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The Special School as 'Natural Habitat'? On the Persistence of Segregated Education of Students With Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract:

In this essay, I explore the reasons behind the persistence of segregated education of students with intellectual disabilities in Austria. Doing so, I critically interrogate three phases of the Austrian education system concerning the role of students with intellectual disabilities: (1) The rapid expansion of special schools in the 1960s and 1970s, (2) the rise of integrated education in the 1980s and 1990s and (3) the last two decades, which were characterized by budget cuts, school accountability policies and failed efforts to further the implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords:

ableism; inclusive education; intellectual disabilities; segregated education; special schools

Introduction

Over the course of the last decade, most European countries have made various efforts to make their school systems more inclusive – with a specific focus on the participation of students with disabilities. And indeed, as a recent study on the progress of inclusive education in eight European countries demonstrated, the percentage of children and adolescents considered as having special educational needs (SEN) has considerably increased in mainstream schools (Buchner et al., 2021). However, a closer look at these developments with regard to a specific subgroup of students with SEN reveals that students with *intellectual* disabilities have not benefited from this ostensible progress towards inclusive education to the same extent as other students with disabilities. As the same study showed, the percentage of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools has not increased as much as the overall percentage of students with SEN – and has remained, by comparison, rather low. Accordingly, the percentage of students with intellectual disabilities placed in segregated educational settings remains rather high in most countries, which is why the authors of the study concluded that students with intellectual disabilities remain 'the key target group' of the special school system (Buchner et al., 2021). However, as the authors conclude, the reasons for this phenomenon are rather complex and differ among countries.

In order to explore this phenomenon in the Austrian context, I will reconstruct the role of students with intellectual disabilities in three phases of the Austrian education system. Doing so, I will loosely relate to concepts of Dis/Ability Studies, such as Ableism (Campbell, 2009), and combine these with a constructivist understanding of educational spaces (Buchner, 2017). First, I trace the establishment of segregated schooling for children with disabilities in the 1960s and 1970s – and how students with intellectual disabilities became one of the core populations of the special school system. Second, I critically interrogate policies of integrative education in the 1980s and 1990s, as I argue that they laid the foundation for present-day problems of inclusive education, especially by failing rather often to respond to the needs of students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools. Third, the phase since 2000 is interrogated, which is characterized by budget cuts, policies on inclusive education, and school accountability, with a focus on its effects on the population of students with intellectual disabilities. As I conclude, even though segregated schooling lost its hegemonic position, despite various political efforts, the special school remained the primary address for students with intellectual disabilities until today.

Establishing the Hegemony of Segregated Education: Special Schools as 'Natural Habitats' of Children With (Intellectual) Disabilities

I begin my course of inquiry by focusing on the 1960s and 1970s, decades that saw a rapid expansion of special schools in Austria – including the implementation of specific special school settings for students with intellectual disabilities. This is of key importance, as up until then, the majority had been excluded from any formal education whatsoever. Continuing discursive practices already established in the 19th century, children labeled as 'imbecile' were categorized as *ineducable*

('bildungsunfähig') (Schmitten, 1985) and 'exempted' from schooling until the early 1960s. Thus, children with intellectual disabilities were constructed as *impossible learners, or rather as the constitutive outside of formal education.*

However, the School Organization Act ('Schulorganisationsgesetz'), adopted in 1962, intended to ensure the right to education for everybody, including children with intellectual disabilities. Thus, the new law provided for – besides nine other impairment-related special schools (e.g., special school for blind children) – special schools for so-called 'severely disabled children' ('Sonderschule für schwerstbehinderte Kinder'), the term used at that time for children with what is today referred to as intellectual disabilities. Insofar as the new law and the new type of special schools ensured access to education for students with disabilities, even for some of the children formerly considered as ineducable, they can be considered milestones. However, the same law also cemented a *fundamental ableist divide*: the separation of students into 'regular' students and those with disabilities, as well as their sorting in two differently calibrated educational spaces: The special school and the 'regular' school. According to this divide, within the age- and ability-related homogenized spaces of 'regular' schools, 'regular' students were instructed under the 'regular' curricula – and students placed in special schools were subjected to distinct, specific pedagogical programs. For example, students with physical impairments were educated according to the curriculum for 'the special school of children with physical disabilities', which was characterized by a strong therapeutic focus in order to normalize their physical functioning as much as possible – as this was considered the best type of support at the time. Over the course of the next decades, this impairment-focused structure of special schools expanded rapidly and was celebrated by educational authorities: 'The tremendous increase in autonomous special schools […] illustrates impressively the efforts of the last ten years, to accommodate the special school student in his familiar living environment ('Lebensraum')' (Weyermüller, 1980, p. 9). Following this quote, the *special school mutated to something considered a 'natural habitat'* of children with disabilities – illustrating the hegemony of the idea of the special school as the only thinkable educational space for students with disabilities.

A Place for 'Almost Unable' Learners or: How Children With Intellectual Disabilities Became One of the Key Target Groups of the Special School Regime

However, within the emerging hegemony of special schooling, the population of children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities played a specific and increasingly important role.

In order to understand this development, it is important to note that the above-mentioned act of 1962 established access only for those children with intellectual disabilities who were regarded as *able* to follow special school education – but did not suspend the distinction of in/educable. Hence, a rather large group of children with more severe forms of intellectual disabilities, labeled as ineducable, was still deprived of access to (special) schooling. Thus, one might consider that the education system was not only structured by one, but rather *two fundamental spatialized ableist divides*: the differentiation of students into with/out disabilities and the related obligatory placement in different types of schools, as well as the exclusion of those considered ineducable from any formal education. Accordingly, even students with intellectual disabilities attending special schools were constantly threatened by the possibility of being re-evaluated as ineducable and consequently excluded even from segregated education. Thus, this group's access to the spaces of special education can be considered as rather precarious – unlike students' with other impairments. This established a high dependency of children with intellectual disabilities and their parents on the goodwill of professionals, who had the authority to judge whether a child was meeting the ability expectations to be considered 'educable'.

As with other special schools, teaching in 'schools for children with severe disabilities' was thought to have to be conducted following an own, impairment-related special curriculum. Interestingly, this curriculum differed markedly from all other special school as well as regular curricula. First, there was only one curriculum for the whole course of compulsory education (while the others differentiated between school grades and subjects). Second, the curriculum was characterized by lower ability expectations linked to specific special education aims, differing greatly from the subject-related learning goals of both the regular and the other special school curricula. For example, the main educational aims of the curriculum of the 'special school for children with severe disabilities' were "to stimulate the overall development of students with severe disabilities that are approachable ['ansprechbar'] and educable ['bildbar'], to reduce their disabilities by special education measures if possible, to prepare their subsumption into small communities (family or group home), to teach them the most elementary behavioral rules and to equip them with some basic skills for their later life" (Bundesministerium für Unterricht, 1963, p. 1). Thus, even though children targeted by this curriculum were no longer defined as ineducable, they were now subjected to what seemed like a pedagogical parallel universe in relation to mainstream schooling, preparing them for a segregated life after school. While other special school curricula also foresaw strong therapeutic/special educational work, they also showed a much more coherent orientation towards the contents of regular curricula and aspired to provide

students for some integration into the first labor market after graduation. Thereby, students with intellectual disabilities were positioned at the bottom of the ability-based hierarchy of the special school system. This discursive work of positioning children with intellectual disabilities as '*almost unable, but somewhat educable learners'* legitimized their education far away from the gates of mainstream schools and solidified their dependency on the special education system. In other words, *the formerly constitutive outside of formal education had been integrated into the spheres of special education*. Nonetheless, these developments must also be viewed in relation to the structures of mainstream schools at the time, which were still characterized by homogenization and instruction of large classes by one teacher – a structure that served to legitimize the segregation of all learners regarded as unable to follow these modes of schooling.

Finally, the construction of special schools as the only thinkable education environment was facilitated by medical knowledge at the time. For example, the leading Austrian psychiatrist in the field of intellectual disabilities in the 1970s, Andreas Rett, argued that children with intellectual disabilities could only be educated in special schools due to their low IQ (Anlanger, 1993).

Consequently, at the beginning of the 1980s, students with intellectual disabilities had become the second largest group of the special school system (Engelbrecht, 1988) – and, next to students with learning disabilities, the second key population of the special school system.

Challenging the Hegemony of Special Schooling: The Rise of Integrative Education

The hegemony of special schools started to erode in the 1980s, when the Austrian disabled people's movement and the parents' movement for integration joined forces, pointed out the exclusionary, disadvantaging effects of special schools, and demanded access to mainstream schools. However, proponents of integrative education did not only call for access, but also for a comprehensive transformation of the education system as a whole, and demanded individualized learning for every child.

And indeed, this movement created a strong dynamic towards change. Across Austria, so-called pilot school projects ('Schulversuche') on integrative education were conducted over the course of the 1980s. Thus, the formerly homogenized spaces of mainstream schools, characterized by placements of students considered as 'able', were diversified by integrating students with disabilities. These pilot projects were equipped with additional personnel resources, intended to allow for individualized instruction of all students based on their abilities and needs. Over the course of the 1980s, the number of projects increased and integrative education gained more and more public attention. Due to this discursive shift and the related, increasing pressure on political decision-makers, Austrian school law was amended in 1993 and 1996, granting parents the right to choose between a mainstream or a special school for the education of their child with disabilities – at least on paper. Over the course of the 1990s, students with disabilities were increasingly placed in mainstream schools. Thus, in 2000, around 50% of all students with SEN were educated in mainstream schools (Buchner et al., 2021) and the number of special schools had been reduced from 525 in 1993 to 389 in 2003 (Gruber & Ledl, 2004). Hence, integrative education was often considered a "success story" (Anlanger, 1993, p. 1), as it challenged the automatism of the education of children with disabilities in special schools and led to a rising demand of integrated settings. However, even though the hegemony of special schools was over and the number of special schools reduced, special schooling remained a key feature of the Austrian education system.

Furthermore, the extent to which students with intellectual disabilities benefited from the developments outlined above is uncertain. Within the integration movement, especially the first mainstream school careers of students with intellectual disabilities were promoted as 'success stories': In a way, they were turned into 'living proof' that integrative education was not only possible – but even so for a group of learners previously considered as only 'educable' within the spheres of segregated education (Mader, 1999). However, the number of special schools for students with intellectual disabilities remained relatively stable over this period. Thus, it can be assumed that despite the overall increase in placements of students with SEN in mainstream schools, special schools remained the main educational spaces for students with intellectual disabilities.

Integrating Special School Logics: Integrative Education as an 'Add-On'

Critically examining policies and practices of integrative education, these measures can be understood as a rather problematic *integration of the logic of the special school system into mainstream schooling*. The originally intended goal of integrative education, to not only open up the gates of mainstream education for students with disabilities, but to transform the whole school system in order to allow for a more just, individualized learning for everybody, was, as I will show in the following, reduced to an *'add-on'* – which at least implicitly suggests the reproduction of spatialized structures of the 'great ableist divide' – but now under the roof of the 'regular' school. Thereby, rather than liberating students with disabilities from this ableist grammar, it was instead transferred to the 'mainstream' with them.

Obviously, the laws on integrative education did not challenge the ableist divides that were produced by the structures of the special school system, but instead updated

them at various levels. For example, the distinction between students with and without SEN was not abolished but upheld when practicing integrative education. Similar to special schools, students with disabilities who want(ed) to gain access to mainstream schools also need(ed) to be diagnosed as having special educational needs – a label that proved stigmatizing and marginalizing within the spaces of mainstream education. However, the integration of special school logics into mainstream education might be exemplified best by the instruction of students according to differing, impairment-related curricula. Intended to foster a more differentiated instruction based on students' needs, teachers were expected to orient their teaching of students with intellectual disabilities by the already known curriculum, originally designed for education in special school settings. Thus, also within mainstream schools, students with intellectual disabilities were educated according to the curriculum of the special school of students with intellectual disabilities (including the lowered ability expectations inscribed therein) – a curriculum that followed a specific agenda which, as shown above, had little to do with the regular curricula. Even though this curriculum was revised in 1996, the overall structure of the curriculum remained almost identical, including the deficit-focused, ableist constructions of children with intellectual disabilities – ensuring the importation of these understandings into the spheres of mainstream education. In addition, the obligation for teachers to develop individual education plans (IEP) for students with intellectual disabilities (as preset in the new curriculum) must be considered as ambivalent, as it suggests that only this group of learners needs an IEP – and other students can be instructed in the same, homogenizing way.

Furthermore, the integration of special school logics into mainstream schools manifested in a specific concept, which had been evaluated as beneficial for practicing integrative education (Buchner & Proyer, 2021) and became the most common integrative setting: the so-called integration class. Integration classes were (and are) characterized by a lower number of students (around 20, of which at least 5 need to be categorized as having SEN), more personnel resources (one 'regular' and one special education teacher), and specific concepts (both teachers should facilitate cooperative teaching, offering differentiated learning opportunities in relation to the needs of every student). However, this concept not only reproduced ability-based distinctions at schools (regular vs. integration classes). In addition, the construction of teacher teams (special education and 'regular' teacher) implied a certain responsibility of the special education teacher for the students with SEN. Even though in some integration classes this combination of pedagogical expertise was used to facilitate a practice of integrative instruction considered as successful (Anlanger, 1993), a problematic spatialized pattern emerged in many integration classes, which remains common in these settings: The separate instruction of students in relation to their assumed abilities during the main subjects (German, math, and English). Thus, especially students with cognitive impairments (from learning difficulties to intellectual disabilities) were positioned outside the classroom in these scenarios, in order to allow for individualized instruction of these students, while the 'regular' students – considered 'more able' – remained in the classroom. In other words, the practices emerging within these settings re-produced homogenized spaces of 'regular' instruction – and spaces of special education outside the walls of the classroom, which becomes the 'norm space' in this dynamic.

In conclusion, integration classes were intended to work as an 'add-on' for specific territories of mainstream schooling, which led to an integration of special school logics, while the traditional grammar of schooling, the techniques of homogenization, normalization, and hierarchization of students in relation to their (cognitive) abilities was not suspended. As I argue, students with intellectual disabilities often benefited the least from these settings, as they, due to the everyday, spatialized (and judgmental) marking of differences in ability, were prone to marginalization by their peers, which is also mirrored in quantitative studies (e.g., Schwab et al., 2019).

Developments Since the 2000s: Policies on Inclusive Education and the Renaissance of Special Schooling for Students With Intellectual Disabilities

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the resources for integrative (and later on, inclusive) education in Austria have been cut back. Hence, a growing lack of resources for this area of the education system can be observed. This lack can be linked to the budget cap for inclusive and special education in relation to the percentage of students labeled as having SEN at 2.7% (of all students). However, this estimation was never updated in relation to the real figures, which have grown dramatically over the course of the last decade (up to 5.1% today) – leading to a lack of personnel resources and causing what has been considered 'quality problems' of integrative education. More concretely, this meant fitting individualized support for students with SEN, especially those with intellectual disabilities (Specht et al., 2006). This led, as I argue, more and more parents to withdraw their children from mainstream schools or rather enroll their children in special schools – in combination with another 'incentive' of special schools: the opportunity for after-school childcare, an option (still) not offered by most mainstream schools for students with intellectual disabilities (Monitoringausschuss, 2018).

However, the signing (2007) and ratification (2008) of the UN-Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) obliges Austria to make its education system more inclusive. And indeed, some years later, in 2012, Austria adopted the National Action Plan

Disability, which aimed to foster the implementation of the UNCRPD – including at least a few measures in the area of education: (1) the reform of teacher education, aiming to equip in- and preservice teachers with the skills needed to practice inclusive education and (2) the 'Inclusive Model Regions' policy, which was intended to make the school systems of three model regions (Carinthia, Styria, and Tyrol) more inclusive, to reduce special schools within these regions, and to gain insights for a further transformation towards an inclusive education system (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2015). Thus, practitioners and administration authorities explored new ways to foster inclusive education – but only for two years, as the policy was canceled due to a change of government in 2017.

In sum, despite these efforts, the structures for providing inclusive education, including the problems mentioned, remained the same: integration classes. Over the course of the last decade, practitioners within these settings increasingly struggled with a lack of resources due to the mentioned cap (Buchner & Proyer, 2021). However, as can be assumed, other policies increased this pressure and fueled the already mentioned problematic practices of separation in integration classes. For example, the educational standard ('Bildungsstandards') policies, which came into effect in 2009, included the testing of learning progress within the main subjects – and feedback of the results to schools. As students with SEN were excluded from these test regimes, the testing practices probably urge(d) teachers to focus on the learning achievements of 'regular' students, leading to the already described practices of separation of students during these lessons.

These dynamics, the already problematic construction of integration classes as an 'add-on', the continuing lack of resources as well as the failed policies on inclusive education are leading to what might be considered as a *renaissance of the special school for students with intellectual disabilities*, as more and more parents seem to pull their children out of mainstream schools, transferring them to special schools - hoping for support that fits the needs of their children better (Buchner & Proyer, 2021).

Conclusions: Unfinished Business

As shown, the results of the international comparative study on the state of inclusive education in relation to students with intellectual disabilities mentioned in the introduction of this text are not surprising. Considering the case of Austria, one might even say that while segregated education has lost its hegemonic position for students with disabilities due to the rise of integrative and inclusive education in general, it has remained the primary address for students with intellectual disabilities until today, due to various reasons. First, the grammar of schooling remained untouched over the course of the last decades, as the implementation of integrative education did not lead to the necessary comprehensive reform towards individualized education for all, but rather to the mainstreaming of the logics of special schooling. Second, the systematic thinning of resources in combination with failed policies on inclusive education affected the quality of schooling students with intellectual disabilities in integration classes further, leading to increasing pull-out practices by parents.

Thus, even though integrated and inclusive education policies opened up the gates of mainstream schools for students with SEN, one can observe an increasing *ableist 'creaming' and 'cleansing' of educational spaces* in schools – during an era that is officially dedicated to implementing the UN-CRPD. Thus, the emerging, perverted form of inclusive education means education in mainstream environments for those students with SEN *who are able enough to cope with limited support and a rather unmodified grammar of schooling*. In conclusion, the persistence of segregated education of students with intellectual disabilities is nothing like a 'naturally occurring' phenomenon but needs to be seen in relation to the rather untouched ableist pillars of schooling – and policies, that were only successful to establish a certain, ableist heterogeneity within schools' spaces.

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