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# EDUCATION POLICIES CONCERNING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN AUSTRIA

Marie Gitschthaler\* & Erna Nairz-Wirth\*

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with the key issues of early school leaving and youth unemployment in Europe and takes a look at the causes and consequences of these problems. A summary of relevant early school leaving statistics and research studies which describe the situation in Austria is presented. Measures and initiatives to reduce early school leaving that have been implemented in Austria since the Lisbon 2000 Strategy are discussed along with the questions of whether, and if so which, EU policy documents have influenced Austrian measures to tackle early school leaving. The conclusion critically sums up the following relevant results: although many of the policies recommended by the EU have been implemented in Austria, many preventive measures are also still outstanding. These include, for example, the continued lack of (tertiary level) training for kindergarten teachers and the failure to introduce comprehensive schools. The call for the latter was not met by Austria's introduction of so-called new middle schools, a workaround which has not led to a reduction in social inequalities in educational pathways. The supra-company apprenticeship training concept is a positive development, since it reaches some of the country's early school leavers.

**Keywords:** early school leaving, youth unemployment, policies, evaluation, policy analysis

## LES POLITIQUES ÉDUCATIVES CONCERNANT LE DÉCROCHAGE SCOLAIRE EN AUTRICHE

**Résumé:** Le présent exposé traite des principaux aspects des jeunes décrocheurs scolaires et du chômage des jeunes. Les causes et les conséquences du problème sont prises en compte. Un résumé avec des statistiques concernant le décrochage scolaires et des études décrivant la situation en Autriche sont présentées. Des mesures réduisant le décrochage scolaire et des initiatives mises en œuvre en Autriche depuis la Stratégie de Lisbonne 2000 sont discutées tout comme le sont les questions de savoir si les documents stratégiques UE ont influencé les mesures autrichiennes contre

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le décrochage scolaire. La conclusion montre les résultats suivants: Bien que de nombreuses stratégies recommandées par l'UE aient été mises en œuvre en Autriche, un grand nombre de mesures dans le domaine de la prévention n'ont pas encore été réalisées: la professionnalisation des pédagogues de maternelles au niveau tertiaire et la non-introduction de l'établissement d'enseignement secondaire. Cette exigence n'a pas été remplie par l'introduction de la Neue Mittelschule qui ne réduit pas les inégalités dans les carrières scolaires. Ce qui est positif, c'est la formation des apprentis en dehors des entreprises des jeunes décrocheurs scolaires.

**Mots-clés:** décrochage scolaire, chômage des jeunes, politiques, évaluation, analyse des politiques

### **AS POLÍTICAS EDUCATIVAS SOBRE O ABANDONO ESCOLAR PRECOCE NA ÁUSTRIA**

**Resumo:** Este artigo científico começa por introduzir as questões do abandono escolar precoce e desemprego jovem na Europa, analisando brevemente as causas e consequências deste problema e resumindo as estatísticas, definições e investigações sobre o abandono escolar precoce relevantes que descrevam a situação na Áustria. Na sua grande maioria, as medidas e iniciativas de redução do abandono escolar precoce que têm sido desenvolvidas e implementadas na Áustria desde a Estratégia de Lisboa 2000 são apresentadas e discutidas no que diz respeito a se e que documentos de políticas da UE influenciaram as medidas austríacas de combate ao abandono escolar precoce, quais destas medidas podem ajudar a reduzir o abandono escolar precoce e aumentar a igualdade na educação e o que se pode aprender dos resultados de avaliação das medidas que já foram avaliadas. A conclusão resume fundamentalmente os resultados relevantes: embora muitas das políticas recomendadas pela UE já tenham sido adotadas pela Áustria, há várias medidas no âmbito da prevenção que ainda não foram implementadas. Dois exemplos disso são, entre outros, a profissionalização de educadores de infância de nível superior e a não introdução do ensino integrado. Com a chamada medida intermédia referente à nova escola secundária, o último requisito não foi atendido, uma vez que esta não conduziu à redução das desigualdades sociais em termos de percurso educativo. O conceito de formação interprofissional, com o qual será possível abordar parcialmente a questão do abandono escolar precoce (early school leavers), deve ser salientado de forma positiva.

**Palavras-chave:** abandono escolar precoce, desemprego jovem, políticas, avaliação, análise das políticas

## **1. Introduction**

According to the Education and Training Monitor (European Commission, 2014), there are more than 5 million early school leavers in Europe. About 41% of these early school leavers are unemployed and, as such, face the risk of becoming socially disadvantaged and excluded.

Whether this is due to the shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based society and the increasing demands for high-skilled workers, also referred to as displacement processes (Gesthuizen, Solga, & Künster, 2011), to the increasing risks of stigmatisation for low-skilled workers (Solga, 2002), to the consequences of outsourcing unqualified labour to countries with low labour costs or to economic crises that have turned the labour market into a precarious field, the fact remains that high numbers of low-skilled workers, early school leavers and unemployed youth are costly and have negative effects on both the economy and the individuals concerned (e.g., Brunello & Paola, 2014; Belfield & Levin, 2007; Psacharopoulos, 2007). To effectively fight early school leaving and youth unemployment, EU policy documents (e.g., European Commission, 2011, 2013, 2014) recommend the Member States to develop and implement measures that emphasise the importance of education, knowledge and research.

Austria, with one of the lowest early school leaving rates (7.3% in 2013) (Statistik Austria, 2014b) in the European Union, already reached the target defined by the Lisbon 2000 Strategy, *viz.* reduce the rate below 10% by 2010, in 2009 (8.8%). Besides Austria, eight further countries reached this target: Croatia (5.2%), Slovakia (4.7%), Czech Republic (4.9%), Slovenia (5.0%), Poland (5.4%), Luxembourg (7.1%), Lithuania (7.9%) and Sweden (6.5%). However, the average early school leaving rate for the EU-28 Member States was 13.9% in 2010 and 11.1% in 2014. This means that the target has not been reached so far and is now one of the headline targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy (Eurostat, 2015a). Austria's relatively low early school leaving and unemployment rates for 15-24-year-olds (8.2% in January 2015) (Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz [BMASK], 2015b) are considered to be primarily due to the country's dual system<sup>1</sup> and a youth training guarantee introduced by the government to integrate young people into different school and training programmes, such as, for example, supra-company training. This measure provides young people who do not want to remain in school or cannot find an apprenticeship place with an education alternative. However, early school leavers face a particularly high risk of being excluded from the labour market compared to young people who have attained an upper secondary leaving certificate. While this risk is on average 1.9 times higher in the EU-15 Member States, it is 2.6 times higher for early school leavers in Austria, a fact that puts Austria at the top of the list according to Eurostat data (Eurostat, 2015b). Using the Eurostat indicator, the general employment rate as a key socioeconomic determinant is relatively good (4.8% in January 2015) in Austria, compared to other EU countries. However, the national unemployment rate

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<sup>1</sup> The dual system of apprenticeship combines practical training in a company (80%) and education at a vocational school (20%). At the end, the apprentice takes a final apprenticeship exam. About 40% of young people in Austria begin an apprenticeship after finishing compulsory schooling (BMASK, 2015a).

of 8.4% in 2014 (Statistik Austria, 2015a) is one of the highest since 1953 (8.7%) and almost half of those who are unemployed have no more than the compulsory level of schooling (Arbeitsmarktservice Österreich, 2015).

Furthermore, the situation regarding early school leavers has noticeably deteriorated in Austria over the last decades. While in 1980 almost 50% of the working age population had completed compulsory schooling, this number has decreased to 19.1% in 2012 due to education expansion (Statistik Austria, 2014a). Paradoxically, however, while this group was to a large extent (men: 80.1%; women: 43.4%) integrated into the labour market in 1980, it now constitutes 46%, i.e., the largest share, of the unemployed (Statistik Austria, 2015b).

In Austria, early school leavers are categorised as *Zertifikatsarme* (lacking qualifications), and since compulsory schooling ends in the country when pupils reach the age of 15, the group of people lacking qualifications is defined with the help of two indicators (Bruneforth, Weber, & Bacher, 2013):

1. The cohort proportion of *young people who leave education after compulsory schooling* – as the name suggests, this indicator comprises those who do not continue education after completing compulsory schooling (Bruneforth et al., 2013); it also includes the *cohort proportion of young people* who leave lower secondary education (including pre-vocational school = ISCED level 3c) without successfully completing grade 8 (Bruneforth et al., 2013).
2. The proportion of early school leavers using the EU definition, which defines early school leavers as people between the ages of 18 and 24 years who have only completed lower secondary education or less (without a qualification beyond ISCED level 3c) and who do not participate in any kind of vocational training or further education programme (Eurostat, 2014) – this definition is criticised by Steiner (2009), who, taking into account the above-mentioned fact that compulsory schooling in Austria ends earlier than in other European countries, extends the age range to include 15-year-olds; using Steiner's indicator, the number of early school leavers in Austria rises from 55,000 to 75,000.

Recently a new national indicator – «FABA» (*frühe Ausbildungsabbrecher*) – is used to measure the share of young people without an upper secondary school leaving certificate. With this indicator based on data obtained from the monitoring of education-related employment (government data based on a full census), the share of young people without a school leaving certificate almost doubles from 7.6% to 13.0%, i.e., 128,000 young people (Statistik Austria, 2015c). These figures present a different picture of early school leaving in Austria and correspond to the proportion of the risk group of young people with low com-

petency in reading (19.5% in PISA 2012, i.e., 180,000 pupils). In Vienna, like in other big cities, the proportion is particularly high and lies at 20% (Steiner, 2015). While such definitions do help to make social phenomena quantifiable and comparable, educational research also critically points to the stigma effects that categories like «lacking qualifications» may impose.

The same holds for early school leaving studies and discussions that fail to consider push-out or structural factors that cause early school leaving; given this omission, such studies suggest that the students are themselves responsible for dropping out of school prematurely. Considering those factors, Nairz-Wirth, Feldmann, and Diexer (2012) have developed a catalogue of interventive and preventive measures to be used by teachers, head teachers and parents when dealing with potential dropouts. In a four years qualitative longitudinal study (Nairz-Wirth, Gitschthaler, & Feldmann, 2014), the further life courses of 17 school dropouts had been explored. As a result, a typology of seven habitus types could be reconstructed: the ambitious, the disoriented, the escapist, the resigned, the status-oriented, the nonconformist, and the impeded. Experiences with stigma are the common thread that runs through all seven habitus types.

This short overview of recently commissioned studies on early school leaving shows that the issue is being taken seriously by the Austrian government and that ambitious efforts to tackle early school leaving and youth unemployment have been undertaken since 2000. The extent to which EU and OECD recommendations have influenced those efforts and the measures which have been developed, implemented and evaluated so far will now be discussed in more detail.

## **2. Methodology and research questions**

This desk-based research project involved the examination of existing literature on measures that have been developed to combat early school leaving in Austria since 2000. The process of scoping, searching, identifying and analysing (Rickinson & May, 2009) relevant literature was guided by three main questions: (2.1) which EU policies have influenced early school leaving-reducing policies in Austria? (2.2) Which measures have been implemented in Austria to reduce early school leaving and enhance equal opportunities since Lisbon 2000 Strategy? (2.3) What are the effects of the implemented measures that have been evaluated so far?

In order to answer the first two questions, we examined – in addition to the Lisbon 2000 Strategy, the EU Policy Framework to Reduce Early School Leaving (European Commission, 2011) and the EU 2020 Strategy – a total of 27 Austrian research papers and 49 Austrian policy

documents. Of these Austrian policy documents, the National Reform Programmes and corresponding implementation reports proved to be highly relevant in our investigation. Since these reports are published at regular intervals, we were able to trace measures back to 2000 – as the starting point for our journey – and reconstruct their implementation process and further development. In addition, we were able to examine how country-specific recommendations issued by the Council of the European Union, the EU Commission and in several OECD country reports were included in the developed measures. A further aspect of the analysis refers to the intended impact (preventive, interventive and compensatory) of the measures. To answer question three, we searched for evaluation reports. Our desk-based research showed that five of the measures described in this article have been evaluated so far. The results of the corresponding evaluation reports are described in section 2.3.

### ***2.1. EU policies that have influenced early school leaving-reducing policies in Austria***

Since the EU Commission, the Council of the European Union and the OECD explicitly address early school leaving, this topic has been given great attention within the education policy discourse in Austria (Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur [BMUKK], 2012). Over the years, a number of national policy documents, influenced by the EU-2020 Strategy and the country-specific recommendations of the EU Commission, have been issued to tackle the problem.

One important paper in this context is the National Strategy Paper on Lifelong Learning (Republik Österreich, 2011), which identifies the following targets, benchmarks and lines of action with respect to early school leaving: the 2009 early school leaving rate of 8.7% should be reduced to a maximum of 6%, and the proportion of students who perform badly in reading should be halved from 28% (based on the 2009 PISA report) to 14% by 2020. Three of the paper's ten lines of action explicitly address early school leaving and are equipped with a set of specific measures: line of action 2 refers to basic educational attainment and equal opportunities in school and apprenticeship training; line of action 3 refers to free-of-charge offers to complete education by attaining relevant qualifications later in life; line of action 4 addresses the expansion of alternatives for young people to enter the labour market.

Another important document is the National Strategy Paper for Preventing Early School Leaving (BMUKK, 2012). Besides Austria, about one third of countries/regions in Europe (Belgium [Flemish Community], Bulgaria, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, the United Kingdom and Norway) have developed such a national strategy.

Austria and five other countries/regions (Belgium [Flemish Community], Bulgaria, Spain, Malta and the Netherlands) developed their national strategies on the basis of the recommended EU Policy Framework to Reduce Early School Leaving (European Commission, 2011) and focus on prevention, intervention and compensation (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Cedefop, 2014). Taking this document as our point of departure, we analysed the various measures to reduce early school leaving introduced by the Austrian authorities. Although the recommendations advocate giving equal weight to each of the three types of measures, compensatory measures are a central element in the Austrian strategy. By way of comparison, Belgium (Flemish Community), Malta and the Netherlands, for example, have implemented comprehensive strategies with a strong focus on preventive measures. Many of the measures developed and implemented in Austria do not focus on early prevention but on offering young people alternatives to complete their education later in life.

## ***2.2. Measures to tackle early school leaving and to enhance educational equity***

Since one of the aims of the Lisbon 2000 strategy, *viz.* to cut national early school leaving rates by half by 2010, had to be redefined five years later to lowering the average early school leaving rate within the EU to below 10%, the EU Commission asked the Member States to establish National Reform Programmes (NRPs) specifying measures to promote economic growth and employment (Janger, 2006). The NRPs and the corresponding implementation reports respond to the Council Recommendations which, in turn, examine the measures recommended in the NRPs; in specifying early school leaving-reducing initiatives, the NRPs also pay attention to the country-specific recommendations formulated by the European Commission, the Council of the European Union and the OECD country reports that summarize and assess the progress made in this field.

Austria's first National Reform Programme 2005-2007 (Bundeskanzleramt, 2005) already included several measures and initiatives to reduce early school leaving and youth unemployment. Its focus was on post-qualification (Bundeskanzleramt, 2005): to promote vocational education and training, the «Jobs4You(th)» initiative and the «Blum-Bonus»<sup>2</sup> were introduced. To offer young people a safety net, the Youth Training Guarantee Act (*Jugendausbildungssicherungsgesetz*) was passed and supra-company training (*überbetriebliche Lehrausbildung*)

<sup>2</sup> The Blum Bonus, named after the former government commissioner for youth employment and apprenticeship training, subsidised companies and organisations which employed additional apprentices to the value of 400 euros per month in the first year of the apprenticeship, 200 euros per month in the second year and 100 euros per month in the third year.



introduced. Free-of-charge courses were offered to early school leavers who wished to rejoin the education system and take the school leaving exams. To make dual training more attractive, a scheme combining apprenticeship and the upper secondary school leaving certificate (*Lehre mit Matura*) as well as a modular apprenticeship training programme were established. To reduce dropout rates, orientation classes for 9<sup>th</sup> graders at vocational schools and integrated vocational training for youth with special educational needs were offered.

Of the above-mentioned compensatory measures and initiatives to tackle early school leaving, the youth training consolidation act (*Jugendausbildungs-Sicherungsgesetz*), which was passed as part of the national action plan for employment (*Nationaler Aktionsplan für Beschäftigung*/NAP) and the supra-company training scheme are of particular relevance. This measure, which was first introduced in 1998 and was established nationwide on a uniform legal basis in the same year, was implemented to assist young people who could not find an apprenticeship place after completing compulsory schooling. In 2008, the 1998 law was amended by the Vocational Training Act (*Berufsausbildungsgesetz*/BAG), which established a new legal basis for supra-company training. Since then, it has been recognised as equivalent to and a regular component of the dual training system and has been expanded as an element of the *apprenticeship training guarantee* (*Jugendausbildungsgarantie*) for young people up to the age of 18. As part of the country's labour market and employment policies, this measure follows the NRP guideline of improved education/training conditions for disadvantaged youth (Bundeskanzleramt, 2008).

Recent debates in education policy focus on the issue of mandatory education and training (*Ausbildungspflicht*) for 15-18-year-olds. These measures are to be implemented in the 2016-2017 school year, and from that year onwards every young person must, after completing compulsory schooling, participate in some kind of further education or training programme by attending a full-time secondary school or doing an apprenticeship. Disadvantaged youth can participate in special programmes, such as supra-company training and production schools (BMASK, 2015a). In *production schools*, early school leavers and young people who cannot find an apprenticeship place can acquire basic competences to reintegrate them into the formal education and training system (BMASK, 2015a). The first production school was established in 2001 with financial support from the European Social Fund (ESF). By autumn 2014, 24 production schools had already been established (BMASK, 2015a). As part of the country's labour market and employment policies, production schools follow the NRP guideline to improve labour market participation among certain target groups (Bundeskanzleramt, 2011).

Since the 2003-2004 school year, young people who have not completed compulsory schooling and adults with low qualifications have been offered free-of-charge courses to acquire the compulsory school leaving certificate (Bundeskanzleramt, 2005). This initiative

that is financed by both the federal government and the provinces has been developed continuously since 2003. By 2017, more money will be provided for free-of-charge programmes that help both young people without a compulsory school leaving certificate and adults with low qualifications to make up for missed education. As part of the country's labour market and employment policies, this measure follows the NRP guideline to promote a life-cycle-based approach in employment policies (Bundeskanzleramt, 2005) and the lifelong learning strategy (Republik Österreich, 2011).

Since the first NRP was established by the Austrian government in 2005, the Council of the European Union (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) and the European Commission (2015; Bundeskanzleramt, 2007) have both asked Austria time and again to improve the situation of disadvantaged youth and to implement measures that would reduce the impact of the socioeconomic milieu on school performance and academic achievement.

In Austria, socioeconomic status – or the availability of economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1966) – strongly influences school performance. Only 2.9% of children whose parents have an upper secondary school leaving certificate (*Matura*) or higher education qualification leave school early. The corresponding figure for children whose parents have at most completed only compulsory education is markedly higher at 18.2%. In terms of parental labour market status, the early school leaving rate for children of employed parents lies at 5.5%, while that of children whose parents are unemployed increases to 17.7%. The risk of early school leaving (26%) is particularly high for first generation migrants who were not born in one of the EU-15 countries. The corresponding figure for youth without a migrant background lies at 4.7% (Steiner, 2014).

Publications (e.g., European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2013) emphasise that socioeconomic background already has an influence on early tracking, i.e., the splitting of 10-year-olds into secondary academic schools (AHS) or lower secondary schools (*Hauptschule*)/new middle schools (*Neue Mittelschule*) after primary school. While 69% of children whose parents have a *Matura* or higher education qualification choose to go to secondary academic schools, 71% of children from less privileged social backgrounds (i.e., whose parents have completed compulsory schooling, an apprenticeship or an intermediate vocational or technical school) attend a lower secondary/new middle school (Vogtenhuber et al., 2013).

As a result, the learning environment of students at lower secondary/new middle schools is increasingly homogenised and, as a consequence, these students experience stigmatisation, e.g., increased mistrust by employers towards people who have been streamed or separated out by schools and teachers. The last Austrian National Report on Education indicates that tracking by teachers and family circumstances play a more important role than the pupil's competencies in the selection of a school (Vogtenhuber et al., 2013).

A look at the main primary and lower secondary education models in Europe in 2014-2015 reveals that only Austria and Germany carry out early selection after 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Selective lower secondary education is also encountered in the Netherlands, Lithuania and Luxembourg, albeit not until a later grade. The remaining countries (e.g., Sweden, Slovenia) have either a single structure education system (education is provided from the beginning to the end of compulsory schooling, with no transition between primary and lower secondary education, and with common general education provided for all pupils) or common core curriculum provisions (all students progress to lower secondary level where they follow the same general common core curriculum) (e.g., Portugal, France) (European Commission & Eurydice, 2014).

One area in which most European countries still need to adopt policies/measures that contribute to enhancing equal educational opportunities is in improving access to and the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Cedefop, 2014).

In its efforts to improve education and training for disadvantaged youth, which was one of the recommendations made by the Council of the European Union and the European Commission (Bundeskanzleramt, 2008), Austria placed particular emphasis on preventive measures for youth with a migrant background in its second NRP (2008-2010). One such measure is the establishment of a *compulsory free-of-charge kindergarten year with integrated language classes* for children who are not linguistically proficient enough to be taught in German (Bundeskanzleramt, 2008). According to the European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat (2014), the last one to two years of pre-primary education is compulsory in eight countries in addition to Austria, namely Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Latvia, Luxembourg, Hungary, Poland and Switzerland.

As part of the country's labour market and employment policies, this ongoing measure is designed to support disadvantaged children, to enhance equal educational opportunities, to support women in entering the labour market and to fight child poverty (Bundeskanzleramt, 2011).

In 2008, *early language assistance* in kindergarten was introduced by law (Article 15a of the Federal Constitutional Act [B-VG]; BGBl. II Nr. 478/2008) (Stanzel-Tischler, 2013) in Austria. Since kindergartens fall under the jurisdiction of the provinces, the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture established a steering group in 2007 to introduce the following language assistance measures in all nine provinces of Austria: assessment of language skills using specially developed observation forms 15 months prior to the start of primary schooling; educational plans to systematically promote language skills; establishment of educational standards for speech and language competences in German prior to the start of compulsory education; development of a curriculum for a course in early language promotion at

teacher training colleges (Stanzel-Tischler, 2013). Children's language skills are then tested again prior to the start of compulsory schooling (De Cillia & Krumm, 2009). The Austrian federal government's 2013-2018 work programme also foresees a second free-of-charge and obligatory kindergarten year for children in need of additional assistance and support (Bundeskanzleramt, 2013a).

The 2008-2010 NRP also foresaw the introduction of a new type of school, the «new middle school» (*Neue Mittelschule*), as a pilot project in five provinces in the autumn of 2008 (Bundeskanzleramt, 2008: 38). In 2009, the new middle school was then introduced nationwide for 10-14-year-olds to reduce educational inequalities and improve school achievement. In these schools, children from different social milieus learn and are taught using new methods such as team teaching, coaching, flexible learning groups and open learning. By the 2018-2019 school year, all lower secondary schools (*Hauptschulen*) in Austria should have been transformed into new middle schools. As part of the country's labour market and employment policies, this measure follows the guideline to improve education/training conditions for disadvantaged youth (Bundeskanzleramt, 2008). However, the corresponding 2015 evaluation report shows that the original aims have so far not been met (Eder, Altrichter, Bacher, Hofmann, & Weber, 2015).

The 2010 NRP includes several other measures to reduce early school leaving, e.g., more full-day care in schools (*Tagesbetreuung Neu*). Additional financial support has been guaranteed for further implementation of this measure by 2018-2019 with the aim of raising the density from 25% to 50% of full-day care (Hörl, Dämon, Popp, Bacher, & Lachmayr, 2013). As part of the country's labour market and employment policies, this measure follows the guideline to improve education/training conditions for disadvantaged youth (Bundeskanzleramt, 2013b).

To improve education levels and meet the changing demands in this profession, a new teacher training programme (*PädagogInnenbildung NEU*) was initiated in 2011 (Bundeskanzleramt, 2011). Based on a law passed in June 2013 (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen [BMBF], 2015), teacher education will consist of three parts (a 4-year basic degree (Bachelor) programme, a 1-2-year induction programme and a 1-2-year Master's degree programme) by 2016 (BMUKK & Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung [BMWF], 2010). With this measure Austria's aim is to catch up with international standards for teacher education. The measure follows the guideline to invest more and more effectively in human capital (Bundeskanzleramt, 2006).

Despite the fact that improving the skills of teachers, and in particular their ability to recognise the learning needs of individual students, to create a learning environment and promote inclusion, is one of the determining factors in reducing the number of early school leavers, less than one third of the countries in Europe (i.e., only Belgium [both the Flemish

and the French communities], Hungary, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Switzerland) indicate that early school leaving is a subject addressed in their teacher training and further education policies (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Cedefop, 2014). The role of head teachers is considered particularly crucial in the process of reducing dropout rates (Bryk, Allensworth, Easton, Lupescu, & Sebring, 2010).

The new teacher training programme in Austria does not, however, apply to early childhood education; Austria is currently one of the few remaining countries in Europe where early childhood educators are not required to complete a tertiary education programme (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, & Eurostat, 2014).

Socioeconomic changes also affect the transition from school to work, which has become more and more difficult as a result of the increasing demands set for young employees by employers. School leavers are now expected to have comprehensive knowledge of information technologies as well as specific qualifications relating to their chosen occupation (Martin & Quintini, 2014; Elffers, 2012). The NRP 2012 included nationwide youth coaching as an intervention measure here (Bundeskanzleramt, 2012). Youth coaching was introduced in 2013 and aims at improving both labour market integration and education/training conditions for 9<sup>th</sup> graders (Bundeskanzleramt, 2012). Youth who are at risk of being socially excluded are offered counselling, personalised support and case management to develop their prospects based on their skills and abilities. As part of the country's labour market and employment policies, this measure follows the guideline to improve labour market participation among certain target groups (Bundeskanzleramt, 2012).

To reduce the dropout rate among 9<sup>th</sup> graders at vocational middle and upper secondary schools as well as at the *Oberstufenrealgymnasium* (a special type of upper level secondary academic school), the use of small-group instruction is to be intensified and teaching methods improved in general. Classroom size is also to be reduced in core subjects (Bundeskanzleramt, 2008). As part of the country's labour market and employment policies, this ongoing measure, which was launched in 2008, follows the guideline to improve education/training conditions for disadvantaged youth (Bundeskanzleramt, 2008).

The European Commission (2014: 54) criticises the fact that in Austria there is «no monitoring of the implementation of the strategy as a whole» and that only «some of the individual measures that have been put in place are subject to review».

In the following section, we look at those measures that have already been evaluated to ascertain whether they were assessed as being effective in reducing dropout/early school leaving and in enhancing equal opportunities in education and training.

### **2.3. Evaluation results**

#### *Supra-company training*

Evaluations show that this measure can serve as a safety net for disadvantaged youth (particularly for youth without a compulsory school leaving certificate and youth with a migrant background). It is, however, important to note that this group of trainees is more at risk of dropping out than any other group, a fact that could indicate that supra-company training might be too high a threshold for this particular target group. Bergmann et al. (2011) point out that social disadvantages and a lack of school qualifications cannot be compensated by this measure and recommend the provision of additional support or some kind of preparation or bridging course. On a positive note, they report that socioeconomic differences are negligible among successful participants in supra-company training (Bergmann et al., 2011).

#### *Production schools*

From an integration into the labour market perspective, the evaluations of production schools yield the following results: 30% of participants remain unemployed after leaving a production school; 30% sign an employment contract; 7% continue their education by starting a course offered by the Austrian public employment service; one third are registered as «Out of Labour Force» (Bergmann & Schelepa, 2011: 61). Over time, however, integration into the labour market does improve, and the proportion of unemployed is halved after one year. The labour market status of youth with an employment contract remains constant over time; however, the same also applies for the group registered as not in the labour force. The authors conclude that production schools can help young people enter the labour market and that they generally support stabilisation among students in the long term (Bergmann & Schelepa, 2011).

#### *Early language support*

Since the middle of 2008, *early language support in kindergarten* has been accompanied and evaluated by BIFIE (Zentrum Graz des Bundesinstituts für Bildungsforschung, Innovation & Entwicklung des österreichischen Schulwesens), the Graz-based office of the Federal Institute for Education Research, Innovation and Development of School Education in Austria. The evaluation report (Stanzel-Tischler, 2011) shows that early childhood educators consider the support settings to be insufficient. Potential for improvement is seen in group size and group social composition, the education and professionalisation of early childhood educators and parental involvement. The recent country report (European Commission, 2015) points out

that some of the measures announced in the strategy for lifelong learning have yet to be implemented, namely the national quality framework for early childhood education and care and the facilitation of smooth transition from early childhood education to primary school.

#### *New middle school*

According to a recent evaluation of the new middle school (Eder et al., 2015), this new school type shows the following positive aspects when compared with secondary modern schools (*Hauptschule*): pedagogical processes, teaching methods and school climate have improved while violence and deviant behaviour have decreased. These aspects, however, do not lead to continuous and consistent improvement in school achievement. In other words, the educational level of new middle schools is not higher than that of comparable lower secondary schools. It would even appear that in some particular cases the new middle schools do not quite reach the educational level of the older type of school (Eder et al., 2015). Furthermore, new middle schools are seen to contribute little to educational equity, an aspect that may be due to the fact that they are run alongside academic secondary schools (lower level), with the latter still attracting those students from privileged social backgrounds (Eder et al., 2015).

#### *Youth coaching*

Evaluators generally consider the introduction of youth coaching in 2012 to have been a step in the right direction to reducing early school leaving. However, they consider the fact that 6.7% of young people who take advantage of this measure quit prematurely (Steiner, Pessl, Wagner, & Karaszek, 2013), and 8.7% of them could not work out a clear career perspective to be less positive (Steiner et al., 2013). With regard to gender and migrant background, no noteworthy differences could be observed. For 68% of the participants, the career plans could be given sharper contours, 33% increased their motivation and 31% developed a more positive self-image. The latter aspect was particularly evident among youth with migrant background. Three quarters of the participants said that their situation had improved after attending the coaching programme (Steiner et al., 2013).

### **3. Conclusion**

Current data show that Austria has neither been successful in reducing the impact of the socioeconomic milieu on school performance, nor has it sufficiently shifted the focus of mea-

asures to reduce early school leaving away from compensation. As can be seen from a recent evaluation report (European Commission, 2015), the new middle schools introduced in Austria in 2009 could not counteract the consequences of early tracking, *viz.* the separation of ten-year-olds into different types of schools. Furthermore, analyses of the measures that have been implemented so far show that Austria does not invest sufficiently in early dropout prevention.

As described in section 2.2, the risk of leaving school early is particularly high in Austria for youth from migrant families and from socioeconomically disadvantaged milieus. While the average educational outcomes have improved, the achievement gaps for students with low SES and young people with a migrant background have remained much the same. Similar results were yielded by the new middle school, the evaluation of which shows that this type of school contributes little to promoting educational equity and has not reached its original target, namely to mitigate the consequences of early segregation.

Recent data ascribes a positive effect to the free-of-charge, obligatory kindergarten year and to early childhood language promotion. This indicates that measures which are aimed at tackling early school leaving and promoting educational equity should start as early as possible. The positive effects of these two measures are acknowledged by the current debate on the need for an education policy that facilitates a second free-of-charge year at kindergarten for children at risk.

However, it should not be forgotten that, until recently, the individual measures that have been introduced have, on the whole, been insufficiently aligned with strategic perspectives, and that cooperation between the different providers, funding agencies and target group authorities has been limited. Although the recently introduced youth coaching initiative can be regarded as an attempt to establish greater transparency and coordination of measures in this field, the ex-post coordination of already existing initiatives is proving to be difficult.

The recent country report (European Commission, 2015) criticises Austria for not giving enough attention to early dropout prevention. This criticism is justified. Many measures to combat early school leaving and to enhance educational equity focus more on compensation and intervention than on prevention, and very few of them aim at adapting education and training organisations and authorities to the changes brought about by new technologies, globalisation and increased competition. The majority of the measures are designed to prepare young people for the labour market and to integrate them into the dual system; only a few have been developed to qualify them for entry into tertiary education.

Last but not least, we would like to emphasise that future measures should not forget how important it is to include parents in matters relating to school and education and to build up networks with the community in our efforts to effectively tackle early school leaving.



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