

Citizenship Education in Austria

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Background information: brief history of citizenship education

In the early 20th century, when the general right to vote was introduced for men, a formal introduction to political information for citizens, called “Bürgerkunde“, was established. The goal was to create a positive attitude towards the existing social and political system. What was mainly taught was information about political institutions.¹

Citizenship education for adults was first organised by associations dedicated to workers’ and general adult education (called “Arbeiter- und Volksbildungsvereine”) as well as middle-class readers’ and literature clubs (“Lese- und Literaturgesellschaften”). Their efforts were driven by the emancipative goal of empowerment.

The time between the wars – and, of course, the two world wars themselves – did not promote the development of a democratic education system. On the contrary: a lack of identification with the Austrian state as well as authoritarian developments and the dictatorship made schools the procurers of legitimisation for whoever was in power.

A radical re-orientation after World War II in citizenship education was short-lived and the 1928 curriculum was taken over basically unchanged. A Decree on Citizenship Education in 1949 focussed on an education for conscious “Austrianness”.²

A quarter of a century later, in 1974, the Austrian Education Ministry considered introducing a new compulsory school subject –Citizenship Education – in the final years of secondary schools, but the bill failed in parliament. As a compromise, Citizenship Education was established as a teaching principle. After long negotiations on its legal foundation a Decree on Citizenship Education in Schools was finally signed in 1978.

An important stimulus for Citizenship Education was the reduction of the active voting age to 16 in 2010. A broad coalition demanded more citizenship education from an earlier age. All pupils and students were to be prepared for responsible political participation during their compulsory schooling. In the school year 2008/09, a new subject was introduced in the 8th grade of all school types called History and Social Studies/Citizenship Education. The new curriculum for this subject also introduced competence orientation³, which will now be taken over step by step into other curricula and standards/guidelines.

Definition of citizenship education

The Decree on Citizenship Education in Schools specifies a framework of content and didactics for formal education. It starts from a very wide definition of politics. According to the Austrian Ministry of Education, Citizenship Education comprises human rights education⁴ and

¹ Andrea Wolf (Hg.): Der lange Anfang. 20 Jahre „Politische Bildung in den Schulen“, Wien (Sonderzahl Verlag) 1998, p. 16

² Ibid., p. 22ff

³ www.politik-lernen.at/site/basiswissen/politischebildung/kompetenzmodell [23.3.2015]

⁴ The European Council, on the other hand, in its Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education explicitly lists both fields and differentiates between them.

is closely related to similar educational and teaching principles such as media education. Important reference points for Citizenship Education are international documents such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education⁵ as well as the Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning⁶ of the EU with one of them, Civic Competence, having an obvious reference to Citizenship Education.

In non-formal education, definitions and the relative importance of individual parts in particular vary from one organisation to another. An example is the definition applied by the Austrian Society for Citizenship Education (“Österreichische Gesellschaft für Politische Bildung” - ÖGPB) founded in 1977. It defines Citizenship Education as the imparting of knowledge of, skills and insights in socio-political, economic, ecological and international correlations and contexts. Awareness is built in accordance with the principles of the Austrian Constitution and of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The motivation for a responsible participation in society takes the different viewpoints of a pluralistic society and the aims of gender mainstreaming⁷ into consideration. In the German language use the term is ‘politische Bildung’, which literally translates as ‘political education’.

Ecosystem of non-formal citizenship education

The landscape of non-formal education is very diverse. It comprises areas like the extra-curricular education of young people in youth centres, traditional institutions of adult education (e.g. community colleges) and the umbrella organisation for Citizenship Education mentioned above as well as party academies and various CSOs. Providers of Citizenship Education are also international organisations (some having their seat in Austria).⁸

Civil society players are mostly non-profit organisations financed partly or mostly through public funds.

The Common Interest Group for Citizenship Education (“Interessensgemeinschaft Politische Bildung” - IGPB) founded in 2009 “sees itself as a nonpartisan platform for linking institutions and people active in Citizenship Education and advocates the improvement and deepening of citizenship education measures – in schools and outside schools.”⁹

Legal environment ¹⁰

Curricula for schools are decreed centrally by the Austrian Ministry of Education. If the occasion arises, additional guidelines or circulars¹¹ provide a framework for implementing classes.

A text book campaign¹² has made it possible to provide free class materials for pupils and students (since 1972). The text books (and audio-visual teaching materials) have to be approved by the Ministry of Education and the aim is to contribute to equal opportunities for all

⁵ www.bmbf.gv.at/politische-bildung

⁶ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11090_de.htm [23.3.2015]
http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11090_en.htm [23.3.2015]

⁷ Statutes of the ÖGPB: www.politischebildung.at/oegpb/kontakt/#A35004 [23.3.2015]

⁸ Players working in Citizenship Education and related areas in Austria: www.politik-lernen.at/akteurinnen

⁹ Policy statement of the IGPB (in German): www.igpb.at

¹⁰ www.politik-lernen.at/site/basiswissen/politischebildung [12.3.2015]

¹¹ Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education. Rundschreiben 15/2012, BMUKK 33.466/0119-I/6a/2012 (Circular of the Austrian Ministry of Education - in German): www.politik-lernen.at/dl/nMpgJKJKonomnJqx4KnJK/bas_Erlass_33.466-0119-I-6a-2012_Europarats-Charta_zur_Politischen_Bildung_und_Menschenrechtsbildung_-_Rundschreiben_mit_Charta.pdf [23.3.2015]

¹² www.schulbuchaktion.at

children and young people. On the whole, however, teachers have a lot of freedom as to what reading and working materials they use in their classes, provided these materials contribute to fulfilling the curriculum and have been carefully chosen and reviewed.¹³

There also is a federal law on the promotion of Citizenship Education and publishing which lays down rules on how political parties are to promote Citizenship Education.¹⁴ Their party academies on the one hand are to provide citizens with insights into political and social conditions and motivate them to participate, and on the other hand qualify people active in politics.

Every government in office issues a programme detailing its current and future plans. In its programme for 2013 to 2018 the Austrian Federal Government stated its intention of increasingly involving children and young people in social and political decision processes and making Citizenship Education an obligatory module in schools from the 6th grade.¹⁵

Stakeholders

The Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs' Citizenship Education Department is responsible for supporting schools and teacher training institutes in their work. To this end it uses an external service provider called "Zentrum *polis* – Politik Lernen in der Schule" (Learning about politics in school)¹⁶. The Austrian Parliament also regards it as one of its responsibilities to convey a basic knowledge about the politics: "The aim is to allow children and young people to experience democracy."¹⁷ Similar offerings can also be found on the regional level.

All these activities by the Ministry of Education are carried out in co-operation with organisations of civil society in Austria and abroad. These co-operations can either be directly with the target groups or in collaboration with third organizations. Important umbrella organisations are the Austrian Federal Youth Representation¹⁸ and the IGPB.

The biggest target group for formal Citizenship Education are pupils and students. They are represented by their statutory pupil/student representations. Their federal umbrella organisation advocates strengthening Citizenship Education.

Teachers in Austria are trained at training colleges and universities, which are also responsible for their further training. A few teaching methodology centres have been established in recent years.

Challenges

A danger of education being more and more subject to economic considerations, the disenchantment with politics and the general lack of resources might have a negative impact on a successful development of Citizenship Education. The players in Citizenship Education work hard to improve its general conditions. What mainly needs to be done is to bridge the gap between the generally posited importance of Citizenship Education and the realities of its implementation. A big challenge is the professionalization of teachers since Austrian teacher training does not offer independent studies of a teaching methodology for Citizenship

¹³ See § 14 Schulunterrichtsgesetz (Austrian law on school education):
<https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/Bundesnormen/NOR40119622/NOR40119622.html> [23.3.2015]

¹⁴ <https://www.bka.gv.at/site/4073/default.aspx> [16.3.2015]

¹⁵ <https://www.bka.gv.at/site/3542/default.aspx> [16.3.2015]

¹⁶ www.politik-lernen.at

¹⁷ www.demokratiwebstatt.at ([www.demokratiwebstatt/transkription-in-englisch/](http://www.demokratiwebstatt.at/erwachsene/filme-vorstellung-demokratiwebstatt/transkription-in-englisch/)) [16.3.2015]

¹⁸ www.bjv.at/politik/politische-bildung/

Education. It is no coincidence that IGPB, in 2010, chose this issue as the subject of its first annual conference and has addressed it repeatedly in its position papers.

Citizenship Education with its participatory aspects has a European and a global dimension. This is why international co-operation, e.g. under the NECE umbrella, is imperative.

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