in zahodno kulturo. Zaradi naštetega je v izobraževalno politiko treba vnesti številne ukrepe. Multikulturen pristop kot možnost obojestranskega učenja iz različnih kultur je v avstrijskih šolah prevladujoč.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** integracija, kulturne razlike, jezikovni problemi, učiteljska izobrazba, priseljenjski val, medkulturni pristop

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When Austria's expanding economy was confronted with labor shortage in the 60's of the last century the government began to recruit migrant workers from South East Europe, mainly from former Yugoslavia and Turkey. This system of incoming migrant

\* Univ.-Doz. DDr. Barbara Friehs, Universität Graz, Institut für Erziehungswissenschaften, Meran-gasse 70, A-8010 Graz. Mail: bfrieh@s yahoo.de

workers was originally based on rotation, which meant that the workers were not supposed to bring their families along with them. They were expected to return after a few years to be replaced by new labor. But in fact quite the opposite happened. Despite of all policy intentions many migrant workers decided to stay in Austria. Families were reunited and many of the new immigrant children were born in Austria.

At that time, Austria did not really have any concept for integration measures for these children into the education system of the country. It was not before the mid 70's when the presence of immigrant children in compulsory schools was officially taken notice of and dealt with in a more competent manner. Up to those days, it was mainly teachers who developed methods and models on their own to cope with the problems they were confronted with.

When school authorities finally decided to face reality and accept the fact that an increasing number of immigrant children were sitting in Austria's classrooms, their first reaction was to implement additional German language classes as well as mother tongue instruction for immigrant children. The idea, which was behind these supportive measures was not so much a quick integration process of these children, but more to facilitate re-integration in their countries of origin. The support was only offered at compulsory level as immigrant children were practically absent at upper secondary schools.

Even though, quite many foreign people came to Austria during this first immigration wave after the Second World War, their number was still not high enough to have a considerable impact on Austrian educational institutions. As a consequence, the second generation after these migrant workers, assimilated "successfully" by more or less losing their native language and original identity.

This changed considerably after the second immigration, or rather refugee wave in connection with the Balkan crisis in the early 90's. During that time Austria's population increased by more than a million to over eight million people altogether. Nowadays, approximately 45 % of all non-Austrian residents in this country are nationals of former Yugoslavia, and 17.5 % are of Turkish origin<sup>1</sup> (Statistik Österreich 2001).

Statistical evidence shows an average percentage of immigrant and refugee children in Austrian elementary education of about 12 %, whereas Vienna has an average percentage of more than 33 % and in elementary schools in some parts of the city more than 85 % of non-native pupils. In Graz and Linz, the two other major cities of the country, the situation is similar.

This time, everyone in Austria is also aware of the fact that the "new" immigrants will never return to their home countries but stay and that fact requires adequate political economic decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2001, 764 314 residents (9.4 % of the total population) were non-Austrian nationals. Of these, more than a third (286 661) live in the capital, Vienna. The percentage of non-Austrian nationals in Vienna was 17.83 % in 2001 with more than 25 % in certain districts. In the eight other federal states, the percentage varies from 4.5 % (Burgenland) to 13.55 % (Vorarlberg). asfj iaosdjf aijdsf aidsf dapoisf aids fapids

## 2. IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS

The Austrian constitution stipulates that state schools be accessible to all pupils, regardless of origin, gender, race, class, language, or religious belief. School attendance is compulsory for nine years for all children who have their permanent residence in Austria, regardless of their nationality. The total number of pupils attending compulsory schools in 2002/03 whose mother tongue is a language other than German was 103 877 (15.2 % of all pupils) (Statistik Österreich 2003).

The establishment of separate classes for immigrant pupils needs the consent of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, which is usually given only in special or emergency cases, as Austrian education policy rejects the idea of segregation. Hence pupils who are not Austrian citizens and whose mother tongue is not German are taught together with their native Austrian colleagues.

Lack of German language skills is a major stumbling block in the adjustment of many immigrant children to their new schools, affecting their reading comprehension and accordingly many other areas.

The significance of the children's mother tongues in this context has so far been grossly underestimated by school representatives. Linguists claim that a full-fledged linguistic competence in the respective mother tongue does not only guarantee the child's intellectual and emotional development but also facilitates the acquisition of a second language and improves academic achievement in general. This insight is backed up by the daily experience of teachers who work with immigrant children (Rösler 1994: 33).

Many immigrant children are bilingual. They experienced primary socialization in their native language and acquire German as a second language. The problem is that they often only have a basic knowledge of their native language and a functional competence of German, mainly for "surviving" in schools. This leads to a de facto semi-bilinguality (Luchtenberg 1991: 56). Many native languages are regarded of lower value than German or English and often teachers do not allow their use within the class-room, as this is seen as a disturbing element. Therefore immigrant children often start disrespecting their own mother tongue that can even lead to a refusal to use it (Grießhaber/Özel/Rehbein 1996: 173).

Mother tongue instruction is not offered at a large scale level, however, due to lacking financial means and the large number of different native languages. Currently, the following languages are offered: Albanian, Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, Farsi, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Romany, Russian, Serbo-Croat (Bosnian/Croat/Serbian), Slovak, Spanish and Turkish. Any language may be taught, provided that there is enough demand, that trained teachers are available for the language in question. Also sufficient posts have to be provided for in the annual budget. Mother tongue teachers are employed throughout Austria, though some of them, notably teachers for the less common languages, work part time, teaching only a few lessons per week<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Since 2000/01, it has been possible to study the two most commonly spoken languages of immi-

It should be noted that there are no separate curricula for each language, but there exists one curriculum that can be used as a basis for all the languages offered<sup>3</sup>. The pupils' mother tongues may be taught as optional subjects, either in separate (afternoon) classes or integrated into the general schedule, with the mother tongue teacher working alongside the class or subject teacher in the form of team teaching. The integrated model is widely practiced in Vienna, whereas afternoon provision is preferred in the other federal states. The number of lessons may vary from two to six a week. Mother tongue instruction is part of the mainstream school system, and the teachers are employed by the Austrian school authorities like all other teachers.

Pupils are admitted to school according to their age. There are no formal test procedures for assessing the child's competence in German. When a six-year-old child is enrolled at school, the head teacher usually talks with the child in order to find out whether he or she understands German or not. Pupils whose competence in German is not yet sufficient to follow classes held in German are admitted as so-called ex-matricular pupils for a maximum period of two years. This is the case for six-year-olds as well as for 'late comers' (pupils older than six years of age) who have not studied German as a foreign language in their country of origin (bmbwk 2003).

Ex-matricular pupils do not necessarily get grades during this period and automatically move up the next year. After this period of special status, it is assumed that pupils can generally follow instruction in the classroom, even though their competence in German is not yet comparable with that of native speakers. However, the general assessment criteria, as laid down in the legal guidelines, do not take into account the special learning situation of these pupils, so that they are basically treated like everyone else when it comes to grading. On the other hand, teachers have a wide range of discretion and are actively encouraged not to neglect the pupils' individual circumstances. This shall contribute to an avoidance of school failure of immigrant pupils (Eurydice 2004).

Ex-matricular pupils in compulsory schools may have up to twelve "German as a second language" lessons per week, matricular pupils in primary schools may have a maximum of five "German as a second language" lessons per week, and in secondary and pre-vocational schools the maximum number of "German as a second language" lessons is six a week. In all other school types the number of lessons per week is laid down by the school itself.

A major reason why immigrants do not achieve in school, is their lower socio-economic status, which affects the financial and parental support that children have at

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grants in Austria (i.e. Serbo-Croat and Turkish) as foreign languages at general secondary schools. It should be pointed out, however, that this option is not frequently exercised as, in practice, English is offered as a first foreign language by the overwhelming majority of all secondary schools. Serbo-Croat, but not Turkish, has been added to the curriculum of some academic secondary schools.

<sup>3</sup> The curriculum for mother tongue instruction at primary schools is laid down in BGBl. 528/1992, the curriculum for (general and academic) secondary schools is laid down in BGBl. II Nr. 134/2000 respectively in BGBl. II Nr. 133/2000.

home, and which is a proven factor in academic performance (Coleman 1986). There are significant differences in current living conditions between many native born Austrian children and people of foreign origin. More advantaged pupils have educational supports such as encyclopedias and personal computers and can be offered additional private lessons in the afternoon that are quite expensive in Austria.

They are also likely to have better educated parents who can help them with their homework, and can set an example of academic achievement. Immigrant pupils in general have higher dropout rates than the native-born. Here, again, German language proficiency plays an important role. It is true that all these negative effect may also be a problem for Austrian pupils from poorer, less educated families. But they are still in advantage compared to their foreign colleagues as their primary socialization was already oriented at Austrian norms and values which usually makes an adaptation to school life easier for them.

### **3. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Children of foreign citizens do not automatically receive the Austrian citizenship even if they are born in this country. They have the same citizenship as one or both of their parents. In former days this fact could have far-reaching consequences for them as soon as they wanted to enter the labor market. Having been subjected to special laws could have restricted their access. Application for the Austrian citizenship has become less complicated nowadays, as most of the immigrants are applicable after ten years of having lived in this country<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, can a different citizenship have negative consequences on the integration process. It makes identification with the Austrian country and society more difficult and can contribute to the development of a divided identity.

### **4. TEACHER TRAINING**

Teachers and other school staff have an essential part to play in heightening awareness of cultural diversity and respect for differences on the part of pupils. Reacting to stereotyping by pupils calls for a complex type of skill that does not only involve the acquisition of a theoretical body of knowledge but above all the confrontation with real situations and practical experience. In almost all European countries, initial teacher education covers the inter-cultural dimension of teaching, which is also often included in in-service training. Several schemes have recently been started to help teachers in this

<sup>4</sup> The Austrian Nationality Act 1985 [BGBl. Nr. 311/1985, most recently amended by BGBl. I Nr. 124/1998, Article 10 defines the rules for naturalisation: These provisions may be disregarded on the grounds of a special consideration'. Under Article 4 Z 1, birth in the federal territory is seen as such a special consideration.

respect, whether through the preparation of teaching materials aimed at an inter-cultural approach or by offering them support from specialists in this area (bmbwk 2003).

Pre-service teacher training institutions offer classes on inter-cultural education, but mostly as electives at some universities and teacher training colleges in Austria. Moreover, they are not taken by the majority of students on a regular basis. Major areas covered in these programs are: raising awareness of problems stemming from migration, the situation of different ethnic groups in Austria, a critical reflection of the concept of identity, a discussion of the attitudes required in a multi-cultural society, the recognition of one's own and other people's values, etc.

The teacher-qualification program 'German as a foreign language' puts special emphasis on the inter-cultural dimension since the program is directed to facilitate the integration of immigrant children. It is offered as an optional program at most universities and teacher training colleges. Institutes for in-service teacher training also offer a variety of courses and seminars in "German as a second language". It must be noted, however, that in-service training is not compulsory. While some "German as a second language" teachers have additional competence in the field of language teaching, others are not sufficiently qualified to teach this subject.

## 5. INTER-CULTURAL EDUCATION IN AUSTRIA

By law, immigrant pupils shall be integrated and at the same time their cultural identity be conserved and promoted which often creates problems with the daily school routine. To realize this legal requirement, inter-cultural education was introduced into the Austrian school system as a so-called educational principle in the academic year of 1991/92. Teachers have to integrate inter-cultural topics into their instruction regardless of the subject they teach. Inter-cultural education aims at a mutual understanding between pupils of different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and is meant to make them aware of similarities and differences and to fight racism. The problem is that teachers are not sufficiently prepared to deal with the required educational principles. Moreover, teachers who have never questioned their own value system and pre-conceived ideas are unlikely to live up to the concept of inter-cultural education (Friehs 2004: 83).

An inter-cultural approach is encouraged to highlight the enriching effect of cultural difference and stressing the need to avoid discrimination and hostility towards immigrants. The curriculum aims at strengthening the ability for self expression, imparting tradition, encouraging problem-solving and cooperative behavior, promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts, imparting a knowledge of cultural customs (e.g. calendar of religious festivals) and at the same time supporting a critical analysis of social values.

An "educational principle" is not a subject but a theme that teachers are recommended to take into account across the curriculum. Inter-cultural education is covered in a cross-curricular approach involving all subjects or those that are more appropriate

(history, geography, foreign languages, etc.). Other 'educational principles' are environment education, sex education and political education.

Inter-cultural education aims at a mutual understanding between pupils of various social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It also aims to make them aware of their similarities and differences and to combat Euro-centrism and racism. Linguistic and cultural diversity should be adequately reflected in the classroom (posters and worksheets in different languages, celebration of Christian and non-Christian holidays etc.). The inter-cultural approach is not limited to curricular provision but can also be part of other aspects of school life such as the organization of events or forms of entertainment to promote cultural diversity and exchanges with pupils from other countries. Developing an inter-cultural approach to education for all pupils is vital in facilitating the integration of immigrant pupils by fostering a dialogue between cultures.

In order to develop inter-cultural competence, children and young people must learn about the traditions and patterns of their own and other cultures. The Austrian syllabi contain elements that are deemed relevant in acquiring a knowledge of cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds and interrelationships and an understanding of how to live together in a multicultural society. Like in other European countries among many other topics the following are part of instruction: Information about characteristic features of one's own and other cultures, common features of and differences in cultures and their mutual influence, human rights and their universal validity, development and relevance of prejudices, reasons for discriminatory attitudes, reasons for and effects of present and past migrations, international efforts to solve religious, ethnic and political conflicts, possibilities for minorities and majorities to live together in multicultural societies (Eurydice 2004).

## **6. PROBLEMS IN THE DAILY SCHOOL ROUTINE**

The huge immigration wave has caused additional major challenges for teachers in the daily school routine. The Christian value system prevailing in Austria is not compatible with a lots of Muslim values, even though within schools this seems to be a larger problem in Germany or France. In Austria the Muslim dress code of female teachers and pupils is not forbidden by law. So they can cover their heads and wear their traditional clothing anywhere they like. As only a very small number of girls and women does it in Austrian schools, this has not caused any problems so far. An explanation could be that Muslims from former Yugoslavia are by far larger in number than for example Muslims from Turkey and the former did not know a strict dress code back in their old home country either.

A more liberal understanding of Muslim religion by the majority of Austria's immigrant population is also the reason for fewer restrictions by parents when it comes to the participation of Muslim girls in school activities like excursions or field trips. Usually they take place like everyone else. This is also true for sports lessons, even

though it would be acceptable by law to stay away. Missing acceptance of female teachers by male Muslim pupils, as reported in Germany, cannot be observed in Austria at a large-scale (Trenz 1994: 210).

Rising fundamentalist ideas among pupils like in other Western European countries are not a problem in Austria, so far. Not even the crucifix as the predominant Christian religious symbol that can be found in every classroom in Austrian schools, has been seriously challenged yet.

This does not mean, however, that there are no problems at all in Austrian schools. One is a separation along nationalities within class-rooms (Esser 1990: 192). There is a general lack of inter-cultural friendships among pupils which often leads to an outcast-situation for immigrant pupils. This could be due to the general low status of immigrant pupils in schools (Müller 1994: 40). A very important reasons for this fact is the low socio-economic status of their families. Many immigrant pupils cannot participate in trendy leisure-time activities, cannot afford brand-mark clothes and have less money available than their Austrian colleagues, as the lack of an attractive income situation of their parents does not allow major spending.

Little family resources also contribute to low achievements in schools. So only 6 % of all Turkish pupils and 12 % of all pupils from former Yugoslavia that now live in Austria finish school with an A-level-certificate. Even though, a low family income also does not support a successful school career of Austrians, their number of high-school graduates is much higher (Haider et al. 2005).

Many immigrant pupils develop identity problems as they have the feeling that they do neither belong to the culture of their origin, nor to the Austrian one. Neither one offers them the roots that are needed for the development of a strong personality and identity. Conflicts between differing expectations of the immigrant families and Western culture add to this confusing situation. This may lead to an alienation process from their own families and/or to integration problems into the Austrian society (Herrmann 1993: 13).

## 7. FORTHCOMING REFORMS

The occurrence of immigration is now regarded as part of our increasingly multicultural societies. The successful integration of immigrants into their "host society" is a growing concern for policy-makers. Schools have to play an important part in this process. All pupils shall learn to have respect of other cultures. Teachers are not supposed to evaluate different cultures, but stimulate an „inter-cultural dialogue“ and their pupils shall be enabled to participate in this mutual dialogue. In this way, migrant pupils shall be enabled to live within two cultures instead of living between them.

Since the PISA 2000 study proved that pupils from immigrant families performed relatively poorly in the field of literacy, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture considers it an absolute priority to improve the reading skills of



pupils whose mother tongue is a language other than German (Haider et al. 2005; Eurydice 2004). Specific measures have not been implemented yet, however. Another topic discussed very vividly is the introduction of an compulsory year in kindergarten for children with a limited command of German before starting school to facilitate this transition.

In the future further reforms will be necessary. Among them will be the development of practical suggestions and best practices on how to include inter-cultural aspects into teaching, a reduction of the prevailing mono-cultural orientation of syllabi and textbooks, improved offers in teacher education, and the enhancement of the cooperation between schools and teachers to exchange knowledge and experience in the field of inter-cultural education. Also improved measures to integrate immigrant pupils into the daily school routine are necessary. Last but not least and maybe most important of all is the removal of the prevailing unequal opportunities for school and life careers for immigrant pupils (Wenning 1996: 151).

Teachers will have to try even harder to avoid unconscious discriminating actions towards immigrant pupils. On the other hand, a positive discrimination of immigrant pupils by teachers can be problematic, too, as this would mean a disadvantage for Austrian pupils. So teachers have a very difficult task to fulfill – to guarantee equal opportunities for all their pupils. How to do this, will probably have to be decided independently with every single case (Radtke 1995: 862).

Education is a key indicator for future economic and social perspectives. In principle, there is no formal "discrimination" of immigrant children by the Austrian school system. However, low educational attainment levels are still being transferred from one immigrant generation to the next. The result is that children of immigrants are not able to close the educational gap between themselves and their native Austrian counterparts. One long-term consequence will be a large number of poorly qualified persons in the work force, who are much more likely to face severe labor market problems and as such will be a problem for the Austrian economy for many years to come (bmbwk 2003).

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POVZETEK

PRISELJENSKI OTROCI V AVSTRIJSKIH ŠOLAH

Barbara Friehs

Približno 45 % vseh neavstrijskih prebivalcev v Avstriji je pripadnikov narodov bivše Jugoslavije, 17,5 % jih je turškega izvora. To dejstvo gre pripisati predvsem geografski legi Avstrije, njeni politiki zaposlovanja tujih delavcev, ter v začetku devetdesetih, sprejemanju beguncev iz bivše Jugoslavije. Avstrijska ustava določa, da morajo biti državne šole dostopne vsakomur ne glede na narodnost, spol, raso, jezik ali vero. Devetletno osnovno šolanje je obvezno za vse otroke s stalnim bivališčem v Avstriji ne glede na njihovo narodnost. Skupno število učencev, ki so obiskovali osnovno šolo v letu 2002/2003 in njihov materni jezik ni nemščina, je 103.877 (15,2 % vseh učencev).

Avstrijska izobraževalna politika zavrača idejo segregacije. Zato učenci, ki niso avstrijske narodnosti in katerih materni jezik ni nemščina, ne obiskujejo ločenih šol ali razredov, ampak se izobražujejo skupaj z avstrijskimi vrstniki. Po zakonu naj bi se priseljenški otroci integrirali in hkrati ohranili ter gojili svojo kulturno identiteto, kar pogosto povzroča probleme v vsakodnevni šolski rutini. Zaradi tega je v začetku devetdesetih v avstrijske osnovne in srednje šole uvedeno medkulturno izobraževanje, imenovano 'izobraževalno načelo'. Namen medkulturnega izobraževanja je doseči medsebojno razumevanje med učenci različnih socialnih, kulturnih in jezikovnih izvorov. Usmerjeno je tudi k osveščanju glede podobnosti in različnosti ter k zmanjševanju evrocentrizma in rasizma v avstrijskih šolah.

Kakorkoli že, stvarnost kaže, da je nerešenih problemov še veliko. Tuji učenci imajo v avstrijskem izobraževalnem sistemu slabše možnosti kot njihovi avstrijski vrstniki, čuti se pomanjkanje medkulturnega prijateljstva med učenci, kar pogosto vodi v izobčenje priseljenških otrok ter v konflikte med pričakovanji priseljenških družin in 'zahodno kulturo'. To spet vodi v odtujitev od družin in/ali integracije in problemov identitete priseljenških otrok.

Zato morajo biti v izobraževalno politiko uvedeni številni ukrepi. Pri tem ima prednost medkulturni pristop kot možnost medsebojnega učenja iz različnih kultur.