

Diversity and co-operation: cultural education in Austria

Current policy developments and related EDUCULT projects

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Austrian cultural policy is traditionally characterised by two attributes: on the one hand, there is a strong reference to a pre-republican cultural heritage; on the other hand, there is heavy bias towards artistic production.

Therefore, cultural policymakers believed for a long time that any changes in the cultural behaviour of the audiences – the recipients – could well be neglected. This misconception now starts to take revenge as audience attendance is declining. The negative consequences are also displayed in a public survey – a culture monitoring – conducted last year for the first time since the 1980ies. According to the survey, only a minority of Austrians still approve public funding for culture and the arts, whereas a 60% majority says that they would not have any personal connection with the cultural and artistic products created with public funding.¹

Cultural education and access to the arts on the governmental agenda

The coalition of social democrats and conservatives in office since February 2007 has put finding a remedy for the gradual marginalisation of culture and the arts on the agenda. A declaration of intent in the governmental agreement states that cultural education, participation and access to the arts will be of special concern: “This means more arts and culture at schools and the development of new forms of arts education, in co-operation with established cultural institutions.” As a precaution, the negotiators have added the passage “in consideration of present resources”.

The minister for education, arts and culture Claudia Schmied, now responsible for the implementation of the government programme has in her statements affirmed that cultural education would be “at the core” of her considerations about “connecting education, innovation and creativity”.

In the minister’s view, cultural and artistic activities play a central part in acquiring skills and competences if cultural education is regarded as the ability to orient oneself in a continuously changing, complex aesthetic environment – and to be an active and creative “designer” of our every-day surroundings. Claudia Schmied’s intention is to implement cultural education in a culture of learning and teaching, fostering the individual talents of each child and young person.

The government programme sounds less ambitious in the field of public cultural institutions, also a policy area of minister Schmied. At least, the coalition agreement suggests considering a free entrance for all federal museums once a month. In the meantime, Schmied’s department has initiated a working group on the federal museums that has published a position paper, also pointing out that museums need

¹ <http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/15575/23800007berichtkultur.pdf>

to open their programme and activities “considering new audiences (also with a migrant background)”.²

Evidence based policy

In compliance with government programme that also encourages an improvement of empirical data in the interest of evidence-based policy in cultural and education policy, the department of education, arts and culture has commissioned EDUCULT to carry out an Austria-wide qualitative research on the situation of cultural education. The intention of this project was to highlight basic aspects like definitions of cultural education, characteristics of quality and value, the specific motivation and qualification of those working in the field – teachers, educators and artists –, plus questions of resources and funding and examples of good practice.

The minister’s idea about this project was not only to arouse public interest in cultural education, but also to create a comprehensive – and comprehensible compendium of existing praxis in the field, followed by identifying areas of improvement and finding strategies how to tackle them.

Working on a tight schedule, EDUCULT designed the research project as an exploratory action research. By conducting interviews and round-tables in four federal states, over 100 individuals working in schools, school administration, youth programmes or in the cultural and artistic sector have been involved. The research made evident that a large and lively variety of arts education activities takes place; some of them are described in the good practice chapter of the final report. And yet, most of the activities are depending on the enthusiasm and engagement of the people involved that quite often are struggling with existing structures. Usually people work isolated and do not know a lot about other activities in their area, which sometimes forces them to reinvent the wheel over and over again in a gruelling way.

The collected statements reconfirmed the assumption that arts and cultural education as a model of “consequent audience orientation” (Armin Klein) is not well-positioned in the Austrian cultural sector. This is even valid for those institutions drawing the major part of their audiences from school visits. The usual laments are about very tight budgets consistently threatened by cutbacks and administered by freelancers that do not have a say in strategic decisions of arts and cultural institutions.

A joint strategy is needed

The feedback on our project demands the development of a joint strategy involving all stakeholders – policymakers, teachers, school administrations and parents, as well as artists, cultural educators and administrators. This effort serves as a basis for developing a convincing, feasible scenario and a catalogue of tangible objectives and instruments, relating to transparent qualitative and quantitative indicators: What should cultural education in Austria look like in ten years time? Or, more precisely: with what kind of instruments and resources are we creating what kind of effects?

² http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/15883/mpi_grundsatzpapier.pdf

Unlike in other European countries – Germany, England, the Netherlands, for example – where arts and cultural education has meanwhile become a broadly debated topic, the discussants in Austria pointed at a striking deficit of public discourse. Many of them regretted to be “stewing in their own juice” and therefore to be caught in convincing the convinced with the same old arguments again and again. It is evident that such a tendentious hermetic debate has negative effects on the quality of cultural education.

In order to involve other potential stakeholders, EDUCULT has included positions of artists, business people, journalists and scientists in the report. Their arguments prove that this was worthwhile, also in order to develop a prospective PR-concept for cultural education. After all, parents, employers and the media are important stakeholders that should not be – arbitrarily or intentionally – excluded.

This kind of more comprehensive strategy, consciously and confidently – and not from a defensive position – embracing advocacy and lobbying to involve new audiences and target groups and creating new partnerships across traditional sectors could lead to new synergies: arts and culture and health, integration, science, economy... Reciprocally, arguments and know-how beyond the sometimes limited experts' perspective could benefit the field of cultural education. As some positions show, the openness to collaborate is greater than one would initially expect, considering the usual cultivation of prejudices.

The positive side-effects of the research projects were encounters of people working in different areas that did not lead to a lamentation about restricted resources. Instead, we experienced a controversial debate characterised by politically, ideologically and aesthetically diverse positions, involving potential partners that – strikingly, yet typically for a small country like Austria – did not know much about each other. This corresponded with a large demand for a more regular, more intense exchange of information and experiences, rendering obvious the need for creating working groups, semi-institutionalised networks and web-portals.

We need structural development

In addition to these basic requirements, the report made the need for structural development evident. A first step towards inter-relating the ministerial departments – education, arts and culture and their sub departments – was made by creating a coordinative position for cultural education affiliated to the ministerial office. One of the tasks is to bring transparency in the policy of the individual departments, administering budgets, programmes and projects of different range and scope and thus of different impact. Because of the isolated character of the activities – is it on the federal, state, municipal or institutional level – they never reach a critical mass that would stimulate the Austrian cultural and educational landscape.

The report also suggests the creation of a cross-sectoral steering committee joined by experts from the arts, culture, education, science, economy, social interest groups and the media in order to monitor the implementation of measures and their effects.

We also recommend the institution of an expertise centre (according to the Dutch example Cultuurnetwerk Nederland) to provide reliable data for evidence-based policy.

Pilot projects in the field stimulating the cooperation of schools and arts and cultural organisations – following international examples such as Creative Partnerships in England or “Kinder zum Olymp!/Children to the Olymp!” in Germany could inspire innovation and quality. Having a project of joint reference could also improve networking and enlarge involvement, thus also attracting more public attention.

Cultural education and intercultural dialogue

A closer collaboration of cultural institutions and schools could also reach new audiences: In Vienna, almost 50% of pupils at public primary schools have families with a migrant background. Museums and other institutions need to find strategies to relate to the young generation – otherwise, they will continue to alienate the people living in Austria: “There are many barriers and codes in museums. Being a migrant, I feel lonely in there. The building in itself is a mechanism of exclusion”, a woman told us. Though there are again examples of good practices, our research in the context of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 – “Art, culture and intercultural dialogue”, the report is available in German³ – has shown that so far, only few museums and other cultural institutions develop means to connect with a more diverse population residing in Austria. The basic decision to be made by leaders of cultural institutions is either to continue relying on tourists or to start communicating with the locals. This would mean working according to the International Council of Museums’ (ICOM) mission statement that Europe’s museums “must acknowledge the importance of migration for its cultural identity. Only by approaching the stranger among us with empathy, museums in Europe can engage in the dialogue of cultures and people for the benefit of understanding.”⁴ The statement could well be adapted to theatres, concert halls and other institutions. As a matter of course, this also demands a corresponding cultural policy mandate.

³ http://www.educult.at/uploads/media/Bericht_IKD_v6_druckfertig_.pdf

⁴ <http://www.icom-europe.org/>