

## **Comprehensive Education and Teachers' Unions**

Why comprehensive education has never been established in Austria:  
An analysis of Austrian vested interests.

## **Abstract**

Austria is among the very few European countries that have not established any form of comprehensive education. Despite three major reform attempts over the last century, a selective system that separates students into two tracks at the age of ten, remains. Several theories exist as to why these reform attempts have failed. This dissertation argues that these theories do not tell the whole story and considers the role of the Austrian teachers' unions in the failed reforms. Based on the theory of vested interests and fourteen interviews conducted with (former) union leaders and politicians, the unions' power structure, lobbying efforts, and resistance are analysed. This analysis shows that the unions are a strong force of resistance and a main reason for the failure of all three comprehensive education reform attempts. Particularly the powerful union for the higher track in the selective system, its strong influence within the conservative party and its ability to mobilise against comprehensive education, is a main reason why comprehensive education has never been introduced. The threat of diminished vested interests has made them resist all comprehensive ideas. In addition, the role of the union for compulsory schooling in advocating comprehensive education has been reluctant. Accordingly, because of the powerful and influential teachers' unions blocking or altering all reform attempts, even powerful and committed governments were not able to introduce comprehensive education in Austria.

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## 1 Introduction – Austria – an outlier?

Comprehensive education has always been one of the most controversial issues in education in Austria. In most other European countries, some form of comprehensive education was introduced already back in the 1960s and 1970s (Brunello et al., 2012; Budzinski, 1986). Even in Germany, one of the most reform-resistant countries, a diluted form of comprehensive schooling has been introduced in most *Länder* (states). This situation makes it even more perplexing as to why Austria remains so strongly opposed to this form of education. No substantial development has occurred concerning comprehensive education in Austria. Thus, it is one of the very few countries left in Europe without any serious form of comprehensive education and has maintained a strict two-track system with students being separated into two different types of school at the age of ten. The aim of this dissertation is to examine why it has been so difficult to reform the structure of the Austrian school system.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the era of comprehensive reforms in Europe, comprehensive education was regarded as the system most suitable to fulfil the promise of a democratic, equitable and modern education. Decades later, this promise of equity seems to be somewhat fulfilled (Green et al., 2006; Green & Wiborg, 2004; le Donné, 2014). Furthermore, comprehensive education was also seen as an opportunity to meet the rising demand for education and a better qualified workforce in the educational expansion of that era (Scheipl & Seel, 1988). That is why many countries decided to establish a non-selective system where all pupils attend the same type of school during the years of compulsory schooling, named comprehensive education.

As mentioned, Austria is an exception of this trend. Without any doubt comprehensive education is one of the most disputed and polarised policies in Austria. Nevertheless, three

attempts have been made to introduce comprehensive education over the last century. The first attempt took place in the interwar period, the second in the 1970s and 80s and the third started in 2007 and lasted until 2017. But all these reforms failed, with the selective system being maintained.

Scholars have put forward several theories as to why these comprehensive reforms have failed. First, Austria's historic conservatism is argued to be the main reason as to why comprehensive education has never been established (Scheipl & Seel, 1985, 1988). Secondly, it is argued that the political polarisation concerning comprehensive education between the two biggest parties, the conservative ÖVP (*Österreichische Volkspartei*) and the social-democratic SPÖ (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreich*) has impeded reforms on comprehensive lines (Gruber, 2018; Pultar, 2021b). Thirdly, the elevation of education laws to constitutional status in 1962 has made it difficult, if not impossible, to reform the structure of the Austrian school system (Engelbrecht, 2014; Pultar, 2021b). Fourthly, it is argued that, even though the SPÖ has officially been a proponent of comprehensive education, its role in ensuring this remains ambivalent (Gruber, 2018; Pultar, 2021b). Fifthly, the *Gymnasium*, the higher, more prestigious, and academic type of school in the two-track system, remains extremely popular (Mayrhofer et al., 2019; Nikolai & Edelstein, 2013). Finally, the federal structure of the political system is seen as a hindrance of pushing through reforms.

While these explanations have contributed to our understanding of why comprehensive education has never been implemented in Austria, I argue that they do not tell the whole story. Austrian teachers' unions, their power and influence on education policy-making are a factor that has only been mentioned peripherally by the above scholars (Gruber, 2018; Pultar, 2021b) but which, as I argue in this dissertation, provides an even stronger explanation as to why the selective two-track system still exists. By examining their lobby activities regarding

comprehensive school reforms in this dissertation, I demonstrate that they have played a vital role in the failed reforms.

As Moe and Wiborg (2016) state in their foundational book on teachers' unions, assessing the power and influence of teachers' unions is crucial to understand a country's education system, its history, its distinct characteristics, and its outcomes. Although Austrian teachers' unions are often said to be highly influential and powerful they have rarely been studied academically as political actors (Pultar, 2021a; Stadler, 2021). Thus, investigating union actors and their interests, powers, division of power, and influence on parties and policies (Moe & Wiborg, 2016) is essential for understanding why comprehensive education has never been introduced in Austria.

This is exactly what this dissertation sets out to do. The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the role of Austrian teachers' unions when governments attempted to introduce comprehensive education. In doing so, the strength of the existing theories about the failed comprehensive reforms in Austria will be discussed and complemented by a new explanation, the role of Austrian teachers' unions in blocking reforms. To achieve this aim, the remainder of the dissertation is structured as follows.

Chapter 2 starts with describing the outcome of interest in more detail: the three failed reforms, the current structure of the Austrian education system and the existing theories as to why the reforms have failed. Chapter 3 outlines the theory of vested interests in education policy and how it will be employed in this analysis. Furthermore, it will describe the role of teachers' unions in comprehensive education reforms in four selected European countries in order to draw conclusions about the behaviour of teachers' unions in Austria. Chapter 4 describes the methodology and data used in the empirical part of the dissertation. It is based

on the method of explaining-outcome process-tracing and interviews with (former) politicians and union leaders. Chapter 5 investigates the first comprehensive reform attempt in the 1920s. Even though today's teachers' unions did not exist at that time, the role of teachers' associations will be examined. Chapter 6 then investigates the second big attempt to establish comprehensive education in the 1970s and 80s. In chapter 7, the role of the teachers' unions in the most recent comprehensive reform attempt from 2007-2017 will be examined thoroughly. In this chapter the power, influence and decisive role of the unions will be described in most detail. Finally, this dissertation concludes by summarising the core findings.

## **2 The outcome of interest**

All three major reform attempts to establish comprehensive education in Austria did not achieve their goal but resulted in the selective system being maintained or sometimes even strengthened. Therefore, the Austrian education system is an outlier in Europe. In the following, I will describe the three failed reforms, the existing education system, and the established theories on why there is no comprehensive education in Austria in more detail.

### **2.1 Three failed comprehensive reform attempts**

The first attempt to introduce comprehensive education took place in the interwar period, an era of school reformism in Austria (Engelbrecht, 1988). At that time, a tripartite system existed at lower secondary level following four years of comprehensive primary schooling (Fischl, 1950; Scheipl & Seel, 1985). The "upper stage" of the primary school (*Obervolksschule*) and the so called "citizens' school" (*Bürgerschule*) constituted the lower, non-academic tracks. The middle schools (*Mittelschulen*) were the higher, more academic track which also led to higher education. According to Achs and Krassnigg (1974), more than 90 % of all students attended one of the two lower tracks before 1918. In the years following 1919, Otto Glöckel, a social

democrat and Austria's first Minister of Education under a republic democracy, tried to unify this selective, tripartite system (Göttlicher & Stipsits, 2015; Pfeiffle, 1985). He envisioned a single, comprehensive track until the age of 14, called *Einheitsschule* (unity-school) (Glöckel, 1916). Glöckel first fought to implement comprehensive education during his short time as Minister of Education, but failed to do so when the coalition broke in 1920 and the social democrats lost their power in government (Achs, 1985). His second and longer fight for comprehensive schooling was as president of Vienna's local school authority. Even though Glöckel and the social democrats managed to establish several comprehensive trial-schools in Vienna, they failed to establish a permanent comprehensive system. The school reform era of the 1920s ended with a political compromise that replaced the *Bürgerschule* by establishing a new type of school, the *Hauptschule*, along the ideas of Otto Glöckel but maintained the middle schools (later *Gymnasium*) as a selective, higher track (Engelbrecht, 1988; Scheipl & Seel, 1985). Thus, a decade-long attempt to introduce comprehensive education failed with a selective two-tracks system, the *Hauptschule* and the *Gymnasium*, being maintained and strengthened.

The second attempt to introduce comprehensive education occurred at the pinnacle of the social democrats' power in the 1970s and 80s (Budzinski, 1986; Scheipl & Seel, 1988). The SPÖ reclaimed a parliamentary majority in 1970 and even enjoyed an absolute majority in parliament from 1971 until 1983. Based on the proposals of a reform commission that was established even in 1969, the social democrats tried to bring about structural change with the goal of abolishing the selective system (Scheipl & Seel, 1988). These years were characterized by various school trials which all aimed at to establish comprehensive schooling by integrating the two tracks, the *Gymnasium* and the *Hauptschule* (Sauer, 1980). The former third track of the system, the "upper stage" of primary schooling had only been relevant in sparsely

populated rural areas and was gradually phased out. Despite their power and the positive feedback from the comprehensive school experiments (Gruber, 2015), the absolute majority government of the SPÖ failed to implement a long-lasting comprehensive system (Engelbrecht, 2014). They did not manage to incorporate the school trials into the standard school system, with most of them ending in 1982 (Budzinski, 1986). Pelinka (1985, p. 32) calls the SPÖ's failure in establishing comprehensive education during these years "[...] particularly remarkable, particularly provocative", especially in the light of the SPÖ having gained an absolute majority in three consecutive national elections. However, also this second comprehensive reform attempt by the SPÖ failed to introduce a comprehensive education system.

The third reform attempt started with the campaign for the national elections in 2006 (Pultar, 2021b). Following two decades of comprehensive education taking a political back seat, the SPÖ announced it as a key focus of this campaign (SPÖ, 2006). After winning the elections and the re-elections in 2008, the SPÖ was able to appoint the Minister of Education and put forward their plans for a comprehensive education system. An expert-commission which was established by the new Minister of Education once more proposed the unification of the two-track system (ExpertInnenkommission, 2007, 2008). The SPÖ-ÖVP coalition introduced a new type of school, the *Neue Mittelschule (NMS)*, again as a trial (Petrovic & Svecnik, 2015). The NMS was meant to be a non-selective school with the goal of unifying the *Gymnasium* and the *Hauptschule* by closer cooperation, especially between teachers. However, very few *Gymnasien* participated in the school trials with less than 3 % of the *NMS* being *Gymnasien* in 2011 (Eidenberger & Sandberger, 2012). Hence, the initial idea of establishing a new, unified school type resulted only in a reform of the lower track, the *Hauptschule* (Eder et al., 2015). So, the third reform phase failed to establish comprehensive education and ended in 2017

with the two-track system of the *Gymnasium* and the *NMS* just as separated as before. As a result of these three failed reforms, the Austrian education system has structurally remained mostly unchanged and is organised as follows.

## **2.2 The Austrian education system**

The bipartite education system is based on four years of primary schooling. These four years are sometimes characterised as the only comprehensive type of school in Austria because public primary schools are not selective. Thus, the composition of the student body is expected to be heterogeneous, in terms of ethnicity, first-language, socio-economic background and performance. For most primary schools, fixed local catchment areas determine the allocation of pupils which makes residential segregation the decisive factor for school segregation (Biedermann et al., 2016). But, in some cities such as the capital, Vienna, and Austria's third biggest city, Linz, school choice was increased which resulted in increased segregation (Altrichter et al., 2011; Biedermann et al., 2016). So even though primary schooling is set up as comprehensive schooling, segregation is increasingly pronounced even at that level. It is important to highlight this phenomenon since it has consequences for the next step of the system. At the end of the four years of primary schooling, at the age of 10, children get selected into two different tracks, the *Gymnasium* and the *Mittelschule* (formerly *Neue Mittelschule (NMS)* and before that *Hauptschule*). This selection is formally based on the marks that pupils receive from their class teacher in their last year of primary schooling.

The *Gymnasium*, also called *AHS (Allgemeinbildende höhere Schule)*, is the selective, higher, more academic, and more prestigious school in the tracked system. It takes eight years and ends with an important school leaving exam, the *Matura*, which creates the possibility to enter university and other forms of higher education. In Austria's federal structure with a federal

government and nine *Länder* governments, the competences for education policy are shared (Schratz, 2012). All higher schools, the *Gymnasium* and the later described higher vocational schools, are the legal responsibility of the federal state. It is also the federal state who employs all higher school teachers. These teachers, especially the *Gymnasium* teachers, undisputedly enjoy a higher reputation, status and often better working conditions. The result of this is a rather pronounced profession-consciousness in relation to *Mittelschul*-teachers (Pultar, 2021b).

The *Mittelschule* is the non-selective, lower, less academic, and less popular type of school. Together with primary schools, it forms what is called “compulsory schools”, APS (*Allgemeine Pflichtschulen*), meaning that they cannot select or reject any of their students. The *Mittelschule* takes four years and ends without any exam or certificate. Compulsory schools are, in most aspects, under the jurisdiction of the *Länder*. Accordingly, compulsory school teachers are employed by the nine *Länder*. Lassnig (2016) describes these shared jurisdictions with many administrative organisations running parallel at different levels as a broken bureaucratic structure. The employment of compulsory school teachers is exemplary of this with the *Länder* being the employers but having to get it funded by the federal state. This leads to permanent contentions between the *Länder* and the state (Lassnig, 2016). Previous to the introduction of the new service law in 2013 these various employer plans resulted in different salary schemes, especially between higher and compulsory school teachers but also between compulsory school teachers in different *Länder* (Eder et al., 2007; *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, 2013).

Overall, in Austria, around 60 % of students at lower secondary level attend the *Mittelschule* before moving to higher secondary schooling, starting an apprenticeship or work. In contrast, in Vienna, less than 50% of pupils attend the *Mittelschule* with the majority going to the

*Gymnasium*. (Mayrhofer et al., 2019; Statistik Austria, 2021). This urban-rural gap is an important fact to consider when talking about comprehensive education in Austria. In some rural areas, the *Mittelschule* already serves as a quasi-comprehensive school since the nearest *Gymnasium* is too far away even for those students who would have the grades to get in. In most urban areas, on the other hand, the pressure on the *Gymnasium* is increasing with the *Mittelschule* being a school that hardly anyone wants to go to. In short, at lower secondary level, between the age of 10 to 14, students get selected into two fundamentally different types of school, in terms of social composition, prestige and opportunities later in life.

There is a strong notion in Austrian society that this selection occurs on the basis of ability, intelligence and performance. That view is widespread and often used by proponents of a supposedly meritocratic, tracked system (APA, 2012). However, national statistics show that the selection takes place more along the lines of the parent's education, socio-economic background, ethnicity and native language (Oberwimmer et al., 2019). Thus, if two students have the same score on a standardised test, the one from an academic household is three times as likely to go to the *Gymnasium* than the one whose parents only finished compulsory schooling (Mayrhofer et al., 2019). Two-thirds of the social segregation between the two school types can be explained by non-performance-related effects, so-called secondary effects (Oberwimmer et al., 2019; Weber et al., 2019).

The differentiation between primary and secondary effects was introduced by Boudon (1974). *Primary effects* is a term meant to explain differences in competencies, knowledge, and performance of pupils from different socio-economic groups, such as when children with an academic background perform better in school because their parents have the means to support them more or can offer them wide-ranging extra-curricular activities (El-Maafalani, 2020). Primary effects cause inequalities when children from socio-economically

disadvantaged families go to the lower track more often because of lower performance. *Secondary effects* describe different decisions of various socio-economic groups, such as in the choice of school, even when performances are the same. In a comprehensive system, parents do not have to make many choices. But, in a tracked system inequalities are created by secondary effects when children from socio-economically poorer groups attend the lower track more often, even if their performances are equal to the ones from academic children.

In Austria's system, a large proportion of the socio-economic segregation between the *Gymnasium* and the *Mittelschule* is caused by secondary effects. Thus, the socio-economic composition of the student bodies in the two types of school is vastly different (Mayrhofer et al., 2019). As a result, Austria has, compared to other European countries, a high inequality of opportunity, measured as the influence of socio-economic status on educational attainment (Green et al., 2006; OECD, 2019). Put differently, social, and educational mobility is limited because of the tracked system at lower secondary level.

After the age of 14, upper secondary schooling is extremely fragmented. Both the *Mittelschule* and the lower part of the *Gymnasium* feed into higher secondary schools. There are numerous different versions of the upper part of the *Gymnasium*, some focusing on languages, others on science and maths. Next to higher secondary schooling in the *Gymnasium*, there are various higher vocational schools, also concluding with the *Matura*, which also offer specific training such as engineering or computer science. These higher vocational schools receive their students in an equal share from the *Gymnasium* and the *Mittelschule*. The share of pupils attending upper secondary schooling in a *Gymnasium* after having been to a *Mittelschule* is below 10% (Mayrhofer et al., 2019). Next to these higher vocational schools, there are also three-year long lower vocational schools. Essential to note are also the vocational colleges

where students complete an apprenticeship. These schools receive their students almost exclusively from the *Mittelschule*.

To sum up, the most debated and controversial aspect of schooling in Austria is the tracked system at lower secondary level. All debates about comprehensive education focus on unifying the years of schooling between the age of 10 and 14. So why has comprehensive education never been introduced?

### **2.3 Established theories on why there is no comprehensive education**

Even though academic literature on Austrian education policy is scarce, a few authors (Budzinski, 1986; Engelbrecht, 2014; Gruber, 2006, 2018; Pultar, 2021b) have developed theories as to why there is no comprehensive education in Austria despite three successive attempts. Some of these theories are similar to theories of the Germany case (Ertl & Phillips, 2000; Heidenheimer, 1974; Robinsohn & Kuhlmann, 1967; Thum, 2012; Wiborg, 2010), others highlight special Austrian characteristics.

#### **2.3.1 Conservatism**

The conservative theory holds that Austria's conservative and hierarchical conception of society and politics, which was predominant for a long time and has its roots in the monarchy, is the root of the tracked system (Engelbrecht, 2014; Scheipl & Seel, 1985, 1988). In 1774, the first foundational education law established a national education system. Three types of elementary schools, the *Trivialschule*, the *Hauptschule* and the *Normalschule*, were introduced. Each of these schools was designed to serve its own social class with the *Trivialschule* being the lowest and the *Normalschule* the highest elementary school (Scheipl & Seel, 1985). Next to these elementary schools, higher secondary schools, the Latin *Gymnasien*, served the upper classes. In the following years, Emperor Joseph II. wanted to connect the

elementary schools and secondary schools, but failed to do so because *Gymnasium* representatives and teachers were strongly opposed to such ideas (Engelbrecht, 2014). To meet the rising demand for better qualified workers, a new type of school, the *Realschule*, was introduced in 1805. The *Realschule* was intended to link the three elementary schools with the *Gymnasium* but evolved to be a secondary school, parallel to the *Gymnasium* (Scheipl & Seel, 1985). Several attempts to unify the lower stages of the *Realschule* and the *Gymnasium* failed, just as connecting the elementary schools with the *Gymnasium* was impossible (Engelbrecht, 2014). The power, influence, and class consciousness of the upper classes in the *Gymnasium* was too strong.

The revolution of 1848, which aimed at a more liberal and democratic society, brought some years of liberal education policy (Scheipl & Seel, 1985). However, Scheipl and Seel (1985) argue that this liberal movement must be characterised as bourgeois liberalism. It was the bourgeoisie and the upper classes that demanded a liberal reform of their schools, which is why secondary schools were reformed more than elementary schools. Hence, the *Gymnasium* was strengthened in its role as an eight-year long elitist school. The *Realschule*, which was connected more closely to the elementary schools, was changed to a six-year secondary school, running parallel to the *Gymnasium* (Engelbrecht, 2014). In contrast to Scandinavia, where liberal movements were expedited by peasants and working classes (Wiborg, 2004), Austrian liberal education policy did not result in a more egalitarian system.

Another surge of political liberalism after 1866 then led to a reform of elementary schooling. All three elementary schools were unified to one comprehensive four-year primary school. This new comprehensive primary school fed into the *Realschule* and the also newly founded, and above-mentioned, *Bürgerschule* which was established for the lower classes (Scheipl & Seel, 1985). Even though the system could be characterised as a ladder system with the

primary school, the *Bürgerschule*, the *Realschule* and the *Gymnasium*, unification never took place, with reforms almost always leading to further fragmentation and selection.

Scheipl and Seel (1985) argue that this fragmentation was the manifestation of a distinct class consciousness, a conservative conception of who is allowed to go to school with whom and a result of the power of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. They say that *“the monarchic principle of super- and subordinating with the acknowledgement of privileges that are based on being born aristocratic [...] unquestionably shaped the existence of schooling”* (Scheipl & Seel, 1985, p. 63, my translation). Hence, this theory postulates that the special role of the *Gymnasium* and the reasons behind a selective system are based in a conservative notion of education rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **2.3.2 Political polarisation**

Another often voiced reason for the absence of comprehensive education are the ÖVP and SPÖ’s fundamentally different views on education and their opposite political stances on comprehensive education (Budzinski, 1986; Gruber, 2018; Pultar, 2021b). While the ÖVP is categorically opposed to comprehensive education, the SPÖ has always been a proponent. This polarisation is rooted in the reform attempt of the 1920s, when the general political climate and particularly debates around education were extremely heated. But the issue remained contentious after the Second World War. As described by Pultar (2021b), Austrian politics in the decades following 1945, dominated by the ÖVP and SPÖ, can be characterised as consensus- and negotiation-oriented but *“among the few issues challenging this political settlement and regularly flaring up controversy was the question of educational selection [...]”* (Pultar, 2021b, p. 4). Even though a strong corporate, consensus-oriented system emerged, the issue of comprehensive education was too ideologically laden to find an agreement, let alone a compromise (Gruber, 2018). Hence, this theory claims that because of comprehensive

education being mostly debated on ideological terms between the ÖVP and the SPÖ, real progress and reform was impeded (Budzinski, 1986; Gruber, 2018). However, the two parties had tried to settle their disagreements concerning education policy in 1962.

### **2.3.3 Constitutional barriers**

One reason that is mentioned by all scholars are the education laws of 1962 (Budzinski, 1986; Engelbrecht, 2014; Gruber, 2018; Pultar, 2021b; Scheipl & Seel, 1988). These scholars argue that the education system was made almost immutable by elevating education laws into constitutional status. This meant that all new education laws and reforms then needed a two-thirds majority in parliament to be passed. It was the SPÖ that urged this in 1962, out of fear that a simple conservative majority could change the education system to the worse (Scheipl & Seel, 1988). Both parties mistrusted each other concerning education so much that blocking each other from making unilateral reforms seemed to be the best option (Pultar, 2021b; Scheipl & Seel, 1988). Furthermore, Budzinski (1986, p. 290) describes this *“ruling as a sign of Austria's fear of uncertainty, its neurotic desire for predictability, and evidence that schooling in Austria is a static and legally inaugurated process.”* Thus, abolishing the early selection and establishing comprehensive education would have required bipartisan support from the ÖVP and the SPÖ to get the two-thirds majority in parliament. Considering the political polarisation regarding the issue, this seemed unlikely. The two-thirds rule was loosened in the early 2000s and most education laws can now be changed by a simple majority (Pultar, 2021b). However, some form of selection at lower secondary level still has constitutional status, with the constitution stating: *“The legislature has to provide a differentiated school system [...] whereby an appropriate further differentiation has to be provided at secondary schooling” (Article 14 (6a) B-VG, 2019 my translation).* Overall, this theory argues that the historical requirement of

a two-thirds majority for introducing comprehensive education has preserved the status quo of the tracked system.

#### **2.3.4 Ambivalent social democrats**

Budzinski (1986), Gruber (2018) and Pultar (2021b) argue, that the role of the SPÖ is somewhat paradoxical and ambivalent regarding their supposed endorsement of comprehensive education. Officially, comprehensive education had been in the SPÖ's programme since the 1920s (Adam, 1983). Furthermore, the SPÖ held an absolute majority during the years in which the comprehensive reform movement peaked Europe-wide and appointed the Minister of Education until the mid-1990s. But the SPÖ seldom made comprehensive education a priority and never a condition sine-qua-non for a coalition, nor did it use its power in the 1970s and 80s. Pultar (2021b) reasons that the SPÖ's reluctance to introduce comprehensive education is rooted more deeply than just being constrained by the two-thirds barrier. She argues that, even though it is the party's official political line, internal support and mobilisation is weak. In addition, it remains a risky policy to push within its electorate. This may come from the SPÖ and its electorate benefitting from the *Gymnasium* personally.

#### **2.3.5 Popularity of the *Gymnasium***

Another reason raised for why there is no comprehensive education is the unquestioned popularity of the *Gymnasium* (Gruber, 2015, 2018). Especially among the more privileged and influential bourgeoisie in urban areas, the *Bildungsbürgertum*, this type of school enjoys ever-increasing approval (Mayrhofer et al., 2019). As Edelstein and Nikolai (2013) argue for Germany, the economically and politically powerful *Bildungsbürgertum* profits from the status-reproducing effects of the selective system and is therefore an obstacle to reform. Gruber (2015, 2018) reasons that the situation in Austria is similar. He claims that the more

affluent middle-classes do not want to give up their privileged position of sending their children to the *Gymnasium*. According to him and Pultar (2021b), the affluent urban middle classes actually appreciate the early selection which ensures that their own children will not go to school with working class or migrant children. Hence, the theory claims that the popularity of the *Gymnasium* among this politically influential and important social class obstructs comprehensive reforms.

### **2.3.6 Federalism**

Lastly, the federal system with the shared jurisdiction between the *Länder* and the state is seen as hindering education reforms in general but also the introduction of a unified system (Lassnig, 2016; Pultar, 2021b; Schratz, 2012). The shared responsibilities and power give all entities concerned the influence to pursue their own interests. Considering that the nine *Länder* are responsible for primary schooling and the *Mittelschule*, and are the employers of these teachers, their interests often contradict the national state's interests. Schratz (2012) argues that systemic changes are dependent on balancing those different interests, which reveals disadvantages in policy making: *"The weakness of the dominant policy culture lies in the difficulty of developing cohesive reform initiatives, which makes widespread sustainable change difficult"* (Schratz, 2012, p. 98). Furthermore, he claims that education policy failure can be attributed to the paradox of centralised thinking about education policy and top-down reform attempts but the special interests of the *Länder* then undermining those reforms. In addition, Lassnig (2016) argues that the different political majorities in the *Länder* and hence the varying levels of willingness to enact certain education policies further undermine national reforms and their implementation. In summary, these scholars argue that the complex, shared jurisdiction where neither the *Länder* nor the national government can establish fundamental

reforms without the other also maintains the status quo and forestalls the implementation of comprehensive education.

In brief, the outcome that this dissertation sets out to explain are the three failed comprehensive reform attempts and the resulting tracked system at lower secondary level. There are already reasonable and coherent theories of how this outcome came into being. But I claim that they fail to consider one vital aspect, the role of Austrian teachers' unions acting as powerful vested interest.

### **3 Vested interests**

I argue that there is an additional layer which has not been recognised and examined in depth but is crucial for understanding why there is no comprehensive education in Austria: Austrian teachers' unions. I claim that the strong vested interests of Austrian teachers' unions are a main reason why all three reform attempts failed and why therefore comprehensive education does not exist in Austria. Teachers' unions, especially in Europe, have rarely been studied in a coherent framework as political actors. This changed with Moe's (2011, 2015) introduction of the framework of vested interests and Moe and Wiborg (2016) applying it to study the power, behaviour, and influence of teachers' unions in several countries.

#### **3.1 The theory of vested interests**

Vested interests exist in all domains of policy and must be thoroughly studied in order to understand and explain the outcome of public systems and policies. Usually, the term vested interests is used to describe special interests of powerful businesses and economic lobbying groups. But Moe (2015) and Wiborg (2016) argue that vested interests exist in all fields of public policy, whether in the public healthcare sector, the environmental industry or social policy. All these institutions and policies create vested interests. Even though it may in some

respects be a negatively used term to describe secretive interests, the theory of vested interests should be used analytically and neutrally to investigate public policy and power distributions (Moe & Wiborg, 2016).

In the following, the expression “vested interests” will be used synonymously to characterise groups and institutions but also the interests of those groups and institutions. There is no final definition of what vested interests are. However, they incorporate several particular characteristics (Moe, 2011, 2015; Moe & Wiborg, 2016). Vested interests are groups that have special interests in a current system and directly gain (material) benefits from that very system. Thus, vested interests have great incentives to preserve the existing system and to use their power to keep it as one that benefits them. Importantly, what distinguishes vested interests from other interest groups that also have special interests in systems is that *“they arise from the very institutions whose stability and change we want to explain.”* (Moe, 2015, p. 287). This means that vested interests are created by the institutions they have interests in and that they either want to maintain or sometimes even reform it. Their organisation and their survival depend on these institutions and policies. Because of vested interests using their power to maintain their benefits and to prevent reforms that could possibly threaten those benefits, stability is the norm in systems with strong vested interests.

As Moe (2015) depicts, stability is the usual state of most institutions. He argues that even though change and reform may be more exciting to investigate, resistance to reforms and the often-resulting stability must be studied to comprehend the development of institutions and policies. Assessing vested interests’ behaviour and power is crucial to understand and explain the stability of institutions and systems. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to conceive how they could be changed. To reform systems, politicians do not only need to have and exert power, but they must overcome the immense power of vested interests working against them.

Hence, the tendency of institutions and systems of being stable comes from the systems themselves, often by creating strong vested interests. While not all vested interests are powerful enough to block reforms that threaten their benefits, those that are certainly create stability in institutions.

Assessing education policies in the United States over a time span of more than 20 years, Finger (2018) finds that vested interests focus on strongly opposing those policies that threaten them the most organisationally. Furthermore, vested interests sometimes even want to maintain poorly run systems because they benefit from them. That is, the possible improvements of a reform are uncertain or not as appealing as the current state and therefore opposed (Moe, 2015). In doing so, vested interests can, according to Beyers et al. (2008), be a threat to more all-encompassing general interests. By using their power to enforce their, often sectional, interests, well-organised vested interests can supplant the interests of the less organised, more diffuse public. Consequently, the vested interests' resistance to reforms that could threaten their benefits and their strong incentives to maintain an existing system explain why change is rare and incremental in systems where vested interests are powerful.

Importantly, veto points play a crucial part in vested interests being powerful and influential (Beyers et al., 2008; Immergut, 1992; Moe, 2016). The more veto points there are in a system, the better for vested interests. If a reform is introduced by politicians, vested interests must only win at one of the veto points to block that reform. The more possibilities they have to block a reform, the more likely it is they succeed. Put differently, the fewer veto points there are, the greater the government's power and ability to carry out fundamental reforms and change institutions. In their book, Moe and Wiborg (2016) argue that veto points not only constrain the power of governments to implement radical reforms, but also lessen their commitment to even try to introduce them. Thus, a system with many veto points gives much

power to vested interests, removes power from the government, and in addition lowers the government's strive and commitment for reforms. Importantly, systems of multi-level governance and corporate structures increase the number of veto points (Beyers et al., 2008). Federal systems like Germany or Austria, with shared jurisdiction between the state and the *Länder* entail veto points at both levels and thus create many opportunities for vested interests to influence and block policies. Furthermore, extensive corporate structures, like in Austria (Siaroff, 1999), often provide vested interests with official veto points at all levels.

If a reform does get implemented, the role of the old vested interests changes and new vested interests are created (Moe, 2015). On the one hand, the old vested interests do not cease to exist. Even after the reform has been implemented, they will still try to enforce their interests and extend their benefits. Therefore, a reform must be well established and stable in order to survive the continuing fight of the old vested interests. Hence, even if a reform is successful in the short run, it may not be successful in the long run because of the old vested interests still working against it. On the other hand, the old vested interests change their tactics. Rather than working against change, they now become proponents of change in order to get the previous, more beneficial system back. The new vested interests that are created by the new system may have contradictory interests to them.

One more particularly important aspect, especially when analysing the behaviour of the Austrian teachers' union for compulsory schooling, is the changed role of vested interests when existing institutions do not benefit them anymore (Moe, 2015). Vested interests tend to demand change and become proponents of reforms if an existing system, that had previously benefitted them, does not do so anymore. Differently put, if vested interests see their benefits extended through a reform, they become supporters of that reform.

In summary, vested interests are created by public institutions and policies, gain (material) benefits from an existing system, use their power to defend and extend them and therefore often block reforms that could potentially change the existing system and their benefits.

### **3.2 Vested interests in education policy**

In the field of education policy, several different vested interests exist and play an important role (Moe & Wiborg, 2016).

Clearly, parents and children have vested interests in education. They have an interest in high-quality and well running schools that offer them good education and open opportunities in life. In Austria for example students organise themselves in student councils and even have a national student representative. Parents are organised in associations too. Even though these vested interests exist, they normally remain weak because they are too dispersed and lack resources and veto points to influence reforms.

Furthermore, private school providers and often the church have vested interests in education policy. These vested interests have certainly been influential, especially the church, in most European countries. While the church's influence has been declining in most countries, private school providers face the issue of dispersed interests and organisational barriers.

Lastly, local school authorities, local governments, the bureaucracy and of course teachers have vested interests in education. The interests of the former also clearly well-running and cost-efficient schools but also incorporate the vested interests of state officials and civil servants in their jobs, salaries and authority. Besides the bureaucracy and governments, the vested interests of teachers are justifiably the most well organised and most powerful ones in education policy: the teachers' unions (Moe & Wiborg, 2016).

### **3.3 Teachers' unions as vested interests**

Teachers' unions have vested interests in the jobs, job security, working conditions, salaries, pensions and further (material) benefits of their members. Standing up for these interests, increasing the benefits and fighting against reductions, is the inherent job of teachers' unions. They are committed to their members, their members' interests and try to enforce them (Moe & Wiborg, 2016). Crucially to state is that these are not the only interests teachers, especially individual teachers, have. It goes without saying that teachers have altruistic and non-material interests. But the unions as organisations that were founded to enforce collective (material) interests, have the above-mentioned vested interests in jobs, salaries and working conditions. As unions it is their duty to defend and enlarge them.

However, contradictions arise, and conflicts of interests develop when vested interests, here teachers' unions, enforce their interests. That is, the vested interests of teachers do not always correspond with the vested interests of parents, children, or other groups and institutions (Henderson et al., 2004; Moe, 2015). What is considered to be high-quality education policy and good for schools from the teachers' unions' point of view may be seen differently by parents, children, or the bureaucracy. Equating good education policy with the vested interests of only one of those groups or institutions is therefore difficult and misleading. Different perspectives on and consequences of teacher unionism are debated in the book of Henderson et al. (2004). Henderson (2004) states that even though teachers' unions are authentically interested in educational reform, their concern is limited by the fear of change minimising their benefits. Johnson (2004) introduces the concept of the paralysis perspective and the possibilities perspective. The paralysis perspective postulates that the behaviour of teachers' unions is motivated by self-interests and opposing reforms. The possibility perspective, on the other hand, recognizes that some union actions are motivated

by self-interests but states that others truly seek to improve the education system and schools. The tension between action that is driven by self-interests and more selfless behaviour for the students and schools is elaborated also by Murray (2004) and Koppich (2006) who calls this “new unionism”. Another conception that distinguishes between industrial bargaining and reform bargaining is established by Johnson and Kardos (2000). Industrial bargaining which originates in the 1960s describes union negotiations that focus only on job, salaries and working conditions. With that, they argue, the status quo of schooling is maintained and reforms aiming at improving schools for students often fail. In consequence, Johnson and Kardos (2000) argue, administrators and politicians tend to circumvent negotiations with the unions, being tired of the stagnation and blocking. Reform bargaining instead builds on the notion that negotiations between the unions and the administration are not a zero-sum game and that both have a shared interest in improving schools. They acknowledge that this is hard and requires going beyond the usual topics of union negotiations and union interests (Johnson & Kardos, 2000).

Seldomly do these models of unionism exist in their pure form. On the one hand, teachers’ unions do strive for reforms that improve schooling. On the other hand, as vested interests, the interests in jobs, salaries, working hours and benefits will always play the major role in negotiations. This is also why conflicts of interests, fighting over which part to focus on more, also emerge within the unions (Johnson & Kardos, 2000).

Anyhow, one should focus on the fundamental analytical point for the rest of this dissertation. Teachers’ unions are vested interests in education systems. They have vested interests in their members’ jobs, salaries and (material) benefits. Being well organised, using veto points, and making use of their informal power, teachers’ unions try to extend their existing benefits and block reforms that could harm them. The theory of vested interests in education policy gives

us the appropriate analytical framework to investigate the role of teachers' unions in education systems, policy, and comprehensive education reforms.

Comprehensive education reforms have been a struggle in many countries. Teachers' unions have played a crucial role in blocking, postponing or diluting comprehensive reforms in several countries. Therefore, I will describe how teachers' unions behaved in comprehensive education reforms in four selected European countries. We can draw conclusions from these examples about how Austrian teachers' unions might behave in a similar situation, acting as vested interests.

### **3.4 Teachers' unions as vested interests in comprehensive education reforms: four examples**

#### **3.4.1 England**

Throughout most of the twentieth century, England's teachers' unions were powerful and played a central role in education policy (Stevenson, 2014, 2015; Wiborg, 2016a). This was especially true for the implementation of comprehensive education.

In 1965, the Labour government introduced a reform that aimed at ending the early selection by replacing the tripartite system with comprehensive education (Wiborg, 2016a). To do this, the government issued a circular requesting the responsible local school authorities to reform their education systems along comprehensive lines. At that time, local authorities, the Department for Education, and the unions formed a social partnership, also called the "iron triangle" (Wiborg, 2016a). However, since the circular only requested, rather than required the local authorities to change their system, they maintained their power and autonomy (Wiborg, 2017). The optional nature of the reform has often been considered as an indicator of the Labour government's weak commitment to unify the tripartite system and as the reason

why comprehensive education has never been established nationwide (Ball, 2008; Chitty, 2014). But Wiborg (2017) argues that the power of England's teachers' unions and local authorities was the real reason for why this reform was diluted. The unions opposed the circular from the start and used their power within the Department for Education to block and slow down the reform. Being part of many committees and councils within the Department gave them the influence to do this. Having their vested interests tied to the existence and survival of their own type of school in the tripartite system, the unions feared losing benefits, jobs, and special salary schemes if the system was being unified. Furthermore, the highly competitive union landscape (Stevenson, 2015) meant that unions, especially the biggest union, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), feared losing their distinct member base by a unification of the system and thus power (Wiborg, 2017). The vested interests' resistance through the committees and boards within the Department for Education resulted in a compromise: a weakened circular. Because of this compromise the old structures could be maintained or recreated. Many local authorities established comprehensive schooling, if at all, very slowly. Others simply re-labelled their schools while maintaining the selective nature of the system and recreating old structures such as teachers' salary gaps (Wiborg, 2017). The teachers' unions only accepted and tried to benefit from the diluted reform when they realised that they could no longer prevent it. That is why Wiborg (2017, p. 402) argues that *"The slow and patchy development of comprehensive education in England lies in the capacity of organised interests to hinder or shape its progress in line with their own interests."* Thus, the vested interests and resistance of teachers' unions are a main reason why comprehensive education has never been established nationwide in England.

The unions' power and influence changed dramatically when the Conservatives obtained governmental power in 1979. From the early 1980s, a raft of market-oriented reforms and

increased centralised governance fundamentally changed the education system. Consequently, the power of the local authorities and the unions drastically decreased. The unions have largely been excluded formally and informally from governance and negotiations ever since, even by New Labour (1997-2007) (Wiborg, 2016a, 2017). Weakened vested interests, abolished veto points, and centralisation paved the way for even more extensive implementation of market-oriented reforms, such as accountability measures, high stakes testing, flexible forms of teacher training and academy schools (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018; Hatcher, 2011; Keller, 2005; Olmedo et al., 2013). Even though the unions opposed all those policies, they could not stop them. Accordingly, since the 1980s, England exemplifies a system with few veto points, weak vested interests, and powerful and thus committed governments (Moe, 2016; Wiborg, 2016a).

### **3.4.2 France**

As with most policy domains in France, the education system is highly centralised. Therefore, French teachers' unions, all of which are left-leaning, are organised around the national administration and bureaucracy (Baumgartner & Walker, 1989; Dobbins, 2016). Generally, corporatist structures are weak in France (Ambler, 1985) but teachers' unions have managed to create a continuous and strong interchange with the Ministry of Education. This interchange is so powerful that Dobbins (2016, p. 92) labels it as an *"institutionalized co-administration between the state and education unions"*. Furthermore, a "revolving door" policy between the administration and the unions provides them with great influence. In addition, education policy is taken to the streets by the unions more often than in other countries. According to Ambler (1994), this is not only due to strikes against government plans, but also because the fragmented unions want to showcase their strength and membership

power. Bearing in mind that French teachers' unions have ideologically always been socialist or even communist, their role in the comprehensive reform of 1975 is particularly interesting.

In 1975, René Haby, Minister of Education, initiated a wide-ranging restructuring of the French education system that came to be known as the Haby-Law (Poujol, 1980). The reform aspired to reorganise the entire education system, from kindergarten up to the exam concluding secondary education, the *Baccalauréat*, with the aim of improving educational equality. Coombs (1978) and Duclaud-Williams (1983) provide a detailed account of the reform and the teachers' unions' reaction. The Haby-Law established comprehensive education by unifying the existing three-track system of *Collèges* at lower secondary level into a single track, the *collège unique*. The idea was to postpone selection and tracking while giving all children the possibility to receive a solid education in mixed ability classes and the chance to go to secondary schooling. While the public, being dissatisfied with the old system, eagerly awaited fundamental education reforms, the teachers' unions opposed Haby's reform plans, especially the introduction of comprehensive education (Coombs, 1978; Duclaud-Williams, 1983). The union for secondary schooling, *Syndicat National des Enseignements de Second Degré* (SNES), publicly resisted the reform plans early on in 1975. Haby still hoped to gain support from the union for primary school teachers, *Syndicat National des Instituteurs* (SNI), but was disappointed when the SNI also opposed his reform plans (Coombs, 1978). This strong resistance is interesting insofar as the SNES and the SNI have always been proponents of a more egalitarian and leftist notion of schooling and had urged the government to minimise educational inequalities (Coombs, 1978; Duclaud-Williams, 1983). Thus, the reform should have pleased them, at least ideologically. But it threatened their vested interests and benefits. The question of what kind of teachers, primary or secondary, would work in the new comprehensive school, and issues such as salary schemes, working conditions, and union

membership were the reasons for such strong resistance (Duclaud-Williams, 1983). In numerous rounds of negotiations, Haby tried to regain support, at least from the SNI. In the end, he managed to gain their reluctant approval by creating thousands of new teacher jobs, raising the education budget, and minimising class size (Coombs, 1978). Coombs (1978, p. 502) states that *“Without sugarcoating of this kind, it is extremely doubtful that the far-reaching reorganization of French education would have received even the grudging acquiescence of SNI [...]”*. In summary, French teachers’ unions resisted the comprehensive reform that should have appealed to them ideologically because their vested interests were threatened. They only hesitantly agreed when their benefits from the reform were increased.

### **3.4.3 Sweden**

Like in England and France, teachers’ unions played a key role in the introduction of the nine-year comprehensive school in Sweden in the 1960s and 70s (Wiborg, 2009). At that time, the left-leaning union for primary school teachers was the most important and powerful teachers’ union. The more conservative union for academic teachers was smaller and less important, and continued to be so throughout the next decades as conservative parties were rarely in power. The unions’ power had increased ever since the Second World War, with them being institutionalised in decision processes, becoming part of formal and informal political procedures, negotiations, and increased corporatist structures (Wiborg, 2016b). They were at the peak of their influence when the comprehensive reform started in the 1960s.

Initially, Swedish teachers’ unions opposed the introduction of the nine-year comprehensive school in 1969. But the larger and more powerful union for primary school teachers quickly changed its stance when they realised that they could gain from the reform (Wiborg, 2016b). They expected to have their jobs, members, and power increased as primary teachers would also work at lower secondary level in the comprehensive school, replacing academic teachers.

Primary school teachers were further motivated by the prospect of closing the status and prestige gap between them and the academic secondary school teachers. The primary union became a powerful supporter of the government in their quest for comprehensive education (Heidenheimer, 1974).

Importantly, the union was able to mobilise its numerous members to join the fight for comprehensive education. Furthermore, the primary union had been involved in several education commissions which prepared the abolishment of the old system (Carlgren, 2009). The academic union, on the other hand, fiercely fought against the comprehensive reform (Heidenheimer, 1974; Wiborg, 2016b). They feared that their influence and member base would shrink with secondary teachers being removed from the lower secondary level. Again, the question of who would teach in the new school type largely determined the unions' stances. In addition, plans to reduce the salary gap between secondary teachers and primary teachers with the introduction of comprehensive schooling led the academic union to even initiate strikes (Heidenheimer, 1974). While the academic union saw their vested interests threatened, the primary union anticipated to have their interests extended. In the end, the nine-year comprehensive school, unified salaries, and a new teacher training were established, giving primary school teachers more career prospects and jobs (Wiborg, 2016b).

From the 1980s on the unions were increasingly side-lined in negotiations, corporatist structures declined, and more right-wing governments came into power (Wiborg, 2016b). In the education system, neoliberal market-oriented reforms (Böhlmark et al., 2016; Bunar, 2010; Fuller & Stevenson, 2019), decentralisation, and deregulation put pressure on the unions and reduced their power. However, even though the academic union opposed the introduction of comprehensive education, the primary union, expecting their benefits to increase, supported the idea and thus made change possible.

### 3.4.4 Germany

Even though teachers' unions in Germany are as fragmented as the education system itself, they have been powerful and influential in education policy (Heidenheimer, 1974; Hildebrand, 1993; Nikolai et al., 2016). The most important unions are the GEW (*Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft*) and the DPhV (*Deutscher Philologenverband*). The GEW is a broad union, representing teachers from primary school to university. Nevertheless, their focus and vested interests lie with compulsory school teachers. It is considered a more left-leaning union, affiliated with the social democratic party, the SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland*). Conversely, the DPhV represents higher secondary teachers, mostly *Gymnasium* teachers, is considered conservative and is associated with the Christian-Democratic Union party, CDU (*Christlich Demokratische Union*) (Nikolai et al., 2016). In general, they exert their power and influence through the strong corporatist tradition, various veto points in the federal structure, and staff councils at all levels (Nikolai et al., 2016; Robinsohn & Kuhlmann, 1967; Thum, 2012). The role and power of these different vested interests also help to explain why there is no genuine comprehensive education in Germany.

Like in most other European countries, Germany's comprehensive reform movement peaked in the 1960s and 70s. The need for change increased ever more with the old, tripartite system proving insufficient to cope with economic and social challenges. That is why two substantial reform plans were put forward: the *Rahmenplan* by an official government committee and the *Bremerplan* by the GEW (Enderwitz, 1963). Even though the *Rahmenplan* argued for a restructuring of the entire education system, it did not touch the tripartite system and maintained the early selection. The *Bremerplan* by the GEW was only slightly more progressive, proposing to extend primary schooling by two years with the so-called *Förderstufe*, but also did not question the selective tripartite system. It is puzzling, why the

GEW, as the left-wing union for primary teachers, did not promote a more ambitious plan. According to Robinsohn, Kuhlmann (1967) and Heidenheimer (1974), conservative groups within the GEW resisted more progressive comprehensive plans. These more conservative groups within the GEW feared that supporting comprehensive education would risk losing their status and groups of Catholic members that had from the start only reluctantly joined a social democratic union. As Robinsohn and Kuhlmann (1967, p. 326) explain *“it is characteristic of the attitude of the Union that in a number of instances it withdrew support from measures proposing innovations when questions of salary and status, for instance, were at stake [...]”*. Hence, the GEW did not only weakly advocate for comprehensive education but was also part of the forces against a reform (Thum, 2012). In addition, the SPD, fearing that it would not be approved by their electorate, did not seek public support for comprehensive education but remained ambivalent (Heidenheimer, 1974).

But the most forceful reactions came from the secondary union, which saw their benefits and status threatened. The DPhV opposed all reform plans and insisted on maintaining the strictly selective system. In alliance with middle-class parents, the *Bildungsbürgertum*, it was able to defeat several comprehensive reform attempts in some *Länder* such as Hamburg or Hessen (Heidenheimer, 1974; Nikolai et al., 2016). Most parents of the *Bildungsbürgertum* highly value the *Gymnasium* and therefore benefit from the tripartite system and have strong vested interests in keeping it intact. So, the DPhV had and still has a strong partner in those parents, also within the SPD voting base, in their fight to preserve the existing selective system (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). The reform era ended without the introduction of comprehensive education. Since then, the GEW has officially argued for common salary schemes and working conditions, unified teacher training, and comprehensive schooling. However, being politically weaker and less influential than the DPhV, it has failed to muster much, if any, support for most of its aims.

The DPhV, acting in accordance with their vested interests, has always lobbied - and still does - against the unification of the system as this would profoundly alter its structure and risks undermining its privileges (Nikolai et al., 2016). Thus, although some *Länder* have introduced diluted versions of comprehensive schooling (Davoli & Entorf, 2018), the vigorous resistance of the unions, especially the DPhV, is a main reason why Germany still has a selective system.

### **3.5 Interim results**

Teachers' unions in each country addressed here have vested interests in jobs, salaries, working conditions, pensions, and other (material) benefits in the existing system. They fight for these interests and block or alter reforms that threaten them. Consistent with this theory of vested interests, a clear pattern emerges when assessing unions' behaviour in comprehensive education reforms in various countries.

Across all countries, the unions for academic secondary teachers fiercely opposed or still oppose comprehensive education. They resist attempts to introduce such education because they fear losing the higher status, salaries, better working conditions and benefits that they enjoy. The role of the union for primary teachers is more complex. Initially, primary unions also resisted comprehensive education reforms, but in some countries, such as Sweden, the primary union changed tactics and stances when realising that they could benefit from such a system. However, primary unions remain ambivalent and were never among the first or most enthusiastic supporters of comprehensive education in any country. Overall, the fear of losing or the prospect of gaining benefits determine the unions' actions in regard to comprehensive reforms. Or, as Wiborg (2017, p. 402) put the issue of losing benefits: *“Teacher unions will therefore tend to oppose efforts to bring about major reform, even when these are designed*

*to increase educational equality.*” Coombs (1978) goes to the heart of (French) teachers’ unions’ actions as vested interests in comprehensive education reforms when stating that:

“[...] there has been a tendency to oppose reforms which would dislocate or inconvenience substantial elements of the union membership. This has led to the frequent charge that, despite their philosophical leftism, French teachers are one of the more conservative elements in the power structure of French education” (Coombs, 1978, p. 487).

Therefore, I argue that one can expect teachers’ unions to oppose any comprehensive education reform as it potentially diminishes their benefits. This is especially true for unions of academic secondary teachers but also applies to primary unions if they do not see their benefits increasing in a unified system. If these unions then are powerful within a country’s political system and can exert their resistance, they are successful in blocking or diluting comprehensive reforms. Thus, powerful and influential teachers’ unions are the main reason why the introduction of comprehensive education proved and still proves to be difficult, if not impossible, in some countries. One can expect to find the same patterns of behaviour when assessing the role of Austria’s teachers’ unions in comprehensive education reforms.

## **4 Methodology and Data**

To assess the influence of Austrian teachers’ unions in comprehensive education reforms one must look deeply into their structure, power, ways of exerting that power, and the processes of how this power influenced and resisted policy. This chapter explains how I do this.

The main research question that this dissertation set out to answer is: How did the Austrian teachers’ unions influence the failure of the three comprehensive education reforms?

Based on the current state of the system, the theory of vested interests and the examples of teachers' unions actions concerning comprehensive education in other countries, I extend the questions that remain to be answered with the following: In what way did the union for academic secondary teachers fight comprehensive education? Is the union for primary and lower secondary education teachers a force of resistance or change? How did the unions block or alter the three reform attempts? Would the comprehensive reforms have succeeded if the unions had behaved differently?

To answer these research questions, data was gathered in semi-structured interviews and the method of process-tracing will be used.

#### **4.1 Method of process-tracing**

Process-tracing is a method to study causal mechanisms or processes between two variables or instances within a single case (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; George & Bennett, 2005). The aim is to trace causal mechanisms between an independent and a dependent variable, the outcome. A clear specification is offered by Bennett and Checkel (2014, p. 7) when they define process tracing as

*"[...] the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a single case for the purpose of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might actually explain the case."*

Thus, process-tracing is a method to make within-case causal inferences. Because of the in-depth focus on a single case, it is suitable to capture and explain the context and complexity of policy-making (Kay & Baker, 2015).

This dissertation uses the method of explaining-outcome process-tracing by Beach and Pederson (2013). Explaining-outcome process-tracing attempts to establish a sufficient

explanation of an interesting and puzzling outcome. Being case-centric, it is not about proving or creating a theory but about proving that an existing theory is useful to lay out the best explanation of a puzzling outcome. It is an iterative method that uncovers systematic and non-systematic causal mechanisms that created the outcome of interest. For that, several steps are important. First, one must define the outcome of interest well. Second, existing theories must be tested to determine if they are sufficient to explain the outcome. Third, if these existing theories are not sufficient, they must then be reconceptualised and extended by the newly gathered evidence and complemented by new theories (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). This is what I do in this dissertation.

In addition, best practices for the application of process tracing are offered by Bennett and Checkel (2014). Next to the aspects of taking alternative explanations into account, gathering diverse information, and being open to inductive and deductive analysis, two practices are worth noting here. First, one must consider potential biases in the evidence gathered and one's sources for information. Especially in political processes, those bringing forth the evidence may have certain motives to push one particular explanation more than another. Second, one must make the decision when to stop gathering and analysing evidence. Bennett and Checkel (2014) argue that the time to stop comes when repetition in the evidence occurs. Naturally, the method of process tracing also bears some constraints (George & Bennett, 2005). First, its application is only valid if *“an uninterrupted causal path linking the putative causes to the observed effects, at the appropriate level(s) of analysis [...]”* can be outlined (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 114). In the present case, a continuous mechanism between teachers' unions and the failed comprehensive education reforms must be established. The second constraint is that there can be more causal mechanism than the hypothesised ones which are also consistent with the evidence and the outcome. These other mechanisms and

theories need not to be exclusive but can be complementary. As Bennett and Checkel (2014) argue, it is therefore important to follow the evidence wherever it one leads. One must then see how these different causal links relate to each other.

## **4.2 Literature**

As already cited, this dissertation draws on the literature of vested interests, especially literature assessing teachers' unions as vested interests, literature on (the history of) comprehensive education and the scant literature on Austrian teachers' unions. Particularly because this literature is so scarce, the work of Anna Pultar (2021a, 2021b) and Karl Gruber (2006, 2018) is of high value. In addition, literature on the history of the Austrian education system, from its beginnings to the interwar period and the time after the Second World War will be a basis of analysis. Furthermore, the chapter on the third reform attempt makes use of press releases and press statements from the unions and unions' leaders during the reform era. Lastly, but very importantly, the following chapters will draw on the teachers' unions' magazines. The two biggest and most important unions, the ahs- and aps-union, publish their own magazines every two months. Making use of these magazines provides valuable insights into the unions' thinking and strategies.

## **4.3 Interviews**

With the aim of being able to better assess the unions' role in comprehensive education reforms and to understand their thinking about those reforms and their political stances, I conducted interviews with union leaders, former union leaders and former politicians.

Tansey (2007) describes some important aspects of conducting interviews in the context of process-tracing. Since the aim of process-tracing is to obtain as much information about a specific mechanism or process, one should not draw on a random or representative sample.

Rather, he argues, one must interview those who can share the most information about the process and outcome that one is interested in. These important actors then explain decisions and actions and give insights into the, often historic, mechanisms central to the outcome. They can also reconstruct informal decision-making processes and negotiations that took place behind closed doors. But within this non-representative sample, one must make sure that all important positions and characteristics are represented. The idea of interviews in process-tracing is that the information gathered moves beyond official descriptions and thus can supplement the public perception of political processes (Tansey, 2007).

Hence, the interview partners for this dissertation were selected according to the information they can provide on the process of interest, their positions, and their party affiliation. This dissertation draws on 14 interviews with union leaders, former union leaders and former politicians. Of those 14 interviews, 10 were specifically conducted for this work (1-10, see appendix) while four interviews (11 - 14) were carried out for a previous essay on Austrian teachers' unions in general (Stadler, 2021). Two of those four interview partners were interviewed again with a focus on comprehensive education. The interview partners were selected so that all political factions of the two biggest unions and all political parties relevant to the process are represented. Even though the interviewees are diverse in terms of political parties, factions, and unions, there is a lack of diversity concerning age, gender and ethnicity. This gap is primarily a result of the lack of diversity among the unions' and parties' leadership but must be kept in mind when analysing the results. However, so that the interview partners remain anonymous, only their union, faction, or party are displayed in the appendix. All these interviews were semi-structured (Brinkmann, 2014; King et al., 2019; Magnusson & Marecek, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2009) with the purpose of focusing on the same key aspects but

having the flexibility to change to more in-depth questions. They were either conducted in person and recorded with a mobile phone or carried out via Zoom.

The following chapters, especially chapter 7, are based on these interviews.

## **5 The first comprehensive reform attempt – conservative power and engaged teachers**

The first failed comprehensive reform in Austria occurred in a fiercely polarised political climate from 1919 until 1927. Among other issues, education policy revealed the deep divisions in society and between political parties. The two biggest parties, the social democrats, *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei* (SDAP) and the Christian Social Party, *Christlichsoziale Partei* (CSP), fought over the role of the church in education, the years of compulsory schooling and the comprehensiveness of the system (Engelbrecht, 1988; Scheipl & Seel, 1985). As explained above, a tripartite secondary school system followed four years of comprehensive primary schooling at that time. Contentious debates about this system had begun even before the First World War (Engelbrecht, 2014). The newly founded teachers' associations were vocal in these debates and a decisive factor in the failed reform.

### **5.1 The emergence of teachers' associations**

At the turn of the century, especially young teachers became active and engaged in education policy, mostly in smaller organisations, from the bottom up. Several teachers' associations, the predecessors of today's unions, were founded in those years.

*Die Jungen* (The Young), a group of young, progressive, left-wing teachers was the first of these grassroots-like organisations. Initially, the group had formed to fight for better working conditions and salaries for the often severely underpaid trainee teachers. But, over time, *Die*

*Jungen* grew to be a well-organised group that mustered strong opposition to the existing conservative structures of the education system and, in 1898, developed its own independent programme for education (Adam, 1983). The social democrats, Otto Glöckel, the later Minister for Education, and Karl Seitz, later mayor of Vienna, were leading figures in the association. Hence, even though the association was independent, it had close links to the social democrats and laid the ideological foundations for their education policy in the coming decades (Engelbrecht, 2014). Furthermore, it was one of the predecessor organisations of the later established social democratic teachers' associations. The numerous conferences and discussion groups organised by *Die Jungen* certainly helped to mobilise young compulsory school (primary school and *Bürgerschule*) teachers for the fight against the existing system (Glöckel, 1939).

An association that emerged out of *Die Jungen* was the *Freie Schule* (Free School). In this association, social democrats, liberals, and the liberal bourgeoisie fought together against the church's power in schooling and Catholic interests (Achs & Tesar, 1985). The *Freie Schule* was one of the rare alliances of these different groups. The educational programme of the *Freie Schule* was the first to propose the concept of a unified, comprehensive system (Adam, 1983; Engelbrecht, 2014). This was the basis of Otto Glöckel's idea for an *Einheitsschule* (1916) and his famous education programme and speech, *Tor der Zukunft* (1917). Furthermore, the *Freie Schule* was also successful in mobilising teachers with having more than 15000 members in 1910 (Engelbrecht, 2014).

Next to these bottom-up organisations, the first party-political teachers' associations emerged. A corporate system with unions as such did not exist at that time but these party-political associations effectively acted as unions. So, at that time, one can treat the associations as equivalent to unions. The social democratic teachers' association, the

*Zentralverein der Wiener Lehrerschaft* (Central Association of Viennese Teachers) which was closely connected to the SDAP was founded in 1896 (Adam, 1983). In addition to its affiliation with the SDAP, the *Zentralverein* had close ties to *Die Jungen* and *Freie Schule*. Like them, the *Zentralverein* supported comprehensive education and advocated for a reform, also within the SDAP. It argued that only a unified system could be socially equitable and empowering for the working class (Adam, 1983; Engelbrecht, 2014). In terms of members, it was the smallest party-political association (Sertl, 1985).

The biggest teachers' association was the *Deutschösterreichische Lehrerbund* (German-Austrian Teachers' Federation) with more than 21 000 members in 1919 (Engelbrecht, 2014). This organisation was affiliated with the parliamentary parties of the German-liberal and German-nationalist movement. It too strongly supported comprehensive education and made it a priority in its programme. The *Deutschösterreichische Lehrerbund's* arguments for comprehensive schooling were different to the social democrats. They argued that a unified system would be more meritocratic while not wasting talents needed for society and the economy (Engelbrecht, 2014).

Fiercely opposed to comprehensive education were the conservative Catholic teachers' associations. Founded also in the 1890s, the *Katholische Lehrerbund für Österreich* (Catholic Teachers' Federation for Austria) represented compulsory teachers. This association and the later founded *Vereinigung christlich-deutscher Mittelschullehrer* (Federation of Christian-German Middle School Teachers), which represented higher schooling teachers, strongly defied the ideas of a unified system. Both conservative associations were closely affiliated with the Christian Social Party and the Church (Engelbrecht, 1988, 2014; Sertl, 1985).

Nevertheless, because of the social democratic and liberal teachers' associations' success in mobilising teachers, the majority of compulsory school teachers were supportive of comprehensive education (Sertl, 1985). The debates about the unification of the system intensified ever more after the war, when Otto Glöckel, as Minister of Education, tried to put comprehensive education into practice.

## 5.2 Reforms Austria-wide

Glöckel was appointed Minister of Education in 1919. As one of his first acts, he established a commission within the Ministry of Education, called the *Reformkommission*, which was responsible for developing fundamental reform plans of the education system. Moreover, Glöckel tried to win the 'hearts and minds' of teachers, being convinced that education reforms could only be implemented by having a majority of motivated teachers on his side (Fischl, 1950). The *Reformkommission* developed far-reaching plans for the re-structuring of the tripartite system in the *Leitsätze für den allgemeinen Aufbau der Schule* (Guidelines for the General Structure of Schooling) by proposing an all-through comprehensive school until the age of 14 (Fischl, 1950; Göttlicher & Stipsits, 2015). As mentioned above, the idea of these guidelines was to unify the tripartite system, the *Gymnasium*, the *Bürgerschule* and the upper stage of the primary school. These guidelines were seen as basis for further discussions with the teachers' associations and the general public (Göttlicher & Stipsits, 2015). Generally, a high consensus existed between all parties on the necessity to reform lower secondary schooling (Scheipl & Seel, 1985) but they disagreed as to how to achieve this. The social democratic *Zentralverein* and the *Deutschösterreichische Lehrerbund* pushed for comprehensive education since they expected to have their lower salaries and status increased in a unified system. They put pressure on the SDAP in government to carry out the proposed reform. But the conservative resistance was strong. The CSP, Glöckels' partner in

the coalition, and the sometimes even more conservative Catholic teachers' federations firmly rejected all attempts to introduce comprehensive education and were successful in doing so (Engelbrecht, 2014). Glöckel's time in office ended after one and a half years as the SDAP lost their power in the national government. They would not be part of any of the following governments in the interwar period and remained in the opposition. However, the era of school reformism was not over with the social democrats and Glöckel shifting their focus to the capital of Vienna.

### **5.3 Reforms in Vienna – educational dualism**

The odds of comprehensive education being established on the national level became very low after the SDAP lost power in the national government. The SDAP's chance for reform now seemed possible in Vienna. In 1922, Otto Glöckel became the president of Vienna's local school authority, the *Wiener Stadtschulrat*. The following years are often said to be characterised by an educational dualism, with the national government being led by the CSP and the SDAP dominating the important and powerful capital city of Vienna (Achs, 1968; Göttlicher, 2016). Hence, Glöckel, together with other supporters of comprehensive education, tried to change the system by taking on the conservative resistance from the Ministry and the Catholic associations. In his inaugural speech as president of the local authority, he called the introduction of comprehensive education his top priority (Tann, 1922). However, like on the national level, he also failed in the capital. The reform process started by converting six of Vienna's *Bürgerschulen* into comprehensive schools (Göttlicher, 2016). These schools were required to take in every child from their newly assigned school district and were set up according to the ideas of Glöckel's *Einheitsschule*. Opting out of these schools was possible but difficult (Engelbrecht, 2014; Glöckel, 1927). Uncharacteristically, teachers from the *Bürgerschule* and the *Gymnasium* taught side-by-side in these six trial-schools. Originally,

the former headmaster of the *Bürgerschule* was meant to be the new comprehensive school's headmaster but this provoked resistance from the *Gymnasium* teachers. Instead, each of these six trial-schools got appointed two headmasters, one from the *Bürgerschule* and one from the *Gymnasium*. With this arrangement, the demands of both groups of teachers were satisfied and none lost their privileges and benefits (Engelbrecht, 2014; Scheipl & Seel, 1985).

The results of the six comprehensive trial-schools were regarded as positive after the first cohort of students had finished in 1926 (Göttlicher & Stipsits, 2015; Scheipl & Seel, 1985). That is why, in 1926, Glöckel applied to the Minister of Education, Emil Schneider from the CSP, to extend the comprehensive school trials to more schools in Vienna. At first, Schneider approved the request and thus allowed Glöckel to continue expanding comprehensive education by increasing the number of trial-schools in Vienna (Fischl, 1950). This approval was met with vociferous resistance from clericals, the Catholic teachers' associations, and conservative groups within the Minister's own CSP (Fischl, 1950; Sertl, 1985). The Catholic vested interests pressured the Minister of Education to withdraw Glöckel's permission to extend comprehensive education in Vienna. Even though the Minister tried to argue that his earlier approval to extend comprehensive education in Vienna was invalid, the pressure from the more conservative teachers' associations within his own party was so strong that he was forced to resign a few days later (Fischl, 1950). In response, a mass protest was organised by the social democrats, their teachers' associations and other progressive teacher groups to demand the extension of comprehensive education in Vienna as well as a new and more progressive curriculum (Achs & Krassnigg, 1974; Fischl, 1950). The successor of Schneider and new Minister of Education, Richard Schmitz, did not approve Glöckel's request to increase the number of comprehensive schools in Vienna (Sertl, 1985). On the contrary, he issued a new reform plan for lower secondary schooling that did not touch the structure of the tripartite

system. There was no mention whatsoever of a possible unification or experimental comprehensive schools (Scheipl & Seel, 1985). The Catholic teachers' organisation had successfully pressured their affiliated party's minister to adopt their more conservative stances. Consequently, the comprehensive school trials in Vienna came to an end because of the Catholic teachers' associations pressuring their party to end them.

A compromise was reached in 1927, however. Although the SDAP was no longer part of the government, the CSP still needed its approval for gaining the needed majority to push through an education reform. The SDAP, strengthened by a success in the national elections, in the year 1927, was able to extract some concessions from the CSP (Engelbrecht, 1988; Göttlicher, 2016). As described above, the compromise resulted in the abolishment of the *Bürgerschule* and the introduction of a new type of school, the *Hauptschule*. The *Hauptschule* was set up as Glöckel had envisaged the *Einheitsschule* except that it remained a lower track in the selective system (Engelbrecht, 1988; Scheipl & Seel, 1985). Thus, it was a reform of the lower track in the system only. In summary, the comprehensive reform initiatives of the 1920s failed, resulting in firm segregation between the schools types (Adam, 1983).

Several aspects of this comprehensive education reform era are noteworthy. Even though teachers' unions and the corporate system of governance did not exist as such, the various teachers' associations and teacher groups had a big impact on the failure but also on the partial success of the reform which they helped to shape.

Firstly, the reform movement was arguably only able to become powerful and gain so much momentum because it was able to mobilise a lot of teachers. The *Zentralverein* and the *Deutschösterreichischer Lehrerbund* mobilised their members and the majority of compulsory school teachers to support the promotion of comprehensive education. But the grassroots

groups such as *Die Jungen* and *Freie Schule* too were essential in pushing forward the idea of comprehensive education. Primary school teachers and teachers from the *Bürgerschule* would have gained considerably from a unification in terms of increasing their status and salary. This active mobilisation to advocate for comprehensive education by left-wing teachers' associations was a main reason why the SDAP and Glöckel could be so strongly committed in education policy, even dictating the policy discourse from the political opposition and, partially, enforcing their stances on education. Even though comprehensive education through restructuring the tripartite system was not implemented, some improvements for the working classes were achieved by establishing the *Hauptschule*. Such a fierce engagement of left-wing teachers' organisations was absent in the next reform attempts. However, it still was not enough.

Secondly, the power of conservative and Catholic teachers' organisations was strong enough to resist the reform movement. Although the CSP was on the verge of agreeing to extending comprehensive school trials in Vienna, the more conservative forces within the party, the clericals and Catholic teachers' organisations impeded this. This conservative factions within the CSP resisted any comprehensive ideas that were put forward and they were successful in quashing the strong movement for the introduction of comprehensive education. Thus, without the Catholic teachers' associations' powerful resistance, the comprehensive reform would have probably been successful.

## **6 The second comprehensive reform attempt – social democratic power and resisting teachers**

The second comprehensive reform attempt occurred under vastly different circumstances than the first. This second attempt failed, perhaps surprisingly, at the peak of social

democratic power in Austria in the 1970s and early 80s. After the Second World War, the educational structure of 1927 was put back in place. As mentioned above, the ÖVP and SPÖ, which dominated Austrian politics, tried to govern based on consensus but education and the issue of early selection remained controversial. Starting with the necessity to clarify the constitutional status of education laws, two decades of reform began in 1960.

### **6.1 Old structures – new aspirations**

The educational structure of 1927 was only provisionally reinstated. In the long term, the Austrian Constitution stipulated a foundational law that ought to be the new legal foundation for the organisational structure of the education system. This new law had to clarify the competences of the federal government, the *Länder* and the local authorities concerning all questions of education. Therefore, the decades following the Second World War were characterised by the ÖVP and SPÖ trying to reach a compromise concerning that fundamental law. But creating this legal foundation for the education system proved to be difficult. While the SPÖ wanted to change the structure fundamentally compared to 1927, the ÖVP wanted to maintain it (Scheipl & Seel, 1988). The teachers' associations from both sides of the aisle opposed a compromise whatsoever. On the one hand, the conservative associations feared that a compromise would introduce comprehensive education. On the other hand, the social democratic association feared that the new legal basis would eliminate comprehensive education for good (Engelbrecht, 2014; Scheipl & Seel, 1988). Engelbrecht (2014) argues that:

“In this phase of getting closer and of an improved climate for negotiations, the teachers' associations clearly demonstrated that it was difficult to enforce political decisions concerning schooling that were against their will.”

(Engelbrecht, 2014, p. 58, my translation)

Engelbrecht's observation of the unions' power was also voiced by the SPÖ's former spokesperson for education: *"It is difficult to make decisions in parliament that are against the Gymnasium-union."* (Interview 7, my translation) According to Engelbrecht (2014) the right-wing, Catholic associations' resistance affected the ÖVP's negotiations strategy more than the left-wing associations did for the SPÖ. So, the Catholic teachers' associations aimed at defending the selective system that benefitted them by trying to push the ÖVP to adopt their more conservative stances. Reaching a compromise proved to be almost impossible with the teachers' associations fighting for their vested interests.

But the pressure to reach an agreement increased when the constitutional court, in 1960, invalidated most of the previously passed education laws (Engelbrecht, 2014). In the following negotiations, the ÖVP and SPÖ, therefore, circumvented the teachers' associations to avoid being stymied by them and the polarised public debate (Engelbrecht, 2014; Scheipl & Seel, 1988). Precisely because the unions were outside the policy-making process, a compromise was reached even though the two parties had rather differing views on the education structure. In 1962, the law that laid the foundation for the education system's structure was passed. It clarified the above-described shared competences in the federal system and determined the structure of the education system, and, among other issues, the years of compulsory schooling. Unsurprisingly, the law did not incorporate comprehensive education. Even though the social democratic teachers' associations had hope for that, the Catholic teachers' associations, especially for secondary education, would not have let the ÖVP agree to such a compromise. However, the law was the legal basis for the whole system and is, in most aspects, still valid (Eder et al., 2007). In addition, because of the SPÖ insisted on the need for a two-thirds majority to change education laws, this rule was also decided in 1962 (Scheipl & Seel, 1988).

In the subsequent years, enormous societal changes took place not only in Austria but in Europe and elsewhere. Economic changes led to a need for better educated people and thus to an educational expansion (El-Maafalani, 2020; Engelbrecht, 2014; Scheipl & Seel, 1988). In addition, the idea that education was important for economic prosperity became prevalent for the first time (Budzinski, 1986). Because of this idea, alongside increased prosperity and higher educational aspirations of more and more people, education policy was a key focus again. The main question was how to structure the education system so that it could keep up with societal changes.

## **6.2 One reform commission – numerous school trials**

To find a possible answer to that question a reform commission, the *Reformkommission* (SRK), was established in 1969. All parliamentary parties, the bureaucracy, the teachers' associations, unions, students' and parent's representatives and the church were represented in the SRK (Scheipl & Seel, 1988).

During this era, like in the 1920s, the teachers' associations were the most vocal and important organisations of Austria's complex system of teacher unionism. That is, teacher unionism in Austria was and still is based on three pillars (Pultar, 2021a; Sertl, 2015; Stadler, 2021). The teachers' associations are one pillar. These are groups, closely affiliated with a political party or even part of its structure and active in education policy. The second pillar are these associations' official representations in the statutory staff councils. The third pillar then are the unions. The three pillars overlap a lot. Importantly, the conservative organisations dominate all three pillars. But, more on that later. The key take away is that, in the 70s, the associations were the most important of the three pillars, effectively acting as unions.

In the SRK, comprehensive education was again one of the SPÖ's main policies while the ÖVP argued to maintain the selective system. The social democratic teachers' association supported the SPÖ in their quest for comprehensive education. The Catholic associations on the other hand were split in their opinion on comprehensive education in the SRK (Engelbrecht, 2014). The *Katholische Lehrerbund* that represented compulsory school teachers was in favour of comprehensive school trials. The *Vereinigung christlicher Lehrer* (VCL), the successor of the above-mentioned *Vereinigung christlich-deutscher Mittelschullehrer*, represented *Gymnasium* teachers and was categorically against any form of comprehensive schooling (Scheipl & Seel, 1988). As is the case today, the VCL and its partners in the unions and staff councils were more powerful and influential within the ÖVP than the conservative associations for compulsory schooling teachers. Hence, their stances in the SRK were more important for the ÖVP and its views on comprehensive education. Thus, the resistance of the *Gymnasium* teachers' association determined the party line of the ÖVP.

Genuine debates about comprehensive education within the SRK only started when the political scene changed drastically in 1971 with the SPÖ and its leader Bruno Kreisky winning an absolute majority in parliament, which it held until 1983 (Sauer, 1980; Scheipl & Seel, 1988). Different variants of far-reaching comprehensive school trials were initiated right away (Engelbrecht, 2014). The "additive comprehensive school" where the *Gymnasium* and the *Hauptschule* would be unified, although with strict streaming according to ability, and the "integrative comprehensive school" with mixed-ability classes were the two most important trials (Scheipl & Seel, 1988). The initial idea was that *Gymnasien* would participate in both of these variants, either by unifying with a *Hauptschule* or by converting to an integrative comprehensive trial-school. But that did not happen. These school trials were far from being truly comprehensive with only *Hauptschulen* participating in them. In 1977, 85 out of 86

“integrative comprehensive schools” were former *Hauptschulen* (Sauer, 1980). The idea of an “additive comprehensive school” had to be abolished altogether since not a single *Gymnasium* wanted to participate, leaving the trials only to the *Hauptschulen*. The *Gymnasium* teachers’ resistance against these trials was fierce as they saw these as a threat to their jobs, higher salaries and better working conditions. Furthermore, they wanted to continue teaching only the more academically able students (Engelbrecht, 2014). Even though there were signs of support for some form of comprehensive education within the ÖVP (Engelbrecht, 2014), the *Gymnasium* teachers and their associations’ resistance almost killed off the school trials.

Nevertheless, the results of these trial-schools at the end of the 1970s was regarded mostly positively since education equality had increased (Budzinski, 1986). Still, the ÖVP and Catholic teachers’ associations refused to see this as a proof for the superiority of comprehensive schooling. With the *Gymnasium* teachers’ associations fighting so fiercely against the trials, the ÖVP became even more opposed to comprehensive education. That is why, at the start of the 1980s, new rounds of negotiations between the ÖVP and SPÖ about the trials were needed in order to decide on their future.

### **6.3 An absolute majority is of no use**

In 1980, the ÖVP did not wait for the final reports on the school trials before it introduced a motion in Parliament to put an end to them. The SPÖ, in response, issued a motion to extend the trials by incorporating them into the general school system (Engelbrecht, 2014). Negotiations among the two parties followed to find a compromise between these two contradictory motions. In these, it quickly became clear, that the ÖVP would not accept the abolishment of the *Gymnasium* or any kind of unification of schools at the lower secondary level (Engelbrecht, 2014). Thus, the *Gymnasium* remained an eight-year long elitist and

selective school, just as the academic teachers' organisations wanted. In stark similarity to what happened in 1927, the reform that followed targeted the lower track, the *Hauptschule*, only (Scheipl & Seel, 1988). In 1982, a compromise between the ÖVP and SPÖ put an end to all comprehensive trial-schools and maintained the selective *Gymnasium* (Budzinski, 1986). Thus, the comprehensive reform initiatives in the 1970s failed.

The academic teachers' association, VCL, had put strong pressure on the ÖVP to oppose any comprehensive plans from the SPÖ. Even though the *Katholische Lehrerbund*, also a conservative force, had argued for comprehensive trial-schools within the SRK, the influence of the *Gymnasium* teachers' association within the ÖVP was too strong. This imbalance of power between the two conservative organisations within the ÖVP was also voiced by a leader of the union for compulsory schooling teachers, the aps-union:

*"I have seen that in negotiations and I still see it in negotiations, that the ÖVP listens more to the ahs-union [note: union for Gymnasium teachers] than to our union."* (Interview 1, my translation)

Even though the aps-union and the conservative associations for compulsory schooling were (and still are), in terms of members, larger than the *Gymnasium* associations (Zahradnik, 2010), the latter were more influential, powerful, and determinative when it comes to the issue of comprehensive education within the ÖVP. Having their vested interests at stake, they fought fiercely to defend the selective *Gymnasium* within the SRK and the ÖVP. This can also be seen in speeches (Österreichisches Parlament, 2021) of ÖVP parliamentarians during the sitting that debated the 1982 compromise. Several ÖVP members of parliament, who were teachers themselves, even criticised this compromise as being the first step towards comprehensive education. For example, Gerhard Schäffer, who had been a *Gymnasium*

teacher, president of a local school authority and active in the teachers' associations, or Johann Wolf, who had been a teacher and then a union leader in the GÖD and the Catholic teachers' associations while being a member of parliament for the ÖVP defended the tracked system. Of course, the ÖVP had never been enthusiastic about comprehensive education, but the slim possibility of them agreeing to introduce some sort of comprehensive education in the 1970s was impeded by the influence of the more conservative and class-conscious *Gymnasium* teachers' organisations. They forced the ÖVP to adopt their more conservative stances. It was then easy for the ÖVP to block comprehensive reforms since their votes would have been needed to reach the two-thirds majority. A former politician of the Green party summarised this power as follows:

*"I think we have a distinct status consciousness among the ahs-teachers. We have a very powerful ahs-union which has prevented any steps in that direction."* (Interview 8, my translation)

Despite gaining an absolute majority three times in succession, the SPÖ was unable to push through their most important education policy because of union resistance. This failure aside, the government managed to improve the education system by introducing free textbooks, building new higher schools, reducing class sizes, and abolishing the entry exam for the *Gymnasium* (Mauhart, 2006).

The conservative and academic teachers' associations were once again successful in defending their vested interests and the selective system. Through their influence within the SRK and the ÖVP they diluted and ultimately blocked all comprehensive school trials and impeded their extension.

For the next two decades or so, comprehensive education became a topic that was avoided by most parties, even the SPÖ. The defeat was that resounding. That changed in 2006, when another comprehensive reform attempt was initiated.

## **7 The third comprehensive reform attempt – an impossible task?**

The political landscape changed with the national elections in 2006. The SPÖ regained their power in government after having been in opposition to an ÖVP-led, right-wing government since 2000, by once again forming a coalition with the ÖVP. During these coalition years, comprehensive education was revisited and quickly became a hot topic. Even though the ÖVP's categorical rejection of comprehensive education had somewhat faded and the SPÖ had gained new allies with the Green party and later the liberals also supporting comprehensive education, the comprehensive reform failed. Again, the teachers' unions had the necessary power and influence to dilute and obstruct government policies. To understand how the teachers' unions achieved such power, I will first describe their organisational structure and the power relations between the unions, the government and the parties in more detail.

### **7.1 Dispersed but powerful unionism in the new century**

As described above, the teachers' associations were the most vocal of the three pillars of unionism in the 1970s. But, during the third reform attempt, the legal representations, the statutory staff councils, and the unions were the more vocal and important of the three pillars (Pultar, 2021a; Sertl, 2015; Stadler, 2021).

The teachers' associations as the first pillar are still responsible for developing the factions' political stances, voicing criticism and playing an active role in education policy debates.

The task of the second pillar, namely the staff councils, is to advocate the interests of teachers vis-à-vis the headmasters, local school authorities called *Bildungsdirektionen*, and the Ministry of Education. The main competences of staff councils concern issues of staffing, working hours and employer-employee relationships.

The third pillar consists of the fragmented unions. The ÖGB (*Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund*) is the umbrella organisation for all Austrian unions in one of the strongest corporate cultures of the world (Siaroff, 1999). The GÖD, *Gewerkschaft öffentlicher Dienst*, the union for public services, is a sub-union of the ÖGB and the head organisation of the five teachers' unions. In addition to the ahs-union for Gymnasium teachers and the aps-union for compulsory schooling teachers, there are the bmhs-union for higher vocational school teachers, the union for vocational college teachers, and the union for agricultural school teachers. Within the GÖD, the five unions collaborate in a task force, called *ARGE-Lehrer*. Each of these five teachers' unions is further fragmented in political factions, the partner organisations of the teachers' associations. These factions are the conservative, Catholic FCG (*Fraktion Christlicher Gewerkschafterinnen und Gewerkschafter*) which is closely affiliated with the ÖVP, the social-democratic FSG (*Fraktion Sozialdemokratischer GewerkschafterInnen*) which is part of the SPÖ and the left-leaning, independent ÖLI-UG (*Österreichische Lehrer/innen Initiative – Unabhängige Gewerkschafter/innen*) which has ties to the Green party. The founding of this third faction in the 1980s caused many controversies in the GÖD which had, like most other aspects of public life, previously been divided up between the SPÖ and the ÖVP.

Importantly, all five unions have been and still are dominated and led by the conservative FCG at the national level (ÖLI-UG, 2021). There are some exceptions at the *Länder*-level but because of the FCG's dominance, teachers' unions, especially the ahs-union, and the GÖD are

closely affiliated with the ÖVP. Hence, unusually, the union for compulsory schooling is also conservative. These three pillars are very much intertwined in personnel with the chairwoman of a union faction often being a legal representative and the chairwoman of the teachers' association at the same time.

The teachers' unions, meaning all three pillars of them, are not only closely interwoven in personnel with the political parties, but also with governments, parliaments, and the local authorities, the *Bildungsdirektionen*. This is how they promote their vested interests informally (Anzengruber et al., 2010; Stadler, 2021). So many (former) union leaders can be found in parliament, especially in the SPÖ and ÖVP, or working in the *Bildungsdirektionen* which are actually the counterpart of the unions in negotiations. Almost all heads of these *Bildungsdirektionen* can be categorized to a political faction, either "red" (SPÖ) or "black" (ÖVP) (Stadler, 2021). This connection gives the unions an important access point for exerting their vested interests. However, in general, the informal links and long-standing corporatist tradition constitute the most important ways for the unions to exert their power and influence in education policy in Austria. The unions' power and influence were at their peak when the SPÖ and ÖVP formed a coalition and involved their union factions in all talks. (Stadler, 2021).

In addition to the strong informal power of teachers' unions, the federal system and the corporatist governance structure provide formal veto points to block or shape unwanted reforms. Undoubtedly, the system of shared competences gives unions many access and veto points in each of the *Länder* and *Bildungsdirektionen*. (Stadler, 2021).

## **7.2 A reform is needed and made more likely**

Comprehensive education was discussed again primarily because of Austria's poor PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results in 2000 and 2003. The studies

created a “shock”, particularly because the students from the *Gymnasium* were not among the top scorers (Bauer et al., 2005; Pultar, 2021b). The expert commission that was subsequently established by the ÖVP-led, right-wing government proposed to focus on school-internal improvements to enhance PISA results, not structural reforms like comprehensive education (Pultar, 2021b). But another long-contested topic became relevant again. The ÖVP, being in the right-wing coalition, wanted to get rid of the two-thirds majority rule for education laws to be passed but needed the SPÖ’s votes to do so. According to a former ÖVP education spokesperson, these talks “*were some of the toughest negotiations*” (Interview 9, my translation) he ever took part in. While some vested interests and political parties feared that their power would be reduced by abolishing the two-thirds rule, others hoped to have theirs enhanced. The SPÖ’s reluctance on this matter is depicted by its former spokesperson for education:

*“Not everyone was in favour of it [note: abolishing the two-thirds rule]. People feared it would make it possible to change the system to a more conservative one.”* (Interview 7, my translation)

The SPÖ’s caution is interesting insofar as the system was already very conservative but apparently some feared that even more conservative policies would then be pushed through.

The teachers’ unions also opposed the abolishment of the rule. Especially the ahs-union feared that without the two-thirds majority needed for reforms, a comprehensive education system might stand a chance to be implemented. In the end, the rule was abolished despite union resistance for more than 90% of the education laws. But, as stated, “an appropriate further differentiation” at lower secondary level still has constitutional status and a two-third majority is needed to abolish that.

In addition, because of the generally agreed need for reform, an increased number of politicians within the ÖVP challenged the party's categorical rejection of comprehensive education (Pultar, 2021b). This type of schooling became a burning issue again when the SPÖ put it on their political agenda in the campaign for the elections in 2006 (SPÖ, 2006). After winning these, the SPÖ appointed Claudia Schmied as Minister of Education who immediately started to work on establishing comprehensive education.

### **7.3 Another try – history repeating itself**

#### **7.3.1 Finished before it started?**

To develop a fundamental reform plan for bringing about comprehensive education, Schmied established another expert commission. Mainly independent experts were represented on the commission, but not the teachers' unions who were, perhaps for the first time, excluded from a government commission. The commission worked on far-reaching reform proposals and one of the suggestions involved, once again, the unification of the two-track system. (ExpertInnenkommission, 2007, 2008).

The SPÖ wanted to unify the system by introducing a new type of school, the *Neue Mittelschule* (NMS), which in effect would function as comprehensive education. The idea was to create a non-selective middle school with mixed-ability classes for everyone regardless of the socio-economic background. The SPÖ changed its tactics by calling the NMS a 'unified' or 'common', instead of comprehensive, school. In the following debate however, the opponents of the NMS and the public mostly used the term comprehensive. Yet, the degree to which this introduction of a new school type was even a serious attempt to introduce comprehensive education is questioned by almost all interviewed union leaders and politicians. It is only the

ahs-union representatives that experienced these plans as a genuine attempt to introduce comprehensive education with one stating:

*“Actually, I have experienced the reform in 2007 as an attempt to introduce comprehensive education. But they did not imagine such strong resistance and then they did not dare to push through [...]. (Interview 5, my translation)*

The resistance to the NMS was fierce and immediate. On the one hand, the ÖVP made clear that the eight-year long *Gymnasium* would be left untouched (ÖVP Bundespartei, 2007). On the other hand, the unions, especially the ahs-union vociferously resisted the NMS plans. The ahs-union’s chairwoman called the idea of providing the NMS extra funding and teachers “unfair” (AHS-Gewerkschaft, 2007a, 2007b). The union also launched fierce campaigns in their magazine, arguing that unified schooling is of no educational value but only serves to reduce educational spending (Quin, 2007; Scholik, 2007). Furthermore, they claimed that it will lead to fewer classes, therefore fewer teacher jobs and, ultimately, to a levelling down of performances.

Initially, the SPÖ’s plan was to implement the unified NMS not as a trial-school but as a new school type, based on its own laws and regulations. Furthermore, the plan was to establish large model regions in which the NMS would be put into practice (Feller, 2015). If these two core ideas were implemented, it would have been possible to centrally convert all schools of one region, the *Hauptschulen* and the *Gymnasien*, into an NMS. Hence, some districts or even whole *Länder* would have been able to establish a unified system. The draft of the law that introduced the NMS proposed these two core ideas and was made public in September of 2007.

The unions' response was once again immediate and obstructive. They labelled the draft a *"destruction of teachers', parents' and students' civil rights"* (AHS-Gewerkschaft, 2007c) and opposed all of its ideas outright. The ahs-union demanded that trials should be carried out before deciding on the NMS by law. In Austria, a school can only participate in a school trial if two-thirds of the school's teachers, students and parents vote to take part. The ahs-union argued that teachers, parents, and students at every single school must be given a vote in order for a school to be transformed to an NMS. They knew that this would be an almost insurmountable hurdle, especially at the *Gymnasien*, and thus most probably ensure that none of them would participate in the NMS-trials. Furthermore, they argued that the "freedom" to choose must be upheld by maintaining a *Gymnasium* in every district. By demanding this, they fought against the second core idea, the large model regions in which every school should be converted to an NMS. To reinforce their resistance, the ahs-union organised strikes and several forms of industrial actions in October of 2007 (Nimmervoll, 2007).

Interestingly, also the social democratic faction, FSG, within the ahs-union opposed the reform plans of the social democratic minister to establish model regions of comprehensive education (AHS-Gewerkschaft Niederösterreich, 2007). Generally, the social democratic Gymnasium teachers were and are at least reluctant to agree to but often also actively opposed to comprehensive education (Zahradnik, 2008, 2011). This contradictory stance to the SPÖ's official party-line was also often voiced in the interviews:

*"Consistently among all factions, the ahs-union was always against comprehensive schooling [...]"* (Interview 1, my translation)

*“In the ahs-union the FSG actually always had the same opinion as we [note: FCG] do. Only the independent faction is for comprehensive education everywhere.”* (Interview 5, my translation)

*“Those who come from the *Gymnasium*, the former long-time FSG-chairman for example, were and are clearly proponents of the eight-year long-form *Gymnasium*.”* (Interview 3, my translation)

Not only union leaders, but also the SPÖ’s former spokesperson for education states that:

*“Strictly against comprehensive schooling are ahs-teachers, consistently among all factions. [...] There were fierce debates with the social democratic ahs-teachers. Within the party, they voted for motions for comprehensive education, but they were actually fine with not having to teach certain kids.”*  
(Interview 7, my translation)

Thus, the SPÖ’s party-internal support and mobilisation for comprehensive education was weak, even close to zero, among the *Gymnasium* teachers.

Anyhow, the ahs-union still demanded that a vote must be held at all schools and that the “freedom” to choose any type of school must be guaranteed in all regions. Their plan was to dilute the SPÖ’s proposal massively. On the one hand, it would be very unlikely that the teachers, parents, and students of a *Gymnasium* would vote for converting their school to an NMS. On the other hand, without far-reaching model regions that also included the *Gymnasium*, genuine comprehensive education would not be possible.

Yet this is exactly what happened. After the teachers’ unions strong resistance, the industrial actions and public campaigns, the SPÖ was forced to revise its draft proposal. In its final

version, the plan for the NMS was vastly diluted to merely a school trial. Hence, every school that wished to participate had to muster a two-thirds majority of its teachers, parents and students. Furthermore, the eight-year long *Gymnasium* was protected and one had to remain in every district. On top of that, only 10% of one district's schools were allowed to participate in the school trials if they wished to do so (Engelbrecht, 2014; Witzmann, 2007). The law was passed at the start of 2008 and the school trials began that autumn. Thus, in many aspects, the attempt to establish comprehensive education through a unified middle school, in 2007, failed because of the unions' resistance even before the first trial-school opened its doors. The ahs-union had managed to vastly dilute the NMS law and achieved almost everything they wanted. How was that possible and what was the aps-union's role in this?

### **7.3.2 One powerful union**

The ahs-union blocked and diluted the introduction of the NMS and comprehensive education primarily because it threatened their vested interests. They feared to lose their higher status, salaries, prestige and better working conditions that they had secured over many decades. This threat of diminished vested interests was often mentioned in the interviews:

*“They had higher salaries, higher status and easier kids to teach. That is what they did not want to give up.”* (Interview 7, my translation)

*“Of course, one's position determines what one has to argue for and be a proponent of. [...] Because that is your job. [...] If you ask me, solely from a pedagogical point of view, of course there are comprehensive systems that are good. [...] But me, standing up for the tracked system as a union leader, primarily comes from structural conservatism.”* (Interview 6, my translation)

The also argued that merely structural reforms would not solve the problems in education. Furthermore, they opposed the introduction of the NMS and other more extensive forms of comprehensive education because they did not and still do not want to give up the supposed privilege, they have of selecting their own students. Putting aside the fact that *Gymnasium* classes are also mixed-ability, they did not want to teach mixed-ability classes in the NMS.

*“Under these circumstances [note: mixed-ability classes], it is absolutely obvious that the aps can only win, they get better students. [...] A student with better performances is always easier. And the Gymnasium gets only weaker students. Thank you, no, we do not want that.”* (Interview 6, my translation)

This claim is further strengthened by an aps-union leader stating that:

*“At time, the most important thing for ahs-teacher was that they could select their pupils and can tell certain pupils to leave their school.”* (Interview 1, my translation)

In addition, while opposing the introduction of the NMS, the ahs-union managed to strongly influence public opinion, especially that of the *Bildungsbürgertum* that sent their children to the *Gymnasium* and thus also had their vested interests at stake. The union went as far as to frame comprehensive education as harmful for increasing educational performance:

*“What we fear as ahs-teachers is a downward equalisation if you introduce comprehensive education. That the best students are less focused on because we have to care even more about the weakest students.”* (Interview 5, my translation)

Another argument that was often brought forward by the ahs-union was that the early selection prevents the emergence of expensive private schools. They argue that everyone can send their children to the public, selective and high performing *Gymnasium* to get an excellent education. This, they say, ensures that not the parents' money but performance decides on the education the child receives. The introduction of comprehensive education would, on the other hand, lead to the *Bildungsbürgertum* sending their children to expensive private schools, which would lead to a more unfair system. Of course, this argument neglects to consider that the early selection already occurs along the line of socio-economic factors, not performance. So, the ahs-union resisted the introduction of the NMS and comprehensive education in general by campaigning publicly against it, mobilising its members to take part in that campaign, forming alliances with the *Bildungsbürgertum*, and thereby influencing the public opinion.

*“The resistance came from initiatives of teachers' unions, students and parents' associations. They said, we don't want that; we want a high-quality school.”* (Interview 5, my translation)

Equally, if not more important than this alliance and the public resistance, was and is the ahs-union's power within the employee organisation of the ÖVP, the ÖAAB (*Österreichischer Arbeitnehmerinnen und Arbeitnehmerbund*) and thus within the ÖVP. The ÖAAB is one of the biggest and most powerful groups within the ÖVP. The ahs-unions' true power and political leverage come from its major influence within the ÖAAB and the ÖVP.

*“The ahs-union was always extraordinarily strong within the ÖAAB. Not to say that the aps-union was not, but the ahs-union is stronger within the*

*ARGE-Lehrer and the ÖVP and within the GÖD, even though the aps-union is bigger.” (Interview 9, my translation)*

The importance of that link, from the FCG ahs-union to the ÖAAB and the ÖVP, can hardly be overstated. Even though employer organisations and economic groups that have always been closely affiliated with the ÖVP or were even part of its party structure increasingly argued for the introduction of comprehensive education, the ahs-union’s ideas prevailed. Through their power in the ARGE-Lehrer, the GÖD and the ÖAAB, the ahs-union made it impossible for the ÖVP to pursue a different education policy than theirs.

### **7.3.3 One quiet union**

The conservative aps-union, representing teachers from primary schools and the lower track, the *Hauptschule*, did not engage in the debate as actively as the ahs-union. Its former chairman who had moved up to be the chairman of the whole GÖD was a member of parliament and the ÖVP’s spokesperson for education at the time of the NMS reform. Neither he nor the aps-union promoted comprehensive education at that time.

This is also articulated by politicians of several parties.

*“The aps-union did also not articulate their support for comprehensive education.” (Interview 10, my translation)*

*“The aps-union was and is far from being a supporter of comprehensive education.” (Interview 8, my translation)*

*“The aps-union leaders were often on the side of the ahs-union, but the base was not [...] They did not dare to publicly state that comprehensive education*

*would have some advantages. They never made this an official demand.”*

(Interview 9, my translation)

At the time of the NMS reform, the aps-unions’ official stance was not much different than the one from the ahs-union. However, as the last statement shows, the aps-unions’ resistance to comprehensive education was far from categorical and universal, also not within the conservative FCG. Nevertheless, the aps-union was rather quiet during the introduction of the NMS. Neither did it launch campaigns in its magazine, nor did it publicly raise its voice or mobilise its members. For one thing, it was powerless compared to the ahs-union. This imbalance of power and influence is spoken about by the former Minister of Education:

*“The ahs-union, even though they were fewer in numbers, they were the spokespeople and more dominant with more confidence than the aps-union.”* (Interview 10, my translation)

On the other hand, the aps-union may have been satisfied with the increased resources, money and teachers that were provided for the NMS. It had its vested interests extended, even in the tracked system.

#### **7.3.4 Comprehensive education defeated once again**

The first NMS opened their doors in the autumn of September 2008. In the first year of the school trial, 67 schools started work as an NMS (Eidenberger & Sandberger, 2012). Only 3 of those 67 schools were former *Gymnasien*, the rest were *Hauptschulen* (Pultar, 2021b). As one could have expected after the ahs-union had pushed through their requests about the two-thirds majority needed in every school and the model regions, hardly any *Gymnasium* participated in the school trial. The ahs-union celebrated this, its resistance, and strikes as a success (AHS-Gewerkschaft, 2007d). Even though a handful of *Gymnasien*, especially in

Vienna, joined the school trial in the following years, the number remained insignificantly small as a result of the ahs-union continuing to oppose the NMS and advising *Gymnasien* to not take the vote whether to transform (der Standard, 2008). However, progressive voices within the ÖVP, bad PISA results again in 2009, and an education-referendum kept the discussion about comprehensive education going (der Standard, 2010; Engelbrecht, 2014; Pultar, 2021b).

The 10% cap for schools that were allowed to convert to an NMS however was not lifted. That aroused criticism from several *Länder* since transforming to an NMS had become popular among the *Hauptschulen*. That was because changing to an NMS meant gaining extra funding and more teachers due to the new learning-design of the NMS that included mixed ability classes. Furthermore, to strengthen the cooperation between the NMS and *Gymnasium*, *Gymnasium* and NMS teachers were supposed to teach together in the new school (Bundesministerium für Unterricht Kunst und Kultur, 2011). So, several *Gymnasium* teachers did some of their teaching in an NMS. This was fiercely opposed by the ahs-union and gradually phased out over the years even though it was seen as one of the core concepts of the reform.

Interestingly, some of the *Länder* that criticised the cap, such as Vorarlberg and Tirol, were governed by the ÖVP. These two, Salzburg, and Vienna would have probably even agreed to establish a far-reaching model region for comprehensive schooling in their *Land*, also including the *Gymnasien*. But the resistance from the ahs-union and more conservative forces within the ÖVP was too strong. Hence, the ahs-union had not only managed to impede the participation of *Gymnasien* in the school-trials, but also the establishing of model regions.

However, a compromise was reached in 2012. The ÖVP agreed to lift the cap to allow all *Hauptschulen* to convert to an NMS in exchange to the promise that the *Gymnasium* remained

unaltered. Even though the final evaluation of the first NMS-cohorts was still missing, the SPÖ-ÖVP government incorporated the NMS into the general system and thus ended the school trials in 2012. In the following years all *Hauptschulen* were transformed to NMS but the *Gymnasium* remained as a selective second track. In remarkable resemblance to the reforms in the 1920s and the 1970/80s, the NMS reform from 2007 to 2012 was a reform of the lower track only. Motivated by protecting their vested interests, the teachers' unions, especially the ahs-union, fiercely fought against the reform and had, through their power within the ÖVP, again managed to impede the unification of the system. Thus, another comprehensive reform failed that had already been weak from the start.

#### **7.4 The idea survives? Vorarlberg's unique union context**

Comprehensive education had mostly vanished from the national policy discourse after 2012 but remained relevant in Austria's most western *Land*, Vorarlberg.

Vorarlberg had been among the most active *Länder* in the NMS reform and was in many aspects concerning education policy quite different to the rest of Austria. Even though Vorarlberg was governed by the ÖVP, it was quick to convert all its *Hauptschulen* to NMS. It always seemed as if the introduction of genuine comprehensive education by establishing a *Land*-wide model region that also included the *Gymnasium* was possible and even likely in Vorarlberg.

A main reason for this was that the ÖVP in Vorarlberg did not categorically reject comprehensive education anymore. In 2013, they even launched research projects to study all possible ways of introducing comprehensive education and developed an implementation plan in 2015 (der Standard, 2017). In addition, the regional government's programme from the ÖVP-Green coalition in 2014 also planned the introduction of comprehensive education.

Furthermore, several other interest groups such as the chamber of commerce started to support comprehensive education (Engelbrecht, 2014).

After this preparatory work in Vorarlberg, the legal foundation for a *Land*-wide model region was established on the national level in 2017 through an education reform that finally allowed the establishing of comprehensive schooling model regions. The new law only allowed model regions that included less than 15% of Austria's lower secondary students and schools. In addition, every school that wanted to participate still had to take a vote whether it wanted to take part in the model region. However, Vorarlberg was and still is small enough to convert the whole *Land* into a model region, including the *Gymnasien*, if they voted to participate (Die Presse, 2017). The more progressive ÖVP and its allies had lobbied several years for the implementation of this law in order to establish a model region. So, why is Vorarlberg, especially the ÖVP in Vorarlberg, different?

The teachers' unions scene in Vorarlberg stands in profound contrast to those in other *Länder* and Austria in general.

*“The ÖVP-union is the minority in one Land; that is Vorarlberg. In the ahs-union as well as in the aps-union and the bmhs-union. And that changed the situation.”* (Interview 8, my translation)

Teacher unionism in Vorarlberg is dominated by an alliance of the independent and the social democratic faction. All staff councils at the *Länder*-level, also the one for the *Gymnasium*, are led by this alliance (ÖLI-UG, 2021). This is because the independent faction started to run for office very early on and managed to mobilise teachers, also from the *Gymnasium*, to join them and their more progressive agenda. Since the political composition of the staff councils and unions is determined by elections, it is only a reflection of the teachers' attitudes. Hence,

because of the historical strength of the independent faction and its ability to mobilise teachers, teachers' attitudes in Vorarlberg are more progressive in general and supportive of comprehensive education. According to the interviewed politicians, these more progressive political stances of Vorarlberg's teachers, including from the *Gymnasium*, put pressure on the ÖVP to also be more progressive. The ÖVP was not able to neglect the issue of comprehensive education since the teachers' unions and teachers in general demanded a more progressive education policy.

Nevertheless, the introduction of a model region lost momentum after the national elections in 2017. Even in Vorarlberg genuine comprehensive education is a long way off. Another decade of comprehensive reform attempts ended and failed in 2017.

There are however two other reforms that were passed in those years and that could potentially lead towards a more comprehensive system. During the years in which Vorarlberg worked on introducing comprehensive education the teacher training and service law of NMS- and *Gymnasium*-teachers were unified (Stadler, 2021). This unification is surely a first step in overcoming the pronounced profession consciousness and dualism of teacher identities (Pultar, 2021b). Having their vested interests threatened, the ahs-union fought both of these reforms fiercely but was only able to dilute the unification of the teacher training. However, for the last few years, the introduction of comprehensive education has been more unlikely than ever before. But with the vested interests of the aps-union changing dramatically it could soon be at the heart of education policy again.

### **7.5 A conservative bulwark of vested interests – starting to crack?**

Motivated by their strong vested interests in the existing system, the ahs-union had achieved to maintain the selective system through their influence within the ÖVP. Their vested interests

were and still are the reason why they ferociously resist all reforms that aim at introducing comprehensive education.

Being dominated by the FCG, the aps-union also resisted the introduction of comprehensive education for a long time. The active mobilisation of social democratic teachers' associations in the 1920s aside, the union for compulsory schooling teachers never truly articulated their support for comprehensive education in the reform attempts. But this has changed over the last few years with current aps-union leaders, of course from the FCG, publicly supporting comprehensive education. Furthermore, at their annual conferences, the aps-union passed resolutions, unanimously, in support of comprehensive education.

The aps-unions' change of opinion may be a result of changing vested interests. The current selective system just does not benefit them anymore. As mentioned above, the NMS, becomes ever more unpopular and of less prestige, especially in urban areas. More and more teachers want to work at the *Gymnasium*, a trend that has been intensified with the unification of the teacher training and service law. So, the two-track system is increasingly harmful to the vested interests of the aps-union. With the prospect of having their vested interests enlarged again, they now support comprehensive education in a unified system.

But this newly emerging support for that contentious policy leads to controversies not only within the different FCG groups but also within the ÖVP.

*"I was heavily criticised for supporting comprehensive schooling, party-internal."* (Interview 2, my translation)

*"We had this discussion [note: about comprehensive schooling] within the FCG and ÖVP, but as aps-union we noticed very clearly that the majority is with the ahs-union."* (Interview 1, my translation)

This is also the reason why the aps-union, while supporting comprehensive education publicly, still does not fight for it within the union.

*“I think, the aps-union does not want to push comprehensive education at the moment. For that, the configuration of all teacher unions in the GÖD is difficult. [...] There we are in one group, the ARGE-Lehrer, with the other unions. If we, as the aps-union, push comprehensive education in that group, we are in war with the ahs-union. [...] We have many issues and things that we have to negotiate together so it does not make sense to divide ourselves because of that issue.”* (Interview 1, my translation)

Hence, even though its vested interests change drastically, the aps-union is unwilling or too weak to fight the ahs-union within the *ARGE-Lehrer*. The desire to increase their other vested interests is in the way of taking on that fight. But this may change if the system keeps on failing to benefit them and fighting for comprehensive education becomes worth the controversies.

*“Me, personally, I would have always said yes to a good comprehensive concept. And, at times, I would have even hazarded the fight with the ahs-union. [...] Yes, because I think, when it is about their benefits, they do not care about us either.”* (Interview 1, my translation)

## **8 Conclusion**

By maintaining a strict selective two-track school system, Austria is an outlier in Europe. While most other countries have introduced at least some form of comprehensive education in the past decades, all attempts to establish comprehensive education have failed in Austria. These failures cannot be attributed to a single cause alone but Austria's teachers' unions are a strong

force of resistance and a main and crucial reason for why comprehensive education has never been established.

The ahs-union has always resisted the introduction of comprehensive education. They see it as a threat to their vested interests and power in the existing selective system. Their members' jobs, higher status, prestige, better working conditions, privilege to select students, and partly higher salaries could be diminished if comprehensive education was introduced. Hence, they do everything in their power to oppose it. The ahs-union was and still is able to mobilise its members, run public campaigns, and form alliances with the powerful *Bildungsbürgertum* in order to defend the existing system. Until now, they have been successful in doing so. The most essential reason for this success is the ahs-unions' influence within the ÖVP. Even though it is, in terms of members, smaller than the aps-union, it is more powerful within the *ARGE-Lehrer* and the *GÖD*, highly influential in the *ÖAAB* and thus capable of determining the ÖVP's education policy. The ÖVP cannot pursue any other education policy than the ahs-union's one. Therefore, I claim that the ahs-union's resistance and power is the cornerstone of the ÖVP's resistance. The two-thirds majority rule then comes in handy to exert that resistance. The ahs-union's strong resistance is therefore a main reason why all three comprehensive reforms failed. In the first attempt, the conservative teachers' associations managed to pressure their own party to end the school trials and thus the establishment of comprehensive education in Vienna. In the second attempt, they resisted a social democratic absolute majority and the more progressive stances from the conservative compulsory schooling association, again by influencing the ÖVP to end all school trials. In the third reform, the ahs-union managed to dilute the SPÖ's plan to the point that true comprehensive education never stood a chance. Hence, their resistance is key to understanding why all three reforms failed. But the aps-union also played a major role.

The aps-union's political stances and actions are more complex and ambivalent. On the one hand, the social democratic and independent faction, which always supported comprehensive education at that level, are stronger within that union. On the other hand, the aps-union's vested interests in the selective system have appeared to diminish, which has made them proponents of change over the last few years. Nevertheless, for a long time, the conservative led aps-union and compulsory teachers' associations have also not supported comprehensive education. The benefits that they had established in the selective system and the extra funding and teachers provided for their schools at certain times were more appealing than a potentially destructive reform. While conservative compulsory teachers' associations resisted a unification in the first comprehensive reform era, social democratic groups were highly supportive and engaged. They were able to mobilise a lot of teachers for that cause but were still defeated by more conservative forces. This kind of mobilisation had rarely been seen afterwards. In the second reform attempt, the conservative compulsory teachers' association became more open to comprehensive education but large mobilisation efforts lacked from all factions. During the third reform attempt, the conservative aps-union also did not advocate the introduction of a unified school. This lack of support for comprehensive education from compulsory school teachers that could actually gain from its introduction is puzzling and a main reason why the resisting, conservative forces could never be overcome by a government. Since the aps-union's vested interests in the selective system have been drastically reduced over the last decade, it has become more vocal in advocating comprehensive education. This change could make the introduction of comprehensive education possible or even more likely. It remains to be seen if that happens.

In an ever more digitised, globalised, and diverse world, education can be a main driver of equality, prosperity, tolerance and social cohesion. But severe educational inequalities

contradict these noble goals of education. It will be one of the most important tasks of the next years to ensure that education leads to more economic prosperity, equality and social cohesion. Comprehensive education is fundamental to this goal. It is the most equitable form of schooling and capable to enable that children from all parts of society get to know each other and have more equal chances in life.

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## List of Abbreviations

- AHS – Allgemeinbildende höhere Schule (Gymnasium)
- APS – Allgemeine Pflichtschule
- BMHS – Berufsbildende mittlere und höhere Schulen
- CDU – Christlich Demokratische Union
- CSP – Christlichsoziale Partei
- DPhV – Deutscher Philologenverband
- FCG – Fraktion Christlicher Gewerkschafterinnen und Gewerkschafter
- FSG – Fraktion Sozialdemokratischer GewerkschafterInnen
- GEW – Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft
- GÖD – Gewerkschaft öffentlicher Dienst
- NMS – Neue Mittelschule
- NUT – National Union of Teachers
- ÖAAB – Österreichischer Arbeitnehmerinnen und Arbeitnehmerbund
- ÖGB – Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund
- ÖLI-UG – Österreichische Lehrer/innen Initiative – Unabhängige Gewerkschafter/innen
- ÖVP – Österreichische Volkspartei
- PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment
- SDAP – Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei

SRK – Reformkommission

SNES – Syndicat National des Enseignements de Second Degré

SNI – Syndicat National des Instituteurs

SPD – Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland

SPÖ – Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreich

VCL – Vereinigung christlicher Lehrer

## Appendix

### Conducted Interviews

<i>Interview 1</i>	FCG, aps-union
<i>Interview 2</i>	FCG, aps-union
<i>Interview 3</i>	FSG, aps-union
<i>Interview 4</i>	ÖLI-UG, bmhs-union
<i>Interview 5</i>	FCG, ahs-union
<i>Interview 6</i>	FCG, ahs-union
<i>Interview 7</i>	former SPÖ's spokesperson for education
<i>Interview 8</i>	former The Green's spokesperson for education
<i>Interview 9</i>	former ÖVP's spokesperson for education
<i>Interview 10</i>	former Minister of Education
<i>Interview 11</i>	ÖLI-UG, aps-union
<i>Interview 12</i>	FCG, aps-union
<i>Interview 13</i>	FSG, aps-union – same as <i>Interview 3</i>
<i>Interview 14</i>	FCG, ahs-union – same as <i>Interview 5</i>

## Interview Questionnaire

1. The issue of comprehensive reform has been fiercely debated in Austria at least since 1920. What do you think of comprehensive reforms and the debate about it in general?
2. Comprehensive reform is one of the most contested and polarised policies in Austria. Why do you think that is?
3. Almost all European countries have introduced comprehensive education. Why do you think it has not happened in Austria?
4. What is the role of teachers' unions in comprehensive education reforms in Austria?
  - a. Do you think they hinder reform, or do you think, they support it?
  - b. Do you think they are a reason why it has not happened yet?
5. What do you think of the attempt in the 2008 to introduce comprehensive education?
  - a. What was the role of your union/faction in this reform? Were you and your union/faction against it or did you support it? And, why?
  - b. Why do you think it failed?
  - c. Why did your union/faction organise strikes and union actions against the reform?
6. A plan to introduce comprehensive education was put forward in Vorarlberg in 2015; the ÖVP was supportive of that policy and wanted to establish it in 2017. What do you think of that reform effort in Vorarlberg? Why is it different?
7. What do you think of the attempt in the 1960s/70s to introduce comprehensive education?
  - a. What was the role of your union/faction in this reform? Were you and your union/faction against it or did you support it? And, why?
  - b. Why do you think it failed?
8. What would your union/faction do if an education minister says she/he will introduce comprehensive education? What will your union's/faction's reaction be like?
  - a. What steps will your union/faction take to prevent comprehensive education?
9. What would have to happen that you and your organisation would support comprehensive reform?
  - a. What would have to be included?