

Policy Reform Efforts and Equal Opportunity – An Evidence-Based Link?

An Analysis of Current Sector Reforms in the Austrian School System

CORINNA GEPPERT^{*1}, SONJA BAUER-HOFMANN²
AND STEFAN THOMAS HOPMANN³

☞ The main focus of the present paper is to answer two different questions: From the perspective of Austrian education policy, which core areas of schooling are linked to the demand for equal opportunity? Can these reform efforts sustain the current state of research, and what are the consequences for schooling? The paper draws on an analysis by Hopmann, Geppert & Bauer (2010). Fifteen official self-presentations (political programmes) of Austrian political parties were analysed for statements concerning the improvement of the education system. This resulted in about seventy different statements, which were aggregated into eight core areas. We conducted a systematic analysis of four of these core areas, dealing with the topics of equal opportunity: comprehensive school, all-day schooling, school autonomy and standardisation of students' achievements. The aim was not to judge the legitimacy or the political content of the claims made. In line with evaluative discourse, we asked whether the combination of political demands and their associated expectations met the current state of research. In many policy programmes, it is assumed that comprehensive schooling, all-day schooling, education standards, standardised general certification for university attendance, school autonomy or language surveys go hand in hand with more equality of opportunity, justice and quality in education, but an analysis of the current state of research could not confirm this. The analysis showed that, with regard to education policy demands, statements having empirically little or nothing to do with each other are often linked.

Keywords: Equal opportunity, Inner framework of schooling, Policy impact assessment, Reform efforts, School structure

1 *Corresponding author. Department of Education, University of Vienna
corinna.geppert@univie.ac.at

2 Department of Education, University of Vienna

3 Department of Education, University of Vienna

Prizadevanja na področju zakonodajnih reform in enake možnosti – povezava, ki je dokazljiva?

Analiza trenutnih področnih reform v avstrijskem šolskem sistemu

CORINNA GEPPERT*, SONJA BAUER-HOFMANN IN STEFAN THOMAS HOPMANN

Osrednji namen prispevka je odgovoriti na dve različni vprašanji: Katera temeljna področja avstrijskih edukacijskih politik so povezana z zahtevo po enakih možnostih? Ali lahko prizadevanja za reforme vzdržijo trenutne ugotovitve raziskav in kakšne so posledice za izobraževanje? Prispevek temelji na analizi, ki so jo opravili Hopmann, Geppert in Bauer (2010). V uradnih samopredstavitvah (političnih programih) 15 avstrijskih političnih strank so analizirali trditve, povezane z izboljševanjem izobraževalnega sistema. Rezultat je okoli sedemdeset različnih trditev, ki so bile uvrščene v osem osnovnih področij. Opravljena je bila sistematična analiza štirih izmed teh področij, ki so povezana s temami enakih možnosti: skupna srednja šola, celodnevna šola, šolska avtonomija in standardizacija dosežkov učencev. Namen ni bil presojati o legitimnosti ali političnem konceptu postavljenih trditev. V luči evolucijskega diskurza je bil narejen pregled, ali so politične zahteve in s tem povezana pričakovanja skladna s trenutnimi ugotovitvami raziskav. V veliko političnih programih predvidevajo, da so skupna srednja šola, celodnevno šolanje, izobrazbeni standardi, standardizirana enotna potrdila za vpis na univerzo, šolska avtonomija ali jezikovne raziskave povezani z višjo stopnjo enakosti možnosti, večjo pravičnostjo in s kakovostjo v izobraževanju, a analiza trenutnih ugotovitev raziskav tega ni mogla potrditi. Analiza, opravljena glede na zahteve edukacijskih politik, je pokazala, da trditve, ki so povezane med seboj, pogosto nimajo nič skupnega.

Ključne besede: enake možnosti, notranji okvir šolanja/izobraževanja, ocena političnega učinka, prizadevanja za reforme, šolska struktura

Introduction and research questions

Social change and societal developments over the last 20 years have had many consequences for the Austrian school system. During this period, many education reforms concerning the primary and secondary school levels, as well as higher education, have been initiated. Today, the Austrian school system is also exposed to many international influences. Current debate on education reform in the Austrian school system was triggered by the results of PISA 2000 (Programme for International Student Assessment), which again showed substantial problems with student participation in education. When the school system is selective, weaker students often lose. Hence, Austrian education policy is faced with counteracting these inequalities in education.

Current political debate focuses on the question of the extent to which equal opportunity is realised in the Austrian school system. Embedded in the tension between the constitutional right to education and predominantly sociocultural and socioeconomic disparities in participation in education, the demand for equal opportunity is a guiding principle in these debates and, at the same time, provides the reasoning behind education reformist initiatives. These initiatives attempt to reduce the influence of differing student backgrounds.

In the present paper, we analyse initiatives by education policymakers on equal opportunities in education. The paper deals with two questions: firstly, it enquires as to the kind of contexts within which equal opportunity is approached, a question that is concerned with concrete courses of action. The paper also formulates empirical assumptions on these constructs and their consequences, namely: Can the reform efforts undertaken sustain the current state of research and what are the consequences?

Methods

Fifteen official current self-presentations (political programmes) of political parties in Austria (SPÖ, ÖVP, Die Grüne) serve as the data basis for this analysis. The analysis was performed in three steps: Analysis step 1, the extraction of claims that have equal opportunity as an education goal, based on the Austrian education programme, is followed by analysis step 2, the synthesising of these statements into eight core areas. In a last step, the statements were evaluated with reference to international research literature.

Analysis step 1: The extraction of claims that have equal opportunity as an education goal

Programmes of political parties in Austria were systematically analysed with respect to the question: Which core areas of schooling are linked to the demand for equality of opportunity?

The definition of “equal opportunity” in the present paper is based only on how this term is used in the programmes analysed, and it transpired that the term is used in a very undifferentiated manner. The following statements give an overview of how reform efforts are linked to the term “equal opportunity” in political programmes. One statement by the ÖVP, for example, was: “We argue for a uniform national education plan for kindergartens in order to ensure equal opportunities for all children regardless of their social and cultural backgrounds when entering school (education plan for an Austrian federal legal framework)” (ÖVP, 2010). “The current system of primary, general lower secondary and special schools, as well as academic lower secondary schools, should be replaced by a comprehensive school for all six- to fourteen-year-olds. It should be structured as a differentiated comprehensive school with individual support and all-day activities. Only such a system can guarantee truly free access to education and, therefore, equal opportunity” (Die Grünen, 2009). However, what “equal opportunity” actually means is not defined any further by the political parties. These statements arise from the current trend of “evidence-based policy making”, and the aim of the present paper is to analyse the premises on which these statements are built.

Analysis step 2: The synthesising of these statements into eight core areas

Approximately seventy different statements were aggregated into eight core areas: pre-schooling and primary schooling, school structure-comprehensive schooling, all-day schooling, upper secondary level, autonomy, heterogeneity and standardisation of students’ achievements, and teacher education. We proceeded to take a closer look at four of these areas: school structure-comprehensive schooling, all-day schooling, autonomy, and standardisation of students’ achievements. For a more detailed definition, it is important to understand the fundamentals of the Austrian school system.

In Austria, school is compulsory for nine years. It is dominated by four major parts: the transition from primary to secondary school, the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary school, the end of compulsory

schooling, and the transition to post-secondary and tertiary levels. The Austrian school system differentiates for all children after four common school years, which, from an international perspective, is very early. The first distinction is made between general secondary school (Hauptschule) and academic lower-cycle secondary school (Allgemeinbildende höhere Schule-Unterstufe).

The core area of school structure – comprehensive school – is situated in this context. In many cases, this early subdivision is seen as an instigator of social and regional inequalities. This core area focuses on the question of joint or separate schools for ten- to fourteen-year-olds, a seemingly insolvable question, which cannot be answered uniformly in education policy. The retention of the articulated system (general secondary school and academic lower-cycle secondary school) is confronted with the demand for replacing it with an integrated system – namely, comprehensive schooling for ten- to fourteen-year-olds – in order to achieve equal opportunity. In contrast to many other countries, schools in Austria are not all-day schools. Curricular afternoon activities are voluntary and mostly incur charges. It is in this context that the second core area, all-day schooling, arises. The analysis shows that all-day schooling is required to be non-partisan and is seen as an adequate way of dealing with equal opportunity because all students can be supported in the same way.

The upper secondary level in the Austrian school system has a very broad structure. In addition to the academic higher-cycle secondary school (Allgemeinbildende höhere Schule-Oberstufe), the Austrian school system has a very strong component of vocational education, which, like the academic higher-cycle secondary school, leads to higher education but also offers vocational training. The whole vocational sector is highly differentiated by type, grade and length of training. “According to the School Organisation Act, the acquisition of higher education and the transition to another school type should be possible for all qualified pupils/students” (cf. SchOG § 3 Section 1).

In general, the Austrian school system is dominated by a federal, bureaucratic, heavily regulated and hierarchical system of school administration. In the core area “autonomy”, demands for greater school autonomy are included. Greater autonomy should increase equal opportunity by enabling schools to be more responsive to their clients’ needs. The desire for increasing school autonomy is almost always closely linked to greater accountability, which means that a specific level of achievement has to be reached. This leads us to the next core area, standardisation of students’ achievements. In this section, political statements deal with the question as to whether the homogenisation of students’ achievements can improve the quality of the school system. Centralised exit examinations and education standards should guarantee the quality of the

school system and equal opportunity for students.

Analysis step 3: The evaluation of statements with reference to international research

Core areas, such as questions concerning school structure (comprehensive schooling, all-day schooling) or questions concerning the inner school framework (autonomy, standardisation) are discussed with respect to the question as to whether there is evidence that supports the political claims. Where Austrian research was insufficient, international studies were discussed. The aim is not to judge the legitimacy or the political content of such claims, but to undertake an evaluative discussion on the matter.

School structure – comprehensive schooling

International comparisons show that the duration of common schooling for all students is extremely varied. In many cases, early subdivision – such as in the Austrian school system – is seen as an instigator of social and regional inequalities, but also as a hub for future opportunities in life (see also Laux, 2010). Theoretically, the performance of students governs their allocation to the various types of secondary school; however, in practice, there are significant social and regional aspects involved in this allocation. Therefore, the decision to transfer to an academic lower-cycle secondary school mainly concerns children “(...) who come from families with a high socioeconomic status, living in urban centres.” (Eder, 2009, p. 50). Analyses of education programmes have shown that a school structure debate set against these problems discusses mainly the pros and cons of a differentiated or integrated school system. Thus, Austrian education policy is faced with the question of determining the right time for the first school career decision, without causing social or regional disparities.

The requirement regarding the retention of the articulated system is confronted with the demand for replacing that system with an integrated system; namely, comprehensive schooling for ten- to fourteen-year-olds. This demand stems especially from the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ, 2010) and the Green Party (Die Grünen, 2010).

Concrete efforts to postpone the first decision have existed in Austria since the beginning of the last century. Established on two main pillars of service and support (www.neuemittelschule.at), the “new middle school” (Neue Mittelschule) was introduced in 2008/2009 in order to again counteract the problems of social and regional disparities. Analysis showed that the surface

structure of the school in particular is under pressure to change when it comes to the question of how to fight injustices in education.

According to Friehs (2004), the arguments of those who advocate comprehensive schools can be summarised as follows:

- a. The comprehensive school could provide common social experiences for children from different social classes.
- b. The comprehensive school could ensure the basic democratic right of equal education and could offer the same school careers at all locations by postponing school career decisions until the end of compulsory school attendance.
- c. The comprehensive school could enable the capture and promotion of all abilities and talents and could mobilise social education reserves of society.
- d. The comprehensive school could ensure a science-oriented basic education for all students.
- e. The comprehensive school could help more students qualify for degrees, especially students from populations disadvantaged for social and regional reasons.
- f. The comprehensive school could counteract school career decisions based on problematic and uncertain talent diagnoses, and could offer students more participation.

Research shows that the problem with these expectations is that, except for the first (a. common social experience), they are either empirically doubtful (b. and c.), or not necessarily linked to the different types of school structure. The basic presupposition defining the school structure debate is that the social distribution of school performance and educational careers could be decided through the surface structure of schools. However, research shows the opposite.

Interesting findings are provided by the Life Study of Fend (2009). The objective of this research was to study education courses and life career paths. The investigation focused in particular on the question as to whether it is possible to overcome, or at least reduce, social selectivity through integrated school forms (comprehensive schools) (Fend, 2009). The results showed, however, that school structures have no lasting effects in terms of equal opportunities in life. Research has shown that the extension of common school education postpones problems of selectivity but does not solve them (Tillmann, 2009).

“With appropriate institutional opportunities (permeability beyond lower secondary) education career decisions in favor of higher education and

vocational qualifications are made by those families with greater cultural, social and economic resources.” (Fend, 2009, p. 63)

Furthermore, there is another problem: no one school is like another school, not even within the same school type. Effective performance levels in schools of the same type are also very different, suggesting a correlation between achieved levels of performance and the social composition of the school (Ditton, 2007). There are countries where integrated education systems have a significantly greater equality of opportunity, but there are others where this is not so; for example, New Zealand, the United Kingdom or the United States (Fend, 2009). In the Norwegian comprehensive school system, for example, there are growing social differences with advancing schooling (Bakken, 2010). The debate on school structures omits the fact that every school system has some form of selection (Oelkers, 2006); for example, differentiation by sponsorship, by school programmes, by social geography, by investing in the next higher educational qualifications or private educational activities such as tutoring, review sessions or cram schools (Hopmann & Bauer, 2011). These examples illustrate the strong influence of non-school resources – mostly financial resources – on the academic success of children. “Modern school systems are porous when it comes to family resource effects even though such systems value meritocratic processes...” (Baker, 2006, pp. 172-173). This unequal distribution of resources proves to be significant for generating differences in a largely homogeneous school (e.g., Baker, 2006).

Nevertheless, it has to be said that although the first school career decision in the Austrian school system is made very early, it is not a decision that determines the future school career. The Austrian school system has a very strong component of vocational education, which can be followed after general secondary school and which also leads to higher education. In this context, empirical comparative international research forewarns that a dismemberment of the school system could have negative effects on other pathways, particularly that of vocational education (Brunello & Checchi, 2007).

In summary, an isolated change in school structure is not sufficient to improve equality of opportunity in education (see also Fend, 2009). This, however, does not lead to the conclusion that the question, “Joint or separate school for ten- to fourteen-year-olds?” becomes obsolete, because there might be other reasons for wanting one or the other type of school. There are thus a number of arguments (Friehs, 2004) and empirical studies (e.g., Fend, 2009) showing positive effects of comprehensive schooling, but the analysis revealed that demands for equal opportunity cannot be met through this school structure.

The starting point probably lies with each individual school, depending on the prevailing conditions of the school and the instruction quality, the existence of non-school resources and further educational options.

The same applies to the area of all-day schooling, where we analysed statements and asked whether there was any evidence to support the claims.

All-day schooling

The analysis of education programmes showed that all-day schools are currently en vogue. All-day schooling must be non-partisan, and attendance at all-day schools should be voluntary. The demands of the political parties presented in the programmes analysed show that all-day schooling is seen as an adequate way of accommodating single-parent, patchwork families, one-child families or migrant children (MKV, 2010). Other motives, however, such as more flexible instructional design or individual support, could be more effective. All-day schools should not only keep students in school, but should regard teacher support as a pedagogical concept, with curricular content being processed, extended and supplemented. Moreover, the motives for equal opportunities for all students are in conjunction with the desire to introduce all-day schools. The all-day school will offer all students a fair and equal opportunity for development, and will be responsive to their individual strengths and weaknesses (SPÖ, 2004). However, this is as far as the political programmes go.

According to McKinsey (2010), all-day schools (through more time) allow better individual support for students and a flexible exchange between heterogeneous learning groups. They also facilitate the active practice of educational partnership with parents, thus contributing to better support for weaker students. Furthermore, the current state of research shows that all-day schooling is seen as a necessary response to social and societal change, structural change in the family, social inequality and unequal education opportunities. Behind the debate on all-day schooling also lies the claim that increased efforts in public education can relieve families under time pressure and reduce resource-related social differences (Rauschenbach, 2007).

However, the benefits of all-day schooling, especially for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, cannot be clearly demonstrated empirically (Arnoldt et al., 2007; Beher & Prein, 2007; Black et al., 2009) because there are many different types of all-day schooling or extended school days. The models of all-day school range from fully bonded systems (all students are required to participate) to open models (participation is voluntary). Our research illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of all of the models,

while previous research indicates that we cannot give preference to a particular type. “By paying for education programmes in the public school system processes of social selection which ought to be reduced are instead reinforced through the introduction of all-day schools.” (Beher & Prein, 2007, p. 16). However, even for paid offers, research shows that children and adolescents from families with no academic background participate less and more irregularly in full-day operation than children with such a background (Steiner, 2009). Students whose parents both do not work have less chance of receiving full-day services (Steiner, 2009).

In the discussion of the consequences of all-day schooling, it should be noted that school performance is not solely the result of school education. As shown above, learning and performance success is also the result of extra-curricular learning resources. School success depends on the dynamic interplay between intra- and extra-curricular learning resources. Moreover, research shows that extra-curricular conditions (such as social and educational capital) are more powerful than intra-curricular conditions (Baumert et al., 2006; Becker & Lauterbach, 2006). Thus there are different problems for different reference groups. For example, those with a wealth of extra-curricular learning resources will hardly accept a full-time education that is of poorer quality than that which they can already attain on their own. Therefore, the offer must also be acceptable to education-conscious parents, so as to avoid renewing social disparities (Rademacker, 2007). Only then will all-day packages no longer be seen as emergency care, and only then will those who can afford it refrain from turning to private providers for afternoon support (Rademacker, 2007). However, those who do not have out-of-school resources will have to meet the requirements of all-day schooling programmes (Steiner, 2009; Heinrich et al., 2010).

An important lesson arising from recent studies is that an extended period of time alone only has a very small effect. Research also shows that all-day school programmes usually do not fulfil expectations. Preliminary results of a Germany-wide longitudinal study suggest (similarly to U.S. evaluations), that effects depend strongly on the quality of the offers (Holtappels & Rollet, 2009; Radisch et al., 2008).

The trend seems to be to set up such services for each specific target group and their specific learning needs. Locally different (different local infrastructure) and flexible solutions are very important, and will depend on what is intended to be achieved for the target group and under which conditions.

School autonomy

In Europe, the policy of school autonomy is already widespread. Autonomy of educational institutions is one of the major issues in contemporary educational policy (Berka, 2003). In the 1990s, there were already increased demands regarding heightened school autonomy (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010).

In the international context, Austria is dominated by a federal, bureaucratic, heavily regulated and hierarchical system of school administration associated with relatively little school autonomy (IBW, 2009; Lassnigg et al., 2009). The individual school is seen as the “last link” in an administrative chain controlled by a central organ administering education policy (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010). From an international comparative perspective, Austria belongs to those countries where decision making in education is shaped by many actors with often overlapping and not infrequently ambiguous tasks. In particular, since the 1990s, the centralised management system has been increasingly strongly criticised (Schratz & Hartmann, 2010). National and international studies indicate that the current form of Austrian “school governance” has a sub-optimal structure (IBW, 2009). In recent years, consensus has emerged that incentives are absent in the performance of this kind of organisation, and it therefore has limited dynamics (Prisching, 2010). Critics of the current system say that average performance is only reached with great effort. Even in this area, PISA results have prompted new discussions on autonomy in education policy. Studies clearly indicate that the school governance structures of most of the “PISA Top Performers” have “leaner systems”, as well as a higher degree of school autonomy (IBW, 2004; Falch & Fischer, 2010).

Analysis indicates that the intention to enhance the ability of individual schools to design their own options places greater emphasis on the political agenda, especially as a means of increasing and improving the quality of education. More concretely, the strengthening of school autonomy is desired, often being seen as interaction between state-regulated educational goals and outcomes, and an autonomously chosen path of achievement within individual schools. Thus, the request for increased school autonomy corresponds to the assumption of Altrichter and Rürup, who believe that an increase in school autonomy should not be understood as the detachment of individual schools from national politics, but rather as a control policy distinguished by decision rights of, and coordinating relations between, the various actors and levels of agency in the school system (Altrichter & Rürup, 2010). Similarly, the National Education Report for Austria sees the creation of an efficient incentive structure, with clear definitions of objectives, as necessary for quality improvement.

This incentive structure should be in conjunction with regular monitoring of the input-output relations (Lassnigg & Vogtenhuber, 2009).

Programme analysis shows that there is a need to encourage individual schools to build up profiles, which also falls within the context of school autonomy. Location-based profiling within a flexible framework should help schools to use client-related and need-based pedagogical processes on site more efficiently. Location-based profiling brings development dynamics to the school system, but may also have negative side effects, since profiling is always combined with a competitive situation. Increasingly, the Austrian school system includes an element of competition focused specifically on the recruitment of positively selected and powerful students. Eder and Altrichter, for example, demonstrate that higher quality of curricular and social processes, as well as better performance in music classes, are almost exclusively due to the selection of able students. Compared to regular classes, these classes thus have significantly fewer students from immigrant backgrounds and more children with significantly better cognitive performance due to fully competent and supportive families. It is apparent that schools with specific profiles have competitive considerations aimed at attracting better students. This may result in an increased number of students with poor learning conditions being in residual classes, both within individual schools and in schools within certain regions (Eder & Altrichter, 2009). Similar effects are well known in international research (see Ooghe & Schokkaert, 2009). In England, for example, massive social disparities in individual schools arise due to competition-driven approaches (Schwier, 2005).

Each concept of autonomy, therefore, has to take account of the question of resource allocation. Voucher concepts (with budget grants for each student) thus have not produced any convincing results because the overall composition of the respective Students' Union and other side effects have not adequately been considered. Instead, models of "student-weighted budgeting" are discussed in which a budget is allocated not only on the basis of student numbers, but on that of selected social statistics and other features. This discussion has now also reached Austria (see Altrichter & Nagy, 2010). Experiences with such measures in the Netherlands and the United States are mixed (see Baker 2009, 2010; Ladd & Fiske, 2009; Rolle, 2008; Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008) and would seem to focus mainly on the level of budget distribution (district or individual schools), the indicators involved, and ultimately not on how talented schools benefit from a given budget.

The desire to increase school autonomy is almost always closely linked to greater accountability, which means that a specific level of achievement has to be reached.

Standardisation of students' achievements

International benchmarking extends the equality of opportunity issue to a question of individual student performance distribution. Increasing international focus on cross-sectional comparisons of student performance over specific interfaces of the education system constructs social disparities as individual characteristics of students, and school differences as quality differences between school locations, school types, or even school systems. "Educational standards for the 4th and 8th grades will be Austria's guarantee of quality and performance in our schools. The semi-structured, competency-based exit examination will secure the value of graduation" (SPÖ, 2010, p. 2).

Thus, international educational standards and, increasingly, centralised exit examinations are used to ensure the homogenisation of achievements. Driven by results from international assessments, education policies are established that are intended to push students to higher achievements and hence increase equality of opportunity (see Die Grünen, 2009; ÖVP, 2010; SPÖ, 2010).

The establishment of centralised exit examinations in Austria is still relatively new. On 17 November 2009, a law was created to introduce "standardised competency-based high school graduation" in the main school subjects: German, mathematics and English (or French).

The status of international research offers little empirical reason to believe that a centralised control mechanism can enable an increase in the general level of performance, or reduce social inequalities (for a summary, see Bracey, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Elstad et al., 2008; Eurydice, 2009; Hopmann et al., 2008; Mons, 2009).

"Because we cannot know, or precisely measure, the true intellectual abilities of students, we attempt to approach equality of opportunity by using proxy measures of achievement on high-stakes tests. However, equating equity and test scores has been fraught with problems" (Jordan, 2010, p. 195).

Klein et al. (2009) concluded from an analysis of internationally recognised rules for centralised graduation examinations that the handling of centralised tests differs greatly from one state or country to another. Research also reveals no clear and definitive findings on the effects of centralised audit procedures for academic, instructional and individual work processes and outcomes. Few meaningful research findings exist on the effects of different standardisation levels in centralised exit examinations. The premise that continued standardisation of the testing organisation supports the actual integrity of performance standards can be neither proven nor disproven.

On the basis of a PISA and TIMSS reanalysis of the positive effects of centralised exit examinations, Wössmann (2009) reported that these are associated

with better student performance. Centralised exit examinations would also tend to transform the negative effects of increased school autonomy into positive effects. However, in countries with the longest experience with standards and testing systems (such as USA and the United Kingdom), there is no evidence of sustained performance improvement or improved social equality of opportunity when applying similar procedures (for a summary, see Bracey, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hopmann et al., 2008; Mathis, 2010; Mons, 2009).

Yet there are undeniable sustainable curricular effects. Analyses of the first year of implementation of the Central High School Diploma in Germany (Maag Merki et al., 2009), similarly to earlier implementation in other countries (for a summary, see Hopmann et al., 2008; Mons, 2009), show that teachers in centrally approved courses limited their class topics to a significantly stronger degree. Caring less about students' interests or everyday news than teachers in decentralised audited courses, they practiced "teaching-to-the-test" (Maag Merki et al., 2009). At-risk students in particular need specific preparation for such performance reviews. How and whether such standards – and centralised exit examinations are such standards – can be achieved by at-risk students at all, unless they are specifically trained, is not clear (Hörmann, 2007; Stamm, 2008).

Empirical evidence from the United States does not paint a positive picture of national tests, suggesting an increase in stress experience for students, in drop-out rates, in segregation effects, and a significantly greater feeling of anxiety and fatigue amongst students (see Clarke et al., 2000; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Pedulla et al., 2003; Warren et al., 2006; for a summary, see Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hopmann et al., 2008; Stamm, 2008). When schools achieve high scores, this does not mean that they are effective in producing low drop-out rates. Students can be "given advice to go to another school" (Stamm, 2008). Furthermore, performance in national tests and examinations in the United States has serious consequences for the future of all participants (teachers, principals, students) – such as no advancement to the next level or staff redundancies – which in turn continue to foster negative effects. Numerous empirical findings provide a relatively complex picture of the impact of standards-based test procedures in the context of a consequences-afflicted monitoring system. In addition to some positive effects, significant "collateral damage", as shown above (Bracey, 2009; Mathis, 2010; Nichols & Berliner, 2007) also can be observed.

Conclusion

In the context of policy impact assessment, the main focus of the present paper is to answer two different questions: From the perspective of Austrian

education policy, which core areas of schooling are linked to the demand for equal opportunity? Can these reform efforts sustain the current state of research, and what are the consequences?

The analysis of fifteen official self-presentations by political parties in Austria clearly showed that political statements include means and ends that do not harmonise. From the viewpoint of evidence-based policy making, education requirements perpetuate the trend of expressing intentions as an end to justify the means. To do A in order to achieve B, regardless of any historical and comparative research, shows that the reasons for arriving at A are possibly different to those for arriving at B, or that A could have quite different, even contradictory, outcomes to B.

Empirically questionable causal claims are nowadays on the agenda because policy statements are often linked to the demand for equal opportunity. This link goes too far, as the analysis of the four core areas linked to school structure and the inner school framework has shown.

It was not the aim of this analysis to cast doubt on the legitimacy of these core areas for future discussion, but the argument linking each of these areas to equal opportunity goes too far and cannot fulfil the high expectations. There could be other valid reasons for implementing these reform efforts.

The decisive factors for research are not major organisational formats, but rather formats such as learning resources or location, which have more impact on equality of opportunity and achievements. According to research, the types of differentiated teaching, school quality and transition options offered are more important. Special pedagogical programmes should be orientated towards those students needing additional support, and should take the individual backgrounds and out-of-school-learning resources of the students into account. Current research indicates that there is a need to encourage individual schools to have more autonomy within a flexible framework, so as to help schools use client-related and need-based pedagogical processes on site more efficiently.

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Biographical note

CORINNA GEPPERT, since 2010 a PhD student and research assistant in the Department of Education at the University of Vienna. Her doctoral thesis is on *Patterns of Lower Austrian students at the educational transition from primary school to secondary school*, and her research work focuses on educational transitions, conditions of successful educational trajectories, empirical research and longitudinal research, as well as on educational policymaking. She is currently part of a Government-funded project on education evaluation research in Lower Austria (NOESIS: 2010-2014) and is also a contributor to *International Ed News. PK-12 Education News from Around the World*.

SONJA BAUER-HOFMANN, since 2010 a PhD student and research assistant in the Department of Education at the University of Vienna. Her doctoral thesis concerns theories of schooling and her research work focuses on the history of comprehensive schooling, theories of education, international comparative research, conditions of successful educational trajectories, as well as on educational policymaking. She is currently a part of a Government-funded project on education evaluation research in Lower Austria (NOESIS: 2010-2014).

STEFAN THOMAS HOPMANN, since 2005 Professor of Comparative Education and History of Education at the University of Vienna, following similar appointments in Germany and Norway. General editor of the international *Journal of Curriculum Studies*. Since a doctoral dissertation on *Curriculum Making as Administrative Action (Lehrplanarbeit als Verwaltungshandeln*; Kiel 1988) involved in historical and comparative curriculum research, including comparative studies (*Didaktik meets Curriculum*; 1995ff.) as well as empirical research and national case studies. Currently leading a longitudinal project on policy based curriculum change in Lower Austria (NOESIS: 2010-2014).