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**On the importance of the macro-social factors that can determine the quality of research**

In our paper we will present some of the findings that we have obtained in the framework of an international research<sup>1</sup>. Although the call for papers of this conference did not exactly mention the topics we are about to introduce, we decided to present our results here since we find them rather challenging.

On one hand, it is in fact important to study the different mechanisms that can be introduced in the higher educational sector in order to assure quality in research (for example, creation of a policy of quality assurance within the institutions, or make it possible to find and follow up every single research, or introducing a protocol to be followed in terms of the documentation of the scientific researches etc). But on the other hand, it is also important to investigate into the conditions of research at the macro-sociological level, so at the level of the nation-state (in fact such investigations could deal with the role of the supra-national agencies also, these latter having a growing influence on research activities.)

Our first research results on the last ten-fifteen years of educational research in Hungary show that the researches in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dealing with the working mechanisms of the educational system were in fact heavily influenced by some macro-sociological factors. First, one has to keep in mind that the majority of these researches were lead by publicly founded and managed research institutions, first of all by the Ministry of Education. Second, the Hungarian case also reveals the importance of the general characteristics of the ruling political regimes, for example, authoritarian functioning (like censorship and the hostility toward critical reflection) may constitute a serious barrier for social scientific research, particularly for educational research. As it will be demonstrated, this was particularly the case for Hungary in the first phase of pure communist dictatorship.

Third, research can be hindered simply by the lack of money. In this respect one has to keep in mind that in general in Hungary and in many other countries these are the political authorities who are in the position to commission researches.

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And of course the presence of some or all of these barriers decreases the likelihood of commissioning (on behalf of the State) any big researches with the aim of studying a given public policy. In fact even if Hungary became a pluralistic democracy from the end of the 1980ies on, where the liberty of opinion and human rights are respected, researches can still be hindered by institutional and financial dependence of the investigations.

In what follows we will try to outline the evolution of the institutional framework that in Hungary determined the nature of the researches on the educational system.

### **1. 1945-1948: A period when decision makers could go without collaborating with scientific institutions.**

Until 1948 the Hungarian educational field was characterised by the absence of institutions specialized in educational research. The rare researches concerning pedagogic activities were produced by the pedagogic faculties of the universities dealing with teachers training and by the psychological laboratories. In this era educational policy was not yet an object neither to pilot nor to efficiency studies

However in certain cases university professors and experts of educational issues were able to take part in the decision-making process. Above all, the National Council of Public Education exerted such influence. In fact, the Council had been newly formed and took up the heritage of an earlier existing council formed in 1872 when Hungary gained extended autonomy within the Habsburg Empire. Except for some short periods, this latter mentioned body worked until the end of WWII. After the war, for the short period between 1945 and 1948, a similar but somewhat modified and renamed (National Educational Council) decision-making body replaced it. Although some of the highly respected intellectuals of the era worked in this heterogeneously composed body, but in fact they did not participate actively in the preparation of the decisions. Next to leading intellectuals, the representatives of the parties of the governing coalition and those of the sole teachers' trade union what was controlled by the Communist Party since 1945, the delegates of various government departments and major religious confessions were seated in the council. Additionally, some university professors and instructors of top educational institutions also participated. Although members of the council rarely assembled, a small core-team took active part in the preparation of decisions related to the functioning of the education system, and especially in the rewriting of school pedagogic programs and textbooks. Consequently, the council was eventually successful in filling in partly those functions what in the following decades became attributed to the institutes for pedagogical development. Yet, as a secret document of the Communist Party proves, due to the fact that within the council numerous persons were not

members of the Communist Party or influenced by this political formation, in 1948, when the single-party system was introduced, the work of the council was suspended.

## **2. The initial heavy period of political dictatorship**

The educational sector in Hungary, just as every other sector of public life, underwent an overwhelming centralization during the years of communist dictatorship after 1948. It was impossible to conduct critical research in social sciences (including research on education and pedagogy) during the first years of the communist era.

In 1948, Ferenc Mérei, a distinguished psychologist who was at the time in close contact with the top leaders of the Communist Party, wrote an article in the pedagogical newspaper of the Ministry of Education in which he stated that in the council, opinions rather than scientific facts were presented, thus he contributed to the legitimation of the suspension of the work of the National Educational Council. Parallel with the termination of the operation of this body, the Hungarian Institute for Educational Science was established with the direction of Mérei. However, implementing the ambitious ideas of the director on educational sociology which even preceded those in Western Europe was impossible due to the restrictions of the dictatorial regime. At last, one of the main tasks of the institution was to disseminate the results of the Soviet pedagogical research. Shortly after that the director was accused of sabotaging the curriculum regulations, the institution was dissolved. After the death of Stalin, during the political reform process a new Pedagogical Scientific Institution was brought to life with a director aiming at serving political causes and implementing party decrees.

In a conference, a few days before the outburst of the 1956 revolution, the freshly rehabilitated Mérei suggested that as a counterbalance of the Pedagogical Institution, the former National Educational Council should be re-established. He argued for an autonomous body making possible for scientists to participate in the elaboration of educational policies. According to documents that I found in the National Archives, the Ministry of Education was seriously deliberating on the re-establishment of the above mentioned council even four months after Mérei had made his suggestion (Bajomi, 2006).

The period after the repression of the revolution in November 1956 can be characterized by increasingly intense tendencies of an ever more comprehensive restoration of the Stalinist system. One of their side phenomena was the sharp attack of the new Minister of Education against the keynote speaker of the above mentioned conference, Ferenc Mérei at May 1957.

Mérei got accused for aiming to realize the endeavors of the proclaimed traitor, Imre Nagy, Prime Minister during the revolution of 1956, in the field of culture and education. Imre Nagy was executed in 1958, and Mérei was sentenced to life imprisonment for the fake accusations; eventually he got amnesty and was released in 1963. Under those circumstances, it is not surprising that the above mentioned pedagogical conference remained a taboo till 1990. The minutes of the meeting were published in a printed version only in 2006, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution. No wonder either that the restoration of the National Public Education Council was off the agenda of educational politics till the change of the regime. It worth noting that Árpád Kiss, the former managing director of the institution between 1945 and 1948 again made suggestion of its restoration in a study, around the time of the accelerated reform waves, but this initiation did not bring forth any results.

### **3. The consolidation of state socialism: “softening” dictatorship**

The great majority of educational researches and developments has been until very recently conducted in ministerial background institutions funded directly from central public budget. The system of the so-called background institutions is a peculiar institutional form typical of the seventies and eighties in the socialist countries under Soviet domination. The concept roots in the ideology of scientific socialism. Background institutions do not form a network maintained directly by the government but follow sectoral logic: each Ministry maintains one or more institutes. Although under budgetary constraints, the system of institutions has been streamlined and reshaped many times over the last decades, this effected only the specialization of the still existing institutions, their dependency toward the Ministry has remained unchanged. The independence of scientific research conducted in such institutions was always a subject of debates within the staff and of ongoing imbalanced negotiation between the ministry and the director. Directors are still appointed by the founding Ministry, and the research plans always have to be approved by the Ministry. Thus next to basic research, these institutes mainly conduct applied researches for ministerial demands stemming from the daily tasks of public administration. They also have to meet rapid and ad hoc ministerial orders.

Organizational strategies vary depending on the director in charge, on the composition of habits and abilities of employee, and on the "traditional" organizational culture and dominant forms of relations with the ministry/government. The staff of these institutions was a mixture of people with ambitions to work as experts and exert influence on the preparation of

decision-making, and others, striving first of all for scientific autonomy and critical research. Most researchers in the background institutions seem to think ambivalently about their role and perform various strategies: there is an ongoing debate whether policy analysis should be done in these bodies, or, rather they should preserve a critical perspective in describing the sector in a whole and also as part of the whole society/nation/economy. Some researchers may switch to policy analysis and applied research and keep hotlines to ministerial bureaucrats, while others may prefer conducting basic research and writing critical articles for nationwide dailies. Those referred as "*influential researchers*" are typically capable to catch ad hoc government support for both their academic and applied research projects (the boundary of these usually blurs), expose their thoughts in the public sphere and tend to provide personal counseling for high position decision makers.

It was following the economical reforms of 1968 when the other important centre of educational research was formed: a smaller research group started its work in 1972 in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences called the Pedagogical Research Group. Already in the seventies, the research groups and institutes of the Academy were more independent from direct sectoral governance than the ministerial background institutions. This brought (first, economic, but later also on the education system) more autonomous researches sometimes even with a critical orientation.

According to a study on the history of educational policy (Halász, 1985, pp 82-83), scientists of pedagogy during the `60ies were first of all expected to assist in the execution of political decisions. Meanwhile, the task of the Pedagogical Research Group of Academy of Sciences was from the very beginning the support of decision-making by outlining possible decision alternatives. The pedagogical professionals whose political loyalty was unquestionable and who attained leading positions during the preceding two decades were suspicious about the founding of this research group and its new agenda. (Kozma, 1990.)

The researches highlighting possible reform alternatives for the restructuring of the public educational system exemplify this new kind of approach to research characteristic of the Pedagogical Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Meanwhile, research on education have also appeared on the agenda of the Institute for Sociological Research in the Academy: here, at the beginning of the `70s, a research adapting western European methodologies proved that tracking and specializations in Hungarian grammar schools contribute to the widening of social inequalities. (Ferge, 1971). Educational research has become more diverse with the so-called *Directive 6* initiated by reformists of the party under the renewed science policy of the Party. Directive 6 was introduced in 1973 and set a new

research fund which allocated important financial resources from the state budget for researches on public education. At the same time, studies analyzing *Directive 6* and its research programs highlight that there were serious problems with the realization of the original research priorities and with the utilization of results. (Halász, Pőcze, 1988)

In 1980, the Pedagogical Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Centre for Pedagogical Research in Higher Education were closed down and a new ministerial background institution was created called the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research (HIER). Although the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research lacked legal and financial independence, but thanks to the benevolence of its „patrons” (which was always a key issue in the story of research institutions in this era), it was quite autonomous in terms of its research agenda. Due to its autonomy in the 80s, the HIER’s researchers imported and applied new Anglo-Saxon research approaches in education policy and in economics of education systems.

The thematic areas covered by educational research broadened in general in the `80ies. Within the walls of the rival of HIER, the National Pedagogic Institute, educational assessment became the leading research topic already in the `80s. The staff of its Evaluation Centre, referring to British patterns, emphasized the importance of regulation by exams even before the political change (Sáska, 1987), and also underlined after the political transformation the role of the basic curriculum in regulation. The Hungarian Institute for Educational Research (HIER) and the National Pedagogic Institute took active part in the formulation of reform conceptions that resulted in the Education Act of 1985. Educational researchers developed reform concepts about devolution of competencies and the re-evaluation of the role of the earlier state, which considerably influenced the reform of the earlier centralized educational system. (Lukács – Várhegyi, 1989). The pedagogic autonomy of schools and teachers were at the centre of the law. Under this principle, the 1985 Public Education Act put an end to the inspection system and declared the methodological freedom of teachers.

As a result, the devolution of competencies and the role of local authorities in educational policy making got into the centre of the researchers’ attention. However, presumably for censorial reasons, the functioning and the possible reshaping of central regulatory institutions were much less systematically analyzed. And even the few investigations of such topics (e.g. on the structural characteristics of reform debates conducted under latent pluralism /Halász, 1984/ and on the central redistribution of resources in the field of education /Lukács, 1986/) were not analyzed systematically after the change of the regime,

when school autonomy gained a central importance. In sum, investigations had neither been conducted on the possible structural frames that could ensure greater autonomy for researchers (and a critical eye on decision-making) nor on the involvement of autonomous actors in the decision-making process at the local level and in schools.

#### **4. The reorganization of educational researches after the democratic transition**

Partly due to the lack of these researches, after 1990, one of the first actions of the educational decision-makers of the newly formed national-conservative government was the closure of the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research (HIER), and they only reconsidered the decision because of the critics coming from professional-intellectual circles. The institute coming back from clinical death yet existed for more than 15 years. But recently, after serious dismissals, it was merged into a new institution called Institute for Educational Research and Development which will seemingly be much less independent from the Ministry.

During the last decades, the possible financial sources for educational research have widened with research funds such as the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund and the common research program of the Pedagogic Board of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Education. This fund enjoys considerable independence from the authorities and it is meant to finance researches (basic or applied) by means of tenders. However educational researchers (Halász, 2002, Csapó, 2007) pointed out that in an international comparison, the Hungarian state devoted restrained financial resources for educational researches.

Anglo-Saxon typed non-profit, non-partisan research institutes are hardly present in the field. Although the Centre for Policy Analysis (CPA) works at the Central European University, a non-governmental US-style graduate institution, the staff don't exercise advocacy or counseling activity at the national level.

For-profit actors do not exercise influence on central decision-making, but they principally offer counseling and expertise at the local level (principally they focus on quality assurance and provide assistance on the preparation of local public education action plans) and also involved in teachers' trainings and adult instruction.

## 5. National institutional frameworks of educational consultations

In early 1989, when the conditions for the multiple-party political system has started to crystallise, the Hungarian Pedagogical Society proposed the re-establishment of the National Public Education Council (NPEC). Their goal was to hinder that the new educational regulation would neglect scientific views and the possibility that it would be overwhelmingly influenced by political parties. The idea also appeared in a proposal signed by educational researchers.

Although during the preparation phase of the new Public Education Act experts again supported the idea of establishing a consultative body that could “*assure that the different professional and social interest groups have their word*”, their proposition was not realized at last because in the meantime, political forces rejecting liberal principles took over the department and elaborated a new concept for the future Public Education Act. This did not take into consideration the relatively newly formed interest groups of students or parents, so at least, they followed in this respect the organizing principles of the bodies working subordinately to the Ministry of Education before 1948. Serious debates took place about the new conservative proposal, and as a consequence, the Ministry decided to found two consultative bodies in parallel. The Public Education Act of 1993 first disposed over the National Public Education Council that would exclusively consist of members delegated by professional groups (educational researchers, teacher training institutes and pedagogical professional organizations). At the same time, another body, also based on a system of delegation, the Public Education Policy Council (PEPC) was also established by the word of the law. Here, next to pedagogical professional organizations, members are delegated by other interest-groups as well (trade unions, school maintainer local governments and churches, associations of parents and of pupils, and associations of minorities), who were not considered as important professional actors by the ministry. Educational researchers, however, are not represented in this body. Interestingly enough, political parties who are in fact the most capable of influencing educational policies are excluded from the “twin-councils”. The picture of educational consultations is in reality more complex as at the level of the Educational Ministry, another system of three-pillar consultation has been built up where pedagogical trade unions and school maintainer local governments are present. In the latter mentioned council, not only opinions on proposals are discussed but actual negotiations can take place as well – for example on issues concerning wages.

All educational councils are impeded by the fact that practically there isn't any cooperation between the first two councils, and none of the bodies work in contact with the consultative

bodies dealing with higher education and vocational training issues. Contrary to the 1989 expert proposal, new bodies were neither assigned permanent staff nor independent financial resources. This seriously limits their operation until these very days: they can not afford research commissions and expert analyses e.g. on possible decision alternatives.

Consequently the above mentioned bodies rather operate on a reactive manner: they are consulted to express their opinion on the different proposals of the Ministry, often without having enough time to read the proposals carefully. The bodies meet for a session of several hours in a month without exerting serious influence on policy making. The chance for such work was further decreased by the modification of the law in 1996, when three ministerial delegates became members of the National Public Education Council, in this manner derogating the independence of the council.

On the contrary, the Ministry of Education have always had the possibility to command scientific researches either from research institutes dependant on the Ministry itself or from other independent institutes, or from for-profit organizations working with statistical and survey methods, or even from consulting companies whose number and importance have multiplied since the change of the regime. Under these circumstances, the most characteristic investigations focusing on the functioning of the education system are determined by political authorities: first of all by the Ministry of Education and by cross-sectoral bodies who lately play a determining role in the elaboration of public actions in the field of education. These supra-ministerial bodies were formed upon the arrival of vast developmental funds to the country from various European Structural Funds. Evidently such a financially and administratively dependent situation scarcely supports large-scale, independent investigations; and it is also unlikely that all decisive aspects of the lately elaborated public policies would become objects of well-documented and critical studies.

We shall conclude stating that due to the dependence of the most important institutions involved in scientific researches on the education system and also because of the unbalance in terms of financial sources between various actors, nowadays principally political authorities are in the position to determine the focus of scientific investigations who scarcely support that public actions launched on the field of education became subjects of comprehensive and impartial evaluations. Finally, it seems to us that the description of the Hungarian case could be instructive as regards of other countries as well. As an issue of the

International Social Science Journal<sup>2</sup> shows, researchers face similar obstacles in numerous countries. Such problems are either rooted in the lack of autonomy of the research institutes or they occur because of fiscal constraints due to the fact that often governmental authorities have disposal of the majority of financial resources allocated for research activity.

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<sup>2</sup> International Social Science Journal; 179 March 2004; Tracking Impact; Case studies on the social science – policy nexus)

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