The Viennese School System: Social Mobility and its Implications

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It is generally conceded that American schools are dominated by middle class values, staffed by people imbued with middle class values, and offer a fairly good chance for success to children from lower class families if they accept the dominant value system. If the child’s value system is compatible with the teacher’s, he will be judged primarily according to his ability and performance rather than the social status of his parents.

In Vienna a child enters the Volksschule at the age of six and after four years of school is given an examination which will determine whether he will be admitted to the Gymnasium or to the Hauptschule. Those who pass the exam. may go to the Gymnasium for eight years of college preparatory training which will lead to admission to the university. Those who do not pass must go to the Hauptschule, which provides the remaining four years of compulsory education. Approximately 27% of the students enter the college preparatory program while the rest attend the Hauptschule.  

During the Volksschule period the child has been placed in either the first or second Zug according to his academic ability. Schools in Vienna are generally arranged so that they have two such Züge or classes at each grade level and are labelled 1a and 1b, 2a and 2b, and so on. The child is soon aware of whether he is in the faster “a” Zug or in the slower “b” Zug, but often the classes vary only slightly in ability. The realistic acceptance of the ability of the child evidently does not create as much of a problem among Viennese parents as it may among some American parents who have greater aspirations for their children.

Since the entrance examination to the Gymnasium is based on the fundamentals of reading and math., parents can and do hire tutors for their children.

1 In reality the Gymnasium is only one type of Mittelschule. There is also a Realgymnasium, Realschule, and Mädchenschule. For simplicity’s sake I am using the more familiar word Gymnasium for all college preparatory schools as compared to those leading primarily to vocational schools or direct placement in the work force. The many specialized programs have been ignored.

during the summer and for help during the school year. The social class of the parents may greatly influence their attitude toward their child’s achievement in the school. Since the “Doktor” title is highly respected in Austria, the middle and upper class family is willing to sacrifice a great deal to permit a son to complete the course of study leading to the doctorate. Because the entrance examination to the Gymnasium which the child takes at the age of ten determines his academic life to a very large degree, the well educated middle class family may exert strenuous efforts to see that their child gets over this hurdle. Special classes designed to help a student pass this exam are offered by private teachers. If a student fails the exam at the age of ten he can attempt it again after his fifth year of schooling.

The working class family, on the other hand, probably has different aspirations. If a boy were to enter the Gymnasium at the age of ten or eleven he would have eight years of academic training which would provide relatively few skills for earning a living. Only by going on to the university and completing another 5 or 6 years for the doctorate would he really be utilizing his Gymnasium training. Dropping out anywhere along the way, after the fourth year, is tantamount to failing in that the training is not readily applicable in another direction. (His first four years are comparable to Hauptschule schooling, so he can easily shift into the vocational stream at this time.) This feeling also applies to beginning work at the university. As one student at the University of Vienna put it, “If you have studied for seven or eight years in the university and do not take your doctorate, you have wasted the entire period.” In other words the prestige of the “Herr Doktor” title may be every bit as important as the utility of the knowledge gained. As a result working class parents might be inclined to encourage their children to continue their next four years in the Hauptschule and then go to one of the trade schools which will provide training for a secure job at the age of seventeen or eighteen. A boy with talent may go to one of the technical schools and even on to one of the colleges which offers a program in the applied sciences. The desire to see a child earn the doctorate may not be as strong as the realization that the other educational route offers a great deal more occupational security.

After four years in the Volkschule and after entering the Hauptschule, the student can theoretically make the shift to the Gymnasium; but certain practical difficulties exist. In the U.S. a student can shift into the college preparatory program by taking classes in place of an elective or by going to summer school. The change to an academic program can even be made as late as the junior college. In Austria the Latin requirement can interfere with an otherwise flexible program. After the second year in the Gymnasium, Latin instruction begins. If a student were to transfer from the Hauptschule in his fourth year he would not be able to take Latin with a third year class and his other subjects with fourth year students. He must have studied Latin on his own so that he can enter the appropriate class since all of his classmates must take the same program. In reality then, if the entrance into the Gymnasium is not made at the age of ten or eleven it will not be made at all; and for all practical purposes the Gymnasium is the only route to the university.