

ECER 2019, 3.-6. September, Hamburg

Discourses on migration and integration in Austria: Migrant children at schools

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Starting point and context

- On one hand: Securitization/criminalization of migration & disciplining of integration
- On the other hand: Integration policies and measures continue to persist
- Schools as an epitome of the broader society; education/academic performance as litmus test for successful or failed integration
- Widespread references to 'culture war' and 'interethnic tension at schools' in political discourse

Research question

How can we assess current discursive and institutional shifts in the policy fields of migration and integration and, based on this, what prospects can we expect for integration policies and measures that target migrant pupils at schools in Austria?

Guiding assumptions

(1) Integration is an ambivalent and contested discourse. Processes of securitization/criminalization as well as disciplining are attempts to redefine migration foremost as national security concern and integration as a disciplinary measure. This is an expression of existing power relations being currently reshuffled within the state and the society.

(2) In the federal state architecture of Austria, competing or even contradictory integration policies may be available depending on the level of governance.

(3) Civil society plays an important role in developing and implementing integration measures. Civil society organizations often take the role of contractors and service providers for migrants and asylum-seekers in the context of the retreating welfare state and the ongoing process of NGO-ization.

Historical background: migration and education

- The number of 'guest workers' (*Gastarbeiter*) in Austria increased from 21.000 to 227.000 between 1963 and 1973 due to labor force deficit in the 1950s.
- From the 1990s on, right-wing populist FPÖ under the leadership of Jörg Haider → politicized migration as a 'national security issue'.

- Despite being a federation, Austria is strongly centralized.
- The federal government finances academic secondary schools, vocational schools and colleges. The provinces finance general compulsory schools (1st to 9th grade).
- Today: 23% of the total Austrian population (8.7 million) have a migration background.
- ¼ of all pupils speak a colloquial other than German; in Vienna, more than 50% of pupils speak a different colloquial than German.

Methods and analysis

- **Methods:** Political discourse analysis & analysis of selected integration measures on federal and local levels.
- **Political discourse on integration:** ‘Promoting by demanding’; integration as individual responsibility evidenced not least by the obligatory ‘value courses’ and the ‘integration agreement’
- **Main findings:**
 - (1) Diverse discourses, actors and projects compete over the issue of migration and integration
 - (2) Individualization of responsibility to integrate; ‘failed’ integration is punished and interpreted as lack of discipline and a threat to Austrian society
 - (3) At the same time, however, existing integration measures continue to promote participation and inclusion
 - (4) The coexistence of competing discourses and practices account for the contradictory integration policy landscape in Austria and point to ongoing shifts of power relations within the state and the society

Concluding remarks

- An analytical rather than a normative working definition of integration as an ambivalent and contested discourse
- Future research can further explore:
In the context of current migration and integration discourses and policies in Europe, does public education operate as an equalizer or stabilizer of existing inequalities between national and migration children?