



## ARTICLE

### **How do teachers of mother tongue tuition in Austria perceive their role? Migration specific perspectives on teachers of migration languages within the Austrian public sector education system**

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## **How do teachers of mother tongue tuition in Austria perceive their role? Migration specific perspectives on teachers of migration languages within the Austrian public sector education system.**

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### **Abstract**

Monolingualism being the unreflected, unquestioned norm in a nation's educational system has been described as 'monolingual habitus' by Ingrid Gogolin in the 1990s. Her concept can be seen as an applied case of Bourdieu's habitus concept. It supplies a multiplicity of points of orientation in the attempt to understand current practices in language education in educational systems. Based on empirical research (n=55) this article explores how mother tongue teachers in Austria perceive their own role in the education system. According to their self-image they are building bridges between teachers and parents, teachers and pupils and between pupils. Surprisingly mother tongue teachers highly identify with so-called meritocratic ideals of a state school system (e.g. equality of opportunity), even though pupils with low socio-economic status who attend mother tongue tuition in state schools are systematically discriminated by a segregating Austrian school system over decades. In the following text these teachers characterise how they perform their duty as educational actors in Austrian society. They work as mother tongue teachers in a society which seems to live with the deep-seated conviction that monolingualism in educational institutions such as kindergarten and school is the one and only normality, forever and always valid: the characteristic of a nation.

**Keywords:** mother tongue tuition, habitus, professionalism, language acquisition

## **Introduction**

As part of the Erasmus+ project KINDINMI (Kindergarten as a Factor of Inclusion for Migrant Children and their Families), with the Swedish University of Uppsala as leading partner, Pädagogische Hochschule Wien (University College of Teacher Education Vienna) managed to exchange experiences and intensify efforts to achieve mother tongue speaking classes in Sweden and Austria. Building on the outcomes of the network project AMuSE (Approaches to Multilingual Schools in Europe) in which the University College of Teacher Education Vienna cooperated with the University in Gothenburg, we could now gain, within the strategic project KINDINMI, a deepening insight into the world of multilingual children in primary schools in Sweden which sheds a light onto the Austrian circumstances. As Otterup and Fleck in a shared study called 'Mother tongue instruction in Austria and Sweden- a comparative study' (2018) find out, there are informative parallels between both countries, even if both have a completely different compulsory school systems for children aged 10 to 14. Whilst AMuSE has shown ways that schools can make use of the multilingualism of their pupils (and if applicable, of their teachers as well) and how to get from monolingualism to a functional multilingualism, KINDINMI in contrast isolates their outlook on multilingual parents and their children of pre-school age who are being educated in state schools. Very often multilingual parents and their children are overwhelmed by having to 'glide' into a system which takes their employees' monolingualism for granted: one nation, one language. If "education cannot compensate for society" (Bernstein, 1970, p.344), rethinking education to disrupt marginality means – not only for teacher education –it is important to stress positive aspects of a plurilingual society with a public sector education system as its beating heart. Being plurilingual does not make one a subaltern native: someone who belongs to the socially subordinate category of the Other (Spivak, 1988).

Gogolin (1994) discusses the monolingual habitus of educational institutions in her habilitation treatise explaining it in reference to the German Education system, based on the idea that education has to be provided by the state. This idea has been established with the formation of nations (formation of the German Reich, 1871, formation of the Republic of Austria, 1918) and only spread in the last 100-150 years in most parts of Europe but has since been differentiated (Wenning, 1996). Gogolin develops the thesis that "during its development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the national-state-focused German education system established a monolingual self-concept" (Gogolin, 1994, p.3) and this had "dysfunctional consequences because it could not cope with the increasing pluralisation of the plurilingual pupils." Referring to Bourdieu's definition of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1976), Gogolin recognises permanently used practices which seem to appear 'natural' with time (passing), they appear to be the objective truth, which cannot be questioned (Gogolin, 1994, p.410). Gogolin describes the developments which led to the self-concept that the German language was placed as a central point in the German education system:

"Western education systems have traditionally depended on the fundamental myth of homogeneity of language and culture in a 'national' democracy. The monolingual habitus of the classroom - derived from the Bourdieuan 'habitus' that refers to the embodiment of social structures that are reproduced through social practices - is reflected in educational norms, structures and content of teaching that perpetuate assumptions about language and learning implicit in the idea of a national language." (Gogolin, 2016)

This contribution is based on the thesis that the characterisation unquestionably applies to the Austrian school system as well and that the monolingual habitus covers the macro, micro and meso levels of the school system like a veil (Fend, 2006, p.166). If a whole education system (and its participants with 'high national understanding of education') speaks German and 'understands' itself thus, it raises the question how those teachers of mother tongue tuition inhabit their roles and whose task according to the Austrian Ministry of Education involves "to support all children and adolescents with consideration of their different linguistic backgrounds" (Ministry for Education, Sciences and Research, 2019).

The monolingual habitus is the expression of an established group who determines the education system. For the German 'migration society', Rommelspacher created the term 'culture of dominance' (1995, p.11) which applies to Austria as well. The term shows that it is a question of power as to who belongs to the establishment, and who is being made an outsider (foreigner) within the school system. In order to recognise 'others' as 'foreign', the symbolic borders between 'we' and 'them' are established and confirmed again and again. In terms of the Austrian PISA 2006 results in mathematics it sounds as follows:

"the big difference between the achievements of migrants and natives has stayed the same. This shows that no progress has been made with language related integration" (Schreiner, 2007, p.72).<sup>1</sup>

The 'subject-object' differentiation will be discussed here not as 'natives-migrants' relationships but as 'established-outsider' relations (Elias and Scotson, 1990). The term used was established during a sociologic study called 'The Established and the Outsiders' which describes the social mingling of two groups of inhabitants in an English community. One group consists of 'locals', the established ones, the other group are the ones who moved there (outsiders) after the Second World War when they resettled. The incomers were not attributed any characteristics of intersectional discrimination by Elias and Scotson (1990). The only difference was the time, the two groups had been living in the community. The relationship between the 'established group' and the 'outsiders', however, turns out to be irreconcilable:

"Elias and Scotson show in their study that prejudices cannot be researched in isolation and without reference to the societal figuration where they occur. Both scientists emphasize the interdependence of relationship structures of societal groups and categories" (Inanova, 2017, p.37).

Characteristic and typical for the convergence of research in education towards such an 'outsider' group within the school system is the following section from an Austrian National Education Report: "40% of all pre-school children in densely populated areas have a background in immigration" (NBB, 2018, p.27).

People familiar with evidence-based research in education are aware of who is mentioned in the report. 'Immigration background', due to social sciences approaches, is the equivalent for 'language' (and also

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<sup>1</sup> Mother tongue teachers in Austria primarily teach language education in L1, but often they support in integrative lesson settings with primary school teachers in various subjects such as mathematics, social studies and science.

nationality). It compares to the monolingual habitus of the 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 1976, p.325), to 'know' in a 'macrostructural' way which languages are spoken by children/pupils of immigrant *origin*.

It is assumed that these are children who speak languages of lower prestige due to migration and that their parents were not born in Austria. Children from Germany already did not have a background of immigration in the Austrian National Education Report in 2016 (Schreiner, 2016). Pupils in possession of a German passport are assumed to know the elaborate language code of the target language of school institutions in Austria. Those who have fallen victim to the economic discourse of education and those who regard schools as businesses and teachers as service industry workers and those who acknowledge pupils as 'business people of their own making' (Masscheleien and Simons, 2012, p.41) who have to learn 'skills', are surely aware, thinking of children with migration backgrounds, that there are risk factors within the highly risky 'business' of education:

"A background with little education, a low socio-economic status of the family as well as a non-German everyday language are all individual factors in themselves for hindering educational success. If there is more than one factor present, we talk about cumulation of social risk factors, which might hinder a successful education even more. The percentage of migrants who are at least affected by one of the social risk factors, is approximately 80%, whereas the non-German native tongue represents the majority. About 20% of migrants show a combination of two factors and 4% show all three factors." (NBB, 2018 p.27)

The established group, responsible for those kinds of reports, does not question with their numbers how families with low socio-economic status from the working classes in Austria do mostly speak another language than German and how it is, that the working classes are multilingual due to migration (Schneider, Crul and Leslie, 2015). No one in this group is asking the question how the word 'lack of education' (*Bildungsferne*) as lack of 'understanding' and operating Bernstein's 'elaborated code' (Bernstein, 1971) came up and why such a term can only be coined by the established group (Reichenbach, 2015). Moreover, it is irrelevant which structural conditions on the macro-level of the school system have encouraged these unfortunate developments, considering that multilingual children from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds are systematically hindered, especially in urban areas (Mecheril et al., 2010, p.105). Only the subaltern position of the outsider group allows a privileged position of the established group: "If you give a group a bad name, they will make sure to prove it" (Elias and Scotson, 1990, p.24). According to Elias' theory, "the social cohesion of the established, together with the stigmatisation of outsiders, leads to status and power differentials that exclude the outsiders", (May, 2004, p.2159). In this context it is essential to develop in teacher education a critical-reflexive view of differentiation practices which 'others' and 'non-others'.

Döll (2019) views the current circumstances of the Austrian School systems as an "approach of language assimilation" which blends out all other languages than German as not educationally relevant". That contribution is based on the thesis that teaching migration languages (as mother tongue instruction) at Austrian state schools is mostly seen as teaching, in which people characterised as outsiders (teachers of native tongue) teach other young people, characterised as outsiders (multilingual pupils) a migration language. The teaching of migration languages however, is, within the system, considered of little relevance due to the monolingual direction of a highly selective Austrian school

system which is at odds with the stated objectives of 'Discrimination in the Austrian education system' written by NGO 'Initiative for a non-discriminatory education system' that states relating to the European Human Rights legislation:

"[...] those in power must therefore set the right parameters and raise awareness to ensure that diversity is dealt with responsibly. A responsible way of handling diversity means to acknowledge that each child is unique in every respect and that a modern education system cannot be based on social selection, (Initiative, 2017, p.8)

## **Method**

Within this article, research has been conducted on how teachers of migration languages carry out their roles and what kind of changes they would welcome for their mother tongue tuition in Austria. The research interest is to find out which tasks mother tongue teachers as pedagogic players have to fulfil, apart from educating multilingual pupils in L1, and how they interpret those tasks and their own roles. Data was collected with through questionnaires that included open-ended questions. The questionnaire contained two main questions: "How do you see your role as a teacher for mother tongue in a school which understands itself as mainly German speaking?" and "Role swap: as mother/father of a multilingual child: What would be your wishes to the government? How should teachers for mother tongue, given the circumstances, be effectively used in the institution of the school?" Teachers who are currently employed in primary as well as secondary school in Austria were asked at two different times (n=55). The teachers who took part were, on July 2018 (n=27) and August 2019 (n=28), studying on a 30 credit course of the University College of Teacher Education called 'Mother tongue lessons: teaching first languages in an immigration context' which leads to the professionalisation of teachers of mother tongue in Austria and which was offered for the first time in the academic year 2013/2014. Led by Furch and Fleck, during 2019/20, four of the five courses of the four-semester programme were carried out at the University College of Teacher Education Vienna, where within the course during the seminars of the author, data was collected. The teachers were then asked to answer the questions in writing in German. The completed questionnaires were then anonymised. This paper documents an empirical-qualitative method in which empirical data have been analysed systematically according to grounded theory. On the basis of the principle of openness, a research process is formed, in which to start with, an only vaguely formulated knowledge interest is specified within the history of the evaluation process of the sample. Therefore, it differs from a process which is checking hypotheses and whose aim it is to generalise hypotheses (Kelle and Kluge, 2010, p.11; Rosenthal, 2011, p.47). The amount of data is analysed in individual elements, added to by analytical steps and given categories inductively with the help of open coding, "[...] using inductive data to construct abstract analytic categories through an iterative process differs from sorting topics, as is common practice in general approaches to qualitative research." (Charmaz, 2014, p.15).

## Findings and discussions

The figure below shows 30 out of 55 mother tongue teachers have chosen the metaphor of the ‘bridge’ to characterise their roles. During coding it was important to find out which ‘bridging’ role they in fact inhabit. Within this context a variety of roles were named multiple times in order to characterise the variety of roles. Translating as building bridges between languages was most chosen. 54% of the participants saw their main role as functional translators. A further category mentions ‘building bridges between social classes’: 49% of the participating teachers see this as a task which they carry out in their function (negotiator-middle class). They refer, in their answers, to conversations with parents of multilingual children in state schools, because those (parents) in urban areas (apparently) often come from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds. 36.4% of the participants see themselves explicitly responsible for the integration of their pupils into Austrian society, whilst 31% see their role in conveying their ‘parent culture’. The remaining coded categories are ‘intercultural creators for migrants’ (14) and ‘intercultural creators in a majority society’ (10). Both of these categories are being investigated with the generating of the hypothesis in the following section.

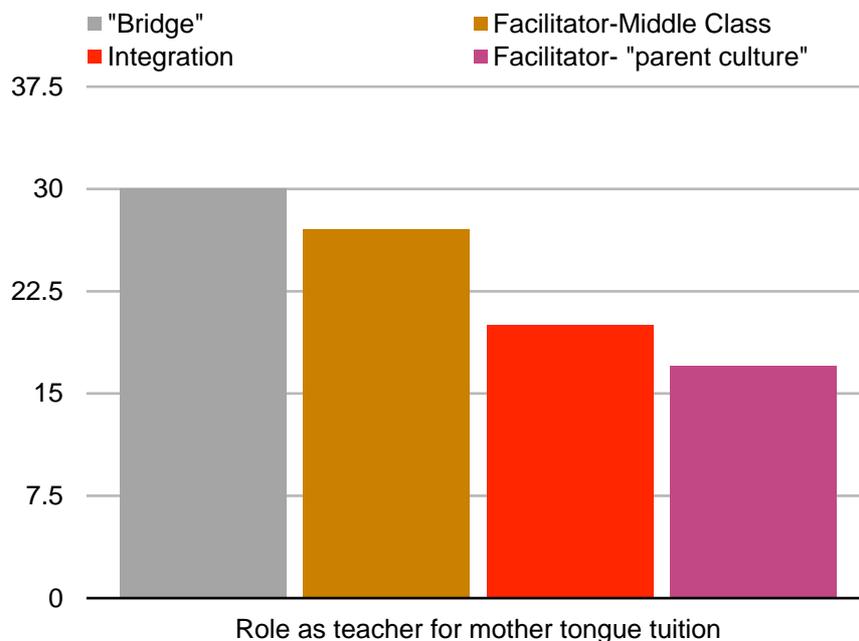


Figure 1: “How do you see your role as a teacher for native languages in a school which understands itself as mainly German speaking?”

Regarding the question in figure 2, 43.6% of the participants answered that they wish for biliteracy which means an uninterrupted language education in L1 and L2, from elementary to Secondary which comes with the demand to get more acceptance and recognition for the mother tongue tuition (38.4%).

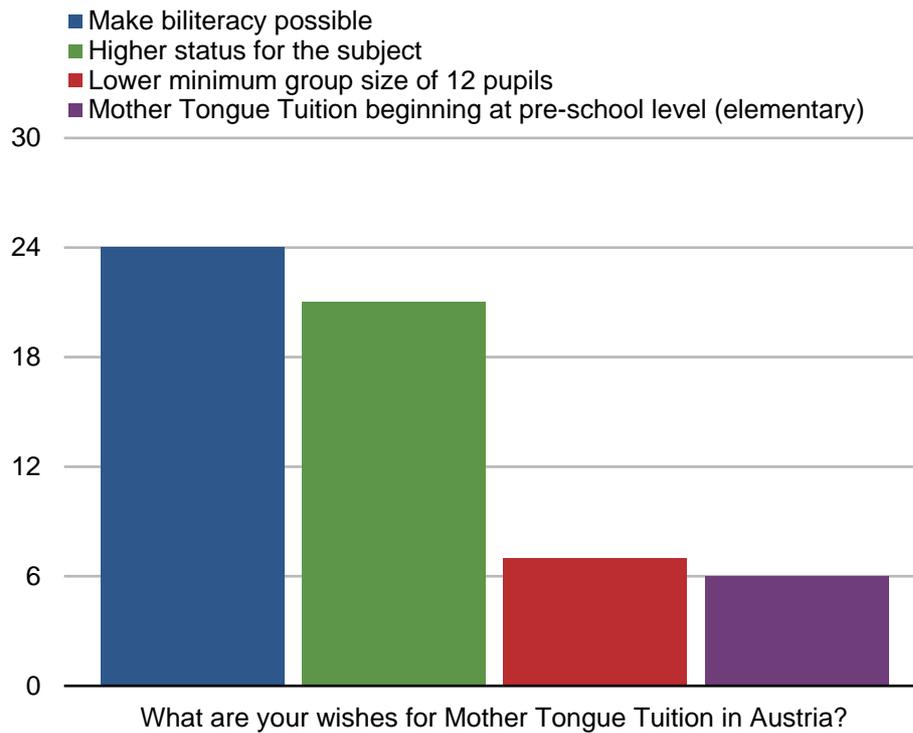


Figure 2: “As mother/father of a multilingual child: How should the government make use of mother tongue educators within schools?”

Based on the theoretical samples this can be compared to Otterup and Fleck’s (2018) study in which the response to the question: “What would the ideal mother tongue tuition look like in your opinion?” was as follows: in Austria (n=126)

- 27% asked for ‘more teaching time’,
- 23% wanted it to be a ‘compulsory subject’ (see figure 2 biliteracy),
- 21.4% would like a ‘higher status for the subject’ (see figure 2: raise status),
- 12.7% of the mother tongue teachers would like the size of the group (which has, at the moment, a minimum size of 12 pupils) lowered.

In Sweden, in comparison, there is already teaching of migration languages with a minimum of five pupils (Skolverket, 2010). The axial coding has further led mother tongue teachers being more affected in rural areas of Austria rather than in cities because the minimum number of pupils cannot be achieved. Similar to Sweden, the teaching in rural areas often happens in the afternoon and very rarely in age-homogeneous groups. Evaluation of the data acquired, moreover, shows that teaching in rural areas is rarely integrative because with mainly morning lessons at state schools, the schools have to be reopened specifically for the teachers and their mother tongue lessons.

Referring to the efforts of the KINDINMI project, it needs to be considered that 10.9% of all participating mother tongue teachers, on top of the general wish for ‘biliteracy’, explicitly wish for mother tongue

teaching in L1, at pre-school level (elementary). KINDINMI underlined that it is important for teachers to support plurilingual and hybrid identities of their pupils and for students to gain

“[...] background knowledge of the pupils’ social environments and cultural models, empathy, knowledge about group processes and dynamics in groups [and] the ability to reflect – particularly on their own prejudices –, and awareness of their own cultural conditioning (cultural perception) and the resultant subjective interpretation and judgement of others.” (Oberlechner, 2019)

### **Perspectives on migration research in the context of mother tongue teachers in Austria**

Within the answers of the participating teachers, inter-cultural education, according to the principles and guidelines (Ministry for Education, Science and Research, 2017; 2019), plays a significant role. Interesting to observe is the fact that in connection with inter-cultural education various roles are being defined: ‘Inter-cultural creator for migrants’ (14) and ‘Inter-cultural creator in a majority society’ (10) are two of the coded categories. Generating a hypothesis, schematically there are two groups of mother tongue teachers which have formed during the process of coding: the group ‘Multicultural society’ and the group ‘Transmigration’, the latter defining so called third culture kids (TCK) or third culture individuals (TCI) and their parents.

The category ‘immigrant’ to describe mother-tongue teachers is problematic. Doing so on an explanatory level allows the individual to be integrated into steps towards assimilation as normatively constructed (Mecheril et al., 2010, p.43). After focussed coding, none of the elicited data allowed for the mother tongue teachers in relation to their pupils to be put into this category. Mother tongue teachers did not describe themselves as so called assimilated Austrian citizens; neither did they aim to educate their pupils to become new persons, who neglect learning the mother tongue as heritage language and forget about the family story of their parents and grandparents.

However, within the group ‘Multicultural Society’ which was chosen a lot, there are clearly defined cultural-ethnic minorities on a phenomenal level who on an explanative level own their cultural identity and who, on a normative level, ask for recognition of differences for themselves and their pupils. (Mecheril et al., 2010, p.43). ‘Intercultural competence’ means for this group, for example, to teach elements of folklore to pupils in schools and the customs and practices of the parents’ country of origin culture (on macro-, meso- and micro-level). The school here has the function to accept this form of teaching and to promote it. The mother tongue teachers see themselves as intermediaries of a ‘culture of the country of origin’ of the parents. It does not matter to that group if the pupils were in fact born in the country of origin of their parents or if they know (fragmentary) it as a country for holidaying. ‘Being multilingual’ means, in an ideal scenario, for this group to forcibly have an identity as an individual which makes them feel fine in both cultures (e.g. school–family) because their identity is clearly defined in terms of life-world. One of the participants in this group writes as follows:

“As a mother tongue teacher, I also try to solve the conflicts which occur between different cultures” (script 26).

Their “building bridges” exists, according to their own assessment, mainly in mediating between two clearly defined cultures. The axial coding of data has moreover shown that 10 of the participants who

explicitly support the mediation of the 'culture of the country of origin' also see themselves as responsible for requesting and guaranteeing the 'integration' (17) of their pupils.

In the second group, 'Transmigration', belonging to multiple categories is assumed on a phenomenal level which assigns a hybrid identity in transnational spaces to the individual on an explanative level which pertains to the acknowledgement of multi-values on a normative level. (Mecheril et al, 2010, p.43). For this group it is clear, that a multilingual pupil with a hybrid identity permanently commutes between living situations. Pupils who are multilingual due to migration, experience multiple identities when they use their language repertoires in L1, L2 and L3 (...) in different social contexts (at home, with relatives, at school). A teacher who most likely belongs to the "Transmigration" group, says:

"I see it as an advantage to be able to speak two or more languages because one gains the ability to 'commute' (culturally); those abilities are often a fundamental requirement for further development and progress and opens plenty of opportunities for a future career." (script 23)

Societal recognition of the multivalued in a society which gives preferential treatment to an established group – unfairly? – is the pronounced aim of this group. For this group, customs and practices are different from family to family; it is not possible for this group to give a uniformly cultural identity to a nation-state. For this group, classification tendentially does not exist where a language and culture are clearly allocated and thus problematising what integration (from what into what?) could mean.

Nevertheless, the fact that there are certain conventions in nation-states which need to be explained to people who do not know, should not be covered up for this group. To obtain knowledge of how Austrian institutions (e.g. schools, local councils, department of education, police services) see themselves, how they function and which practices are valid is undoubtedly characterised as 'important'. 'Culture' (for this group) has, in contrast to the last group ('multicultural society'), a "difference-identity-function" (Gürsens, 2003, p.20). Not everything which is being introduced as 'culture', defines adequately what 'culture' actually means:

"Only when we begin to deal with our allocated ethnic-national connoted names, our allocated gender and our pre-existing social class, will we participate with the 'culture' and 'culture' itself is starting to get a grip." (Gürsens, 2003, p.34)

The group 'Transmigration' understands 'building bridges' more as mediation between people who come from different social classes and who have different ideas about societal norms and values. Axial coding of data has established that five of the eight participants who consider themselves to be 'Intercultural makers in a majority society', are also part of the group which feels responsible to act as mediators between social classes. In one of those axial coded replies, the respondent says:

"There are so many intelligent children who would be able to complete undergraduate studies. Often they are not supported at home. Often, they say: 'No-one in the family had gone to university, I won't be able to do it, I am not clever enough.' As mother tongue teachers we have the responsibility to spot those children, to give them hope and courage." (script 8)

It is unquestionable for 45.5% of the questioned mother tongue teachers that they, as teachers of local authorities schools, belong to a certain social class who have to explain to the parents of their pupils

not only why the L1-education is important for L2 and how the Austrian school system functions, but also generally which career chances higher education (Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 in grammar schools) offers.

“Since many children come from socially disadvantaged social classes, they tend to have quite modest career visions. They copy what they have learnt from their parents or their environment. In their later choice of profession, they for example become taxi drivers, sales representatives or depot workers.” (script 14)

Dropping out of school is not a scandal. Eribon (2018) writes in his text ‘Returning to Reims’ about his father’s education that went no further than middle school:

“No one would have imagined it could have been otherwise, neither his parents nor himself. In his world, you went to school until the age of fourteen, because that was required, and you left school at age 14, because it was no longer required.”

Eribon shows

“that selection within the educational system often happens by a process of self-elimination, and that self-elimination is treated as if it were freely chosen: extended studies are for other kinds of people, for “people of means,” and it just happens that those people turn out to be the ones who like going to school.” (Eribon, 2018, p.45)

It seems that mothers and fathers who do not consider themselves as these ‘people of means’ do not see the sense of mother tongue education of their children. Maybe they consider it as a nice asset for their children to know their *own* language (well knowing it is a language of Outsiders), but it is of utmost importance to succeed in German (as the language of the Established). This happens in the capital city Vienna, where close to 60% of the pupils who start to attend primary school do not speak German as their mother tongue (Statistik Austria, 2018).

Focussed coding of elicited documents showed: a rejection of mother tongue teaching is also being put down to a low education standard of the parents. One of the participating teachers indicates explicitly that multilingual parents insist that their children are fluent in their mother tongue because their judgement is based on self-assessment. In reality, the parents are only able to master their mother tongue on a very basic level, according to this insinuation (script 24).

### **Belief in a meritocratic school system**

Astonishingly the cohort of Austrian mother tongue teachers of this research largely kept a belief in a meritocratic ideology of the current educational system: It is a belief that in a given school system, one pupil’s success in school is an indicator of personal deservingness — namely, that the educational system rewards individual ability and efforts (Young, 1961; Jost et al., 2003). Teachers of “Transmigration” group mainly commented that it is important that one’s family origin (social class) shall not impede success in school, while teachers of the group “Multicultural Society” mainly stressed that

"integration is not a one-way street: it must come from both ways in order to succeed" - Pupils who take the chance to learn their L1 "definitely have better grades and better job opportunities later on." (script 17)

One teacher explains:

"Many children who I taught, went to grammar school later on. To make this success possible I had to speak with their parents and make them understand how important school education is and to support them to understand how important it is for a kid to go to school on a regular basis." (script 12)

This can be interpreted as a form of "prescriptive meritocracy which corresponds to 'how people think the system should work' (i.e. desired meritocracy)" (Wiederkehr et al., 2015), while as recurrent evidence shows that intersectional factors (social class, gender, race) are important and consistent predictors of school performances (OECD, 2014). However, these mother tongue teachers keep their belief that merit is the only important determinant of school success as a key to success in life:

"Multilingualism and a pupil's success in school are like a flower - both grow, if flourished." (script 27)

## **Conclusions**

The social ascent of multilingual pupils through education seems to be a pronounced aim of their mother tongue teachers. This research project has found that mother tongue teachers who see their roles as a 'bridge' in linguistic, cultural and societal areas, two schematic groups can be established who interpret those cultural and societal areas differently. Migration sciences suggest that 'building bridges' for one group ("Multicultural society") means that one can find clearly defined national-cultural customs and rites between the country of origin (of the parents) and Austria which need mediating, while for another group ("Transmigration") it means to mediate between people who come from different social classes and who have different ideas of societal norms. This research has further found, that no matter which group the multilingual teachers are part of, their trust in a meritocratic school system is intact. Their trust in a state school system which perceives itself as meritocratic seems to be intact, although their multilingual pupils – who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds- have been treated as outsiders for decades, especially in urban areas where they have after their primary schooling, been put into those secondary schools where they are schooled separately by the establishment.

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