

Chapter 12

Small Rural Schools in Austria: Potentials and Challenges



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Introduction

Many small primary schools can be found in Austria's rural areas, due both to topological conditions and to hitherto robust political support. However, a certain divide can be observed between the western and eastern regions, partly because the west is more mountainous and its settlements structures accordingly differ, but also because western politicians on a regional level have expressed a strong commitment to small, rural schools. In this chapter, I will provide insights into small rural schools in Austria on the basis of two transnational research projects carried out by the Austrian University of Teacher Education Vorarlberg together with partners from Switzerland. Data of the participating small rural schools has shown that these institutions' small structures make them places of opportunity, but that they also face specific challenges. My focus lies on the characteristics and current situation of small rural primary schools in Austria, the working conditions for head teachers and teachers, as well as the learning context for pupils.

Small Primary Schools in Austria: The National Context

Austria has a centrally organized education system, but certain decisions—concerning issues such as the minimum number of pupils per school or school closures—fall under the jurisdiction of the nine individual provinces. The situation of small rural schools accordingly differs quite strongly from province to province. In the 1960s and 1970s, several factors led to a wave of school closures in Austria. For example, the extension of road infrastructure resulted in many small hamlets

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gaining better access to the centre of the village, free public transport for pupils, the migration of families to the towns, and declining birth rates, as well as a harsh critique of small schools by educationalists and decision makers (Kramer, 1993). Although relatively few small schools were closed in Austria in the last 40 years, the situation has been changing over the past decade, with school closures increasing especially in the eastern part of Austria (Kroismayer, 2015).

Primary school in Austria lasts 4 years. This can be seen as one reason for the higher percentage of small schools compared to countries with 5 or 6 years of primary schooling. Researchers in the two research projects from which the data of this chapter stems—“Schools in Alpine Regions” (Müller, Keller, Kerle, Raggl, & Steiner, 2011) and “Small Schools in Rural Regions” (Raggl, Smit, & Kerle, 2015)—defined a small school as one with less than 50 pupils. An important characteristic of such small schools is that they have mixed-grade classes because of the low number of pupils enrolled. Of the 2998 primary schools that exist in Austria, 883 have fewer than 50 pupils. Over 40% of the primary schools in Tyrol and Vorarlberg are small schools according to this definition (see Table 12.1).

A West-East divide can be seen in the *Standortdichte*, or “location density,” of primary schools per square meter: in Burgenland (14.2 km²), Carinthia (10.5 km²), Lower Austria (18.5 km²), Upper Austria (12.6 km²), Salzburg (8.0 km²), Tyrol (4.0 km²), and Vorarlberg (3.5 km²) (Kroismayer, 2015). In 2000, the numbers of primary school pupils began falling in all Austrian provinces except Vienna. Since 2010, however, these numbers have remained constant or risen slightly, but with significant regional differences. Many school closures have been taking place in this period, which indicates that such closures cannot be explained through falling numbers of pupils alone (Kroismayer, 2015). Whether a small rural school is kept open or closed very much depends on political decisions. The case of the East-Austrian province of Styria exemplifies this very clearly: Implementers of a *Regionaler Bildungsplan*—a regional education plan—closed 41 small rural primary schools between 2011 and 2014. This policy was part of a larger policy for changing rural communities into bigger units. The fusion of several smaller communities resulted in the closure of the small rural primary schools involved (Kroismayer, 2015). Strong, political support of small schools exists in Western Austria. In an interview within the research project “Schools in Alpine Regions,” the regional governor for education in Vorarlberg explained as follows: “We try to prevent any school closure. There should be at least one primary school in every community.” Although a few schools have been closed in the last years in these two provinces, they were exclusively primary schools with less than five pupils.

Table 12.1 Primary schools in Austria (school year 16/17)

	Primary schools in Austria	Tyrol	Vorarlberg
In total	2998	374	161
Fewer than 50 pupils	883	166	67

Source: Design by author. Numbers from “Schulstatistik 2014/15” by Statistik Austria, 2017, Vienna: Rechnungshof Österreich

However, members of the central government are currently exerting more pressure. The authors of a recent report of the *Rechnungshof Österreich* (Austrian Court of Audit) (2018) are putting pressure on Tyrol and Vorarlberg to close more small schools and to mandate a certain minimum number of pupils per school (p. 62).

Methodology

In the two Interreg projects “Schools in Alpine Regions” (2009–2011) and “Small Schools in Rural Regions” (2012–2015), a team of researchers from the Universities of Teacher Education in Vorarlberg (Austria) and the Swiss cantons Grisons, St. Gallen, and Valais investigated the significance of small schools for the region, the work of head teachers and teachers in small rural schools, teaching and learning practices in mixed-grade classes, and students’ perspectives on learning in a small school setting (Müller et al., 2011; Raggl et al., 2015). The transnational cooperation enabled the researchers to compare the situation of small rural schools in the two countries and revealed the plurality of small rural schools.

The mixed-methods approach in both projects included a questionnaire study with head teachers and teachers as well as case studies. Case studies (Stake, 1995) involved semistructured interviews with head teachers and teachers in addition to group interviews with students, participant observations, and documentary analysis (e.g., school brochures and school homepages). In this chapter, I draw on data of the Austrian primary schools that involves 20 case studies of small schools in the province Vorarlberg. The data includes 20 interviews with head teachers, 35 interviews with teachers, and 30 group interviews with 3 students each from Years 3 and 4. Researchers asked the students what they liked and disliked about their school and their learning experiences in small schools with mixed-grade classes. They also carried out additional interviews with regional school inspectors and regional politicians. They recorded and transcribed all interviews and analyzed the content with the help of the software program MAXQDA.

Small Rural Schools: Potentials and Challenges

Small schools differ from their larger counterparts in a number of ways, including class size, the number of staff members, the use of a mixed-grade class structure, and the role of head teachers. These characteristics are a source of both educational opportunities and challenges (Raggl, 2012; Sigsworth & Solstad, 2001). At the same time, the differences between small rural schools and larger schools must be critically examined: Are small rural schools really so different? And if so, in what respect?

On their homepage, a local network of teachers in the western part of Austria presents the strengths of small schools in comparison to larger ones by pointing out

that the low numbers of pupils make individual support of each child more likely, creating a caring ethos in small primary schools. The researchers of the two projects carried out in Vorarlberg provided evidence that the low numbers of students can allow teachers at small schools to offer a different learning community: Three of the participating small schools took on children from larger schools who had been excluded from their former schools because of difficult behavior. One interviewed teacher explained that the small structure provided security and offered a 9-year-old boy a second chance:

He came to us from a big school. He did not get along at all there. And here, at the beginning it was also really difficult, but we managed somehow. Now he is in secondary school, again in a larger setting and he had really big problems there, at least at the beginning. The structure that we were able to offer him, the security he found here—you can't provide that in a big setting. That was a real chance for him. Yes, for many children like him it would be a great chance. (Teacher, V10)

The head teacher of Case Study V1 explained that his small rural school is attracting parents from urban areas who are looking for a more caring school with individual support. Two pupils are attending the school who “failed” in their former larger primary school.

The Plurality of Small Rural Schools

An important result of the research into small rural schools is that they cannot be classified as one type of school. It is necessary to reflect on each school's specific situation. How many teachers work there? How many students attend it? Where is it located? Is it threatened by school closure? A researcher must describe the contextual factors in order to identify the specific potentials and challenges of each school, instead of talking about small schools in an overly general way. The 20 Austrian small rural primary schools who have been participating in the research project can be categorized with the following typology (Raggl, [in press](#)):

1. Single-teacher schools that are very small and remote with fewer than 20 pupils (7 schools);
2. Small, 2-teacher schools, with between 20 and 30 pupils, located approximately 30 min driving time away from the next small town (11 schools);
3. Small schools with a special profile as Montessori schools, with between 20 and 35 pupils, located near urban centers (2 schools).

These three kinds of small rural schools face different challenges depending on their location and distance from the urban area. For example, there was more evidence of teacher isolation and fluctuation in very small, one-teacher schools in remote areas than in more centrally located schools.

Working and Learning Conditions for Teachers and Students in Small Schools

The researchers of the projects “Schools in Alpine Regions” and “Small Schools in Rural Regions” have shown that most of the participating Austrian head teachers and teachers enjoy working in their small rural school. In the two questionnaire studies, more than 70% stated that they are largely content with their work. With these case studies, I have discovered that many are very dedicated to their work and experience it as rewarding. Several of the interviewed head teachers and teachers described their small school as a “special” or “exciting” place, and they experienced their work as challenging though “very diverse” and “never boring” (Raggl, 2015).

In addition, group interviews with students indicate that most of the pupils like their school and speak very positively about their experiences in a small school setting. For example, students appreciate the advantages of having extra space due to the small number of pupils and explain that they enjoy the “quietness” in their school, noting that there is “no crowd on the playground” and “enough toys for all” to share. Children also mention that they like that “everyone really knows everybody” (Raggl, 2015). However, some students explain that it can be hard to find friends in a small school setting.

Every school has its positive sides. Last week, for example, I was in a secondary school for one day and I got really frightened when I came to such a big school. But there is the advantage that you can find friends there. (Peter, age 10, V4)

The limited options for friendships due to the low number of children are mentioned mainly by children of very small schools with less than 20 students.

Building Facilities: Generous Spatial Conditions

Most of the participating small schools in Vorarlberg have nice buildings and have been renovated recently or are relatively new. In the questionnaire study, head teachers and teachers expressed contentment with their spatial situation. They appreciate, for example, that they often have an extra room for group work. The generous spatial conditions are often connected to the declining numbers of pupils in the villages. Many of the schools were built for more students when most children attended the school for 8 years, up through the *Volksschuloberstufe* (upper level of primary school), which existed until the 1970s before more centrally located secondary schools were installed in rural areas. Because of this, a lot of rural primary schools often have rather generous spatial conditions with extra rooms for group work, and so forth.

Teaching Heads

Another characteristic of small rural primary schools is that they have a *teaching head* who has the dual role of serving both as class teacher and head teacher. Only schools with at least eight classes have a head teacher who is mainly responsible for management tasks and freed from teaching commitments. Several of the participating head teachers indicate in the interviews that they see themselves primarily as teachers: “I’m mainly a teacher. The head teacher role comes second to this” (Head Teacher, V4). However, some underline that the double role also provides them with the opportunity to create something: “It’s really tiring, but I also like this role because it enables you to act in a very autonomous way ... for me as a teacher of this school and for the whole staff. ... I have freedom!” (Head Teacher, V1).

The freedom includes a lot of responsibility that falls to a very small team, or even to a single person. Teachers explain that they have to be careful not to exploit themselves out of personal dedication to the school. Asking head teachers of small schools about their tasks, the list seems to be endless: administrative work, building up links to the community, being in charge of building facilities, responsibility for curriculum and school development, and so forth. A review of the existing literature reveals the minimal attention the complex role of rural teaching heads has received from researchers (Dunning, 1993; Wilson & McPake, 2000) internationally and especially in German-speaking countries. For the past decade, head teachers in Austrian primary schools have had to take an obligatory management course. Until then, former class teachers shifted into the management role after some years of teaching. In the interviews, the newly appointed head teachers of small rural schools who were just attending the management course criticized that the lessons were not pertinent to their situation in small rural schools: “Not much of the course is helpful for us” (Head Teacher, V8). A stronger acknowledgment of the specific situation of head teachers of rural schools remains a future task for both research and professional development.

Mixed-Grade Classes

An important characteristic of small schools is that they have mixed-grade classes due to the low number of pupils. On the one hand, mixed-grade classes are a structural necessity for maintaining small rural primary schools; on the other hand, they provide specific learning opportunities. The participating teachers state that pupils benefit strongly from learning alongside younger and older peers. Some criticize the strong age orientation in the education system in general and describe it as “unnatural.” “Nowhere in society are you together only with people of the same age, except in schools” (Teacher, V7). They explain that the mixed-grade class highlights children’s diversity and helps them to explore their potential, especially in the school-entry phase (Raggl, 2015). Several participating teachers deliberately

changed from larger urban schools to a small school because they wanted to work with mixed-grade classes. They are strongly convinced of the benefits of this system, although they are aware that “it gets more complex when you have four grades in one class” (Head Teacher, V1). However, some teachers who changed to a small school explained that they expected it to be easier than it actually was. They had to experience the complexity of the mixed-grade classes and the challenges of the wide range of children in terms of age and performance levels.

Professionalizing Rural Teachers’ Work: Distancing from a Total Immersion in the Village

In the literature, one can find constructions of the rural primary teacher who is portrayed as a carrier of culture (Poglia & Strittmatter, 1983) and who is responsible for everything in the school and beyond the school. The long history of the *Volksschullehrer auf dem Land* (rural primary teacher) still has a strong influence on the perception of the rural primary teacher who, until the 1960s, was often not well educated and not well paid. He (the position was most often held by a man) was very much under the control of the church and had to fulfill ecclesiastical duties such as playing the organ, organizing the festivities of the community, or engaging in sport clubs (Kramer, 1993). In an interview, an inspector talked about the “special type of mountain teachers,” indicating that “they have to be tough” and “be able to sort out everything by them” (Inspector, V1). The conditions for mountain teachers have changed a lot in the last decades: Classes are no longer filled with 50 or more students between 6 and 15 years, the teachers have the same education and pay as primary teachers in urban areas, and so forth. However, some old expectations seem to remain. One newly appointed head teacher explained that he had to be very clear with parents that he would not take on responsibilities for activities in the church like the former head teacher. His predecessor played the organ, strongly connected school activities to church festivities, and also included the weekly mass as part of the school activity.

In general, the researchers have shown with their data that head teachers and teachers feel supported by parents and the wider community. Some schools have strong links to the community and can be described as “community-active” schools (Sigsworth & Solstad, 2005) whose teachers encourage parents and other community members to come into the school and contribute their skills and knowledge. However, in the questionnaire study, 70% of the head teachers and teachers’ state that they are not engaged in village activities outside of their work in the school and 65% state that they do not personally live in the village in which they work. In the interviews, several emphasize that the spatial detachment from work and home is important for them. Teachers who are also living in the village where they work found it very challenging:

Sometimes it is really hard when everybody is seeing everything. You see them in the afternoon, in the evening. And when you go to the library you see again the same people, when you go the pub you see the same people, and when you cycle. Sometimes it's really monotonous. So I always try to go to places where I have absolutely nothing to do with the people and the kids. (Teacher, V3)

A few make a point of saying that they prefer to live in urban areas and commute to their workplace in a rural school. Kalaoja and Pietarinen (2009) describe a similar trend for teachers in Finland, where many prefer to live in urban areas and commute to their workplace in a rural school. Unlike in earlier studies (e.g., Poggia & Strittmatter, 1983), wherein village teachers were described as “carriers of culture,” many of the participating Austrian teachers try to emphasize their professional role and distance themselves from a total immersion in village life (Raggl, 2015).

New Ways of Cooperating

The high responsibility which falls to a very small team in rural primary schools is connected with a rather isolated professional situation. This was especially the case in very small and remote one-teacher schools. However, case study analysis indicates mutual support in many small schools, in spite of the generally small team size. In addition, many maintain close contacts with other small schools nearby. In Vorarlberg, most small schools are part of the network of small schools (*ARGE Kleinschulen*) and meet for informal exchange and mutual support or developing learning materials. The interviewed teachers, especially novice teachers in small schools underline the importance of this support network (Raggl, 2015). The case studies also reveal other ways of cooperating: Several primary teachers work closely together with the kindergarten teacher. Primary schools and kindergarten often work rather separately in Austria. The close cooperation in rural institutions is enhanced because they are often the only professional educators in the village.

Current Changes: Development of Regional Clusters

Currently, the development of clusters is a new issue in the context of small rural schools in Austria. The aim is to connect several small rural primary schools in a regional network of schools with one head teacher who is responsible for one cluster. Until recently, every small and even very small primary school had its own head teacher. Policymakers see this development as a chance to combat teachers' isolated professional situation and to enable exchange and support within a larger team. Clusters can include from two to eight schools (primary and secondary schools) in a region. The head of the cluster has to take on the management tasks of the hitherto existing head teachers of each school (BMBWF, 2018). Some small schools are already connected to the next bigger primary school. This was the case

in two schools that took part in the research project. The two case studies revealed that the change was experienced very differently by the head teachers and teachers: In one small school, the staff welcomed the reorganization warmly. The head teacher spent 1 day a week in the small school and teachers of the larger school were teaching for some hours in the small school and vice versa. The enlarged team provided opportunities for collegial support and exchange of learning materials or arranging joint seminars for further professional development. In contrast, in the second case the teacher of the one-teacher school felt left alone and unassisted by the head teacher of the larger school. At the same time, the head teacher felt sorry that he lacked the time to be around more. He explained that increasing demands were pulling him in many different directions: “It’s difficult, because I’m also appointed as a teacher. I teach 14 hours a week at the moment and I’m responsible for two schools now” (Head Teacher, V7). The two cases revealed the potentials and challenges of reorganizing small rural schools in Austria. Some teachers explained in the interviews that removing head teachers from small schools is mainly an attempt to save money and criticized the reduction of head teachers’ autonomy that accompanied these changes.

Small Rural Schools as Places for Innovation?

Researchers have portrayed small rural schools as places providing unique educational opportunities (Bell & Sigsworth, 1987; Sigsworth & Solstad, 2001; Vulliamy & Webb, 1995). Several of the head teachers and teachers participating in the two research projects stressed the idea that the structure of a small school makes it easier to implement changes. Many of them appreciated the degree of autonomy to create their own profile of the school and explained that the small structure makes it possible to implement new ideas easily:

It’s much easier to do this in a small school when you get along well with each other than in a big one. Too many people take part in the discussion there ... And here you just sit together and decide it ... It’s not time-consuming in the end. I really see this as an advantage. (Head Teacher, V3)

A number of the participating head teachers and teachers deliberately transferred from a larger school to a small school because they realized they had the opportunity to put their educational ideas into practice in a smaller setting.

Small Rural Schools with a Special Profile

Two of the Austrian case studies were schools that had developed a special profile as *Montessori schools*. By labelling their schools Montessori schools, the teachers expressed their adoption of many ideas of the Italian educationalist Maria Montessori, who developed her system from working with children with special

needs in Rome at the beginning of the last century. The methods included the development of a variety of didactic material, and center on the individual development of each child (Brehony, 2000). The two Montessori schools are government-funded village schools. Hill School and Valley School (pseudonyms) had to fight against school closure in the past. The label Montessori was therefore also a strategy to avoid such closure. The two rural schools have become attractive to parents from the nearby towns and this has helped to secure their existence. Hill School has doubled its number of pupils and Valley School receives a third of its pupils from outside the village. Despite clearly regulated catchment areas in Austria, several parents have found ways to get permission to send their child to Hill School or Valley School. The head teachers and teachers have set up and defined these two schools as Montessori schools, and portray them as such on their homepages. Parents from the adjacent towns took an interest in the newly established small Montessori schools within a rural environment and the schools took on more and more children from outside the catchment area over the years. Developing a school according to their own pedagogical ideas was a dream for both head teachers. They saw better chances to realize their pedagogical ideas in a small rural school—which is why both switched from larger, more urban institutions (Raggl, *in press*). The two case studies reveal that Austrian head teachers enjoy a high level of freedom to create a school according to their own pedagogical ideas. The role endows them with considerable power and authority (Bell & Sigsworth, 1987). An important factor for fulfilling their ideas was their ability to find teachers who were trained in Montessori pedagogy and to build up a team of committed teachers in spite of the centrally organized allocation of teachers in Austria. Therefore, Hill School and Valley School are examples of schools with a remarkable autonomy despite a centralized education system. They show many similarities to private schools. The label Montessori enabled them to build up a certain profile that attracted both teachers and parents.

Securing the Existence of Rural Schools by Developing a Special Profile as Montessori Schools

Hill School and Valley School are located on the outskirts of towns. Their existence is not guaranteed; they are dependent on their town's interest in keeping several small schools in its hamlets around the city center. The schools operate in what Taylor (2002) refers to as “a local competitive arena” (p. 199). Local municipal governments question the existence of these suburban village schools critically. Showing that they are able to attract parents from outside the village and increase the number of pupils helps these schools to survive. They have to fend for themselves in a competitive climate (Harrison & Busher, 1995) and are dependent on parental support in this fight (Bushnell, 2001; Walker & Clark, 2010).

The Pull-Factor of Small Rural Montessori Schools

The two rural Montessori schools have provoked an interesting phenomenon that seems to challenge the dominant move to urban centers with a kind of countermovement: Up to half of the pupils are commuting every day by bus to these small rural schools in the hills near the urban center. The families found ways to remove their child from the designated primary school despite the prescribed catchment area in western Austria. Some of the children explain that it was very important for their parents that they are able to go to this school. Going to this small rural primary school appears to be seen as a privilege. The families agreed to the longer school journey because of the advantages the small rural school provides—the smaller classes and the more child-oriented individual support that forms a central part of the Montessori pedagogy. The small rural primary school provides a niche for well-informed urban choosers (Raggl, [in press](#)). However, the data also indicates that this move generates tensions between “villagers” and “newcomers”. The head teachers explained that some of the locals would prefer a small village school without children from outside.

Conclusion

With my research into small rural schools in western Austria, I have shown their plurality and how much they differ according to their location, their numbers of pupils and teachers, and whether or not they have to fight for their existence. Small schools are portrayed as niches where head teachers can implement pedagogical ideas more easily than in larger schools. Some of the participating head teachers and teachers have deliberately changed to a small rural school because they saw more chances to realize their educational ideas there than in a larger urban primary school. They seem to have found a niche for their pedagogical ideas and these schools appear as attractive places to work. However, the small rural mountain school can also be a challenging place. The data reveals that this very much depends on the location of the school. Very small, One-teacher schools with less than 20 pupils in remote areas are more likely to be over-demanding places. In some cases, very young and inexperienced teachers are sent to these schools and find themselves in an isolated professional situation. Although regional inspectors are very much aware of these difficulties, they cannot always prevent them because they sometimes fail to find more experienced teachers who are willing to go to more remote schools. However, the findings indicate that most teachers like to work in small rural primary schools and appreciate their freedom to create something and enjoy the challenging but never boring working situation. Teachers interpret the development of new forms of cooperation like the current reorganization of clusters of small schools very differently, but they are attempts to overcome professional isolation and foster more exchange. The data also revealed that small rural schools can be places of innovation and some of them are able to attract parents from urban centers because of their special profile.

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