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**Signposts of change in the landscape of adult basic education in Austria. A telling case**

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## Signposts of change in the landscape of adult basic education in Austria: a telling case

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### Abstract

*Drawing on a strongly grassroots and expertise-supported development in the field of adult basic education in Austria, this paper traces the current shift to politically motivated interventions. The article is based on a methodologically triangulated case study based on interviews (part 1), review of theory (part 2), and document analysis (part 3). It unveils a unique spirit of empowerment and emancipation in Austrian adult basic education. This spirit currently seems to be at risk. The authors identified five signposts of a changing landscape showing a strong tendency towards impact orientation in terms of employability and upskilling: (1) Standardisation and one of its unintended consequences (2) Technocracy over expertise (3) Narrowing the curriculum (4) Teaching supersedes facilitating (5) Research and development – disliked. In order to preserve the tradition within the framework of adult basic education, the authors emphasise the importance of raising informed and critical voices.*

**Keywords:** Adult basic education; Bildung; case study Austria; critical-emancipatory andragogy; traditions and discontinuities

### Introduction

Adult basic education (ABE) in Austria has a history of almost thirty years. It started in Vienna with a pilot project at the *Floridsdorf Volkshochschule* (adult education centre). Basic education courses for German speaking adults were developed and offered from



1990 to 1995.<sup>1</sup> Within this pilot project, basic education for adults was conceptualised in a broad sense, based on andragogical principles (i.a. learner-centeredness), and facilitation of adult learning was clearly guided by the core *Volkshochschulen* principle of emancipation (Brugger, Doberer-Bey & Zepke, 1997, p. 37-52). When referring to this field of Adult Education in theory and practice in Austria, the term *Basisbildung für Erwachsene* (basic education for adults) became widely acknowledged, in line with a broad and general understanding of *Bildung*.

This contribution presents a national case study, comprising an inventory focusing on the genesis and development in terms of theory and practice of ABE in Austria from past to present. This reconstructive approach was based on a triangulation of three research methods: qualitative interviews (part 1), examination of core theories (part 2) and document analysis (part 3).<sup>2</sup> For the first part, two Austrian pioneers and promoters of ABE were interviewed on their significant personal experiences and profession-related theoretical concepts. Their work represents the baseline of the Austrian conception of ABE. In the second part, an examination of foundational concepts corresponding with this baseline was conducted. This literature review outlines core theories (philosophical, educational, and sociological) and provides the theoretical frame foundational to the Austrian expertise. For the third part, a chronological-systematizing analysis of all publications and studies related to ABE in Austria (until 2017) was undertaken. This analysis portrays phases of national development and discourse concerning educational practice and policy, and regarding scientific perceptions and contributions. Recent developments are discussed in the section on the *signposts of change*.

When looking back, a consistent and constant appearance of ABE comes to light. It represents, as outlined in the following three parts, a *spirit* of empowerment: learner-centeredness, lifeworld-orientation, life-deep, life-wide learning, social inclusion, and a *spirit* of emancipation: individual and collective transformation with the desired goal of social change through adult (basic) education. Currently, this *spirit* seems to be at risk because of severe disruptions, which have been rendered visible. These policy-driven and politically motivated ruptures seem to weaken practice-driven grassroots approaches, conventions and quality standards. They seem to fit within the bigger picture: there are strong indications pointing towards a *narrowed frame* and another European country joins the tellers of a *single story*, reducing ABE to employability and upskilling. Therefore, this contribution aims at telling a different story, the original one: A compelling and strong *history* of quality development in Austrian ABE and about its mission to serve the learners' wellbeing, tackle educational disadvantage, and promote emancipation and social justice through ABE. The following part is dedicated to the beginning of this story.

## Part 1: Back to the roots of ABE in Austria

This section presents findings from e-mail interviews conducted in 2016 with Elisabeth Brugger and Antje Doberer-Bey, both pioneers and promoters of basic education for adults in Austria, who developed and realised the Viennese pilot project (Brugger et al., 1997). Treml (2005, p. 21) noted that pedagogical ideas cannot be observed directly and therefore he claimed: *What is not written in the texts does not exist*.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, these narrations, following the oral history approach, aimed at identifying significant personal experiences and profession-related theoretical concepts. Interview questions were framed according to the *episodic interview* (Flick, 2007, p. 238ff.). A written interview enables profound remembering and reflecting and it allows communicative validation in a dialogical form (Schiek, 2014, p. 380-383). Narrative analysis focusing on events and

self-presentation (Flick, 2007, p. 436-442) was applied.<sup>4</sup> The main points of the interviews can be outlined as follows:

- **... reducing inequality and promoting autonomy:** At a young age, Brugger<sup>5</sup> came to the conclusion that school should promote *gifts, individuality, curiosity, thinking and learning; as a consequence, I thought, pedagogy and teachers' attitude had to be changed, and sufficient foundations and accesses to knowledge had to be provided for all* (EB: 2). She chose teacher training because she was convinced that *education, knowledge transfer, thinking and learning are valuable vehicles for changing society, reducing inequality and promoting autonomy and justice, if they take place in an appropriate way* (EB: 1). At the teacher training institute in Merano (Italy), she encountered a critical and open-minded climate *as a result of the 1968 movement, a rather progressive view of the world*, where ideas from the progressive education movement were taught (EB: 16). Working as a primary school teacher, she realized that *with support and encouragement, learning was easier* (EB: 3). Her studies at Austrian universities enabled various formative encounters: She got to know education initiatives (district work) in Berlin (EB: 4), and in southern Italy she researched basic education in community projects (EB: 5).
- **... a person's value does not depend on their level of education:** Doberer-Bey<sup>6</sup> emphasized the importance of personal experiences for her pedagogical/andragogical attitude and ideas – even before *the theoretical positions and the reading* (ADB: 1). She reflected on her childhood in South America, where shortly after her birth Corina, a young indigenous woman, joined her family as a domestic worker: *she lived with us and stayed until I reached adulthood*. Corina could only attend school on an irregular basis and had to make her own living from the age of twelve. *What has this experience taught me? That a person's value does not depend on their level of education*. (ADB: 1) At the same time, it sensitised her to the fact that *the possibilities of shaping one's own life depend on educational opportunities, and social allocation in a society takes place via economic status and educational opportunities* (ADB: 3). Later, she experienced this in her own life: Her parents, who had been academically educated themselves, could not afford her higher education due to health problems. So, she worked as a secretary in South America, later also in Germany and experienced *the (social) narrowness, the limited possibilities, also as a woman* (ADB: 4). With the help of friends of her family, she managed to initiate change: *when I left, letters of application to the university and to a student dormitory were drawn up* (ADB: 5). *It was the confidence in my abilities and the right amount of support that opened the way for me*. (ADB: 6) Her academic education at German universities was clearly influenced by the 1968 movement, i.e. participating in political debate or organising seminars autonomously (ADB: 7-8).
- **Back to professional roots – crossed paths:** After a few years as a teacher and in further teacher training, Brugger decided to focus entirely on adult education in the early 1980s. For many years, until her retirement, she was Pedagogical Director of the *Volkshochschulen* umbrella association (EB: 19). In the post-war years, many *Volkshochschulen* offered courses in orthography (EB: 6, 23). However, she recognized a different need: On the one hand, help was needed in filling out course registration forms; on the other hand, older residents and those with a migration background were often unable to participate in the written documentation of her oral history project. As a consequence, coaching and

German reading and writing courses were offered (EB: 6). This marked the beginning of her professional development with regard to basic education for adults, which included networking activities with *Volkshochschulen* in Germany and involvement in academic debate: i.e., contributing to an international comparative study (Lichtner, 1988), or absorbing concepts and initiatives in Great Britain (EB: 7-9). In 1987, she worked as a teaching assistant at Teachers College at Columbia University in NYC, where she became acquainted with Mezirow, who showed interest in Brugger's Viennese oral history project (EB: 9-10). She was familiar with Mezirow's theoretical concept because of Brookfield's 'Developing Critical Thinkers', which she drew on for a comparative analysis of Gramsci and Freire in the context of a critical examination of the role of pedagogy and teachers (EB: 14-15). Thus, Brugger brought the Transformative Learning Theory to Austria (i.a. Marsick & Finger, 1994) and referred to the concept in the documentation of the pilot project, where she used Mezirow's 'perspective transformation' as a heuristic concept for explaining participants' decision to enrol (Brugger et al., 1997, p. 104-106). Having become acquainted with ABE in the USA, she realised the usefulness of computers (i.e. typeface, professional world/occupations), everyday documents (forms, advertisements, announcements, package inserts etc.), and numeracy (EB: 10). Doberer-Bey taught Spanish at an Austrian university, where she gained access to *foreign language growth*, a method developed in Vienna, with authentic materials anchored in the everyday lives of the learners: *This approach was formative for many years of language teaching, and also important as a background to my literacy work.* (ADB: 11). Brugger and Doberer-Bey finally met at an event of the *Volkshochschulen* on political education with reference to South America. Doberer-Bey co-organized this event and, in this context, became acquainted with the works of Freire and Boal (ADB: 12). Brugger and Doberer-Bey discovered a shared understanding of *Bildung* and of adult (basic) education, against the background of traditional education and the school system (EB: 20, ADB: 16). Brugger won her colleague over for the implementation of the pilot project (EB: 20). Planning the pilot project, Brugger pointed out that *it was about enabling the participants to take part confidently in social life with the help of written expression* (EB: 21). In the words of Doberer-Bey: *The offer has to hit the very heart of people's being.* (ADB: 14) This outlines an understanding of education as lifeworld-oriented and aiming at empowerment and (potentially) emancipation. The question whether power relations are examined critically in ABE was seen differently: With regard to the pilot project, Brugger pointed out that this claim would have been set too high, because it was preconditional with regard to the participants' *background knowledge* and their *ability to reflect and analyse* (EB: 21). Doberer-Bey looked at the adult educators' professional development and claimed *awareness that these power relations exist, that they take effect, mostly at the expense of the weakest [...]. There has to be awareness in order not to blame learners for their 'weakness', their 'failure', if the expected progress is not shown.* (ADB: 24)

### ***Is there an Austrian ABE tradition?***

The pilot project ended in 1995 due to cancellation of funding. Doberer-Bey pushed ahead on a project-by-project basis. By the end of the 1990s, she cooperated with colleagues in three major cities (Linz, Salzburg, and Graz), and joint projects *shaped ongoing*

*developments* (ADB: 25; Doberer-Bey, 2016). This *imprint* is still visible in the relevant documents issued by the Federal Ministry of Education (ADB: 23), an observation which holds true up until 2018 (see discussion of *signposts*). It is probably due to Austria's smallness that over the years a common line has been developed and set as a binding national standard through negotiation processes between leading experts and policy makers, culminating in the national programme Initiative Erwachsenenbildung/*Adult Education Initiative* (IEB), providing ABE (and, as a second area, lower secondary education) from 2012 on. This standard has many authors and is the result of many years of professional work. Nevertheless, Brugger's and Doberer-Bey's pedagogical and andragogical ideas and expertise led to the pilot project. These primary roots and its spirit laid down the foundations of ABE in Austria.

A pivotal trajectory of this foundational work is empowerment through learner-centeredness in terms of recognising and building on participants' abilities and needs. This leads to didactical approaches based on learners' previous knowledge, experiences, interests and lifeworld (Nuissl, 2010) and asks for a learning culture of appreciation and recognition (Fleming, 2016). This corresponds with the depiction and notion of learners as 'competent comrades' (Belzer & Pickard, 2015) and contributes to raising and recognising the learners' voices. This root also draws on a life-deep and life-wide understanding of adult (basic) education, an extensive understanding of literacies and a holistic notion of *Bildung*, understood as transformations of basic figures of self- and world-relationship, as formulated by Kokemohr (2007). In their broad conception of ABE, Brugger and Doberer-Bey stand in a tradition of education as outlined in part 2. Findings based on qualitative interviews with adult educators and learners in ABE in Austria showed preconditions for and effects of transformation in terms of personal development and social inclusion (Kastner, 2011). Critical-emancipatory concepts and theories contributed to this core foundation in terms of illuminating and questioning power structures (Freire, 1973) aiming at humanisation and democratisation. The Transformative Learning Theory offers an integrated approach of promoting and understanding individual and collective transformation in ABE with regard to (self-)empowerment, emancipation and – ultimately – social change (Brugger et al., 1997, p. 104-106; Kastner, Motschilnig & Cennamo, 2018; King & Heuer, 2009; Tett, 2018; Wright, Cranton & Quigley, 2007).

The following part paints a picture of the *Zeitgeist* for the significant personal experiences and profession-related theoretical concepts of Brugger and Doberer-Bey, and outlines the theoretical frame of reference for the baseline of ABE in Austria.

## Part 2: A theoretical frame of reference for the Austrian case

Referring to Brugger's and Doberer-Bey's pedagogical/andragogical concepts (based on the interviews), the following section outlines selected core theories related with the very beginning of ABE in Austria in a reconstructive way.

- ***Lebenswelt – a significant concept:*** The concept of the *Lebenswelt/lifeworld* shines through past and present pedagogical learning theories in many variations (Göhlich, Wulf & Zirfas, 2014). In Husserl's philosophical phenomenology (1970) and Schütz's social phenomenology (1974), *Lebenswelt* is concerned with the recording of subjective everyday world(s) or worlds of experience. These are culturally shaped worlds of meaning grounded in every experience, understanding and interpretation of the given environment. Drawing on Lewin's *field*-concept,

*life space* thus proves to be a *performative* reality (Deinet, 2014, p. 8). The subject in the phenomenological perspective is a *product-producer* of life and social reality (Meyer-Drawe, 2000, p. 103). Socialisation theories from Mead via Goffman to Bourdieu and Habermas advocate the assumption that socialisation processes occur through (life-deep and life-wide) explanations with which subjects make the world significant to themselves (Honig & Behnken, 2012, p. 12). Bourdieu (1982) created a vivid concept for the interaction between subject and environment with the notion of *habitus* (p. 171-173). In this concept, the sense of an increased sensitivity for the integration of learning and educational processes in cultural, economic and social contexts is strengthened, without ignoring the *single* subject's perspective. Habermas' (1981, 1988) concept of the world we live in (and work in) also refers to an intersubjectively constructed *sedimented rule knowledge* (Habermas, 1988, p. 348). In a certain sense, the *life world* represents the inner perspective, but is integrated into social systems (outer perspective). Thus, *life worlds* are never completely *free of power and domination* (Habermas, 1981, p. 40); they are literally *colonized* by mediation instances such as money, media, and power (p. 476). According to Habermas, a *free space* for an *equal* communication – where power is certainly present but reflected by all parties – is the *yardstick for the degree of emancipation of a society* (Boeser & Schnebel, 2013, p. 56). This *free space* may only be achieved in the reflexive justification of a joint *communicative space* according to Habermas. *Lebenswelt* provides a foundation for the broad and general understanding of *Bildung* in ABE, and *Lebensweltorientierung* (Arnold, 2010, p. 185) represents a core principle of adult education. As described in part 1, *Lebenswelt* has significant meaning in the personal experiences and professional activities of Brugger and Doberer-Bey.

- ***The dialogue – a Denkfigur/figure of thought:*** *Dialogue* is a pivotal *Denkfigur* in Habermas' critical theory and Freire's description of dialogue as a source of liberating educational work (Schreiner, Mette, Oesselmann & Kinkelbur, 2007, p. 23). *Dialogue* does not mean a dialogue between isolated subjects, but is in its basic structure already a *political, communal, collective educational process* in which those in dialogue address their common action and reflection to transform and *humanize* the world (ibid., p. 10). In a *free* (communicative) *space*, where narratives and experiences are exchanged, moments of reciprocal empowerment may emerge. The latter happens by reflecting power structures and social inequalities (e.g. gender, ethnicity, social class). Liberating empowerment, which does not intend to *domesticate* learners through education, is a prerequisite for appreciative and emancipatory adult (basic) education. This conception points beyond researching learners in their living environments and focuses on interactive and social learning and transformation processes. The (Austrian) *roots*, as shown above, were inspired by the socio-critical spirit not to act exclusively formatively, but to enable transformation of learners, professionals and society. Contrasting the mainstream discourse of economisation of education, this concept aims at personal and collective change regarding patterns of action, thought and world meanings and critical perception of the self and the significant-others (Von Felden, Schäffter & Schicke, 2014, p. 71). *Dialogue* thus entails major potential for transformation and social justice.
- ***(Multiple and situated) literacies in the Austrian approach:*** Freire's pedagogical activities were a source of inspiration for the Austrian approach to ABE (Doberer-Bey, Hrubesch & Rath, 2013, p. 218) as well as for the *New Literacy Studies* (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Tett, Hamilton & Crowther,

2012). A critical revision and expansion of literacy is a mutual endeavour understanding literacies as a social practice. Problematically, according to Bourdieu, the exclusivity of the *legitimate language* in Western epistemologies as the dominant perspective of *literality* is focused on the idea of proficiency in reading and writing as a sufficient precondition for educational advancement and political participation (Grotlüschen, 2012, p. 61-69). Social and economic inequalities would thus simply be ignored and the consequences of discourses on domination and power individualized (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1996). The questioning of such misinterpretations is pivotal for critical-emancipatory approaches: Freire claims that pedagogy is never neutral (Schreiner et al., 2007, p. 33-34). According to this understanding, ‘multiple literacies’ (Street, 2003, p. 79) are crucial. Regarding knowledge production, the New Literacy Studies asked how socially sensitive research is possible at all with a Western, dominant, and normative regulative. As an attempt to respond, ‘a conceptual apparatus’ for research purposes and professional practice was developed. This provides for a distinction between ‘literacy practices’ and ‘literacy events’ (ibid.). *Literacy practices* narrow the view to the (formative) learning of cultural techniques. The term *literacy event* refers to situated learning in the *Lebenswelt*, based on experiences (bodily, emotional and spiritual). This idea of holistic learning is represented in various learning theories, where learning is conceptualised as an *incidental* moment (Grotlüschen, 2015, p. 232; Künkler, 2011). A *literacy event* refers to the holistic and physical grasping of ‘Reading the Word and the World’ (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Subsequently, *holistic* learning experiences may promote empowering learning processes; and learners may turn from subaltern subjects into sovereign (Gramsci, 1949) and liberated subjects (Schreiner et al., 2007, p. 31).

- **Formative learning or transformative Bildung:** Brugger’s and Doberer-Bey’s critical position towards a traditional understanding of learning and teaching (curriculum-driven, hierarchical), as represented in conventional education, entailed an examination of alternative (adult) learning theories (drawing on Mezirow or Freire) and praxis. There is a variety of pedagogical/andragogical (non-mainstream) theories of learning that focus on transformative and/or experience-based processes: This *debate* is central to Faulstich’s book ‘*Lerndebatten*’ (2014), where pedagogical/andragogical learning theories were connected: Pragmatism (Dewey), phenomenological learning discourse (Meyer-Drawe, 2000), subject-scientific *relational* perspective elaborating Holzkamp’s theory (Künkler, 2011), (neo-)subject-scientific considerations (Grotlüschen, 2015). Koller (2017), referring to Kokemohr, re-visits Humboldt’s *Bildung* as a transformative process. The *reflexive shift* (Beck et al., 1996) in *postmodernism* supports the notions of emotional, social and (life) practical dimensions and therefore extends primarily cognitive and constructivist approaches. ABE in Austria has been inspired by transformative ideas of learning and facilitating, and is in line with ideas of critical-emancipatory (liberating) education.
- **Oral history and dialogue as a mental (learning) space:** In the field of lifelong learning (Alheit & Dausien, 2002), biographical-narrative approaches play a central role (Von Felden et al., 2014, p. 61-85). The narrative becomes a *mental rehearsing* (Fahrenwald, 2011, p. 85); Brugger emphasised oral history (projects), where *story telling* is a learning space for perspective transformation. *Reproduction*, stabilisation, or transformation of individual and collective beliefs (Neumann, 2000, p. 7) take place in dialogical encounters. Transformation is

intertwined with moments of *un-learning* and/or *re-learning* (Meyer-Drawe, 2012) and is triggered by *disorienting dilemmas* (Mezirow, 1991), *incidences* and *discrepant experiences* to the familiar or habitual. Transformative learning can hardly be forced by and *produced* through guided learning based on a narrow(ing) curriculum.

- ***Appreciation and recognition as a ground for joint transformation:*** Turning to prerequisites for good teaching and learning, a distinctive core element for ABE is *Anerkennung/recognition*. Honneth (1990) understands *Anerkennung* as a concept for political liberation for sovereign subjects. *Anerkennung* is achieved through interactively mediated negotiations in order to balance inner (personal) perspectives and outer (milieu-typical and socio-structural) demands and depictions (Ecarius & Müller, 2010, p. 19). This balancing performance can be very complex: For everything that is not sufficiently representable in the social context of one's own biography (i.e. ABE needs) becomes a *taboo* for a powerless subject, producing the *shame of inferiority* (Neckel, 1991, p. 171). These experiences of (self-)exclusion create the self-image and external depiction of a *deficient individuality* (ibid., p. 172). Drawing on Honneth (1990) and Stojanov (2006), a deficit-oriented depiction of learners needs to be shifted and transformed. In ABE, appreciation is key. Following Tett (2018), who presents findings on 'positive caring relationships' as catalysts and promoters for *reciprocity* and *recognition* (p. 11), this attitude towards learners is also visible in ABE in Austria (BMB Abt. Erwachsenenbildung, 2017; Doberer-Bey, 2007; Krenn, 2013).

This theoretical framework presented here, emphasises the learners' and providers' worldview. It paints a picture of multiple ways of understanding literacies and ABE, against the background of *Bildung*. It promotes dialogical and dialectic debate and facilitates re-thematising and/or shifting debilitating discourses on literacies or adult learners, providing a basis for critical debate with policy makers and professional and intellectual resistance against neo-liberal governance practice as tellers of a *single story* about a restrictive way of outcome-orientation.

The following part, based on a document analysis, portrays phases of national development and discourse.

### Part 3: Phases of development of ABE and the Austrian debate

ABE and its reflection did not begin without theory and were at the same time essentially tied to actors in practice, which remained the case in the following years.<sup>7</sup> A chronological-systematizing analysis of all publications and studies related to ABE in Austria (until 2017) show a temporal proximity and clear connection with projects and initiatives funded by governments at regional and federal levels. Based on this document analysis, different phases can be discerned.

***Discovery of a phenomenon by international comparison:*** The reception of debates about *Lebenswelt*, learning theories, reading research and the broadening of the view beyond Austria to the USA (Brugger & Robinson, 1989) and Europe (Brugger, 1990) or to the connection between adult education and literacy in development co-operation contexts (Baha, 1990) coincide with the pilot project at the *Floridsdorf Volkshochschule*. Austria, which was not yet a member of the

European Union (European Community at that time), was able to join international debates mainly through the traditionally well-networked *Volkshochschulen*. Even though there was little prior knowledge about course planning for a still roughly defined target group, the *adult illiterate with German mother tongue* (Brugger et al., 1997, p. 29, 31), it was possible to build on experiences from second chance education. In contrast to the school standards that were didactically adapted to adults in traditional evening classes, the educational goals for ABE still needed to be defined. For this, *basic knowledge in the broadest sense* (ibid., p. 29) should be addressed: Reading and writing (in German) were key, but numeracy, handling of technical devices, knowledge of politics, society, and culture, and social learning and communication were addressed equally in a learner-centred and *Lebenswelt*-approach, drawing on learners' needs and interests. From the very beginning, it plainly went beyond reading and writing courses. Learning tasks showed a clear orientation towards life skills (reading instruction manuals, counting change when shopping, filling in forms, historical contexts for understanding newspaper articles, etc.), and adult educators' tasks included planning, co-ordinating, counselling and facilitating (ibid., p. 37-52). This differentiation can still be found about 25 years later in programming documents on ABE. Unclear whether it was a hidden problem (Doberer-Bey & Rath, 2003) or rather a repressed one (Brugger et al., 1997), the scope of the problem could only be determined by comparative evaluation, which assumed that the number of persons concerned in Austria did not deviate significantly from the share in other industrialised countries. Accordingly, the UNESCO spoke of 300,000 to 600,000 people who do not have sufficient proficiency in reading, writing and numeracy in figures still referred to in 2013 by the Ministry of Education, as no evidence was available to date (Dorninger, 2013). Amid a slowly growing perception on the part of politics and research, special programmes were established at traditional adult education institutions, but also new providers and institutions emerged, which took over capacity building for ABE such as networking, professionalization (Aschemann, 2013; Muckenhuber, 2013) and thematic public relations work (Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte für Kärnten, 2005). The path of scientific monitoring and evaluation of practice, which had already started within the pilot project, continued with funding from the Ministry of Education.

***Diversity of expressions – but also different concepts:*** The common term of (functional) illiteracy was increasingly classified as inappropriate in the views of practice (providers, learners), research and politics. However, this consensus ended where an alternative and non-stigmatising concept became necessary: (Basic) cultural techniques, basic education, (il-)literacy, literacy, written language competence, basic or key competences, educationally marginalized, etc. can be found side by side and reveal distinct disciplinary approaches or understandings. The attribute *lacking* has increasingly been replaced by *low*, which essentially expresses the ability to develop and – to some extent – the need for development. This differs from sweeping statements about target groups, such as *socially disintegrated* and *in need of help*. To equate poor orthography with poor intelligence in a short-circuit manner was identified as *intellectual snobbery* (Krenn, 2009; Krenn & Kasper, 2012). This follows a credo, which Lenz (2010) articulated on behalf of Austrian adult education: *Nobody is uneducated*. Anyway, explicit arguments about terms had little effect on overarching language regulations (Schlögl, Wieser & Dér, 2011). A theoretically and empirically well-

informed new term, which simultaneously provided an essential dimension of impact, was introduced: *Vitale Teilhabe*/vital participation (Kastner, 2011), which combines the demands of educational work with a comprehensive understanding of impacts for both individuals and society at large. Parallel to this struggle for a non-stigmatizing, non-shameful, anti-discriminatory language, there have been recurring objections from scientists who, often with reference to the paradigm of lifelong learning, have problematized the growing commitment to ABE against the background of power relationships, marginalization in the self-understanding of critical education theory (Christof, Doberer-Bey, Ribolits & Zuber, 2008), and have expressed the accusation of falling for a generalized illusion of problem-solving through education.

- **Collecting evidence – competence assessment:** Austria first participated in a survey on adult competence as part of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Results were presented in late 2013 (Statistik Austria, 2013) and in-depth evaluations for low competence levels followed (Statistik Austria, 2014). For the first time in Austria, a data-based statement could be made on the extent to which people are affected, namely that around 17% of 16 to 65-year-olds in Austria (just under a million people) have only the lowest level of (reading) literacy. With this share, Austria is in the middle of the international rankings (Bönisch & Reif, 2014). Looking at those grouped into the lowest competence levels in all three domains tested, the share is 11% (Kastner & Schlögl, 2014). Previous assumptions have clearly underestimated the situation.
- **Challenging multi-level governance:** This new evidence-based situation faces a conceptual diversity, a lack of systematisation of the field of practice, which has only begun to take shape, and the ambiguous political responsibility for adult education in Austria. After a period of funding courses and networks for the development and professionalisation of ABE providers (since 2003), the Ministry started to co-ordinate a contractually agreed policy for the Länder and the Federal Government. This first succeeded in 2012 and is now integrated into the national strategy for lifelong learning (Republik Österreich, 2011). On the way to the accreditation of eligible provisions, however, a regulatory policy measure took place, which defines the field of practice in political terms: In the justification for the national programme IEB it is noticeable that ABE is both an offer for personal development and a condition for economic growth. What is striking is that no reference is made to transnational programmes such as the European Parliament resolution on illiteracy and social exclusion (2002) and the UNESCO Decade of Literacy (UNLD, 2003-2012). While planning and dimensioning were initially dependent on approximations (Länder-Bund-ExpertInnengruppe, 2011), planning for the following periods could refer to PIAAC and monitoring data from the implementation and evaluation of the first programme cycle (Stoppacher, Edler & Reinbacher-Fahrner, 2014). Offers dealing with all programmatically relevant content are accredited, provided they meet defined standards. Pure language courses do not correspond. Without elaborating on this, the standards refer to positions of critical pedagogy (in the tradition of Freire), migration pedagogy and postcolonial theories. In order to ensure that this claim is met, the subject-specific training of the teaching staff is also an element of accreditation. This follows the assessment that the high demands can only be met by sufficiently qualified personnel (Doberer-Bey, 2010, p. 122).

- **Demand and reality of ABE work:** The programming document of the IEB states that provisions are committed to be *demand-driven* (IEB, 2015, p. 16), want to *enable people to solve every day problems* and in this way create conditions for active social, political and professional participation (ibid., p. 18). Additional guidelines offer further descriptions: *ABE work makes cosmopolitanism and awareness of transculturality possible and allows social exclusion mechanisms and discrimination to be recognised and critically reflected. [...] It encourages individuals to help shape and change the world instead of 'only' living in it.* (BMBF, 2014, p. 4) In this way, the understanding of the *Lebenswelt* as a milieu is countered and tensions between a conservative ideal, the acquisition of traditional cultural techniques, on the one hand, and formal education as a socio-political programme, on the other, become apparent. In practice, this claim can probably only be partially fulfilled, since it is necessary to link up with real preconditions. Tenorth (2004, p. 170) soberingly states:

In many cases, it is not so much the initial reasons that are addressed here, but rather the bright heights of target concepts, which describe the end and the maximum, not the realistically described basis or the everyday starting point of educational processes.

### Signposts of change: Is Austria joining the tellers of a *single story*?

Some policy-driven attempts, structural and programmatic in nature (IEB since 2012), and even politically motivated ruptures (since 2018) have been rendered visible. The main questions are: Is the sustainability of almost 30 years of *Austrian tradition* in ABE, as reconstructed in this article, at risk? If so, what consequences might occur?

These disruptions shall be discussed as signposts of a changing landscape:

1. **Standardisation and one of its unintended consequences:** The first signpost is rooted in the structure of the IEB. Funding for providers of ABE is per capita and completion rates of courses. Therefore, providers who used to address Austrian *natives* likewise, report a lack of money for outreach measures and raising awareness. The monitoring data show that those people with basic educational needs who speak German as their first language are not reached by the programme in an expected proportion and are clearly underrepresented. This is intensified by the fact that there are few free-of-charge German language courses for speakers of foreign languages (refugees and migrants) in Austria (apart from obligatory integration courses and voluntary offers without quality assurance).
2. **Technocracy over expertise:** The second signpost is presumably explicable by the funding authority's expectations with regard to monitoring the use of funds awarded and in relation to achieving measurable learning outcomes, and consists of several components: Within the Ministry of Education, a generation change is taking place, meaning that educational ideas and concepts of the 1960s and 1970s (critical-emancipatory, holistic, and related to *Bildung*) seem to decline in importance. The Ministry commissioned a consultant company to develop a curriculum for ABE within the IEB. The company itself was not previously involved in ABE. Leading experts in the field were excluded from the curriculum development process. Additionally, providers with high expertise in the field, but dependent on public funding, are not in a position to raise their voices and express disagreement.

3. ***Narrowing the curriculum:*** The implementation of a curriculum leads, as a third signpost, the way to standardisation of learning content by describing learning outcomes in a highly detailed manner and laying down measurable educational levels. This narrows the broad and plural approach of ABE and neglects learners' knowledge and abilities. In addition, the curriculum has a clear orientation towards the labour market, marketable certification/qualification and skills upgrading, in line with a Western, neo-liberal worldview. Acceptance of this binding curriculum and its obligatory learning outcomes on different levels of educational achievement is doubtful for the practitioners and learners. Additionally, facilitation of ABE and learning on a day-to-day level is made more difficult. Overall, this curriculum signifies a disruption with the ideal of learner-centeredness, which was specifically developed to meet the learners' needs and interests. These elements are in stark contrast with the Austrian tradition.
4. ***Teaching supersedes facilitating:*** This signpost involves the adult educators by putting them in an awkward predicament. The new curriculum requires the balancing of participants' needs, interests, and knowledge of curricular requirements in terms of measurable learning outcomes, and of maintaining the providers' responsibilities towards the funding authority. The pivotal question is, whether or not the adult educators will be able to maintain their andragogical approaches to facilitating and learning, and to 'keep learners and their goals at the centre' against all odds, as described for the UK case by Allatt and Tett (2019). For Austria, two essential factors must be taken into account. Firstly, there is a high staff turnover in the field. Secondly, the corresponding chapter on andragogical and critical-emancipatory learning culture (BMBF, 2014) in the programming document of the IEB will be deleted and replaced by the new curriculum.
5. ***Research and development – disliked:*** This signpost appeared within the latest call for publicly funded projects in 2018. Firstly, the Ministry called for developing and implementing ABE courses. This means that the good tradition of project-based innovation in the field and further development/evolution seems to have ended. Secondly, researchers and research institutions were excluded by defining them (us) as ineligible. This meant that research and development carried out jointly by practitioners and scholars and practitioners-scholars dialogue were prevented. Plans for community-based participatory research projects, involving providers, learners, facilitators, counsellors and scholars, could not be realised. One such example was a concept of researching workplace learning as part of *Lebenswelt* in a participatory way by involving formally low-qualified employees in order to jointly research abilities and needs and develop tailor-made continuing education in the workplace.

#### **In lieu of a conclusion: raising voices**

Effects of the five signposts described above could provoke declining acceptance and demand because of a possible loss of attraction or attractiveness for learners, adult educators and providers. On a societal level, this could contribute to neglecting the phenomenon of *basic education need*. This would once more lead the way to individualising the 'problem' as such, and the idea of educational inclusion would be abandoned.

For ABE in Austria, expertise-supported development has a longer history than its scientific examination. However, in times of changes and disruptions (neo-liberalism/populism), research gains a particular position and mission in order to observe ongoing shifts and raise a critical voice. Therefore, according to Street (2011, p. 584), *the (telling) case* shows the importance of different narratives and multiple perspectives on literacies. The inventory of practical and theoretical roots provides a framework for understanding what might be at risk (exemplified by the Austrian case). Questioning power relations (on individual, collective and policy/societal levels) is crucial and the importance of critical-emancipatory approaches in science and practice is evident.

The authors claim the responsibility of science and research to move forward theoretical framework(s) and provide counter-hegemonic perspectives and maintain the heritage of critical-emancipatory education (as presented here using the example of ABE in Austria) and a broad understanding of literacies/ABE to support the aims of sustainable humanisation and democratisation for all. A skill-oriented understanding of teaching will not suffice to reach this aim.

It is necessary to observe these major changes in order to bring unintended or even harmful effects into public debate. This is seen as a task to be cooperatively maintained by experts in the field: the community of practice (experts, providers, and learners) and the scientific community in order to safeguard the *spirit* of ABE in Austria, as reconstructed in this article, against fading and disappearing in the long run.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Earlier, according to an international comparative study (Lichtner, 1988), literacy courses for migrants were offered at the Ottakring Volkshochschule in Vienna.<sup>2</sup> Part 1 was prepared by Monika Kastner, part 2 by Irene Cennamo, and part 3 by Peter Schlögl. The section on the signposts of a changing landscape of ABE in Austria was especially written for this article in order to contribute explicitly to the call for this issue.

<sup>3</sup> The authors decided to use italics in order to signify quotes that were translated from German to English by them. So these quotes are not literal quotations but informal translations. This applies to the entire text.

<sup>4</sup> The interviews commenced in July 2016 and data collection was concluded in October 2016. Data is available as online and attachment texts. Consecutively, 'EB' refers to the e-mail interview with Elisabeth Brugger, and 'ADB' refers to that with Antje Doberer-Bey, and respective pages of the chronologically organised texts are cited.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Elisabeth Brugger, born 1954 in Bozen/Bolzano (Italy); E&T: post-secondary college for teacher training (1972) in Meran/Merano (Italy); doctoral programme 1972-1977 at the Universities of Salzburg and Innsbruck (Austria) in educational science and psychology, dissertation on gender-specific socialisation with regard to education and occupation; several research stays (i.a. Australia, Canada); training in Counselling and Supervision 1990-1992; professional activities: 1973/1977-1978 teacher (primary and lower secondary); 1978-1979 teacher training (for civic education); 1987 teaching assistant at Teachers College at Columbia University (Victoria Marsick); since 1985 lecturer for educational science

in higher education; 1981-1986 pedagogical management at Ottakring Volkshochschule; 1987-2014 pedagogical director of the Vienna Volkshochschulen (training for course instructors, quality development, guidance and counselling, programme development, i.a. for oral history, basic education, environmental issues); 2012 state prize for a project on training of elderly volunteers for supporting the learning of children; Elisabeth Brugger raised two children.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Antje Doberer-Bey, born 1946 in Santiago (Chile); E&T: high-school and bachillerato (general qualification for university entrance 1965) in Santiago; 1968-1974: teacher training (English/Physical Education) at Heidelberg University and school pedagogics at Freie Universität Berlin (Germany); training in Supervision 1996-1998; doctoral programme 2002-2012 at University of Vienna/Department of Linguistics, dissertation on literacy and language development; professional activities: 1978-1991 teaching of Spanish in adult and higher education and for enterprises; 1989-2016 set up and development of ABE in Austria including counselling/facilitating and content development in the pilot project, train-the-trainer/professionalisation, R&D in EU- and nationally funded projects, quality development, cooperating with and consulting of the responsible ministry; 2009 state prize as adult educator of the year for her achievements in the field of ABE; Antje Doberer-Bey raised three children.

<sup>7</sup> Few exceptions for linguistic or didactic questions of first and second language acquisition can be found.

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