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„Responding to new demands and creating integrated systems of learning opportunities – the case of Austria“

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Austrian policy and practice concerning literacy has gradually evolved from bottom-up since the late 1980s. Important influencing factors have been international activities (UNESCO year of 1989, IALS-Study 1994, EFA and Austrian Commission for UNESCO, etc.) Very roughly, we can see a process, which started from the development and provision of programmes for functionally illiterate adults at one public adult education centre in Vienna in 1990. The access to the EU in the mid 1990s, and the provision of European Programmes, in particular by the European Social Funds (ESF) have positively influenced literacy policy in Austria. A partnership in the course of the EQUAL programme 2005-2007 has played a key role by setting up a formal partnership for the support of literacy, and developing various instruments for information, guidance and provision, and bringing the issue to the political agenda. The social partners and the public employment service have supported the initiatives from an early point also. Now, about one and a half decade after the first initiatives, in the current programme of the government (2007), and in the policy of the minister of education, support of literacy clearly has become an issue. Initiatives have multiplied, and knowledge has spread more broadly. Nevertheless, as in other neighbouring countries, the Austrian activities have remained small scale in relation to demand. In order to improve policy making, and to serve the needs effectively, building up an information and data base, including the assessment of the needs, as well as information about the delivery of policy actions and measures for serving the needs would be very important.

1. Analysis of demand and structures of provision

1.1. Information about demand: taboo and stigma

- *Analysis of demand: “Hide and not seek”*. Problems with literacy have been much of a taboo in Austria, similar to many other countries. This holds at an aggregate policy level as well as at an individual level. At the policy level, literacy has been assumed as being a matter of course for the Austrian population for a long time. According to that common expectation, not being literate is sensed as a shame at the individual level by many people concerned. This basic situation has implications for both policy and practice. There are no thorough observations available about the incidence of illiteracy in Austria. The issue has gained attention mainly from external influence, e.g. by UN or UNESCO activities, and by the OECD surveys IALS and ALL. Estimations about the incidence in Austria have been contested for some time, however, more recently there is more or less consensus about gross figures among the adult population ranging between 300.000 and 600.000 or more. Related to the population over 20 years of 6,5 Mio. the incidence of literacy problems ranges from at least 5% to 10% or more, depending on definition (these estimates do not include the migrant population of about 0,9Mio). The estimates are based on rules of thumb according to the empirical figures in other countries. More recently the assessments of literacy among pupils have corroborated the estimates by extrapolating from the young to the population. Probably Austria will participate in the next large scale assessment of the competencies of the adult population (PIAAC) to gain detailed information.

- *Problems of definition and observation: knowledge vs. stigma vs. action.* According to the gathering of due information about the incidence of problems of literacy there have been widespread debates among the Austrian experts. In particular, with the question of participation in the OECD large scale assessments of ALL (Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey in 2003) and currently PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies). On the one hand, due policy action in a predominantly neglected issue might be fostered and speeded up by clear information about needs. On the other hand, the assessments are quite expensive, and some have argued that means should be used rather for action than for expensive research (which, moreover, might bring about bad news). From the political and economic point of view, bad news about the educational status of the populations might be conceived as a negative signal also for potential investors. Another issue has been raised by supporters of literacy policy, by arguing that the definition and naming of the issue might be a critical point. In the German language, the term for not being sufficiently literate: „*Analphabetismus*“ is perceived very much as a stigma. Therefore some debates evolved among experts, about how to define and formulate the issue. Two more concrete aspects are perceived important: first, the scope of competences spoken about; second, negative or positive formulation of what should be achieved. The professionals in Austrian practice have advocated a *broad definition of literacy* (including reading, writing, numeracy, IT literacy, learning competences), and a positive formulation using the term support of *basic education* (“*Basisbildung*” as against fighting illiteracy or support of literacy i.e. “*Alphabetisierung*”).

1.2. Structures of provision: target groups and bottom-up networks of providers

- *Three target groups with different structures of provision: pupils in compulsory school, people with migrant background, resident people with literacy problems.*

(1) *Provision of a programme in compulsory school.* During compulsory education, as a follow-up to the PISA results, programmes of support of reading have been set up by the education authority, in combination with intermediate organisations in support of distribution of books to young people.

(2) *Migrants: obvious problems, but little action.* For people with migrant background, much too little support has been available up to now (about 11% of the population speak a foreign common language). In the past, pupils with a migrant background have been often sent to special education. About 14% of pupils are from a migrant background in Austrian schools. More recently, some additional teaching has been provided during compulsory school, however, too small scale, and without the necessary impact (in PISA respondents with another first language are 5% to 10% below average). The provision has been subject to individual schools, which because of competing demands for resources often preferred other actions. More recently, the issue of language competences has become a big political issue, and at least for migrant children support of language learning will be made compulsory at the preschool age. In this area, some NGOs have supported stronger political action for many years. In cities, and particularly in the capital of Vienna, the proportion of students with a foreign first language is substantial (40-50% in compulsory school)

(3) *Illiteracy in the resident population: taboo and punctual action from bottom up.* The supporters of the third group had to struggle for attention through one and a half decades. This development is described more deeply in the following.

- *The forming of a community of providers and its struggle for political attention.* For resident people with – mainly functional – literacy problems, we still can hardly speak of a formal structure of provision. We might identify three or four periods of development.

- (1) Provision of programmes has evolved since 1990, when engaged people started the first programme at an adult education centre in Vienna. In the mid 1990s three more initiatives were started in other provincial cities (Graz, Linz, Salzburg).
- (2) During the next decade, until 2005 we can observe the forming of a network of engaged people around the four core providers, supported by regional adult education agencies, branches of the public employment service, and university institutes, and a gradual increase of programmes. Support from the political level has been ambiguous until more recently. A main source of support have been European programmes for employment and social inclusion, which have co-financed programmes. Financial support is a key issue, as most of the people concerned do not have the resources to pay for intense and expensive programmes.
- (3) In 2005 a next step of development started with a partnership financed by the European EQUAL programme, which aimed at the development of innovative activities in support of social inclusion. The very complex programme needed the forming of so-called development partnerships of different actors (organisations or institutions), that had to propose a two-years action programme based on clear objectives. The initiatives were selected for subsidisation in a two step procedure. The core group of providers organised a partnership of 17 contributing or supporting organisations, and succeeded the selection procedure. A broad range of activities and products have been delivered by the partnership which was called „In.Bewegung“ (see box and the information at: <http://www.alphabetisierung.at/index.php?id=99>).
- (4) After the end of the EQUAL programme, the various products have been delivered, several activities have been carried-on, and a set of follow-up activities have been created. Political support has stabilised.

Box 1: EQUAL-Partnership „In.Bewegung“: partners

Operative partners: Three local adult education centres (Vienna-Floridsdorf, Linz, Carinthia), two non-profit providers (ISOP Graz and abc Salzburg), one regional Trade Union (Upper Austria), non-profit organisations for support of business education, gender mainstreaming, and a regional adult education network (Lower Austria)

Supporting strategic partners: Economic, Agriculture and Labour Chambers Austria, Association of Austrian Industry, University Salzburg, regional public employment service (Styria), and the Austrian competence Centre for adult education (Bifeb)

2. Legislative and institutional arrangements, and coordination among providers: weak law and public-private-partnership

In Austria a comprehensive legislative arrangement for adult education does not exist. There are some specialised public institutions, which are acting in a subsidized market structure, together with mainly non-profit organisations, and some for profit organisations. A set of providers is organised as a platform, and get yearly subsidies by the ministry of education, the main responsibility for adult education is situated with the provincial governments, and the public employment service (a autonomous body guided by the ministry of economy and labour) is responsible for labour market training whose market share is about one third. Adult education is rather fragmented to different sections, i.e. the market-led continuing vocational training, labour market training that includes also basic personal and social competences, and general and democratic adult education that also includes language learning, personal development and creativity, and support of political participation. The overall participation in adult education and training is at the European average in Austria, with continuing vocational training being the main proportion.

Except school education there is no clearly responsible agency for purposes of literacy, thus ist advocates had to set up a new structure. The above mentioned EQUAL development partnership has organised as a new NGO, and still has to seek support from the public sector.

Box 2: EQUAL-Partnership „In.Bewegung“: products

- an information/counselling hot-line for Austria and an internet portal, as well as counselling guidelines, training material for counsellors, info material for outreach activities, info campaign for local political leaders
- material for delivery of programmes, e.g. a handbook for reading instruction, learning material, documentary guidelines, analysis of good practices for target groups (women in rural areas, enterprise awareness raising and training), local needs analysis
- Quality measures, e.g., a certified training programme for instructors (initial and continuing), occupational standards, quality standards for delivery, a periodical quality conference for follow-up
- Organisational structures, e.g., a sustainable organisation of providers and supporters of literacy, a rural centre for the support of literacy of women, an regional enterprise-based cooperation structure for the support of literacy, regional networks.

3. Coordination among providers and bridging between types and modalities of learning

We have already seen that those regional or local providers that have accumulated competencies in their literacy work have formed a sustainable partnership, and organised as kind of NGO. They have developed much material for improvement of professional work, and their organisation is open for other providers. Beginning with four providers in the early 1990s, more recently at least sixteen providers in different regions of Austria are delivering programmes for support of literacy. In fact, related to the demand estimations, however, we have to realize that the participation is about 0,3% or less (similar orders of magnitude are reported for Germany: about 0,5% and Switzerland: about 0,7%). The benchmark of the Education for All strategy will not be reached without a substantial increase.

Concerning learners' progression one important instrument has been developed for functional illiterates, called competence portfolio. The basic idea behind this is, that the people – despite their literacy problems – often have very positive competences at other dimensions, which they can document by the portfolio. This is expected to be an important motivating tool also.

Concerning the progression of the other target groups, for pupils the improvement of literacy clearly can improve their progression, and for migrants there remains much to do, as they are often employed below their qualification level.

4. Lessons

- Resistance against acknowledgment of literacy problems must be expected at the individual as well as at the political level. Long-term bottom-up work by engaged people might be necessary for improvement (15 years in Austria).
- Those engaged people from provider organisations, or NGOs need support, but even if they succeed to raise support, and to organize themselves, the activities might remain small scale (below 0,5%).
- High quality measures need a high professional level and substantial resources.
- How the participation in measures of support can be substantially raised without reducing the quality supported by the advocates of literacy measures cannot be easily seen in the Austrian development.
- A key requirement is building up a valid and timely information base covering the needs, as well as the measures responding to the needs (e.g., the size and structure of the target groups, quantitative and qualitative aspects of the delivery of measures, participation, follow-up, outputs and outcomes).