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The elusiveness of the common school in Austria

Abstract

This article investigates the failure of introducing comprehensive schooling in Austria, one of few ‘conservative’ outliers in the European post-war reform trend where early selection survived reform attempts in the 1970s. In particular, the focus is on the most recent attempt to postpone tracking from the age of 10 to 14 in the wake of Austria’s ‘PISA-shock’ in the 2000s. Based on in-depth process tracing and drawing on interviews and documentary sources this article examines the nuances of contemporary politics of comprehensive schooling reforms, assessing the interplay between PISA and long-standing reform barriers, the ambivalence of political parties in comprehensive schooling reforms and the role of policy feedback effects on broader societal support for reform.

Keywords: Austria; secondary education; tracking; comprehensive schooling; selection; Gymnasium; education reform; political parties; teacher unions; PISA; feedback effects

Word count: 7969 without references, 9643 with references

Introduction

One of the key reform trends across twentieth-century Europe was postponing the age at which students are channelled into different educational tracks by introducing comprehensive schooling in the 1960s and 1970s. However, in a few ‘conservative’ outliers, such as Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Austria early selection has survived until today (Blossfeld et al. 2016). In these conservative continental European welfare regimes, a high degree of status

differentiation is mirrored by a highly tracked and stratified school systems (West and Nikolai 2013). Such differentiated skill regimes are characterised by an early channelling of students into different educational and labour market pathways with a well-developed system of vocational education and training (VET) providing alternatives to higher education (Busemeyer 2015). This article investigates the Austrian case and why, after failed attempts to introduce comprehensive schooling in the 1920s and 1970s, a third reform attempt in the 2000s failed yet again.

In Austria, children are separated into different school tracks at the age of 10. Based on their school grades at the end of primary schooling, children are allocated either into the academically oriented *Gymnasium* or the general secondary school *Hauptschule*. Around the age of 14, students can then chose one of the pathways along the vocational-academic spectrum: apprenticeships and various types of VET schools providing vocational qualifications, VET colleges providing both vocational and academic qualifications and the upper cycle of the *Gymnasium*, the most academic and formally selective pathway leading to the *Matura* exam (for an overview see (Eder and Thonhauser 2015). This differentiated provision in upper secondary education and a range of ‘second chance’ measures provide some scope for correcting ‘wrong’ allocations at the age of 10. For example, at 14, high-achieving *Hauptschul* graduates can transfer to the upper cycle of the *Gymnasium* or gain the *Matura* via VET colleges. However, Austria’s differentiated system of secondary education is clearly ‘segmented’ in Ringer’s understanding, where parallel school tracks differ not only in their curriculum and the credentials they award but also regarding the social origin of their pupils (Ringer 1987, 7)). Selection at a young age tends to have long-lasting consequences for young people’s educational careers and is more strongly affected by social background factors than educational choices at a later age (Boudon 1974; Horn 2009). The two tracks of lower secondary schooling in Austria differ in their social composition, with children from highly

educated parents being over-represented in the *Gymnasium*. Like in other conservative regimes, where institutional stratification in schools supports a ‘conservative’ social order (van Zanten 2019, 352), early selection in Austria is frequently identified as key factor in the high degree of inter-generational transmission of educational outcomes (Bacher 2003; Fessler, Mooslechner, and Schürz 2012).

The operation of *Gymnasium* tracks and other ‘state-sponsored’ forms of elite education in increasingly marketized conditions of school choice and competition in countries such as the Netherlands and France have recently received attention (Merry and Boterman 2020; van Zanten 2019). Another long-standing interest has been into why such selective tracks have survived previous attempts to introduce comprehensive schooling in a handful of Continental European countries, in particular the case of Germany (Heidenheimer 1974; Ertl and Phillips 2000; Wiborg 2009; Baldi 2012; see also Greveling, Amsing, and Dekker 2015 on Dutch reforms). Apart from country-specific institutional and political obstacles for educational reform, the literature broadly points towards the particular strength of conservative societal forces defending the selective system, such as Christian-democratic parties, parts of the teaching force and media and the wider public, together with a weakness of advocates for comprehensive schooling, mainly on the political left, in forming cross-class alliances for reform (Wiborg 2009).

Austria has received little attention in the comparative literature on the survival of selective schooling, in contrast to the significant interest in its vocational education system. However, the recent attempt to introduce comprehensive schooling in Austria in the wake of the PISA debates in the early 2000s allows not only to revisit previous explanations for the survival of selection in ‘conservative’ educational regimes but also to examine the politics of comprehensive schooling under contemporary conditions. Drawing on in-depth interviews

with political actors and a broad range of documentary sources, this article investigates the reform process leading to the New Middle Schools (NMS).

After reviewing the literature on the politics of comprehensive schooling reforms in twentieth-century Europe, and in Austria in particular; the article outlines the methods and sources and gives a brief account of the recent reform process. Insights from Austrian case then highlight how the PISA debate interplayed with long-standing reform barriers, why parties are not just players but themselves sites of societal struggles over schooling, and how policy legacies can have long-lasting effects on teacher attitudes and societal support for change more generally.

The politics of comprehensive schooling reforms

The issue of comprehensive schooling is intimately intertwined with the twentieth-century expansion of secondary schooling from elite to mass provision. The gradual universalisation of secondary education raised the question of how to allocate pupils and ‘talents’ across educational pathways (Müller, Ringer, and Simon 1987). In the first half of the twentieth century in Europe, the influx of new students was largely channelled into newly created school tracks rather than expanding existing elite school tracks. In the emerging *differentiated* systems of schooling, parallel school tracks differed in their curricula, length and format, and most importantly, in their prestige and the opportunities they afforded their graduates (Benavot, Resnick, and Corrales 2006). Following the assumption that different ‘types of mind’ required different kinds of education and should ideally be allocated from an early age, access to the most prestigious tracks, such as the English grammar schools or the *Gymnasium* in many continental European countries, was reserved for children with demonstrated academic ability (Kerckhoff et al. 1996).

However, this assumption and the selective practices it underpinned came increasingly under critique. From the 1950s, a growing body of empirical research questioned the reliability of ability-testing in young children and highlighted the role of academic selection in reproducing social inequalities. Also, growing educational demands among an expanding middle class put pressure on the selective system in which academic education ought to be the reserve of a small minority (Kerckhoff et al. 1996, 22; Baldi 2012). Across Europe, political initiatives to integrate school tracks gained momentum over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, leading in most countries to the introduction of comprehensive schooling, where children of all abilities were taught together and selection and track choices were postponed towards the end of compulsory schooling. However, within this broad European post-war trajectory, national reforms varied considerably in terms of ‘substantive detail, pace, and style’ (Heidenheimer 1974, 388), resulting in considerable cross-national diversity of comprehensive schooling systems (Wiborg 2009; Blossfeld et al. 2016). Of particular interest in the literature has been the question why some countries, in particular Germany, completely failed to introduce comprehensive secondary schooling (Heidenheimer 1974; Ertl and Phillips 2000; Wiborg 2009; Baldi 2012).

At the centre of many explanations of the variation in the implementation of comprehensive schooling reforms across Europe are the political struggles which have shaped policy trajectories at critical junctures in time (Wiborg 2009; Busemeyer 2015). Like few other educational reforms, comprehensive schooling was a political issue that inspired passionate debates about the role of education for social change. Within the broader ideological and political struggles of twentieth-century Europe, the question of education for maintaining or changing social order, and specifically comprehensive schooling, became a key battleground for opposing views on social stratification and cultural traditions. Demands for comprehensive schooling as a means to open opportunities for disadvantaged groups and reduce social

divisions by teaching children of diverse backgrounds together often went hand in hand with curricular and classroom reforms influenced by reform pedagogy which for opponents raised fears over a loss of standards and educational traditions. The defence of selective education, in turn, was often accompanied by a preference for school-internal differentiation practices to teach children in as homogenous ability groups as possible, as well as subject-oriented curricula and teacher-centred pedagogy to preserve educational standards and cultural inheritance (for a review of this debate see e.g. Kerckhoff et al. 1996; Schnell 1993; Benn and Chitty 1997).

Overall, social democratic parties, and in some countries, liberal parties, were key actors pushing for comprehensive schooling in the past, while Conservative and Christian-democratic parties belonged to the main defenders of selective schooling (Österman 2017). Tracing the historical roots of national variations in comprehensive schooling in the Scandinavian countries, England and Germany, Wiborg (2009), for example, highlights how different national approaches and the success of reform ambitions were shaped by the power resources and political choices of social democratic parties, including their ability and willingness to forge coalitions with other parties (see also Sass 2015). However, the political divide between left and right has not always been that clear-cut. In some countries, abolishing selection has been supported or even driven by political actors on the conservative spectrum, especially where parental discontent with selection had become apparent or where integrated school systems offered a more cost-effective way of providing schooling in sparsely populated areas (Kerckhoff et al. 1996, 29). Neither was support for comprehensive schooling homogenous on the political Left. Many social democratic parties, while in principle supporting comprehensive schooling, were often reluctant to push for postponing selection and other associated curricular and pedagogical forms, sometimes for electoral reasons and not wanting to alienate white-collar and professional strata in their electoral constituencies (Heidenheimer 1974), but often

also due to an admiration of academic traditions in selective schools and beliefs that these schools could become ‘ladders of opportunity’ for working-class children (Mandler 2014).

Austria is a particular case in point where struggles over comprehensive schooling have exhibited a high degree of political-ideological polarisation between left and right while also exhibiting a clear ambivalence of social democratic positions in education reform. Controversies over the structure of schooling in Austria have their roots in the 1920s when school experiments with ‘common middle schools’ and child-centred pedagogy in social democratic-governed Vienna became entangled in wider ideological and increasingly violent struggles between the social democratic and Catholic-conservative political camps (Glöckel and Achs 1985), followed by Austria’s annexation to Nazi-Germany in 1938. After 1945, the political contestations of the inter-war period gave way to a highly consensus-oriented and negotiation-centred political culture dominated by the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the Christian-democratic People’s Party (ÖVP) (Pelinka 2009). However, among the few issues challenging this political settlement and regularly flaring up controversy was the question of educational selection and the role of the Catholic church in education (for a detailed discussion see Schnell 1993 and Engelbrecht 2014). To pacify this issue, both parties agreed on a momentous compromise in 1962, which introduced measures for some permeability between school tracks, while enshrining the differentiated school system with ‘quasi-constitutional’ status. Since then, school reforms require a two-thirds majority in parliament, which granted both parties effectively veto power in education policy. Shortly after, this requirement then severely constrained the SPÖ – despite winning three consecutive absolute majorities and ruling alone from 1970 to 1983 – in its attempts to introduce comprehensive schooling (Ucakar 1983). Experiments with ‘integrated comprehensive schools’ for 10 to 14-year-olds, started in 1971, led to years of highly contentious negotiations and ultimately failed to gain support by the ÖVP. A political compromise in 1982 then settled the question of the school structure.

Some of the pedagogical innovations of the comprehensive schooling experiments were transferred to the *Hauptschule* and a harmonisation of curricula of *Hauptschule* and *Gymnasium* (lower cycle) improved opportunities for transfer between school types. The differentiated structure of lower secondary schooling overall was not, however, altered (for discussion see Schnell [1993: 273-4]).

The fate of comprehensive schooling in Austria in the twentieth century has therefore been shaped by a combination of a particularly rigid polarisation between political camps in the inter-war period, and, after 1945, a consensus-oriented settlement, which cemented the status quo by making educational reform dependent on cross-party support. Apart from the ÖVP's continuing resistance to comprehensive schooling, another key reason for the failure of comprehensive schooling has been found in the SPÖ's ambivalence and its contribution to establishing the post-war 'educational partnership' which provided both parties with considerable influence and patronage in school policy and administration (Dermutz 1983; Pelinka 1985). In addition to the role of partisan conflict over school structure, other features of the political and institutional context have acted as barriers to school reforms, most importantly, the federal system of education administration. In contrast to the largely devolved responsibility for schooling in Germany, the provision of secondary schooling in Austria is shared between the Federal government, responsible for the *Gymnasium*, and the nine states (*Länder*) responsible for the *Hauptschule* (Lassnigg 2016). This peculiar division gives *Länder* governments a veto in any initiative aiming to unify both school tracks while also putting firm limits on local initiatives and experimenting with integrated school forms such as have emerged in Germany (Becker, Neumann, and Dumont 2017). Another reform barrier in Austria was the organised teaching force which remains highly fragmented by school type and generally dominated by Christian-democratic factions. A particular rigid differentiation between *Gymnasium* and *Hauptschul* teachers in terms of teacher training and qualification,

employment conditions and status, has created strong vested interests among *Gymnasium* teaching unions for maintaining the existing hierarchy (Budzinski 1986).

The recent reform episode allows to revisit arguments about the conservative nature of education policy and politics in Austria in the changing conditions at the beginning of the 21st century. Of particular interest, and a widespread hope among reform advocates, was thereby if the unprecedented debate over education policy in the wake of the PISA studies was able to create the discursive conditions which would help to overcome long-standing political reform barriers. For Germany, Heidenheimer (1974) and Baldi (2012) argue that a delay in the general post-war shift in political and educational discourses in Europe had postponed initiatives for comprehensive schooling in Germany, giving them a short time window before broader societal and political shifts in the late 1970s turned the tides against egalitarian educational reform. A similar trend has been identified in Austria, where notions of a ‘general educability’ of children which challenged the traditional notions of innate and fixed intelligence had already underpinned the school reforms in 1920s Vienna, but then became largely forgotten in the rigidity of Austria’s post-war education policy debate. The underdeveloped nature of empirical education research in Austria then further stifled a shift in thinking on the nature of human ability and potential, which in other countries had delegitimised selective schooling. While comprehensive school experiments eventually started in the 1970s, they appear to have had limited effect on a widespread belief in the legitimacy of selection in the Austrian public (Dermutz 1983; Budzinski 1986; Schnell 1993, 305).

In both Germany and Austria a long period of stability and absence of structural reform throughout the 1980s and 1990s then contrasted with a flurry of reform activities in the 2000s with the PISA-studies as the key ‘watershed’ in educational discourses (Ertl 2006, 621). The ‘shock’ created by the lower than expected performance and other shortcomings of their education systems revealed by the PISA studies revived demands for structural educational

reform. In both countries, considerable cross-party support for reforms allowed to overcome many existing domestic reform barriers and led to far-reaching changes in national systems of school governance, for example with the introduction of national educational standards and other accountability and assessment policies (Ertl 2006; Altrichter 2020). The large gaps between high and low achievers in countries with early tracking revealed in the PISA studies also revived domestic calls to postpone selection. However, this topic remained highly controversial and despite a longer-standing trend from a three-tiered to a two-tiered system and some local experimentation, early tracking was generally maintained in Germany (Davoli and Entorf 2018). In Austria, prospects for comprehensive schooling appeared initially more favourable in the 2000s with the launch of the first round of national school experiments with non-selective schooling since the 1970s.

The Austrian case is therefore interesting not only to re-examine explanations for survival of selection in post-war decades but also how international pressures such as through the PISA studies interact with domestic political dynamics. While much research on the effects of international large-scale assessments such as PISA has focused on the construction and diffusion of policy agendas on the global level, interest has recently increased in the particular ‘translation’ of PISA and the policy agendas transported with them in national contexts. Studies have drawn attention to how local actors in particular political, cultural and discursive contexts interpret and mobilise the ‘lessons’ from PISA studies for example by constructing particular ‘reference societies’ (Grek 2009; Auld and Morris 2016), highlighting the ‘variability of form, content, amplitude, and intensity’ of the reception of PISA (Carvalho and Costa 2015). An important area of study remains the link between the reception of PISA or its ubiquity in national policy discourses and its actual effect on changing education policy. While local actors can mobilise PISA ‘as a national norm-setting device’ to further their policy agendas (Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow 2018, 558), their success also depends on the ‘openness’ of the political

and educational settings for reform, or what Martens et al. (2010) call ‘national transformation capacities’. Firstly, international pressures can be mediated by domestic ‘veto players’, or actors who can block or obstruct reforms, and the existence of ‘veto points’, the institutional structures which provide such veto opportunities (Immergut 1990). Secondly, historically entrenched ‘guiding principles’ of national education policy which have become embedded ‘in the institutional structure and the collective interpretation scheme of a country’ (Leuze et al. 2008, 14)), can shape the discursive environment and political opportunity for reform. The latter appears particularly relevant for policies with long-standing national political controversies such as comprehensive schooling. Using historical institutionalism as an interpretive lens then also allows reflection on potential legacies of past policy settlements and their feedback effects on group identities, vested interests and collective beliefs (Béland 2010; Campbell 2012), and thereby the extent of societal support for reform.

The Austrian case exhibits a particularly high number of veto points through its complex federalist structure and the need for two-thirds majority requirement in parliament. And yet, the unprecedented debate created by PISA sparked hopes among reform advocates that postponing selection might finally be possible, creating broad-based societal support for reform overcoming entrenched conservative beliefs. This article investigates the interplay between PISA and the national political and institutional context, the reform windows that it opened, and the continuing barriers which comprehensive schooling reform faced.

Materials and methods

Process-tracing was used to analyse the recent reform episode in Austria from the early 2000s to the aftermath of the compromise on New Middle Schools in 2012. Given the lack of secondary literature detailing this reform episode, a variety of sources including 24 semi-structured interviews, policy documents and press coverage were used to reconstruct the

sequence and dynamics of the policy process. Interviews with key political actors were conducted in 2015 and 2016, including with three former secretaries of education, several senior civil servants in the education ministry, representatives of political parties, teaching unions and other interest groups, as well as independent policy activists and education experts (see appendix for details). Interviews were not only invaluable to gain in-depth insights into policy-making processes and to triangulate information obtained from documentary sources, but also provided key insight into the attitudes and the thinking of actors involved in education reform (Walford 1994; Tansey 2007). As the analysis focused in particular on the political struggles between actors with multiple and shifting policy preferences, interviews provided invaluable insight into the ‘assumptive worlds’ of these actors (Young 1977, 2–3), their beliefs, interpretations and rationales underpinning their engagement with education policy as well as their perceptions of opportunities and constraints for education policy within the given political context.

A window of opportunity opens and closes

It is hard to overstate the effect of the early PISA studies on the school debate in Austria. Hopes that the upgrade of the *Hauptschule* after 1982 would halt the rising demand for *Gymnasium* school places were premature as the share of primary school pupils transferring to the *Gymnasium* rose from 22 per cent in 1980/1 to 30 per cent in 2000/1, in Vienna from 45 to 50 per cent, reaching even higher shares in some Viennese districts (Statistik Austria 2019). While the *Hauptschule* largely fulfilled its function as a ‘general school’ for the majority of children in rural areas, in urban areas it was becoming a ‘rest school’. Throughout the 1990s, these pressures sparked occasional debates and initiatives with school partnerships in Vienna and Graz (Engelbrecht 2014, 80–89), but calls for comprehensive schooling remained marginal in the national policy debate (Seel and Scheipl 2004, 49). Although the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) continued its hold on the school ministry until 1995, sharing power with the Christian-

Democrats (ÖVP) until 1999, SPÖ politicians were reluctant to renew its traditional demand for comprehensive schooling and re-open the inevitable ideological struggles of the past (Interview 2). Reform advocates were told ‘not to make any waves’ (Interview 10) and comprehensive schooling was largely perceived as a political ‘taboo’ in the SPÖ (Interview 18). The prospects for comprehensive schooling reforms appeared particularly slim when in 1999/2000, after a political watershed, the ÖVP entered a governing coalition with the radical right-wing party FPÖ and the SPÖ found itself in opposition for the first time since the 1960s. Despite both ÖVP and FPÖ reiterating their support for selective schooling, however, calls for structural school reforms made a surprising comeback after the publication of the first two rounds of PISA studies in 2001 and 2004 (Haider and Reiter 2004) where Austria’s disappointing performance produced a veritable ‘shock’ (Bauer and Hauer 2005). The recommendation to postpone selection from PISA-head Andreas Schleicher (*Der Standard*, 7 December 2004) and the high performance of the Finnish comprehensive school system were seized by long-standing reform advocates, in particular by the Greens and parts of the SPÖ, joined by a few voices within the ÖVP which called to end the party’s long-standing defence of selective education (*Der Standard*, 14 September 2003).

The ÖVP education minister appointed an expert commission, led by the Austrian PISA coordinator, which started to develop recommendations for a systematic improvement of school education in Austria, focusing largely on ‘internal’ measures rather than changes to the structure of schooling (Haider et al. 2003). The proposed measures such as the introduction of national performance standards (*Bildungsstandards*) and modernisation of teacher education, were not particularly controversial (Interview 9, 11), but in a reversal of traditional roles, the ÖVP was now dependent on the SPÖ to reach the two-thirds majority of votes required for education reforms. In a surprising offer, the ÖVP, who had long benefited from these veto opportunities, suggested dropping the requirement in 2005. However, the prospect that this

could be used by an SPÖ-Green-coalition to introduce comprehensive schooling by simple majority, mobilised vociferous protest within conservative ranks, in particular the Gymnasium teaching unions, a range of parent associations and some Catholic groups. For many, the two-thirds majority not only guaranteed the survival of selective schooling, but also the future of state subsidies for Catholic private schools and religious education in state schools (*Der Standard*, 1 May 2005). On the other side of the political spectrum, SPÖ politicians were torn. Having long called for the fall of the two-thirds majority, many were now, in political opposition, reluctant to give up its veto power in school policy (Interview 11). In an unusual coalition, SPÖ and Catholic Church joined forces to demand the ‘constitutional protection’ of several ‘core principles’, including the guarantee of free public schooling and state subsidies for Catholic schools. The ÖVP retaliated these demands insisting on including the principle of selective education in this legislation. While the resulting agreement successfully dropped the two-thirds majority for nearly all educational legislation, a handful of ‘core principles’ including changes to the ‘adequate differentiation in secondary schooling’ continue to require a two-thirds majority.

Despite this initial setback, the debate about comprehensive schooling gained political dynamic in the 2006 election. The SPÖ started to campaign more openly for the need to move to a ‘common school’ (SPÖ 2006) and increasingly vocal support for postponing selection within the ÖVP caused frequent speculation that the ÖVP’s bulwark against comprehensive schooling might crumble (*Die Presse*, 16 December 2005). Support for postponing selection came in particular from employer organisations which had long backed the selective education system but increasingly saw the bipartite system as a crude and inefficient way of spotting and developing talents across the population (Interview 21) and started to advocate for a common, but internally differentiated, middle school until 14 (Industriellenvereinigung 2006). Winning the parliamentary elections in 2006 but missing a majority with the Greens, the SPÖ started

coalition-negotiations with the ÖVP where comprehensive schooling and university tuition fees were key bones of contention (*Die Presse*, 25 October 2006). A compromise was eventually found in allowing a small number of school experiments with new forms of ability differentiation and individualisation in secondary schooling, leading the new SPÖ school minister to introduce ‘New Middle Schools’ (NMS). These were non-selective schools following the *Gymnasium* curriculum but with a ‘new learning culture’, more individualised support and team-teaching with teachers of both school types (ExpertInnenkommission 2007), which was hoped to eventually lead to full-fledged comprehensive schooling.

While a new expert commission started to develop proposals, the two governing parties, *Länder* governments and teaching unions battled over the implementation and scope of the experiments. The SPÖ-led school ministry had hoped that non-selective experiments could be implemented across entire ‘model regions’ in alliance with reform-inclined *Länder* governments (Interview 4), but these plans had to be scaled back in favour of experiments at individual schools, which, as was feared, had to compete with neighbouring *Gymnasien*. ÖVP negotiators not only insisted that schools wanting to participate in the experiments need the support of 2/3 of their parents and teachers, but also that at least one *Gymnasium* per district was to remain. As a result, very few *Gymnasien* participated in the experiments, 3 in the initial round of 67 participating schools in 2008/9, growing to only 11 out of 320 schools in 2010/11. However, the ÖVP’s reluctance to lift the existing cap on the number of experimental schools became increasingly criticised from its ÖVP-governed *Länder* governments in light of the popularity of the New Middle Schools with local parents and the additional resources the schools received from the Federal government for team-teaching.

The general deadlock in this and several other school reforms sparked a grass-roots campaign which aimed to overcome the deadlock and partisan divides in educational debates. Supported by public figures and organisation across the political spectrum, including the Greens and

employer groups, the movement was generally united in its concern about selection. However, when developing a ‘people’s petition’ to initiate educational change in parliament, the movement struggled to find a consensus. Uncertainty over the nature of a ‘common school’ and a lingering fear of a loss of educational standards by some was compounded by disagreement in other matters such as university tuition fees (*Der Standard*, 11 February 2011).

The fate of comprehensive schooling was determined by a U-turn in the ÖVP’s strategy. Rather than trying to limit the NMS experiments, the party suddenly proposed to expand the program to cover all *Hauptschulen* across the country, thereby meeting the demands from the *Länder* governments to expand the experiments (and accompanying resource), while at the same time undermining hopes that these experiments would eventually include the *Gymnasia* as well. To the dismay of comprehensive schooling advocates, the SPÖ school minister agreed to the ÖVP’s proposition. The compromise, which came to be adopted in parliament in early 2012, was then remarkably similar to the compromise in 1982 which had ended the comprehensive schooling experiments of the 1970s. The pedagogical innovations of the experiments, such as team teaching and flexible internal differentiation were extended to all *Hauptschulen* while the selective structure of lower secondary schooling remained largely unaltered. Until 2019/20, all *Hauptschulen* were converted to New Middle Schools while the debate about comprehensive schooling has largely disappeared from the political agenda in Austria.

School struggles between and within parties

Attempts to end Austria’s exceptionalism in Europe have once again failed. For some, comprehensive schooling represents ‘the last really ideologically dominated policy field with completely rigid ideological convictions’ (interview 4), while for many actors interviewed, the ideological references in the debate barely disguised defence of status interests among the

Gymnasium clientele. Once again, struggles over comprehensive schooling dominated by partisan conflict, in particular between Social democrats and Christian democrats, yet uncertainties and tensions within each party's stance had become more evident than before.

The most visible change from a historical perspective occurred in the conservative camp. PISA strengthened reform-oriented voices among regional party branches, ÖVP-dominated parts of the educational administration, some Catholic groups and employer wings resulted in several waves of internal debates about modernising the party's policy standpoint in education (Interview 8). In 2010, even the ÖVP's university minister spoke favourably of a future 'Gymnasium for all' (*Die Presse*, 21 May 2010). However, internal debates and diverging voices were routinely shut down the party's routine pledges of 'commitment' to the *Gymnasium* ('*Bekanntnis zum Gymnasium*') (ÖVP 2015). Within a wider 'Christian democratic' programmatic orientation, the party's support for a differentiated school system had traditionally been embedded within its support for a highly differentiated welfare state where benefits relate to individual 'contribution' (van Kersbergen 1995). Early selection by ability was justified with the need to account for 'natural' differences in children's abilities and needs, the desirability of educational diversity and parental 'choice' with a fear that comprehensive schooling would fail especially the gifted students and lead to a levelling down of educational standards (Interview 7, Amon 2012, 409).

Beyond ideological commitments and the aim to protect the interests of the party's clientele among the key beneficiary of the *Gymnasium*, it was the influence of *Gymnasium* teaching profession on ÖVP school policy which in education policy regularly side-lined the otherwise influential employer interests (interview 8, 21). This influence was visible from the appointment of the head of the civil servants' union as chief education negotiator in 2007 to the shutting down revived demands for comprehensive schooling among ÖVP *Länder*

governments after the 2012 compromise when even the ÖVP's party leader was believed to hold sympathies for comprehensive schooling (*Der Standard*, 7 March 2016).

On the other side of the spectrum, the SPÖ has again revealed its ambivalence in school reform. The party's frequent retreat from one of its long-standing policy aim was partly owed to the obvious political constraints school reform faced. More immediate than the barrier of the two-thirds majority which school reforms would require was the SPÖ's dependence on the ÖVP as its de facto only coalition partner. More than once did fights over school reform, and the New Middle Schools, in particular, endanger the survival of the government coalition (Interviews 5, 13). Starting with an ambitious reform agenda and political backing from OECD-circles in 2007 (Interview 3), SPÖ school minister Schmied soon found herself bogged down by negotiations with the ÖVP, the *Länder* governments (which increasingly demanded sole responsibility for secondary schooling and teacher employment) and the teaching unions. Increasingly unpopular within the SPÖ itself and under pressure 'to save her prestige project' (Interview 11), she agreed to the NMS compromise in 2011 which de facto ended hopes to introduce comprehensive schooling.

Beyond pragmatism in light of considerable political constraints, the interviews indicated a more fundamental ambivalence of SPÖ towards school reform. The recent episode once again revealed the weakness of internal mobilisation and doubts among its leadership over the degree of electoral support for comprehensive schooling. While a handful of highly committed activists within the parliamentary party and affiliated associations had since the 1980s continued to mobilise to keep the topic on the party agenda, references to comprehensive schooling had largely become ceremonial or declaratory, like the 'the Amen in the prayer' (Interview 10). Although the demand for comprehensive schooling has long been symbolically tied to social reform ambitions of the SPÖ's first 'defining' period of 1920s 'Red Vienna' (Schnell 1993), aspirations for structural school reform have long coexisted with a more

pragmatic strategy – and perhaps also ideological conviction – of enabling social mobility *within* the differentiated school system. The 1960s slogan of opening the *Gymnasium* ‘for our children too’ to bring ‘more working-class children into the Gymnasium’ (Interview 1) implicitly remained at the heart of social-democratic education policy, underpinning many measures such as the abolishing of Gymnasium entrance exams implemented during the SPÖ’s long hold over the school ministry (1970-1995). Similarly, the ‘open access’ to higher education without tuition fees and admission restrictions beyond the *Matura* certificate is still considered a crucial achievement of the Kreisky governments of the 1970s, aiming to open up educational opportunities despite the failure of integrating secondary schooling.

While the common school was one of the pledges ‘that every SPÖ member can recite when woken up at three in the morning’ (Interview 15), even the mobilisation of the party’s rank-and-file for comprehensive schooling remained weak – compared, for example, to party-internal protests a ‘selling out’ to the ÖVP over university tuition fees would have created (Interview 11). While the PISA studies helped reform advocates in the SPÖ to make education a priority in the party’s policy agenda, comprehensive schooling remained an electoral risky (Interview 11, 13). Similar to the late 1960s, when the party had last ‘discovered’ its traditional demand for comprehensive schooling during a brief spell in government opposition, this demand was frequently downplayed in the party’s campaigns in the 2000s (Interview 10, 11). And similar to the 1970s, reform advocates hoped that the exposure to international debates and the facts created by school experiments could eventually weaken the public’s scepticism towards the common school (Schnell 1993, 234).

Party politics still dominate school reforms in Austria, but the recent reform episode also rendered the internal tensions within parties more visible than before. Such internal tensions had long been submerged by the ‘educational partnership’ (Dermutz 1983) which united the two political blocks that dominated Austrian post-war politics. Lacking a consensus over

‘substance’, it was a consensus over ‘procedure’, which had granted both parties institutional veto powers and shared influence in educational administration, and which had allowed them to balance their various internal demands and mute internal divisions. Since the 1980s, the extraordinary political dominance of the two parties has weakened and other parties, interest groups and grass-roots campaigns became more actively involved in education policy debates. Particularly in the aftermath of the PISA studies, education debates have become more pluralistic, crossing traditional partisan boundaries and opening space for more substantial pedagogical debates which had long been crowded out (Gruber 2006, 2015). However, the debate over comprehensive schooling soon returned to struggles over resources and influence, leaving little space for a more substantial debate about the aims and objectives of educational reform (Interview 8). While the emerging reform coalition became as broad as never before, no shared vision of a common school emerged while defenders of the selective status quo effectively mobilised within and outside the ÖVP.

Societal support for reform: PISA and the long shadow of the past

From the ideological legacies of the struggles in the inter-war years to the political-institutional settlement of the post-war years, it is difficult to assess contemporary school policy in Austria without taking into account its history. In addition to recurring partisan conflicts over selection, a lack of societal mobilisation for comprehensive schooling has undermined reforms in the past (Budzinski 1986). Given the lack of systematic evidence on public attitudes to schooling, the degree societal support for reform cannot be fully assessed here. However, the perceptions of actors involved in the recent reform demonstrate the hopes and uncertainties of reform advocates and allow reflection on past policy settlements influence the conditions for contemporary school reform in Austria.

While experts of the ‘future commission’ were still sceptical that the ‘historical-cultural preconditions’ for comprehensive schooling were given in Austria (Eder et al. 2005, 16), the PISA studies raised hopes for a change in public attitudes among reform advocates. Many saw it as ‘the decisive impulse to undermine the typical Austrian arrogance that we’re the best’ (Interview 9) and believed it would challenge widespread assumptions about the superiority of the Austrian (and German) differentiated school system (Interview 22). PISA allowed the ‘first international fact-checking’ (Interview 18) while its broad press coverage put alternative school systems on the map, as even more conservative media outlets started to switch from the traditional German reference model to Finland’s comprehensive system. Ultimately, even hopeful reform advocates remained sceptical that increasing public concerns over the reliability of early selection would translate to broad-based support for integrating the *Hauptschule* and the *Gymnasium*, with opinion poll results believed to depend on the particular wording of the question. Despite enormous energy in awareness-raising in the following years, reform advocates remained unsure if the public even knew what comprehensive schooling (*Gesamtschule*) meant and suspected that many people still mixed it up with ‘full-day schooling’ (*Ganztagsschule*), a similar-sounding and similarly politicized demand at the time (Interview 11). ‘The problem is in the heads of people’, one reform advocate put it, where a vague idea of what comprehensive schooling might mean contrasted with a clear image of the ‘tried and tested *Gymnasium*, which we’ve always had’ (Interview 20), the ‘Rolls Royce’ of secondary schools (Interview 14). Despite initial hopes that PISA will trigger a change in attitudes, many reform advocates ultimately thought the public as ‘not yet ready’ for the idea of a common school, not unlike common perceptions after the failure of the school reforms in the 1970s (Schnell 1993).

In line with literature on feedback effects (Campbell 2012), it is likely that past reform failures and compensating measures have underpinned this lack of change. The ‘structurally

conservative' educational expansion in Austria, where rising educational demands since the educational explosion of the 1960s were met by adapting instead of more fundamental reform of the differentiated systems, appears to have diffused societal pressure for change and to some degree normalised ideas of selection and differentiation.

Firstly, the expansion of *Gymnasium* school places since the 1970s and the shift from entrance exams to using school grades and teacher recommendations for track decisions made 'selection by ability' more compatible with 'parental choice' and potentially diffused parental discontent with selection, a key factor helping to bolster reform in other countries (Kerckhoff et al. 1996). In contrast to for example the Netherlands, where the *Gymnasium* remains a highly selective and elitist system (Merry and Boterman 2020, 524), the *Gymnasium* has become an increasingly taken-for-granted privilege of the urban middle class, and target of educational aspirations among voters in traditional SPÖ's electoral constituencies. Secondly, subsequent policy measures have since aimed to compensate those students still excluded from the *Gymnasium* track. While attempts to 'upgrade' the *Hauptschule* (age 10-14) failed to create 'parity of esteem' with the *Gymnasium*, routes of educational mobility for many *Hauptschul* graduates came with the creation of educational alternatives to the *Gymnasium* in upper secondary education (age 14-18/19) in the well-developed vocational sector. In particular, the considerable expansion of VET colleges since the 1970s, the school track at the top of the VET hierarchy which provides both VET qualification and a *Matura* certificate giving access to higher education, has broken the monopoly of the *Gymnasium* for university access (Graf, Lassnigg, and Powell 2011, 163).

Although the differentiated education system has not lost its stratifying effect, these adaptations have likely reduced the potential public opposition to early selection. Today's main 'losers' of early tracking, children of migrants overrepresented in the urban *Hauptschule* and lower-tier vocational routes, lack political voice and traction in contemporary Austrian politics.

Another barrier for broad-based societal mobilisation for reform has yet again been the nature of interest group politics among the teaching force. While in many countries teachers actively mobilised for comprehensive schooling in the post-war decades, such mobilisation in Austria was weakened by the particularly strong structural division among teachers by school type. The recent reform episode again revealed the effectiveness of mobilisation of *Gymnasium* teachers against comprehensive schooling. Their influence on school policy arose not only from their voice in the public debate and their influence in the powerful civil servants' union but most importantly their direct influence on ÖVP education policy and to some degree, on SPÖ education policy. Why *Hauptschul* teachers did not mobilise stronger for such reforms remains puzzling, as they would likely benefit from integrating lower secondary schooling. The interviewees suggested several potential reasons, including a general dominance of Catholic-conservative factions in *Hauptschul* teaching unions and their dependence on the leadership of *Gymnasium* unions in public sector pay negotiations. Some interviewees perceived *Hauptschul* teachers as generally de-politicised, as even social democratic *Hauptschul* teacher associations struggled to mobilise their members for school reforms (Interview 19). This lack of engagement in school reform debates beyond issues affecting status interests has previously been interpreted as a product of the highly bureaucratic and centralised educational administration in Austria as well as Germany (Gruber 1990, 316, Ertl and Phillips 2000:405).

Observers have noted an even more deeply entrenched belief in the need for different school tracks across the teaching force (Eder et al. 2005; Gruber 2015). Policy actors interviewed in this study also report the existence of distinct professional identities between *Gymnasiums* and *Hauptschul* teachers. While systematic research of teacher attitudes is lacking, an evaluation of 'team teaching' in the New Middle Schools experiments (Altrichter, Nagy, and Pocrnja 2015) indicated potential difficulties for collaboration between different 'types' of teachers in

a comprehensive system. These distinct identities and beliefs are likely a feedback effect of the segregated system of teacher training in Austria, which until recently differed clearly in provider, purpose and qualification. While the education of *Gymnasium* teachers at universities focuses on academic subject knowledge, teacher colleges for *Hauptschul* and primary school teachers used to emphasise pedagogical skills. It seems that in addition to ideological attachments to ‘homogenous classrooms’, *Gymnasium* teachers also find themselves ill-prepared to teach in mixed-ability and culturally diverse settings (Interview 16, 17). It will be of great interest if the recent partial harmonisation of teacher training (Symeonidis 2018) will foster not only a ‘common identity’ among secondary school teachers but also contribute to more support for the idea of comprehensive schooling and mixed-ability teaching among the teaching force as a whole.

Conclusion

In the European trend towards comprehensive schooling, Austria remains an outlier. Like in Germany, Switzerland or the Netherlands, attempts to postpone early selection of students into different school tracks failed in Austria in the 1970s due to a particular strong opposition from conservative political and societal forces. However, in the early 2000s, the critique of early tracking made an unexpected comeback following the PISA-debate and led to the first national reform initiative in thirty years. This article examined why the introduction of comprehensive schooling failed yet again, revisiting previous explanations for the survival of selection in ‘conservative’ educational regimes and examining the contemporary politics of comprehensive schooling.

Almost 100 years after the fierce debates over comprehensive schooling in the 1920s Vienna, the issue of comprehensive schooling continues to ignite political controversies in Austria, splitting the political spectrum between left and right. However, the in-depth process tracing

conducted in this research also revealed the nuances of how the reform processes unfolded, the reform windows and missed opportunities.

Two main themes have emerged: firstly, while political parties remained important *actors* in these struggles over school structure (Wiborg 2009; Österman 2017), they were also themselves *sites* of such struggles. Even in cases like Austria, where partisan divisions in education policy appear clear-cut, uncertainty and internal struggles over policy remain important to appreciate the opportunities and barriers for educational reform. Comprehensive schooling continued to be seen as ‘socialist’ educational reform. However, the PISA-studies, were initially successful for creating a non-partisan case for non-selective schooling. In particular the economic argument about the inefficiencies of early selection contributed to a shift among employer organisations. These joined a growing number of progressive and pragmatic voices in the ÖVP calling for reform, leading to several instances where the ÖVP’s bulwark against comprehensive schooling appeared to crack. However, defenders of the *Gymnasium* remained vocal, in particular organised Gymnasium teachers which maintained their traditional say over ÖVP education policy. The SPÖ, long-term supporter for comprehensive schooling, remained cautious and ultimately agreed to a compromise which yet again maintained the selective system. The SPÖ’s ambivalence in school reform was partly due to its political dependence on the ÖVP, partly due to uncertainties over electoral support and a broader weakness of party-internal mobilisation for school reform despite recurrent symbolic avowals.

Secondly, the recent reform episode raises the question of societal support for comprehensive schooling in Austria. Across Europe, the post-war push postponing selection was carried on the back of societal mobilisation, where growing education demands, discontent with selection among parents and teachers and a broader change in discursive climate bolstered reform initiatives by political parties (Kerckhoff et al. 1996). The weakness of grass-roots mobilisation

in countries like Austria and Germany has been suggested to have undermined past reform attempts (Budzinski 1986; Baldi 2012). Many of the contemporary reform advocates interviewed in this study, after having placed much hope in PISA, continued to detect considerable scepticism towards integrated schooling from the public. Whether this represents a deep-seated cultural conservatism in Austrian society as is sometimes suggested (Gruber 2015, 65; Eder et al. 2005), would require further research into public attitudes in particular among parents and teachers. However, one root of the suggested uncertainty of public support for comprehensive schooling in Austria might be found in the ‘feedback effects’ (Campbell 2012) of past educational reform. As Ertl and Phillips (2000) point out for Germany, educational pathways which provide an alternative to the *Gymnasium* appear to have reduced societal discontent with early selection in the post-war decades. In Austria, given the inability to introduce comprehensive schooling over decades, rising educational aspirations have been partially accommodated within the differentiated system, both by a degree of opening in the selective track of the *Gymnasium* and by improving the alternatives. While not eliminating the stratification of the system, this ‘structurally conservative’ pattern of educational expansion appears to have diffused societal reform pressure and perhaps even normalised principles of selection and differentiation among large sections of Austrian society.

Combined with particular domestic political circumstances at the beginning of the 2000s, PISA created momentum for school reform in Austria not seen since the 1970s, and yet the common school remains elusive. The emergence of a broader than ever coalition of reform supporters underlines the importance of PISA for creating movement in long-standing national policy debates. However, the manifold political and societal obstacles reformers encountered in Austria highlight the importance of considering societal support for reforms, in particular the role of parental and teacher attitudes, in further comparative research.

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Appendix: List of interview partners

If not otherwise denoted, interviewees' period of activity in this role refers to the 2000s.

- (1) School minister (SPÖ, 1980s); (2) School minister (SPÖ 1990s); (3) School minister (SPÖ); (4) Senior civil servant, school ministry; (5) Senior civil servant, school ministry; (6) Senior civil servant, school ministry (1980s); (7) OVP school spokesperson and teacher union representative; (8) representative of Styrian ÖVP; (9) Green party school spokesperson; (10)

SPÖ school spokesperson (1990s, with involvement in the 1970s reforms); (11) SPÖ school policy spokesperson; (12) SPÖ school policy spokesperson; (13) head of SPÖ party academy and electoral strategist; (14) head of Viennese School Board; (15) SPÖ internal; (16) representative of Gymnasium teaching union; (17) representative of SPÖ Gymnasium teacher association; (18) comprehensive schooling activist and Gymnasium teacher; (19) representative of SPÖ Hauptschul teacher association; (20) representative of the Chamber of Labour (Arbeiterkammer); (21) representative of the Federation of Austrian Industrialists (Industriellenvereinigung); (22) member of the education expert commission (2003-5); (23) education policy expert; (24) education policy expert and activist