

Study Visit to Austria

1st - 4th April 2001

Programme

1. The itinerary included meetings with teachers and Headteachers and School Inspectors based in Vienna, the President of the Vienna Board of Education, a Senior Civil Servant in the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and visits to four schools in Vienna, a Mittelschule, a Hauptschule, a Gymnasium, and a Bilingual Commercial Business School.

Background

2. The education laws of 1962 form the basis for the public education system in the Federal Republic of Austria; Austria has a selective post-primary system with differentiated school types. Education is a very political issue in Austria where there is a strong lobby in favour of comprehensive education. There have been attempts to move towards a comprehensive system but any change requires a two-thirds majority in Parliament and this has not been achieved.

3. Compulsory education begins at age six, but there is currently a national debate about whether children should start school at age five and a half. All schools other than private schools are co-educational. Pupils are required to spend nine years in school, ie four years in primary school followed by four years in either a general, or an academic, secondary school. The last compulsory year is taken in either an academic secondary school (as part of a further four year programme), a medium or higher level technical and vocational college (as part of a further three to four or five year programme) or on a one year prevocational programme. About 20% of pupils complete their compulsory

education through the pre-vocational year and most of these go on to apprenticeship training.

4. In the 1999/2000 school year Austria had some 1.2 million pupils in primary, secondary and technical and vocational schools. There are over five thousand schools catering for some two-thirds of the school population. There are in addition over six hundred technical and vocational schools catering for one-third; these schools offer a wide range of training areas and are held in high esteem. In the city of Vienna there are some two hundred thousand pupils and five hundred and twenty-five schools which include one hundred and twenty-one general secondary schools and eighty academic schools. There are in addition eighty-two technical and vocational schools.

5. The academic schools (Gymnasien) by tradition have a higher social status than the general secondary schools (Hauptschulen). Both provide four years of education on the lower level ie between the ages of ten to fourteen. The Gymnasien also provide four years on the upper level between the ages of fourteen to eighteen for preparation for higher education. The lower level consists of a comprehensive general education after which pupils either stay on or transfer to vocational schools. Pupils can also progress from vocational schools to higher education.

6. At the federal level the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has responsibility for primary, secondary and tertiary education, while the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Labour has responsibility for vocational education. The Länder are mainly responsible for secondary legislation and the provision of compulsory education and are also responsible for school inspections.

Findings

Assessment and Selection

7. Primary school pupils are assessed across a range of subjects and are expected to reach a sufficient standard in all before they can pass to the next grade. A foreign language is normally introduced in the third year. In the fourth (and usually final) year of primary school, parents are informed and advised about the secondary level education recommended for their child. There is a

written assessment in February of the achievements of primary school pupils on five Grades. Schools make their own assessments which are confirmed by the Primary Conference Certificate in June. There is no external moderation of these assessments. Pupils must successfully complete the fourth primary school year and obtain the Primary Conference Certificate in order to move on to secondary education.

8. Parents can apply to any school and admissions are related to school size. There is no official published information on school performance, although the media publish speculative information which parents use as a guide.

9. The successful completion of primary education qualifies pupils for entry to Hauptschulen, where local pupils have priority in admissions criteria. Pupils with Grades 1 or 2 in German, reading and mathematics have an entitlement to a place in a Gymnasium. Pupils with a Grade 3 in these subjects and a statement that their overall achievements meet the requirements of the academic school may also qualify for a place in a Gymnasium. Others have to sit a written and oral entrance test. Primary school teachers come under pressure from parents with regard to pupils' grades.

10. Where a Gymnasium is oversubscribed with applications from pupils with the same or similar grades, the Headteacher may take decisions on admissions on the basis of pupils' marks and his knowledge of the standards of assessment at their primary schools. The Headteacher may also apply distance (and sibling) criteria in deciding admissions when the school is oversubscribed. This year one hundred and fifty pupils in the twenty-second District of Vienna could not obtain a place in their local Gymnasium and have to travel to a Gymnasium in another district in the city despite complaints from their parents; there are sufficient places in Gymnasien in the city overall.

11. The split between pupil admissions to Hauptschulen and Gymnasien is on average 70% and 30% respectively. Over the last decade, there has been an increasing trend in urban areas for children to transfer from primary schools to Gymnasien. In some urban areas this is as high as 80%, in Vienna it is just over 60%. The effect on the local Hauptschulen has been detrimental. This is not the case in the rural areas where pupils have to travel considerable distances to Gymnasien and where local Hauptschulen maintain a higher status.

12. There is an acceptance that the present system of selecting children for different schools at the early age of ten needs to be reviewed, especially in light of the common curriculum which exists for all pupils during the first four years of secondary education.

The Curriculum

13. The Ministry of Education sets the framework for the curriculum, subject to the approval of Parliament, and schools decide the content and how it is delivered.

14. The curriculum at lower secondary level (first four years) contains ten to fourteen compulsory subjects and little scope for choice. Each class period lasts fifty minutes and there are five to six periods per day, which allows an average of two to three periods a week per subject. German, mathematics and the use of a second language, usually English, have a high priority.

15. In the third and fourth years the emphasis in the Hauptschulen is on preparation for vocational and working life and work experience becomes a compulsory curriculum component. In the Gymnasien, the curriculum in the third and fourth years is divided into three main types: Gymnasium, Realgymnasium, and Wirtschaftskundliches Realgymnasium, with different curricular emphasis which include languages, mathematics and science or economics.

16. While the compulsory curriculum takes a standard form at lower secondary level, there are marked differences in the content and manner of delivery of the curriculum between the Hauptschulen and Gymnasien. The curriculum in the Hauptschulen is child centred with small classes, group learning and the use of team teaching (two teachers per class). The approach in the Gymnasien is more rigid and purely subject based.

17. The framework for the curriculum for both lower and upper secondary schools and for vocational schools is being revised. A new condensed version with attainments targets is to be introduced in September 2001 with a focus on skills learning and with the aim of encouraging teachers in the Gymnasien to

adopt a more child-centred approach to meet the needs of today's society. Careers education remains compulsory in schools but it has not worked well.

18. The revised curriculum framework for vocational schools is currently the subject of consultation with relevant professional bodies, industry and commerce, etc. There is some monitoring of the curriculum of vocational schools at federal level to ensure that it is meeting economic needs.

Examinations and Assessment

19. Individual schools assess pupil performance annually, they set their own examinations and examination and assessment standards and all schools have their own leaving certificates.

20. In the Hauptschulen, pupils are placed in classes by ability for three subjects, ie German, mathematics and a modern foreign language (usually English) with scope for movement between classes. In other subjects there is a pattern of mixed ability teaching. In theory, pupils (ie those in the top ability classes) may transfer to a Gymnasium on the basis of good achievements but this is rare in practice. Pupils may apply to a Gymnasium at a later stage, but normally an entrance examination has to be taken. At the end of the first four years of secondary education only some 5% of pupils transfer to Gymnasien.

21. In the Gymnasien, it has been a requirement for pupils to obtain a satisfactory standard in all compulsory subjects in order to be able to move on to the next year. Where a pupil has an insufficient rating in one or two compulsory subjects in his or her annual report, he or she may resit the examination(s) at the beginning of the next school year. Those who fail may repeat the year they failed in, but they cannot repeat more than two years during eight years of academic education. However, there is currently a debate about the practice of requiring a pupil at lower secondary school level to repeat a whole year when he or she fails only one or two compulsory subjects. There is a view that this is counter productive in terms of pupil motivation and current practice is being reconsidered. Where a pupil has temporary difficulties in a subject, additional remedial instruction may be made available.

22. Pupils at Gymnasien are required to take a matriculation examination the "Matura" in the last nine weeks of their eighth academic school year; the examination certificate qualifies them for tertiary/university studies. The framework for the examination is governed by legislation. There are seven exams both written and oral. The written exams must include German, mathematics and a foreign language. Pupils may chose their oral subjects. A School Board sets the questions for the oral exams which last between ten and thirty minutes. Oral exams are regarded as very important in assessing young people's ability to think. The class teacher is also the examiner, although the resulting grades are subject to confirmation by the School Board. The School Board consists of class teachers and is usually chaired by the District Inspector.

Performance Measurements

23. There are no national tests or examinations of any description in Austria and no national standards and the value of external moderation of the examination and assessment arrangements operating at individual school level is not recognised. Also, there is no system of school inspections. Thus there is no information for monitoring and evaluating the performance of schools and school pupils or for tracking the performance of individual pupils across the various parts of the education system. It is therefore difficult to draw conclusions on the strengths and weaknesses of the system other than in general terms. Also, international comparisons are difficult. We were advised that some schools in Austria are participating in an EC self-evaluation project. Also, schools in Austria participated in TIMSS and performed very well at primary level and less well at upper secondary level.

School Management and Administration

24. There are no school Boards of Governors and no internal school management posts below that of Headteacher. The Inspectorate is involved in school management and administration. Regulations have been revised to allow schools more autonomy in relation to class sizes and ability groups. Schools may develop a specialist focus and there are some academic schools which specialise in fine arts and music. The main instruction takes place in the mornings but this runs into early afternoons. There is an increasing tendency towards an extended school day and teachers' (flexible working) hours

accommodate this. Uniforms are worn only in some schools in private ownership. Private schools include denominational schools and International Schools. An Inspector advised us that private schools cater for some 20% of pupils (in Vienna).

School Finance

25. The Federal States fund primary and lower secondary schools on the basis of pupil numbers. There are separate budgets at federal and provincial level for grammar schools with a facility for adjustments to take account of changes to pupil and teacher numbers. Teachers salaries amount to 93% of the costs. The remaining 7% is delegated to Headteachers. Headteachers have no management control over teacher costs, ie they are not involved in decisions about teacher/staffing numbers or substitute cover. Also, those that we met were not in favour of including teacher salary costs in the delegated budget because of the implications of redundancies for the higher paid experienced teachers. There were however other implications in that schools do not have support staff in subjects such as Science and ICT; it was clear during our visits to schools that this caused problems.

26. The school budget may be supplemented by sponsorship/advertising without restriction. A number of big companies sponsor both academic and vocational schools and use schools to train prospective employees in specific work skills.

27. The Government recently introduced a 10% parental contribution towards school transport. There are no free meals; the social benefits available under Austria's welfare system render them unnecessary.

School Teachers

28. The background, training, qualifications and working conditions of teachers in different parts of the system vary quite markedly. Essentially, one group of teachers are employed as civil servants by the federal government, are graduates and are trained in higher education institutions, and work in grammar or higher vocational schools. The others work to state authorities, are trained in teacher training colleges, need not be graduates and work in the secondary or

lower vocational schools. Both have different salary systems and they appear to constitute two distinct professions.

29. Teachers usually remain in the same school for their whole career. It is a female dominated profession. All teachers other than the Headteacher are on the same level, therefore there are limited promotion prospects. We were advised that a teacher's salary would range from the equivalent of £12 thousand to £30 thousand per annum after thirty-five years of service and that the Headteacher of a large school could expect to earn the equivalent of £30 thousand per annum.

The Education Inspectorate

30. The role of the Austrian Education Inspectorate is more similar to that of the education and library boards' curriculum advisory support service than that of our Education and Training Inspectorate. They advise schools in their respective districts on teaching methods; they deal with complaints about, and conflicts within, the school system including those involving teaching staff and they co-ordinate specialist education provision in their respective districts. They have no power of direction, but it would be unusual for a school to ignore an Inspector's advice. Also, the Inspectorate work together on a regional basis to progress new developments and to smooth transitions between schools and between different levels of education.

Further and Higher Education and Employment

31. In the rural areas of Austria a high number of young people are in employment at age sixteen. In urban areas relatively few are in employment at this age. About one-third follow the academic route and some 60% of these transfer to higher education but 50% drop out after the first year. The Matura entitles a pupil to a university place but there is no link between this and the student's university courses. About two-thirds follow vocational training, ie a diploma or a Technical/Eco. course at a technical and vocational school which leads on to higher education. Of these pupils some 20% progress to higher education; the majority have job offers and go into employment. The unemployment rate is just 2%.

32. There are some technical universities and the Fachhochschulen which are private institutions similar to our former polytechnics. The Fachhochschulen provide practically based vocational training courses in particular specialist fields. Graduates from these institutions can pursue postgraduate courses at universities. These institutions “grow like mushrooms” in response to demand. They have to make a business case in order to be granted a charter by the Ministry of Education and they have to prove their worth on an annual basis otherwise they close.

33. The number of Austrian graduates is quite low internationally. There is no shortage of places and grants are available to young people until the age of twenty-seven, but there is to be a five thousand schillings (c£250) fee from September 2001. The drop-out rate is of general concern; most drop-outs do not come back to education at a later stage.