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# Contested integration: hegemony projects in the field of education in Austria

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## ABSTRACT

The Austrian policy landscape with regard to the educational integration measures directly or indirectly targeting migrant children is characterized by inconsistency and the concurrence of integrative and segregative measures. We ask *how these discrepancies can be interpreted without being reduced to mere inconsistencies and why, in the context of the ongoing normalization of the political right, integrative measures have not (yet) disappeared completely*. Based on interviews with experts, we identify three distinct – integrative, multicultural, and segregative – hegemony projects pursued by different social forces through various discursive and institutional strategies. The integrative hegemony project seeks social redistribution through comprehensive, rights-based measures; the multicultural project seeks to promote recognition for cultural diversity; and the segregative hegemony project seeks to re-signify integration through mechanisms of assessment, discipline and control. Although our sample is limited in terms of representation, our research speaks to the ongoing societal contestation over the means and meaning of integration.

## KEYWORDS

Integration; migrant children; Austria; hegemony projects

## 1. Introduction

Political contestation over migration reached new heights in Austria in the aftermath of the so-called ‘summer of migration’ in 2015 (Hess et al. 2016) when the number of annual asylum applications more than tripled.<sup>1</sup> Dropping numbers<sup>2</sup> have so far not helped curb the ongoing ‘normalization to the right’ (Wodak 2020) which further escalated under the right-wing coalition government between the Christian-conservative Austrian People’s Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP) and the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) from 2017 to 2019 (Hadj-Abdou and Ruedin 2021). Even the replacement of the far-right FPÖ with the liberal-left Green Party (*Grüne*) in 2019 has so far failed to defuse the political climate, as evidenced in former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz’ (ÖVP) statement in 2020 that ‘it is possible to protect both the climate and the borders’ (Die Presse 2020).

The rising anti-migration tide has had serious repercussions for integration policies and discourses in Austria, demonstrated by the common approaches of ‘integration through performance’ (*Integration durch Leistung*) (Gruber, Mattes, and Stadlmair

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2016, 69ff.; Rosenberger and Gruber 2020, 128) and ‘integration through punishment’ (Rheindorf 2017, 197ff.). As these ongoing discursive renegotiations of integration are still embedded in the broader context of neoliberalism which economizes all spheres of life (Brown 2015, 30ff.), including migration and integration where the ‘deservingness’ of migrants is measured against their (material and cultural) costs and benefits for Austria, those migrants ‘unwilling’ to give up their cultural-religious foreignness can be forced to behave in certain ways or be punished (Rheindorf 2017, 197).

Arguably, there has not been another policy field where integration has been subject to as emotional debates as in the field of education (Gruber 2018, 6). Neoliberalism has economized public education in terms of institutional reproduction of ‘human capital’ to secure national and regional competitiveness and innovative capacities and has measured the success of national education by quantifying the ‘input’ (public investment) and ‘output’ (school success) ratio. Located at the intersection between integration and educational policies capitalized by neoliberalism, migrant pupils have been at the center of political debates on integration in Austria with regard to missing or insufficient German skills. Coupled with propositions of ‘unwillingness to integrate’, these debates have often disregarded the fact that institutional education distinguishes between national and migrant children through allegedly objective mechanisms of selection (e.g. tracking of students into different types of schools based on their grades), which, as a matter of fact, draw on and reinforce existing social inequalities (Gomolla and Radtke 2002; Hormel 2011; Imdorf 2011). Parallel to this, so-called ‘parallel societies’ and ‘failed integration’ are often held responsible for migrant children’s ‘poor’ school performance (Ronneberger and Tsianos 2009; Yıldız 2009). The discursive and institutional amalgamation of neoliberalism with anti-migration views has recently culminated in the introduction of the so-called ‘German support classes’ (*Deutschförderklassen*) by the former ÖVP-FPÖ coalition. There, students whose German skills are deemed inadequate spend considerable time (up to 20 hours per week) in the German support classes separated from their peers whose German skills are considered adequate (Füllekruss and Dirim 2019; Flubacher 2021).

Despite these disintegrative and segregative policies that serve to safeguard ‘the monolingual habitus of the multilingual school’ (Gogolin 2008), we do not see more inclusive and integrative institutional norms and practices disappear completely. Mother tongue instruction (*muttersprachlicher Unterricht*) which has been part of the Austrian school curriculum since 1992 and which allows pupils to be taught in their first language is the antithesis of the ‘German support classes’. Similarly, the new secondary school (*Mittelschule*) that was introduced in 2008 as a pilot project originally aimed at unifying school attendance among students between the ages of 10 and 14 (5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grades) and thus at postponing the tracking of students into academic and non-academic secondary schools (Nusche et al. 2016, 125). This goal has so far not materialized due to a lack of political consensus for integrated comprehensive schools. Next to these integrative measures that have been traditionally pursued by the Social Democratic Party of Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ), a distinct strand of integration measures has focused on promoting ‘diversity’ at schools and more broadly in the field of education against homogenization and assimilation based on the liberal notion that everyone is ‘different but equal’. The left-leaning, liberal Greens are adherents of this

multicultural standpoint along with civil society organizations (CSO) which operate as contractors and service providers in the fields of migration and integration.

This article takes an interest in this ambivalent coexistence of integration measures as we acknowledge the ongoing institutional resignification of integration in segregative and disciplining terms *and* the persistence of more inclusive integration policies directed at migrant children. Focusing on the case of Vienna, the puzzle of this article is how these ambivalences or contradictions in policies can be interpreted and why, in the context of the ongoing normalization to the right, the overall Austrian landscape of educational integration has so far remained diverse and permeable. To answer these questions, we introduce a state-critical approach to the analysis of educational integration policies. We understand the ambivalences of different approaches as manifestations of ongoing societal and political contestation over the meaning and means of integration. The advantage of this approach is twofold. First, we attach theoretical and empirical significances to ambivalences and inconsistencies in the field of education and integration rather than dismissing them as random contradictions. We consider inconsistencies as effects of struggles between hegemony projects (Forschungsgruppe Staatsprojekt Europa 2014), which compete to become general ‘common sense’ with regard to integration norms and measures in the field of education. Second, the ongoing rise of the right notwithstanding, these inconsistencies and ambivalences demonstrate that segregative hegemony projects, too, face the challenge of asserting themselves against counter-hegemonic (i.e. more egalitarian) projects that possibly hold the potential to curb current authoritarian trends.

We draw our empirical findings from qualitative interviews with federal, municipal, and CSO experts working at the crossroads between integration and education policies. We identify three major hegemony projects – integrative, multicultural, and segregative – which unfold against the overall neoliberal background of Austria’s education policies and which display, though in different ways, elements of neoliberalism. We elucidate each hegemony project on the basis of two to three selected integration measures that shall represent the respective hegemony project: mother tongue instruction at school and envisioning integrative schools (integrative hegemony project), CSO engagement in the field of integration illustrated by a CSO that offers anti-racism trainings, a CSO that pursues mobile youth work and a CSO that targets female migrants (multicultural hegemony project), and the German support classes and reframing of compulsory kindergarten for five-year-olds as an integration measure targeted first and foremost towards migrant children (segregative hegemony project).

In the following, we start by outlining the institutional framework of formal education in Austria. We then discuss the state of research and sketch the theoretical framework for our study. Subsequently, we address considerations related to methodology and methods before turning to our research findings. We finish by drawing a number of conclusions for current and future research on Austrian integration and education policies.

## **2. Research context: organization of formal education and integration at Austrian schools**

Despite being a federal Republic, Austrian provinces (*Länder*) lack any strong legislative or policy-making autonomy, including the field of education that makes Austria an atypical or

weak federal system (Cameron and Hofferbert 1974, 239). The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (led by ÖVP since 2017) is the central executive body for issues related to education, including schooling. In the policy field of education, ‘many legal competencies remain in the hands of the federal government’ (Nusche et al. 2016, 79). The Boards of Education (*Bildungsdirektionen*) introduced in 2019 in all nine *Länder* represent a new administrative authority which serve to coordinate the duties of the federal government and the *Länder*. Austria distinguishes between federal schools (*Bundesschulen*) and provincial schools (*Landesschulen*). Federal schools encompass academic secondary schools (*Allgemeinbildende höhere Schule*, AHS) and upper secondary vocational schools and colleges (*Berufsbildende höhere Schule* [BHS] and *Berufsbildende mittlere Schule* [BMS]), while provincial schools (*Pflichtschule*) encompass primary schools (*Volksschule*, VS), Secondary Schools (*Mittelschule*, MS), special needs schools (*Sonderschule*, ASO), pre-vocational schools (*Polytechnische Schule*, PTS) and part-time upper secondary vocational schools (*Berufsschule*, BS) (ibid., 20). Federal schools are directly funded by the federal government, while provincial schools are funded by the federal provinces and municipalities although ‘a significant share of provincial spending originates from the federal government and is transferred [to the *Länder*] according to the regulations of the Fiscal Adjustment Act (*Finanzausgleichsgesetz*)’ (ibid., 80).

Schooling is compulsory for all children between the ages of 6 and 15 who reside in Austria regardless of their nationality and residence status. Nevertheless, differentiation between students through early tracking is an integral part of Austria’s school system and enjoys broad consensus across the political spectrum but has also offered a field of tension between the two major political parties SPÖ and ÖVP (Budzinski 1986, 291–292). After attending the common primary school for a duration of four years, children used to proceed to a secondary academic school (AHS) or to the general lower secondary school (*Hauptschule*, HS) depending on their school success. In 2008, the New Secondary Schools (*Neue Mittelschulen*, NMS) were introduced by the then Minister of Education (SPÖ) as a pilot project originally designed as a comprehensive school for all fifth- to eighth-graders combining the lower stages (*Unterstufe*) of AHS and HS to postpone and in the long-run abolish early-tracking (Nusche et al. 2016, 125). Due to a compromise between the coalition partners SPÖ and ÖVP, however, ‘all lower secondary stages of academic secondary schools continued to exist next to the NMS’ (ibid.). All HS were replaced by NMS in the school year 2018/2019, and all NMS were renamed Secondary Schools (*Mittelschule*, MS) in the school year 2020/2021. Children with special needs can attend a special needs school or a regular school in form of integrative education.

In the highly selective and stratified Austrian school system, children with a migration background are underrepresented in secondary academic schools (AHS). In the school year 2018/2019, the share of students speaking a colloquial other than German was 20,4% at the academic secondary schools, whereas their share at special needs schools amounted to 38.8% (ÖIF 2020, 28).

The monolingual self-conception of the multilingual school (Gogolin 2008) in Austria which requires that students adjust to the official language requirements instead of opening up institutional education for the existing multilingualism is largely responsible for this. This approach has taken new heights under the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition between 2017 and 2019 with the introduction of German support classes (*Deutschförderklassen*), in which students with insufficient German skills are taught German separated from their peers (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung 2018, 10; Füllekruss and Dirim 2019).

### 3. State of research: integration through education in Austria

School grades and degrees usually depend on the cultural capital which is often inherited from one's family rather than on the 'natural' talent and abilities of students (Kupfer 2011, 82). Educational trajectories thus result in different social positions for different children within a society whose organization is based on the division of (e.g. 'skilled' vs. 'unskilled') labor (Dinsleder 2012, 23).

Existing research demonstrates that early-tracking plays an important role in reproducing existing inequalities between children, leading to homogenization within different school types in Austria (Gruber 2018, 8) as structural factors such as socioeconomic background, gender, regional differences, and migration background impact children's educational prospects (Bacher 2003). It has been noted that the social background and parents' education attainment is decisive in whether a pupil will attend an academic or a non-academic secondary school (Bruneforth, Weber, and Bacher 2012, 200). Similarly, the migration background often undermines children's prospects to proceed to the upper level of academic secondary school after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade (ibid).

Scholarship on Austria establishes that under neoliberalism social and education policies directed toward children and young people have been concerned with the generation of and investment in 'human capital' to secure individual employability and economic growth (Atzmüller, Décieux, and Knecht 2019). This is part of the broader process of neoliberal economization which disseminates 'the *model of the market*' (Brown 2015, 31) to all social domains and re-configures humans as '*homo oeconomicus*' (ibid.). Hence, institutional education is not designed to provide equal opportunities to *all* children but instead reproduces social stratification based on gender, class, and race – contrary to what the *genderless, classless and raceless* 'human capital' suggests. Institutional education requires individuals to acquire and master canonized knowledge and skills that are socially exploitable, while individual performance and success are measured against standardized scoring systems and certificates (Riegel 2016, 82). In their educational offer, institutions often fail to consider existing structures of inequality that prevents underprivileged students, especially with migration histories, from performing in a way that is considered as 'successful' by schools. Scholars also point out that the notion of the 'inefficient migrant child' is largely responsible for the comparatively high rates of transfer to special needs school among migrant pupils (Herzog-Punzenberger and Unterwurzacher 2009, 168). Not least, they observe that a strong hierarchy between languages becomes evident in the monolingual organization of educational institutions in Austria. German is attributed primary importance (Alpagu et al. 2019, 220), which reflects the enduring postcolonial power relations and logics in migrant societies (Knappik and Thoma 2015, 9). Flubacher (2021) considers the hasty introduction of 'German support classes' as part of a 'politics of speed' in Austria, while Josipovic and Reeger (2020, 36) identify conflicts in the implementation of the policy between the federal and the Vienna administration which has taken a critical stand toward the 'German support classes.'

Against the backdrop of these findings, here we introduce a hegemony project perspective to shed power- and state-critical light on educational integration policies. We agree that social inequalities are reproduced through institutional education and further exacerbated in the case of migrant children due to the intersection of social categories of class and ethnicity. However, we put forward a more differentiated

argument by noting that the policy norms surrounding education and integration are constantly contested by social forces that compete to generalize their own vision of education and integration. We argue that these ongoing struggles account for existing policy inconsistencies. In our opinion, it is important to make sense of these inconsistencies to better understand the intricate workings of societal struggles over hegemony and to explore the counterhegemonic, emancipatory potential these struggles may possibly harbor.

#### 4. Theoretical foundations: competing over hegemony

To understand the puzzle of Austrian educational integration policies against the broader context of neoliberalism in which they unfold, we use materialist conceptualizations of the state. According to this, the state is not a mere bureaucratic apparatus that designs and implements policy-decisions, but a conflicting arena where different social actors struggle over hegemony and power (Brand et al. 2021; Forschungsgruppe Staatsprojekt Europa 2014; Poulantzas 1978; Sauer 2001). The state and its policies are thus hegemonic constellations which represent the particular interests and views of specific actors as general ‘common sense’. Policies can thus be understood as ‘unstable compromises among societal forces which are formulated through specific state apparatuses or even groups or alliances in particular apparatuses’ (Brand et al. 2021, 7).

Hegemony is contested by a variety of competing forces and interests called ‘hegemony projects’. The term ‘project’ underlines the fact that the endeavor to become hegemonic may always fail and that it is always contested and processual though based on power resources (Buckel 2011, 640). A project becomes hegemonic when the actions (e.g. political events, lobbying, investment decisions, and draft bills) of certain actors become part of the society’s common imagination and practices and thus gain legitimacy (ibid.). Hegemony projects are ‘bundles of strategies that pursue similar goals’, while ‘a potentially countless number of actors, practices and tactics are bundled into hegemony projects and combined’ (Buckel et al. 2017, 17). Hegemony projects may entail different strategies pursued by different actors who may or may not explicitly reference each other or who may even consider themselves distinct from each other (Forschungsgruppe Staatsprojekt Europa 2014, 46). Hegemony projects, however, cannot simply or ‘objectively’ be derived from the actions, positions, and strategies of political actors but are constructed by critical analysts (Buckel et al. 2017, 17). As much as they represent real-world positions and connections, hegemony projects are at the same time heuristic constructions which may not reflect how the specific actors bundled into a hegemony project by an analyst see themselves (ibid.).

In the context of migration to the Global North and more specifically to Europe, the global division of labor embedded in colonial relations of exploitation and oppression is of key relevance (Buckel 2012). In the course of European integration, neoliberal discursive and institutional frames have asserted themselves to simultaneously prevent (e.g. under the pretext of ‘bogus asylum seekers’ and ‘those reluctant to integrate’) and promote (e.g. care workers and ‘skilled’ workers’) migration, thus seeking to convince the anti-migration electorate of a ‘regulated openness’ for those whose labor is ‘truly needed’ (Georgi 2019a, 105; see also Buckel 2012). Tensions and contradictions between national-neoliberal and euro-neoliberal projects notwithstanding (Buckel et al. 2017, 25),

similar observations can be made in the EU Member States, including Austria, where flexible residence and employment regimes distinguish between desirable vs. undesirable and deserving vs. undeserving migrants. Research by the *Forschungsgruppe Staatsprojekt Europa* shows that the neoliberal project incorporates elements from the conservative hegemony project (e.g. repressive border controls) – for whose positioning right-wing populist parties and groups that have gained leverage against the neoliberal project since the ‘summer of migration’ in 2015 play an important role (Buckel et al. 2017, 27) – to become politically feasible (ibid., 25; see also Buckel 2016). The amalgamation of neoliberalism with right-wing conservative elements signifies the arrival of a new form of neoliberalism that is increasingly more authoritarian and less progressive to restrict the transnational mobility of unwanted working classes while at the same time allowing some transnational mobility by workers whose labor is considered useful for the reproduction of capital (Georgi 2019b, 573).

Beyond the neoliberal and conservative-authoritarian projects, competing hegemony projects in the field of migration in Europe include the national-social hegemony project with a focus on social redistribution and consensus-oriented corporatist arrangements and the left-liberal hegemony project with a focus on tolerance and human and minority rights (Buckel et al. 2017, 30). Although the national-social and left-liberal hegemony projects are significantly distinguished by the aforementioned hegemony projects, they have in common that they all unfold and organize against the broader neoliberal backdrop which has shaped their political strategies and prospects for becoming hegemonic.

## 5. Methodology and methods

To explore hegemony projects competing over the means and meaning of integration in Austria, we paid attention to the work steps laid out by the research team *Forschungsgruppe Staatsprojekt Europa* (Buckel et al. 2017). We started by identifying key actors and institutions who pursue distinct political agendas with regard to integration and education.<sup>3</sup> As Rosenberger and Gruber (2020) demonstrate, the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF), the central federal agency for integration issues in Austria, has come to hold a monopolistic position over the years through which ÖVP can exert political influence on matters related to integration (Rosenberger and Gruber 2020, 142; 144) while among mainstream political parties only the Vienna chapter of the SPÖ refrained from aligning with the right-wing populist FPÖ’s position on migration (Rheindorf and Wodak 2018, 20). In line with this observation, we identified Vienna – the most populous city and province with the highest share of migrant population in the country – as providing political headwind to the restrictive policies pursued by the federal government through more inclusive discourses and policy measures. In the second step, we made a pre-selection of experts based on the levels at which educational integration (policy) is negotiated – i.e. federal, municipal, and civil society levels. In the third step, we paid special attention to integration-related projects that were mentioned by the experts during the interviews as ‘good practice’ policies, measures, and projects (i.e. child-centered and empowering). We selected these projects in the next step based on the criteria that they had a focus on integration, were running at the time of the interviews (at least 1–2 years), and were located in Vienna.



We conducted a total of 15 interviews between May and July 2019. We interviewed three federal officials (two of them gave one joint interview) working on the issues of language education and integration (I10; I14), one member of the National Council (*Nationalrat*) (I5), one member of the city government of Vienna (I15); three municipal officials or bureaucrats (I1; I7; I8), one member of the Provincial Parliament (*Landtag*) of Vienna (I12), five CSOs (I3; I6; I9; I11; I13), and two scholars (I2; I4). Our interview guideline was composed of 30 questions pertaining to the experts' everyday work, their assessment and opinions about the quality and quantity of existing integration discourses and policies directed at migrant children and young people, and their needs.

We then searched our data for different strategies and their respective protagonists in order to identify different hegemony projects. Although the actors and their political positions, actions, and strategies are just as real as the historical and material circumstances on which they are based, the identification of existing hegemony projects requires that the researcher takes a heuristic and interpretative approach to map and develop a typology of existing projects (Buckel et al. 2017, 17). Criteria for this typology of projects were as follows: Who or what is represented as a problem? Which solutions are proposed and with which objective? Doing so, we tried to work out the norms and values, convictions, practices, and goals articulated by the respective interviewee whom (or whose institution or organization) we considered to represent a distinct hegemony project. We then combined specific strategies and their protagonists into three different hegemony projects based on the interviewees' definitions of pressing problems, challenges and proposed solutions in the fields of integration and education: the integrative hegemony project (I1; I2; I4; I7; I8; I9; I12; I13; I15), the multicultural hegemony project (I3; I6; I11), and the segregative hegemony project (I5; I10; I14). The fact that in our sample integrative actors outnumber other actors should not be considered as representative but as an effect of our research site, Vienna, which has a long social-democratic tradition. We acknowledge that these hegemony projects are distinct but also processual and relational – i.e. always in the making in tandem with and in contrast to each other – and submit that in some cases their distinction (e.g. between integrative and multicultural hegemony projects) is less than obvious. Our typology does not include a hegemony project that is directly labeled 'neoliberal' but we find that all hegemony projects – integrative, multicultural and segregative – entail neoliberal elements, though to varying degrees, in terms of liberal notions of 'individual support', 'diversity' and 'difference' as assets for individual and societal cohesion and progress (liberal version of neoliberalism) and authoritarian notions of individual performance and punishment for its lack (authoritarian version of neoliberalism).

## **6. Competing over migrant children's integration: hegemony projects in Aust**

Against the backdrop of the institutional alignment between neoliberal education and integration discourses and policies, we identified three distinct hegemony projects. The first set of integration discourses and policies we identified prioritized social redistribution and welfare strategies and addressed structural inequality and the rising right-wing

tide as posing a challenge to the integration of migrant children and communities in general. Their strategies aimed at comprehensive, rights-based measures to mitigate the effects of institutional discrimination. The representatives of this integrative hegemony project comprised Vienna-based municipal bureaucrats, a member of the provincial parliament, a member of the city government, and CSOs with social-democratic and corporatist leanings. We identified two key policies, mother tongue instruction and the vision of an integrated comprehensive school which recently culminated in the emergence of a new secondary school (*Mittelschule*), as illustrative of the integrative hegemony project. The second set of integration discourses and policies we identified were less preoccupied with redistributive issues but prioritized questions of diversity and recognition. The experts we associated with the multicultural hegemony project were professionals in three different CSOs which operated as contractors and sought to promote diversity and anti-racism through street work and by creating safe spaces. The third and last set of discourses and policies we identified prioritized integration as an issue related to cultural adaptation and national security and proposed controlling, disciplinary, and responsabilizing strategies. In our sample, this segregative hegemony project was found on the federal level among federal bureaucrats and a member of the National Council. We identified two policies, the ‘German support classes’ and the reframing of compulsory kindergarten attendance for five-year-olds, as illustrative of the segregative hegemony project.

### **6.1 The integrative hegemony project: mother tongue instruction and the vision of an integrative school**

The discourses, policies, and actors we bundled into the integrative hegemony project share the basic recognition that the social positions and prospects of migrants are undermined by structural inequality and that they can be improved through long-term redistributive measures. Public policy is thus integral to the integrative hegemony project which attributes a key role to public institutions for providing the necessary framework to generate equal opportunities for nationals and asylum seekers or, more broadly, migrants whereby education, schools and kindergartens are deemed as particularly important (I4; I9; I15). A volunteer from parents’ association stressed the role of education as an opportunity to open new perspectives for children’s lives (I13), while a member of the city government pointed to the key importance of education for social participation (I15). A municipal bureaucrat pointed to the particular importance of working closely with migrant parents whose children are attending the kindergarten and highlighted that there should be more strategies and methods in kindergarten pedagogy which target children with a migration background (I8). By contrast, segregation between students based on their German proficiency as in German support classes was generally considered as reprehensible. Individual support for single children was welcomed, while primary emphasis was put on mutual exchange between – rather than the segregation of – children from day 1, as underlined by a scholar (I4). Another interviewee pointed out that ‘any fantasy of additional measures where children are separated from each other to make them somehow fit for the majority society is an illusion and contradicts every education policy expertise’ (I15). Greater representation and the voice of asylum seekers and migrants in public institutions, including schools, was considered an important step

forward by numerous experts (I1; I4). Similarly, a scholar suggested that diversity among language teachers should be increased and hoped for more experts in policy making and less politically motivated measures (I2).

One main pillar of the integrative hegemony project is the mother tongue instruction at school. The concept was originally introduced in the 1970s to prepare the children of *Gastarbeiter* (migrant workers) for a possible return to the countries of origin and has been part of the Austrian school curriculum since 1992 (Fleck 2011). Mother tongue instruction represents a voluntary offer across all school types and classes. Pupils with first languages other than German as well as bilingual pupils are eligible for being instructed in mother tongue regardless of their citizenship, length of stay in Austria, and German proficiency. Representatives of the integrative hegemony project defend that mother tongue instruction helps recognize and promote multilingualism at schools while raising awareness on multilingualism among teachers (I1). A municipal official trained in pedagogy described the school as ‘a society in small’ and added that over the years a general understanding of multilingualism among school principals who are in charge of notifying the need for mother tongue instructors at their schools could be established (I1). Another municipal official and a member of the provincial parliament both underlined the importance of mother tongue instruction but added that it should be complemented by increasing the number of social workers and psychologists at schools (I8; I12).

The founder of a private company which offers educational services to promote multilingualism and an advocate for mother tongue instruction noted that the federal government has diverted institutional efforts from promoting multilingualism toward a strong focus on German as ‘the only right’, meaning accepted, language (I9). The same interviewee cited financial disinvestment and disintegrative measures such as the German support classes as evidence for this trend on the federal level (I9). A member of the provincial parliament criticized that ‘segregated classes contribute to additional stigmatization that remains the defining experience throughout [one’s] whole life, and for me, this seems to be more important to evade than to teach children appropriate German’ (I12). One member of an association for parents pointed out that the German support classes work against the very laws Austria ratified to promote inclusion, noting that nothing about this measure is inclusive (I13). A member of the city government pointed out that segregative measures such as the German support classes contributed to the individualization of integration as a personal responsibility (I15). The same interviewee further added that this segregative measure might result in the disciplinization of integration, for example when pupils are put in a German support class for scoring poorly at the German language assessment test (I15), while a scholar criticized ÖIF for monopolizing the integration discourse in Austria (I2).

‘Poor language skills’, wrongly used to reference multilingual students with a first language other than German, are often cited to explain the discrepancies between students with regard to their school performance (Khakpour and Knappik 2016). Against such views, social democratic actors have traditionally, though often unsuccessfully and halfheartedly, sought to push forward the idea of an integrated comprehensive school (*Gesamtschule*) attended by all students until the age of 14. The latest attempt to reform early-tracking mechanisms culminated in the emergence of a new school type, the New Secondary Schools (NMS) or, as they are called in the meantime, Secondary Schools (MS). These secondary schools were the outcome of a compromise on the federal level

between SPÖ, which originally intended to introduce an integrated school system, and the ÖVP (Nusche et al. 2016, 125). ÖVP opposed such a system for undermining the principle of ‘individual performance’ (*Leistung*) although few ÖVP politicians from the *Länder* had expressed sympathy for the idea (ORF 2011). In line with these distinct positions vis-à-vis different school types, the interviewees whom we associated with the integrative project and who expressed an opinion on the issue favored blending of school types and students. A member of an association for parents pointed to a widespread prejudice against the Secondary School for being allegedly worth less in terms of academic value and quality mediated not only by politicians but also by the media and even by pedagogues (I13). A member of the provincial parliament made an even more radical suggestion for a ‘completely different concept of schools’ highlighting less disciplining, no grades, and a full-day school model (I12). It can be observed that the cited actors pursue integration as a means to achieve social equality and tend to combine the issues of migration and integration with migrants’ disadvantaged class positions.

## **6.2 The multicultural hegemony project: CSO involvement**

The distinctive feature of the discourses and policies that constitute the multicultural hegemony project is their emphasis on ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’ as cultural assets against assimilationist policies. We witness this line of thought and argumentation, especially with experts who work for civil society organizations (CSOs) that provide, often on a contract or project basis, educational integration services to young migrants. In the neoliberal context of a retreating welfare state and, parallel to this, the responsabilization of individuals, civil society actors have played a growing role as service providers in Austria as elsewhere (Alexander and Fernandez 2021). As CSOs became increasingly more professionalized in the course of the neoliberal restructuring of the civil society, ‘their accountability [shifted] from constituents to funding agencies’ (Lang 2013, 111). At the same time, however, the conservative and right-wing coalition between the ÖVP and FPÖ (2017–2019) in Austria have sought to push back human rights-oriented CSOs to centralize or even monopolize the implementation of migration and integration policies (Gruber and Rosenberger 2021, 10).

One interviewee from a CSO which offers, among others, anti-racism trainings for pupils at schools suggested that change can be initiated through empathy exercises (I6). The interviewee noted that his CSO provides anti-discrimination trainings for schools to improve mutual respect and combat racism and discrimination among students. As part of these trainings, the CSO employs empathy exercises as it considers empathy as important for tackling racist structures and achieving social change (I6). The same interviewee also acknowledged that the individual efforts of teachers are important for pupils’ success but that it should not depend on someone’s luck (of having a dedicated teacher) whether he/she will face discrimination (I6).

A youth worker at another CSO which offers mobile youth work pointed to the importance of unconditional recognition and valuation of children as such (I3). The interviewee emphasized the necessity to listen to and be there for young people and to offer them a safe space where they can come together and exchange ideas. For her, gender-specific offers are also important in order to reassure parents who are more likely to allow their daughters to participate in activities if a youth center is a safe place where

only girls meet (I3). Similarly, the team manager of a CSO for female migrants explained that girls in particular need a protected space, as there are too few spaces for girls to escape social conventions (I11). The interviewee highlighted that girls with a migration history or refugee experience may have different needs than boys and that the offer has to be adapted to the requests of the target group (I11). She added that funding for projects often depends on the priorities and the political shifts in the federal government. Thus, changes in political direction may affect the duration of the projects and determine whether the projects become dependent on donations (I11). This points to a relation of dependency, which may discourage CSOs from pursuing an independent integration agenda against assimilationist policies.

Overall, the call of Vienna-based CSOs included in our sample for recognizing ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’ might be attractive and useful for international neoliberal economic forces interested in skilled migrant workers. Thus, CSOs may run the risk – not at least due to their precarious funding situation – to support neoliberal forces and promote their notion of ‘human capital’ as they referred to a much lesser extent to social structures and re-distributive policies in their claims for ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’. At the same time, however, the multicultural hegemony project does display a political position which fundamentally opposes the segregative hegemony project that seeks to control and deny ‘cultural difference’ and ‘diversity’ through disciplinary measures.

### ***6.3 The segregative hegemony project: reframing compulsory kindergarten and German support classes***

We identified a set of assumptions, convictions, and practices that have in common the belief that migration leads to societal problems stemming from ‘cultural difference’. These problems can allegedly only be solved through integration policies that re-socialize migrants in line with ‘Austrian norms and values.’ Political positions and policies of the segregative hegemony project seek to forge a societal consensus that migration is a security risk and that integration policy should accordingly draw on assessment and control. This project has been discursively reframing and institutionally relocating education policies pertaining to (German) language development into the realm of integration policy. According to our data, not all actors associated with this segregative hegemony project are overtly or completely racist but may avail themselves of multicultural discourses, taking a seemingly more nuanced or unorthodox position.

A conservative member of the National Council problematized during our interview both the right-wing attitude that is intrinsically against migration and the left-wing attitude that is intrinsically in favor of it – a condition that allegedly renders a ‘sensible discussion’ impossible (I5). The same interviewee acknowledged that the political shift to the right is noticeable, especially regarding the fields of migration and integration, but at the same time deemed the ongoing centralization of integration policies through the ÖIF a positive development (I5). He furthermore noted that some migrant communities ‘have abused our law on associations’, that they import ‘politics from the countries of origin to Austria,’ and help build ‘a parallel society’ where they celebrate their ‘victimhood’ (I5). He noted that migrants must be provided with public integration infrastructure and

offers while stressing that ‘we cannot leave everyone outside [Austria], but we cannot let everyone in either’ (I5).

Compulsory kindergarten for all five-years-olds was introduced in 2010 in Austria and there have been attempts, from social-democratic as well as conservative and right-wing political actors, to extend the duration of compulsory kindergarten from one to two years. What is particular about the representatives of the segregative hegemony project, as most recently demonstrated by the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in 2017, is that they seek to reframe compulsory kindergarten as an integration measure targeted especially towards migrant children to teach them Austrian ‘values’ and the German language. Two federal officials working on educational concerns of minorities who gave a joint interview explained to us that language development has become of key importance in the kindergartens and has been moved from the jurisdiction of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research to the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration, and Foreign Affairs<sup>4</sup> (I10). The main goal of compulsory kindergarten is believed to be the assessment and enhancement of the German skills of children at an early age by means of a standardized instrument to assess children’s level of German proficiency (I10). The goal of the test is to ‘observe’ the child and establish whether he/she is able to correctly use verb-second word order and answer to w-questions (I10). The agenda of language development is complemented by a so-called ‘values brochure’ which was developed together with ÖIF to be implemented in Austrian kindergartens (I10). The brochure addresses issues related to democracy, participation, gender equality, and shall provide children with an understanding of the society’s ‘values’ (I10). Another federal official working on integration issues emphasized that the educational field is important especially for migrant pupils and that Austria had to make sure that the society functions (I14). The interviewee further pointed out that integration is a long-lasting process which, nevertheless, should be completed at one point without having to speak of a ‘third or fourth generation’ of migrants<sup>5</sup> (I14).

The federal officials pointed to a study by ÖIF which showed that an integrative model, i.e. teaching together with other children, is suitable if only a few migrant children in the class speak German as a second language or need to learn German from scratch when they arrive in Austria. However, they emphasized that if many children need German support, they should receive more intensive language support – and can therefore be separated from their peers if need be (I10). As a matter of fact, German support classes are formed at a school when there are more than eight ‘irregular’ students in a regular class who lack sufficient German skills.

To sum up, the segregative hegemony project is based on the view that integration should focus on cultural assimilation and that culture and language of the migrant children should be excluded from schools which legitimize segregation despite integration claims. This paradox might be linked to the paradox of neoliberal transformation connected to the liberal market economy and the need for human capital, on the one hand, and the ongoing processes of securitization and disciplining, on the other hand.

#### **6.4 Hegemony projects between demarcation and coalescence**

We observe that hegemony projects assert and construct themselves through self-demarcation from other competing projects. Thus, researching a hegemony project –

i.e. its discourses and practices, social forces driving it, and their strategies – often means listening to what they have to say about other hegemony projects. The relationship between projects competing over hegemony at the crossroads between integration and education policies is expectedly shaped by antagonisms. Actors from the integrative and multicultural projects have expressed stark opposition to the overall securitization of migration and integration and segregative integration measures directed at migrant children. They defended that German support classes interfere negatively with the best interests of children and youngsters and should therefore be abolished. They warned against the gradual dismantling of existing integration policies through budget cuts in recent years (I8) accompanied by what one interviewee called ‘anti-integration’ policies that have a disintegrative effect and serve to ‘push a social group to the fringe’ (I9). We observed an actor and her organization strategically repurpose a discriminatory integration measure (‘values course’) to a more inclusive measure (‘dialogue of values’) in order to bypass the federal pressure to assess and control migrants. A scholar whom we similarly associated with the integrative hegemony project made the prediction that the then federal government would seek to prevent that asylum applications can be lodged in Austria in the future, thus making integration redundant (I4). Another interviewee associated with the integrative hegemony project noted that the closer one moves toward the federal government, the more one is confronted with a political climate that is ‘integration hostile’ (I15), which has significant implications for children and youngsters who are responsabilized for their ‘own failures’ (I15). According to the interviewee, this notion of self-responsibility translates into tests, sanctions, and other segregative measures such as German support classes and leads to the replacement of integration by assimilationist policies (I15).

While antagonisms between the integrative and multicultural hegemony projects, on the one hand, and the segregative hegemony project, on the other hand, are obvious, those between the integrative and the multicultural hegemony projects are less obvious. Nevertheless, we observed differences in the quality and scope of the integrative hegemony project (tendency toward legally secured, universal rights, and redistributive politics) and the multicultural hegemony project (tendency toward project-based measures that celebrate diversity and multiculturalism). However, we did not observe any distinct discourse or strategy each project puts up against each other. This may result in the integrative hegemony project’s assimilation into the multicultural hegemony project which thus might feed into neoliberal tendencies of seeing children and their ‘diversity’ as an asset for the Austrian society. The multicultural and segregative hegemony projects had in common an orientation toward neoliberalism (e.g. measures oriented towards individuals) although they drew on different – liberal vs. authoritarian – interpretations of it.

Our research has also demonstrated that hegemony projects had occupied certain societal and institutional terrains for which our sample may not be representative but may give important clues about the reorganization of hegemony across different levels of governance. Three bureaucrats associated with the segregative hegemony project originated from the federal level, while bureaucrats associated with the integrative hegemony project originated from the municipality and province of Vienna and civil societal actors were mostly associated with the multicultural hegemony projects. Moreover, our study unearthed contradictions and conflicts of hegemony projects between the federal,

provincial, and CSO level which entail different power resources and responsibilities. Given Austria's weak federalism, the federal level has obviously more power – together with neoliberal forces which aim at generating 'human capital' at the expense of social equality – to push through its segregative project. However, other social forces have the power to discursively challenge this hegemony project, introduce practices of their own hegemony projects on the ground and prevent the segregative project – which in itself is paradoxical – to become hegemonic in Austria. Neoliberal economic forces moreover might be interested in a multicultural project in order to attract well-skilled migrants.

## 7. Conclusions

The starting point for this study was the remarkably inconsistent policy landscape in Austria regarding the integration policies in the field of education and the fact that anti-immigration policies since 2015 neither immediately nor fully translated into overall restrictive and exclusive integration measures in the field of education. We took interest in existing ambivalences using the concept of hegemony project as a heuristic tool. We interpreted the coexistence of redistributive and integrative measures with disintegrative and segregative measures as manifestations of competing hegemony projects pursued by a variety of social forces through various discursive and institutional strategies. Based on our interviews with experts, we identified three distinct sets of discourses and practices which we ideal-typically labeled as integrative, multicultural, and segregative hegemony projects. We observed that the integrative project acknowledges structural inequality faced by migrant children and seeks rights-based social redistribution. It has close ideological and institutional ties to the social democracy with its welfare-oriented policies and strategies. The multicultural hegemony project defended that diversity should be recognized and promoted, displaying a liberal interpretation of neoliberalism. The segregative hegemony project displayed elements of authoritarian neoliberalism but also elements peculiar to this project such as the institutional compulsion to assess migrant children's German proficiency. Our findings confirm recent research on the ongoing normalization of right-wing discourses and policies in the fields of migration and integration in Austria, but it also shows that these developments are being contested by actors and forces with opposing political agendas. The limited scope of our sample notwithstanding, we could associate specific hegemony projects with actors on specific levels of governance. The representatives of the segregative hegemony project were located at the federal level, while the actors associated with the integrative hegemony project were found on the municipal level in Vienna and the multicultural project among CSOs. We find that neoliberalism, though in different or even opposing ways, shimmers through the multicultural and segregative hegemony projects. In the multicultural hegemony project, neoliberalism expresses itself in more liberal ways in terms of a positive attitude toward 'difference' and 'diversity' considered as valuable assets for Austria, while in the segregative hegemony project, neoliberalism expresses itself in more authoritarian ways in terms of self-responsibility, surveillance, and punishment. The coexistence of multiple political projects competing over hegemony, as documented in this study, suggests that contradictions in political discourses and public policies shall be taken seriously for they do not only point to new or altered threats targeting



migrants and the society at large but also to existing political struggles and strategies to resist such threats.

## Notes

1. According to Statistik Austria (2015), the number of asylum seekers increased significantly between 2010 and 2015, to a peak of 88.340 in 2015.
2. Since 2015, however, there has been a significant year-on-year decline in the number of asylum applications. In 2019, a total of 12.886 asylum applications were filed in Austria (Statistik Austria 2019).
3. This article is based on empirical material collected within the framework of the project Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (MiCREATE) (grant agreement No 822664). The sampling was limited to actors in the narrow field of integration and education.
4. The Federal Minister for Women, Family, Integration and Media within the Chancellor's Office (*Bundeskanzleramt*) is currently responsible for the integration agenda. The Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration, and International Affairs has thus been renamed as the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs (*Bundesministerium für Europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten*).
5. The Compulsory Training Act of 2016 made further education or training after the completion of compulsory schooling mandatory for everyone who permanently resides in Austria and is under the age of 18.

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