

Self-regulated Learning, Equality of Opportunities and the Mediation of Ideologies: A Discourse Study of the Austrian School System

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Abstract

This paper outlines the methodological framework of a discourse study of the Austrian school system and presents findings on the question of what underlying meanings and ideologies are mediated by practices of self-regulated learning and how this contributes to the reproduction of neoliberal societies.

In the first section I will discuss how practices at schools can be analyzed by the methodical framework of the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse and whether practices can be analyzed by discourse study at all. The key assumption is here that although discourse studies can't examine the subjectification process of the single student, the range of possible options and a presumed "ideal" way of acting can be determined. Referring to concepts of the sociology of knowledge, an understanding of the relationship between discourses and practices will be described and implications for empirical studies will be argued.

In the second section of this paper, I will show briefly three main findings of the study: the first one shows how practices of self-regulated learning are positioned as measures to promote more

efficiency in the learning process as certain competencies like creativity and self-responsibility are assumed to be acquired more effectively. The second is that self-regulated learning environments promote an understanding of equality of opportunities as performance-related justice and thereby delegate the responsibility to the individual regarding their positions in schools and societies. In the third finding it is argued that the claim for more equality of opportunities actually derives not only from a humanistic perspective but also from demands of a neoliberal speaker position.

Keywords: *self-regulated learning, Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse, Austrian School System, Equality of Opportunities, Ideology critic*

Introduction

In 2012, the *Neue Mittelschule* was institutionalized as a new type of school for children between 10 and 14 in Austria and aimed to replace the *Hauptschule*¹. By this measure the Ministry of Education governed by the Social Democratic Party of Austria claimed to make a contribution for more equivalent opportunities for all children. But in their statements there were strong tendencies to describe the realization of equivalent opportunities as a task that has to be performed by the individuals. Consequently, the conditions of equivalent opportunities are implemented by a highly individualized, self-regulated learning arrangement, in order to focus on the individual's strengths and activate their potentials. According to a typical statement in the discourses, this type of school was designed in a way that pupils should be encouraged to realize and activate their full potentials. Self-regulated learning environments would provide more freedom for the individual student to demonstrate his/her learning progress contrary to traditional schooling with teaching-centered instruction and standardized assessment. If pupils had more personal space in

the learning process, so it was assumed, educational inequalities could be reduced.

This is remarkable as sociological studies clearly identified the early segregation in the Austrian school system at the age of ten (where the successful children then attend the *Gymnasium* and the rest the *Neue Mittelschule* or the former version, the *Hauptschule*) as the by far most influential source of social inequality in the education system and yet -- this segregation was not abolished as both types of school still exist today. Even more remarkable was that the Austrian Social Democratic Party, who strongly promoted a uniform type of school for all children until the age of 14 over decades, was mainly in charge of that reform. Yet, one would expect that if a party makes such a strong shift within their own political agenda, critical voices would express their serious concerns about the program and ask whether more social justice could really be achieved while the main reason for inequality continued to exist. Most remarkable was the fact that this didn't happen, neither members of the Social Democratic Party nor external experts raised these questions in the public discourse; instead the official interpretation was widely shared. To give an example, the leader of the Social Democratic Teacher's Union said after the first schools started: "*The Neue Mittelschule is a first step towards more equality of opportunities [...], a school where the talents of the individual students are supported and less disadvantages exist for socially deprived children.*"ⁱⁱ (Dmytrasz, 2007)

Although this may appear to be strange, we need to assume that the lack of protest and cheer of Social Democrats about having institutionalized this new type of school means that these actors actually believe that they contributed to more equal opportunities. If this is the case, we have a strong indication that there has been a shift in the public discourse regarding the meaning of the term

“equality of opportunities”, and important questions are then: What does it mean, what is its position in the discourse and how did the distortion of the term take place? And further: What does this mean for schools?

In scientific terms, I want to show findings on the following primary research questions:

- Which interpretative schemes on equality of opportunities can be found in the discourse of the institutionalization of the *Neue Mittelschule* and how are they attached to the concept of self-regulated learning? What is the relationship between self-regulated learning and equality of opportunities?
- How are discourses, particularly by the interpretative scheme of self-regulated learning, influencing practices of learning in schools? What ideologies are mediated within these modified practices and how can both processes – the process of modification of practices by discourses as well as the mediation of ideology within these practices – be described from a sociological point of view?

This paper starts with the latter point, as the question to which extent discourse studies can examine practices (or whether they can do so at all) is highly controversial. I want to show here the position of the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse and its methodological assumptions regarding this relationship. Following this perspective, I will explain the composition of my empirical study, its scope and limitations and finally some empirical findings, which are part of a larger investigation I conducted as my PhD-project. In the final section the findings will be discussed centering the initial question of how the term of equivalent opportunities has been distorted, how the misconceiving of actors of a social democratic movement can be explained and what

consequences occur as a result of these ideological operations. By this discussion, the primary aim of this article – that discourse research can be a tool of ideology critic on the level of policy-discourses in society as well as in analyzing the structures framing practices on a micro-level in institutions like schools – shall be made visible. Finally, the relationship between these distortions and the political orientation of the Social Democratic Party in power at the time will also be discussed.

Discourses and practices: the methodological perspective of the “Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD)”

Within critical pedagogy, there is a notable skepticism that so-called “postmodern” approaches can provide insights into praxis in schools or whether they could be a useful tool for critical pedagogy. Au and Apple (2011, p. 91) express this skepticism by stating

“that the world of education and elsewhere is not only a text. There are gritty relations out there, realities whose power is often grounded in structural relations that are not simply social constructions created by the meaning of an observer. Part of our task, it seems to us, is not to lose sight of these gritty realities in the economy, in the state, and cultural practices, at the same time as we recognize the dangers of reductive and essentializing analyses.”

In this view, discourse studies were merely a philosophical, text-based method of deconstructing meaning; it can be regarded as a theoretical approach to phenomena, in which, after too much theorizing, the postmodernist needs to be reminded that there is a “real world” “out there”. The implicit assumption here is that as a result of its assumed theoretical approach, discourse analyses cannot tell anything about the way people act in their daily life. Practices, as Apple understands the term, are not determined by the surrounding structures and institutions: Students may contest, transform or reject dominant values or

institutional rules and evolve their very own cultural and social practices, which can therefore only be taken account of by ethnographic (or other observatory) methods. Speaking of those, Apple (2012, pp. 24) notes:

“These ethnographic investigations helped me make it abundantly plain that there was no mechanistic process where the external pressures from an economy or the state inexorably mold schools and the students within them to the process involved in legitimization and in the accumulation of economic and cultural capital. Students themselves have power based on their own cultural forms. They act in contradictory ways, ways that both support this reproductive process and partially ‘penetrate’ it.”

It shouldn't be doubted here that discourse study can't describe or predict practices-in-use in a single school or in a definite setting. But if we agree with Apple here, does that mean that discourse study is actually just an analysis of text and reality is a total different thing? Can the analysis of discourses in fact, as suggested, contribute nothing to an understanding of practices? Are practices fully constituted in a non-diagnosable way by individuals?

To understand the relationship between discourses and practices, it is important to remind oneself of insights provided by the sociology of knowledge. Mannheim as well as Berger & Luckmann (1966) argue for a strong connection between individual actions and knowledge, which is considered as produced and distributed by institutions, collective agents and culture. The social production of knowledge is not only limited to scientific knowledge, as this regards also everyday knowledge, people's conceptions and beliefs as well as norms, sense and meaning. Berger and Luckman emphasize that the process of a collective stock of knowledge is ongoing and not-intentional; still, the “social production of reality” means that individual modes of perception and interpretation of the world are based on collective knowledge while at the same

time each individual is also part of the production process: “These actors' minds perceive the world not as transcendental subjects, but by using the knowledge devices at hand or, if routine (inter)action and interpretation is disturbed, by ‘creating’ new ones in extended processes of social interaction” (Keller, 2005, p. 5).

The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (which combines the theoretic approach of the sociology of knowledge with the discourse theory of Foucault) therefore argues that the subject is neither determined by discourses nor is it autonomous to them.

The term *discourse* is described by Keller (2013, p. 28) as a structured and structuring complex of statements that produces and stabilizes a symbolic order and thereby institutionalizes a binding context of meaning and a stock of knowledge within fields of practice. This means that discourses have a constitutive function for practices and agents in the fields of practice, of course, individuals can develop their own way of thinking and acting in practice; but the hegemonic and legitimized knowledge marks the starting point of this development as well as it creates certain boundaries that Foucault describes as boundaries of the sayable. In the same act in which discourses legitimize and institutionalize certain knowledge, they tend to run short of, or exclude other knowledge and meanings that may question existing power relations or dominant norms and values. As the individual therefore hasn't a full range of acting options while at the same time discourses define a “normal” or “ideal” way of practice, Keller argues, that discourses can in an extended way be described as a “complex of ongoing statements and thereby embedded practices”, which points to the strong interrelation between discourses and practices. To analyze this relation further, three levels can be distinguished on which dominant ideas and knowledge in discourses shape practices:

- Knowledge being institutionalized means that it becomes the base of formal regulation of practice, especially in the school system. In Austria, we can differentiate here between formal regulation by federal law (that concerns most practices in schools through curricula, forms of assessment and so on as well as the organization of the school system itself), public service law (that form the code of conduct for teachers and students and are allowed to sanction teachers who will act against it), and the sphere of academic teacher education, including scientific research: In all this segment, there are formal authorities that do not only supervise the individuals' (the teachers' as well as the students') behavior in the classroom: By the means of their formal authority, they are able to define what counts as a good behavior for teachers and students and, following that, what makes (and who is) a good teacher. Keller (2011, p. 237) argues that by choosing (and rejecting) certain knowledge that defines and justifies what makes a professional agent in practice, by mediating this interpretation to the public sphere and by sanctioning those who act differently, institutionalized agents like school authorities “produce” our view of what teachers are and should be: “discourses produce 'know-how' in the sense of a more or less extensive ability of acting in a specific field. Therefore, they are involved in the production of a (specifically in that field operating) social agent.”
- Following the phenomenological approach of Schütz, Keller notes that modes of perception and interpretation of the world by the individuals are indissolubly linked to a common stock of values, meaning and experience. To Schütz, the constitution of meaning is a process that is tied to the interpretation of the other. Developing this argument further, Keller (2008, p. 78) emphasizes the “social genesis or 'construction' of schemes of interpretation, that are active in processes of awareness and transform a sensual 'living' into a meaningful, reflective 'experience'”. In this approach it is clear that for the individual meaning can't be constituted without the discourses as a referring point for their own reflections.
- Young (1971) already pointed out that knowledge itself is never neutral, but positioned as legitimate, hegemonic knowledge it conceals its bias and its effects, which lie in mediating certain worldviews and stabilizing existing power relations. The same thing, we can add here, goes for practices that are based and justified by hegemonic knowledge. The knowledge naturalizes the history and the

genesis of current praxis, they appear then as reasonable and politically neutral at the same time. Regarding the question of this article this means that in practices of self-regulated learning the knowledge on which this practice is based is mediated in the practice itself; and at the same time, the principles underlying these practices then become the benchmark for teachers and students. Schneider (2015) calls the effect of discourses the naturalization of existing practices and dominant knowledge in a mutual reaction against each other, as the “ontologization” of discourses.

All three aspects shall demonstrate the influence of discourses on practices. So it is argued that discourses are not determining, but have a constitutive function for practices. The analysis of discourses shed light on what is believed to be the normal or ideal way for teachers in schools to guide practices like learning or assessments; and it can point out the boundaries of the sayable (and actable) and so give an idea of the range of options in between. But once again I would like to highlight that the findings presented in this article do not claim to state anything about concrete practices-in-use in a certain school.

The strength of this methodical approach on the other hand is to illuminate existing power relation by reconstructing the discourse. As mentioned, the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse follows the argument of Foucault that knowledge is a result of power relations, and the analysis of the reconstruction of the genealogic process, how and why certain forms of knowledge have become hegemonic and what knowledge has been excluded or neglected, is therefore an analysis of forms of power. This implies also that the dominant knowledge and thereby legitimized practices stabilize and reproduce our current capitalist society, as in this practices a certain worldview is mediated.

Keller introduces a methodological concept to identify norms, values and worldviews underlying hegemonic statements by the term “interpretative

scheme”. Interpretative schemes are an arrangement of singular elements of information, (everyday) knowledge and commonsense assumptions from different discourses that all together form a common and typical cognition and approach to certain phenomena of everyday life. Interpretative schemes, as a result of discourses, create meaning on a collective level; they mark a generally approved appreciation (or notion) of phenomena from the individual's living environment in a sense that some phenomena are more likely to be regarded as “good” things or some behavior is considered as “good manners”. As such, these interpretative schemes exist objectively as part of a collective stock of knowledge and are mediated to the individual in the process of subjectification through practices. But as they always imply a moral component, they can be considered as the link between discourses and the individual's generation of meaning. Keller notes that interpretative schemes can be considered as a “bridge concept that allows to tread a path from the discursive level to lived practice of the individual and to focus on the individual use of interpretative schemes, including processes of interrelation, adaption, appropriation and rejection”. Consequently, the concept of interpretative schemes is well suited to examine processes of subjectification; studies of subjectification therefore combine discourse study with different methods (interviews, ethnographic studies) to explore the individuals’ handling of interpretative schemes in order to find out which circumstances allow people to reject subordinating forms of subjectivity and ideology (see Bosančić, 2016).

This contribution focuses on the objective dimension of interpretative schemes. It aims to reconstruct current interpretations of self-regulated learning, which has become an important element of learning practices with the implementation of the *Neue Mittelschule* as a new type of school in Austria. Based on the outlined methodological approach of the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse, this contribution follows the assumptions that interpretative schemes

found in documents and texts of the institutionalization discourse of the *Neue Mittelschule* do not only guide practices of learning but are also mediating interpretations concerning the relationship between the individual and society – questions of social inequality and the merit principle for instance. In this way, these practices distribute forms of subjectivity and can so be analyzed as a part of society's reproduction process.

In scientific papers published in German, there are a couple of empirical discourse studies based on the same methodological research perspective. To mention a few examples, I would like to refer to Sitters' (2016) research of the discourse on the PISA-study where she points out that putting children with migration background as typical example for disadvantaged pupils in the school system has actual effects on their schooling performance and is so reproducing existing inequalities. Palowski (2016) analyzes the discourse on "stay down" since the 1970s and shows the connection between the "typical" stay-downer and processes of selection regarding the legitimization of selection processes in economy and society. A third important study by Gerdes (2014) analyzes the history and formation procedures of the term "equal opportunity" and its function for the reproduction of society. Although studies show that there are no equal opportunities in the Austrian school system, Gerdes emphasizes how necessary the belief was that it did exist -- if pupils realize how unequal opportunities are, they wouldn't make any effort in school, so there wouldn't be any competition between students and, most important, social inequalities couldn't be justified any more. Gerdes (2014, p. 74) notes: "The potential of social upward mobility is crucial for the acceptance of social inequalities. It makes social inequality bearable, as part in the education system it becomes alterable state. Equality of opportunities means then that everyone can hope to move upwards by one's own effort".

In the scientific papers written in English, early notable contributions that tie a discursive perspective to the question of “micro-policies” and practices in schools come from Popkewitz (1997) and Ball (1994). More recently, it has been Agostinone-Wilson (2014) who scrutinizes the relationship between neoliberal discourses of educational reform and practices in school under a reproduction perspective. She notes: “Whether promoting classroom management as a way to ‘team build’ or steering students toward ‘self-regulation’, these efforts all work together to ultimately shape attitude and dispositions toward a capitalist ethos, embodied in the modern corporation”. Also contributions by Saunders, Murillo and Ayers question the relation between ideology mediated through practices in schools and reproduction, but only with a limited focus on the influence of discourses, or with no systematic empirical study of discourses. Likewise does Vasallo, who presents an insightful critique of self-regulated learning based on the experience of a teacher who rejected this type of learning, as for her it contributes to the reproduction of neoliberal society: “Such pedagogy had the danger of promoting an ethic of efficiency, normalization, and a breakdown in relationships—all effects that she understood as part of a neoliberal agenda”. She viewed self-regulated learning as “misaligned with agency, freedom, and empowerment because of its connection to the improvement of standardized test performance, individualization, and self-surveillance” (Vasallo, 2013, p. 272).

Research design

As the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse has no fixed methodic steps to follow, I would like to give a short description of my research procedure. I conceptualized three steps of research: my starting point was a prime analysis of such types of documents that had a distinct, regulative impact on the school system and were compiled within a ten-year period from 2007-2017. These documents included federal school administration laws, curricula,

enactments, decrees and circular letters passed by different public authorities, project reports of the school supervising agency (or other project curators in case the project was funded by authorities), documents from different departments of teacher education, scientific and popular booklets with teaching suggestions (if they were used for teacher education), as well as house rules and other regulations from a local level. So in the first step and in order to generate a primary data corpus, analyzed documents were mainly obtained from official institutions to determine the hegemonic discourse position.

Part of the first step was also the classification of “consortia of participating actors”. Keller defines those as groups of actors who share (due to more or less strategic reasons) a common position in the discourse that separates them clearly from other interest groups and participants. Consortia are therefore classified as entities that present a definable organizational form as, for example, a social movement, a political party or a trade union. The consortium can be tied to a speaker position or can create one, but a consortium of actors does not necessarily correspond to a single speaker position (for instance, there can be different, content-related speaker positions within a political party).

The second step is aimed to historically reconstruct the currently hegemonic discourse position. In doing so, I divided the data corpus in three “discursive strands” with a different content relation and different consortia of participating agents. The three were: self-regulated learning and the question of equal opportunities, the discourse on “making learning fun” and the discourse on standardization and *competency*-based instruction (though I will only present data from the first strand here). In each discourse strand, I examined a broader data corpus (up to in part 100 years back, 233 documents in total) that highlighted processes of modifications and shortages of information; it showed how dominant statements in education got in powerful positions and how they

correspond to the position of consortia of actors (or how their speaker position has changed historically).

It is important to note here that the analyzing process does not focus on the linguistic patterns or differences in the usage of language. Instead, the guiding question of the analysis “What is the typical feature, the pattern of a discursive formation” refers to the symbolic order that is in some way manifested in texts. Analyzing a singular, empirical statement means asking how the symbolic order expresses itself in it. Therefore, it is compared to other discursive elements and by contrasting many of those, the course of the discourse, processes of modification of statements and power relations become visible. Conducting the analysis, I followed Keller’s suggestion to use methodological devices of the grounded theory: a simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis, the creation of analytic codes and categories developed from data and the principle of theoretical sampling.

In the third step and as a result of the historical contextualization, the now dominant forms of information, classification, knowledge and interpretative schemes could be interpreted. Many works inspired by Foucault refuse steps of interpretation as Foucault insisted on the description of the "positivity" of discursive events, rejecting any kind of interpretation that aims to discover the one and true meaning. Keller argues, that this rejection is to be understood as a criticism on dogmatic Marxism and idealistic, essential assumptions. Keller (2005) notes:

“hermeneutical’ in the German Hermeneutische Wissenssoziologie is, in contrast, much more modest. [...] it simply pleas for methodological reflection on the researcher's use of interpretative skills. It argues for a socially accountable data analysis instead of reasoning on THE truth contained in textual data. Accordingly,

what is required then is a convincing argumentation for each step of the analysis”.

It is clear, that interpretation is needed to identify underlying meanings and ideologies mediated in discourses on self-regulated learning. But it is still important to see that those interpretations can and shall be questioned if not augmented solidly. Therefore, this contribution focuses on this aspect; the steps of the analyses cannot be shown here.

In the following, I want to present three main findings of interpretative schemes and underlying meanings and ideologies which are mediated in the discourse on self-regulated learning and equality of opportunities within the institutionalization of the *Neue Mittelschule*: The first finding I called the “self-regulated learning as a measure of efficiency incensement”; the second “equality of opportunity as performance-related justice” and the third “equality of opportunity and the exhaustive exploitation of societal resources”.

Findings: Interpretative schemes in the discourse of self-regulated learning and equality of opportunities

Self-regulated learning as a measure of efficiency enhancement

In the historical reconstruction it could be shown, that the term “*individualization*” replaced the term “*differentiation*”, which is interesting from a didactical point of view. In the curriculum of secondary schools from 1985, under the section “general didactic principles” it said that

“Differentiation in teaching is about preventing pupils both from over- and under-challenging situations. Arrangements of differentiation include all methodic and didactic efforts in order to cater for individual talents, abilities, predispositions, needs and interests from one or more pupils” (BMUK, 1984).

In the curriculum published in 2000, on the same page and under the same headline, the term “*individualization*” is added to the term “*differentiation*”. Further it is stated here that:

‘Pupils have manifold interests that in class can be expressed in various ways depending on their stage of development as well as on the selection of topics and approaches in instruction. It is the duty of schools to guide pupils to their best involvement of their achievement potentials. Efficiency and special talents are to be fostered therefore continuously’ (BMUK, 2000).

While the curriculum of 1985 uses the wording of “preventing pupils both from over- and under challenging situations”, the version of 2000 centers *increasing the efficiency and special talents* as the goal of individualization and as didactic principle. The shift is expressed in the fact, that authorities in charge at the latter point don't really seem to worry about students being over challenged rather than by non-maximizing efficiency and potentials. This interpretation of individualization didactics is also clearly recognizable in the circular letter “Initiative 25+” by the Ministry of Education, where individualized and self-regulated learning is positioned as most efficient learning: it is being defined as the;

“body of all methodic and organizational actions, assuming that learning is an entirely personal activity of each single student itself and which also focus on supporting and challenging each student according to his/her personality, his/her conditions and his/her potentials” (BMUKK, 2007).

This document shows that the shift towards the enhancement of efficiency of learning processes implies an enlargement of objectives of education as well as a focus towards learning outcomes. The individuality of the single student and his/her potentials that are believed to be demonstrated in one's individuality

shall increasingly become part of education. One aspect is thereby that under a supposed heterogenization of pupils, personal characteristics and qualities are no longer meant to be leveled out but to become part of the learning process – that means designing more open and flexible learning settings in order to take account of one's individual way of learning. The second aspect is that the personality of the learning individual itself and its potentials become part of the curriculum. However, as personal resources and characteristics are considered to be exploited in very individual ways, it follows that the utilization cannot be made in narrow and clearly defined ways (which is also a crucial point for assessment and evaluation). The following discourse element shows this on the example of organizational and social competencies:

“Social Learning is an indispensable component of the individualization of schooling. Therefore, schooling besides the mediation of sophisticated professional competencies will systematically be oriented towards the promotion of personality, initiative and self-responsibility, which are, not least to say, important criteria in the national qualification scale. [...] After all, by intense actions of individualization and self-regulated learning the success rate for schooling shall be increased and top performances and talents shall be promoted and forwarded” (Winkler-Rigler & Scharl, 2009).

As learning is considered to be most effective and efficient when the individual's learning is self-regulated, it is necessary that the student acquires those competencies that allow him to act so. From that follows what was already mentioned: the personality of the student becomes a subject matter of schooling as every student needs to work on themselves in order to improve their learning performances. And as this task needs to be done individually – as every student has different deficiencies – again self-regulated learning environments are required.

Last, but not least, the need for more individualized and self-regulated learning settings is also stated as a measure for better employability and a response to changes in the labor market. Sectors like the “creative economy” and the tendency towards “Lifelong Learning” would more than ever require competencies that can best be acquired by self-regulated learning, as in such settings forms of assessments can be conducted where students are allowed to demonstrate their personal capacities like creativity. Yet, it is important to mention that attributes like creativity were historically mentioned in speaker positions that advocated for an education for its own sake. In documents of the *Neue Mittelschule*, where efficiency and employability are promoted as ultimate objectives of schooling, these terms acquire a new meaning that differs considerably from their initial significance.

Equality of opportunity as performance-related justice

The term “*equality of opportunities*” is described in a paper by the *Zentrum für Lernende Schule* (2015, p. 15) in this way:

“Equality of opportunities [...] means that despite differences in ethnicity, sex, religious beliefs, physical condition, disadvantages or other categories of attribution, no child is being limited in its development by schools. Therefore, an indicator for successful schools is that pupils achieve similar learning goals related to their individual potentials but not depending on their more or less ideal starting conditions. The goal is that everyone leaves school with as much future options as possible”.

Reason for the implementation of the *Neue Mittelschule* was to “promote any student individually in the best way in terms of equality of opportunities”. The tight nexus between the terms “individualization” and “equality of opportunities” indicates that the two are considered as “two sides of the same coin”: the promotion of the individual student and of more equality of

opportunities for everybody doesn't seem to be a contradiction. What does this say about the significance of the term “*equality of opportunities*?”

The analysis showed an understanding of “*equality of opportunities*” as performance-related justice. The statement that pupils should “achieve similar learning goals related to their individual potentials” needs to be interpreted that one's individual potential and their learning performances justify their future position in society, if schools are to be seen as training places for the labor market – a perspective which is indicated by the expression “future options”. In this interpretation schools shouldn't compensate social inequality in society on an institutional level – in a way that within the institutions collective mechanism of discrimination are identified and handled (for instance, with a special curriculum for specially targeted groups that takes them out of the competition race), as overcoming social inequality is clearly not their intent. Instead, it is the individual's task to deal with his/her background, one has to find out their deficiencies and overcome them in a self-regulated way, where support may be provided, but only on special request.

As of course some students in fact move socially upward in the *Neue Mittelschule*, this practice of social inequality in society can be overcome – as a result of “hard work” by the individual – mediate an interpretation scheme that work performance is a fair reference point for society's understanding of social justice, the ones that made it up suggest that it could have been possible for all, but it's their own fault that they didn't make it. With this interpretation scheme it follows here, on the one hand, that mechanisms in society that foster social inequality get out of the radar of discourse and their overcoming on a macro-level is no longer a matter of debate – especially mechanisms within schools. On the other hand – and consequent to that – in documents of the *Neue Mittelschule* there will be no longer a distinction between individual or

collective forms of discrimination caused by societal mechanisms. No matter if a child suffers from dyslexia or gets less support at home as his or her mother is a single parent and working all day, anyone with deficiencies can ask for support, no matter what causes their needs.

This interpretation leads to the assumption that any student is considered as a potential recipient of assistance. In a press release (Schmied & Amon, 2011), the leading politicians in charge of the reform assert: “The Neue Mittelschule increases the future opportunities of more than 220.000 young pupils that went to lower middle schools before”. As the main plus point of the *Neue Mittelschule* are individualized, self-regulated learning arrangements with more assistance, this statement needs to be interpreted in such a way that all 220.000 students have potentially need for assistance in one way or another. This seems logical, as the dominant interpretation scheme suggests that future opportunities and single potentials can both be increased by self-regulated learning, and anybody could always extend their own potentials a little bit more.

The form of subjectivity that is mediated by this interpretation scheme to the single student is that only they are responsible for their own success in school. Further, as it is claimed that all students now would have equal opportunities, it follows that students are prompted to take their chances. To the public, an individual student can't argue that they failed because of structures and circumstances, though they have very little changed in the Austrian school system and there is still a strong correlation between social background and educational level. The public discourse makes it so that the student will have to take fault for their failure as the mechanism of social selectivity tends to be naturalized by this interpretation scheme.

Equality of opportunity and the exhaustive exploitation of societal resources

The “Strategy Paper for Life Long Learning” combines views from different fields of economy, vocational training, research and education and claims that a stronger connection between those fields would secure the prosperity of Austria by more efficiency. It is said, that

“Europe and also Austria must not fall behind in the competition of knowledge economies. Investments in education must therefore be seen as investments in the future of society and designed by criteria of effectiveness and efficiency independently from their contents” (BMUKK et. al, 2011, p.5).

The “knowledge economy” requires not only literate and competent individuals; more important is that people bring in the conviction of being able to learn and the motivation of continuous further training. All educational institutions therefore shall promote these attitudes, and so schools are considered as the first stage of the life-long learning process, where the basic approach towards education and training is formed. The strategy paper notes:

“We share the conviction that life-long learning needs a culture of encouragement that puts confidence in the learning subject regardless of his or her background and social position, and in which the individual gets promoted and challenged by individualized and self-regulated learning environments” (BMUKK et. al, 2011, p.5).

In this wording, the whole ambiguity of the term and the political demand for equal opportunities gets visible, as apparently two contradictive goals are claimed to be realized by this single measure. In this interpretation of the Ministry of Education, individualized, self-regulated learning and the thereby realized aperture of the education system can both promote economic prosperity and a better future for the whole country as well as more opportunities for

everybody, more social upward mobility and a more socially just and democratic society with fewer structural limits. The following quote, again from the strategy paper, describes this scenario and its premises further:

“All people have countless talents. They need to get equal opportunities, explore their talents and develop them further. Realizing equality of opportunities is a center task to democratic societies and will enable fair chances for social advancement. Though realizing equality of opportunities is also a necessity in order to use all potentials economically” (BMUKK et. al, 2011, p.10).

In this interpretation, there is no difference between education and training out of altruistic motives or for its own sake and people going to class as they are forced to take action when they can't find a job; also, on the macro-level, there is no contradiction between a shift in the education system that promotes employability and economic usage of skills and the claim that thereby democratic ideas shall be transmitted and realized. It would be easy to argue here that both visions can't be realized at the same time; and looking at the discourse elements more closely it becomes obvious, which vision of those is determining the other.

The benchmarks set in the strategy paper focus to a large extent on employment rates or capacities and competencies that can be regarded as elementary for further employments. Examples of that are the reduction of NEED-adolescents,ⁱⁱⁱ a rise of the employment rate of adults between 55 and 65 years, a reduction of adolescents with significant reading deficits and so on. What is missing here are benchmarks that reflect the mentioned task of the education system to foster a development towards a more equal and democratic society. Therefore, this can only be interpreted in such a way that the quality of the educational system is more defined by its economic outcome. Just as the initial

statement in the front section of this chapter said, investments in education prevent countries from falling behind in the competition of economies.

The interpretation scheme that is mediated here is that education and training are considered as investment and therefore need to pay off later. It is likely then that those learning practices are estimated as more valuable that mediate such competencies that are assumed to make the learner fit for the job market. As between individuals as well as between states there is competition and the investment needs to pay off well, it is necessary that both of them exploit their resources exhaustively. In this interpretation discriminating structures are dysfunctional, as they prevent potential resources from being exploited – and this is the connection between the claim for equality of opportunities and a stronger market orientation of the school system.

Interpreting the findings: Practices of learning, the distortion of the term equivalent opportunities and the question of ideology

The interpretative scheme of the term “*equivalent opportunities*” which has been shown has existed in its current state since the beginning of the 2000s in large parts of Central Europe. The analysis showed that it changed with the emergence of a neoliberal speaker position in the discourse on education policy. While until that point schools and universities were mainly considered as relatively autonomous from society (following Humboldt’s concept of *Bildung*, which was the guiding idea for the structure of the educational system in Germany, Austria and parts of Europe), these actors considered education and competencies as the future’s most important commodity in the “information age” and therefore schools and universities as institutions that needed to guarantee the future welfare of the nations. In their view, schools not only had to teach the competencies and skills necessary for children to become good employees but also function in the mode that was assumed to be best in

economic understandings –efficient in the outcome by limited budgets. Under this perspective, the demanded modernization and expansion of the education system was seen as promotion for the economic sector and investments for prosperity as this sector needed more and better qualified people and a system of continuous, life-long training on the job. But it was not only about rendering qualifications. As Haug (2003) points out, neoliberal policy interventions were about promoting a “new type of mankind”, an active, enterprising subject, and schools should provide and mediate this new type of subjectivity.

A very good example of this view gives the following speech of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, when he stated:

“And when people say sorry, that’s too ambitious, it can’t be done, I say: this is not a sorry country, we are not a sorry people. It can be done. We know what makes a successful creative economy. Educate the people. Manage the country’s finances well. Encourage business and enterprise. But each bit requires us to modernise and take the hard choices to do it. We have been a mercantile power. An industrial power. Now we must be the new power of the information age. Our goal: to make Britain the best educated and skilled country in the world; a nation, not of a few talents, but of all the talents. And every single part of our school system must be modernised to achieve it” (Blair, 1997).

Very similar is the diagnosis of the manager and developer of a reform concept of the German labor market under chancellor Gerhard Schröder in the 2000s, Peter Hartz. In his influential book *Job Revolution* he described the economic transformation and which changes would need to be done in the education system. In the new economy;

“the entire human is needed with his/her individual potential, his openness, his talent and his passion, to learn, to discover and to transfer. Long live the creative

difference! We are leaving the Taylorism behind [...]. The revolution starts with a third step: work is defined in a new way. Again it includes a holistic peace of life: learn, produce and communicate. Make a change! [...] the local entrepreneur takes the fate of his workers into his own hands" (Hartz, 2001, pp. 16).

Numerous studies have already shown the influence of neoliberal policy on schooling and also the connection between the modes of schooling that these two quotes suggest to the reforms described in this article seems to be quite obvious. But what is remarkable yet is the fact that both influential politicians quoted here were actually members of social democratic parties. The quotes show clearly that their interpretative scheme of ideal learning was to a large extent coherent with a neoliberal interpretation as they shared the view that schools need to serve the interests of the economy. But yet they contributed to the discourse from a different speaker position and so their content, their meaning was simply assumed to be a social democratic one, and as their statement didn't differ from neoliberals in their content and their meaning, there was still a huge difference in their style and in the reactions of their audience in terms of how people interpreted it. When Gerhard Schröder in Germany, Tony Blair in England or Claudia Schmied in Austria as social democratic politicians in charge spoke about reforms to provide more equality of opportunities in the education system, their statements were understood in the socialist tradition of the idea of equality and egalitarianism as these ideas are genuinely associated with their speaker position, although this was obviously not what they actually meant. Although they said quite clearly what they intended, people misunderstood them systematically as they were expecting social democratic policy and interpreted their statements in that way. At least, the fact that there was very little criticism (and instead much cheer) on the school reforms in Austria indicates this. A large percentage of the social democratic actors don't seem to have understood this policy as a break with traditional social

democratic values and as a shift in the political agenda.

My suggestion to explain this fact is that the symbolic dimension of the speaker position encases the content of the statement, and due to this distortion only very little dissent is evoked. In this interpretation I follow Laclau (1996), who shows that terms like “*equality of opportunities*” can function as empty signifiers, which means that in a lack of a corresponding referent their meaning is constituted by the surrounding elements of the chain of equivalence. This emptiness allows a “floating” of the signifiers, which means that they appear in different discourses and are constituted with different meanings in each. The generated overflow of meaning can lead to the point that a term has multiple, even contradictive meanings at the same time in different discourses. The individual's perception and the interpretation of such a term then depends mainly on the position in the discourse, the speaker's position as well as the listening subject. In short, it was mainly the symbolic dimension that constituted the concrete meaning of the educational reform in Austria as the characterizing terms like “more equality of opportunities” were vague enough that the underlying meanings and objectives were no longer visible. Especially among many social democratic actors it was very likely that as their understanding of the term “equality of opportunities” (and other “empty” terms that characterize the reforms) were tied to traditional social democratic interpretation schemes, they were unable to perceive the actual sense of the reform or the shift of the Social Democratic Party's political agenda.

A crucial effect is that with this shift in the political agenda, the Social Democratic Party contributes to the neoliberal hegemony in the discourse to a large extent. Social democratic parties can legitimate neoliberal policy in a very assertive way as we have the same effect here again; although they clearly stand in for the same objectives as neoliberals do, they are still widely associated with

a different speaker position and as a result and their statements cause different reactions as the same sentences spoken by distinct neoliberals. My final thesis is therefore that social democratic parties are to a large extent jointly responsible for the survival of neoliberal ideology in Central Europe not only because they have taken neoliberal positions. Especially in countries where social democrats are still strong parties like in England, Germany and Austria they need to be considered as a main agent in the discourse which stabilizes this ideology because in contrast to distinct neoliberals their statements are embedded within a different speaker position. As a result, the neoliberal ideology gets naturalized, distorted and in this mediation process people are no longer able to see the full consequences of neoliberal measures, as this was here shown using the example of learning practices in schools.

Conclusion

This article showed findings of a discourse study of the Austrian school system, where school reforms constituted the *Neue Mittelschule* as a new type of school in which self-regulated learning environments were promoted as a measure towards more equality of opportunities. Using the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse, the study thereby tried to highlight which underlying meanings could be found within knowledge and justification statements and which forms of subjectivity were mediated in the new learning practices.

Furthermore, the article tried to point out how the relationship between discourses and practices could be described. It showed, in which way discourse studies can be considered as a form of analyzing practices (and to which extent they can't) and demonstrated this form of research as a form of ideology critic.

A central finding was that self-regulated learning environments promoted an understanding of the term “equality of opportunities” in which equality is interpreted as equal conditions to demonstrate one's performances and skills.

In a historical perspective it could be shown that the realization of more equality of opportunities was not a success achieved by social democratic movements (where the demand originated) but was claimed with the rising importance of education and training on the job for the economy. Since the 1990s neoliberal actors link changes in the economic structure to a stronger need for skilled people, and as a result, social inequality tends to be dysfunctional from an economic perspective.

In the last section with a recourse on Laclau's concept of the empty signifier a hypothesis was given to explain the small amount of criticism that social democratic actors raised against this kind of school reform promoted by their own party in Austria. As empty signifiers are constituted in their meaning by surrounding elements of the chain of equivalence and can float in their meaning in different discourses, it is the framing effect of the speaker position of social democratic actors that makes their audience (especially again social democrats) perceive and interpret their statements differently to their actual meaning. Terms like “*equality of opportunities*” are still interpreted in a traditional social democratic way (for instance as a measure to achieve a socially just society as Marx understood it), although this is obviously not the intention of the school policy. Thereby it follows that social democratic actors and parties contribute to the mediation of ideology as they are used to enforcing neoliberal policy while the effects of this policy are concealed by the distorted social democratic terms.

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Notes

ⁱ A short explanation for all those who do not know the Austrian school system: In Austria, all children over the age of six go to the *Volksschule*, an elementary school, for four years. After that, children (or in reality their parents) can decide to go to a *Gymnasium* (very similar to grammar schools in the UK; students attend this school for eight years and which grants them the permission to go to university) or to *Neue Mittelschule* (four years duration, after which children either attend a vocational training or a secondary school, at which in some cases the permission to go to university can also be obtained). At least theoretically they could decide. In reality, this decision does not exist, for most parents the choice is clear: Either because the children's grades are not sufficient for acceptance into the *Gymnasium*. Especially in rural parts of Austria there are too few places; the pressure of competition is high, so that sometimes the best grade in each subject must be achieved in order to get a school place at all.

But mainly because parents usually make this decision according to their expectations of what they want for their child later on, what path of life they think he or she should take - and less on the basis of what he or she is able to achieve at school or how far his or her cognitive development is. Now, these expectations are very different in social classes: traditionally, bourgeois classes in Austria try much harder to get a school place for their children; while parents from working classes often think that their children should better acquire a profession as soon as possible. Teachers in elementary schools are often massively pressured by parents from the bourgeois classes to grant their children good grades; however, they often do not encourage parents from working classes enough to send gifted children to *Gymnasium*.

Statistics such as the Austrian National Report on Education (Bruneforth et. al., 2016, p. 140ff.) show that *Gymnasien* are disproportionately attended by middle class children, and consequently are universities, as especially working-class children do not manage or don't have the confidence to enter secondary schools at the age of 14. The *Neue Mittelschule*, which was originally intended as a reform of the *Hauptschule* and have now replaced it, should therefore serve to ensure that the fate of many people is no longer decided at the age of ten. Evaluative studies of the *Neue Mittelschule* (Eder et. al. 2015) clearly show that this has not been successful, as the number of pupils who after the *Neue Mittelschule* attend a secondary school which entitles them to study, has not increased.

This is tragic, but what I want to show with this article (and what is not limited to the educational field) is this: Precisely because social democratic groups still refuse to see the New Middle School as a failed project, it is clear that something else has changed in society: Namely, our view of what equality of opportunity actually means, how it can be realized and who is responsible for it.

ⁱⁱThis statement as many of the following public statements and scientific quotations have been translated by the author. Where this is the case, the references link to the original, German versions.

ⁱⁱⁱ The acronym NEED means “Not in Education, Employment or Training” and is a scale to counts those adolescents that are not measured by the official unemployment rate as they are not registered in that system.