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Independent Room for Manoeuvre and the Lack of It in Hungarian Education in Romania: the Situation of Teacher Training¹

Doubtless, even among doubts and perplexity the most important sphere of cultural autonomy is education, the complexity of education for any national community. The turn at the end of 1989 held out hopes in this respect too. A lot of things have changed, the teaching of native language gained ground in the institutions; independent Hungarian schools could manage relatively freely, they could shape and establish their relations; chances and opportunities for higher education improved by the extension of its ranges. However, centralised organisation and majority supervision as well as dependence still remained in the educational system; remained the lack of an independent state university at the level of higher education; Hungarian school classes were functioning as specialised sections and were pushed into the background and withered; remained the restrictive and discriminative character of the legal regulation and the unprotectedness of pedagogues. It became obvious that leaders of Hungarian education and most institutions are unable to make use of the existing opportunities or the room of manoeuvre granted. There are even examples that independence of liberty without self-regulation provided opportunities for infringement. The study examines one segment of this extensive issue: teacher training. We focus on it because it is a component of key-importance since it is part of higher education, it determines the operation and the standards of primary and secondary education and through the young people who leave these schools it has an impact on the quality of higher education itself.

1. So far colleges and secondary school institutions have dealt with teacher training. Colleges were organised by some universities and the centre for Hungarian language teacher training was the University of Kolozsvár. Teacher training has not had its own institutions in the past 25 years; education is conducted in university departments in a "multi-channel" system. Since 1990 students can decide themselves whether they take part in the teacher education programme in addition to the basic professional training.² The institutional basis

¹ The study is a partially re-elaborated chapter of greater work which was made by the support of Arany János Kozalapítvány in 2005.

² Education system as a whole is being reformed complying with the recommended European system since 2005. Status of college faculty of teacher training has been clarified yet.

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for Hungarian teacher training was also the University of Kolozsvár. This implies that autonomy for teacher education and training is not granted at an institutional level. In respect of the programmes it is even less so.

It's a fundamental question in the university system how scientific education and teacher training are related to one another. No doubt, there are exclusively scientific requirements, criteria and professional aims, which are to be handled separately according to the special fields; and there are the interests of the community which determine the future of the community. Education is primarily such, and so is teacher training. The aim is to raise the level of school education and make knowledge general among the members of Hungarian minority. The university has already made its choice: it focuses on science. The already existing system of institutions, professional background institutions, international relations and supports primarily serve scientific education. The significance of the University of Kolozsvár will increase in this respect since the Hungarian language institutions, which have been functioning since 1990 can count only on this university as a basis for post-graduate education.

These can have hindrances in regulation. For example that education in the native language will only be supported at primary and secondary level and financing is already one of these hindrances. Choice of subject and career can also contrary to quality: the first is significantly influenced by fashion not by values or perspectives; while the latter is influenced by wages, the expectable income. Owing to the plenty and diverse temptations graduates of foreign languages or informatics take up a teacher's career only in exceptional cases or as a last chance for survival.

Teacher training is important because this part is the segment where education reproduces itself. In an ideal case it generates improvement spirally; or the reproduction is linear; or in the reproduction process primary education spoils the secondary one which in turn spoils higher education which than spoils general education. It embodies the fact that education is a consistent system: universities can see the candidates' and the students' blank spots and shortcomings of knowledge who were taught by teachers that had been educated and trained in higher education. This is a self-generating process: high or low standards on one side generate similar ones on the other. This is why it would be important that education in the Hungarian language would have a relatively independent system of its own.

Earlier it was common that teacher training had its own institutions; raised level secondary schools for primary school teachers, teacher training colleges for secondary school teachers, and certain subjects at universities e.g. mathematics, history, philology etc. also counted as teacher training subjects. Teacher

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training was conducted parallelly with professional education in a multi-channel system and was compulsory.

In the '70s the forms of education were homogenised together with other spheres of social life of the country: formally the three year teacher training was elevated in rank by being extended to four years, while university education lost some of its prestige by being shortened from five to four years. Homogenisation proved to have a harmful effect on quality in this case. Former institutions of post-graduate training, which were the professional background institutions of primary and secondary education, were discontinued. Ever since they have been missing from Hungarian public education. The tight frame in which Hungarian-language higher education and teacher training were struggling in the '80s, the strict selection itself was able to assure high standards, although as is well known, humiliating coercion was a determining factor in that regime: the coercion of appointment which sent many hundreds of young Hungarian teachers into Romanian education over the Carpathians and several thousand Romanian teachers into Hungarian public education. The career had two characteristics: being serf-like bound to soil and the coercion of being appointed. By the end of 1989 coercions and obligations ceased to exist. But as it turned out freedom was continuously misused. Freedom was not balanced by self-regulating responsibility, and this can serve as a warning example for autonomy. Formerly being bound to soil had a natural counter effect: extensive mobility. Those who could had chosen early retirement, others returned to Transylvania, from the villages into the towns to town schools; the Romanians could leave Szeklerland and return back to their own native land. Many of them had already emigrated and there was an other wave of emigration to Hungary and further parts of the world. This excessive mobility resulted in a lack of teachers from which Hungarian public education has not yet recovered. In the academic year 1990/1991 45.7% of kindergarten teachers did not have a relevant qualification, 31% of the primary school teachers, 28.9% of ground school teachers and 13.9% of secondary school teachers.³ Totals for 2002/2003 are available only for primary and secondary school teachers, which still shows 18.3% of unqualified teachers.⁴ This hardly shows any improvement compared to the situation 12 years before. The same applies at lower levels of education and if the negative results of non-selective and accelerated education are added, failures at the important examinations and the poor performance of the students are not surprising at all.

³ Murvai 2000 32, 34, 37, p. 41.

⁴ Murvai 2004. p. 5.

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As a quick remedy for the shortage of teachers, continuous and limitless opportunities to appoint untrained and unqualified teachers have opened up without any self-restriction. The quick employment of masses of untrained teachers naturally did not have a positive impact on quality. Neither did the mistaken ideology – the dangers of which could be perceived already by June 1990 - according to which it was not important for a teacher to be well-educated both linguistically and professionally and to be fit for the career but preferably to be a member of the local community, young Hungarians loyal to their own community. Loyalty can be a noble ideal but cannot be measured unlike professional competence and ability or the lack of it can be scrutinized as they have a direct impact on the students' future prospects. This approach resulted in the light-hearted handing out of degrees and teaching posts. It has been fifteen years since the process started but the system is still protecting the unqualified against those who have gained qualification in the meanwhile.

2. Euphemistically we could say that the period of transition has begun and is still going on but if we are realistic this is the period of increasing chaos in teacher training. As a counter effect to the former restrictions completely uncontrolled training programmes started in order to cover the enormous shortage of primary teachers: week-end courses at various locations, distant education under the control of educational institutions of Hungary and the acceptance of the degrees gained there; the result was more sets of teacher training institutions than necessary and which might not have the necessary conditions

In the second half of the '90s the education of primary school teachers was placed into the sphere of higher education, a process that should have taken place far earlier and could have been more advantageous. The possibilities were already set by the 84/1995 Education Law and its 1999 modification but the actual reorganisation of institutions started only by the 1998 ministerial decree.⁵ Colleges of this kind were already established in 1998 but those of Hungarian-language education only in 1999. (We would like to add that in the school year of 1998-1999 the rate of unqualified staff was still over 20% while in case of kindergarten teachers it was nearly 30%).⁶ During the next governmental period amid general restoration, in 2001 the ministry allowed secondary level teacher training to run parallelly with the one at higher level.⁷ Educational authority made the structure of education chaotic while it centralised the content of education by a compulsory central curriculum although a real reform could have been expected to bring changes in the opposite direction.

⁵ Murvai 2001. p. 161.

⁶ Murvai 2001. p. 165.

⁷ Murvai 2001. p. 167.

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This is when the University of Kolozsvár took teacher training, which had been functioning as college faculties, under its wings; neither the national regulation nor the university protectorate was satisfactory, the reorganisation did not help in the concentration of quality to replace the former dissipation. The system remained confused because primary-school-teacher training became integrated into a two-subject system: it was coupled with foreign language teacher training, and the main point: teacher training was lost. University protectorate would have made sense if it had assured quality and provided the conditions of accreditation. None of these functions were fulfilled: the colleges are still not accredited, majority of teaching posts are not filled and we are facing a new reorganisation in order meet the requirements of Bologna expectations.

Hungarian teachers are being trained at least at ten institutions in seven towns. The University of Kolozsvár has a college faculty for kindergarten and primary-school teacher training at Marosvásárhely and Nagyenyed, at Szalmárnémeti, Kézdivásárhely, Székelyudvarhely and Kolozsvár it is coupled with the training for teachers of English. In addition the independent institution of the Reformed church, which educates teachers of religion and cantors, also trains teachers as well as the Romanian state university at Nagyvárad. (It is likely that the most college degrees of Hungarian teachers were issued by the Goldi Private University, which resides in Arad and teaches in Romanian, because this admitted, for high tuition fees, those students who could not finish their studies at Partium Christian University, which was refused accreditation.) These institutions most typically have few full-time teachers (they operate with part time educators), the number of students is small and the standard of education is poor. Although most professionals have agreed that primary-school teachers cannot and should not be trained in field-departments, remote or correspondence courses, the University of Kolozsvár and others still keep this practice. This anti-quality chaos is fed and increased by two factors: lust for money on behalf of the institutions and ambitions, interests of local groups. The consequence is obvious: instead of having two or three high standard institutions there are a dozen of weak ones with no perspective.⁹

The foundations of the Hungarian public education in Romania has become precarious in lower primary school classes because of incompetent un- or poorly qualified teachers who are unfit for a teaching career. There are major Szekler villages from where a great number of lower primary school pupils are taken to the nearest town (i.e. Udvarhely) to learn because the work of the local teacher is felt to be ineffective. Now there is an attempt as a counter balance – out of misinterpreted autonomy – by restricting the parents' right to choose schools.

⁹ The official optimism of the ministry –not proved to be true - which was conceived by László Murvai managing director claimed: "Quality of education is going to improve in the kindergartens and in lower primary schools on every account." (Murvai 2001. 165)

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3. Teacher education started at the Partium Christian University and at Sapientia in the '90s. Perhaps it is too early to discuss their experiences or results.⁹ Not to mention the opinions which appeared when Sapientia started that by certain division of tasks Sapientia could have been the "university of sciences" while the Hungarian Department of Babe-Bolyai the teacher education centre. It is undoubted that the University of Kolozsvár remained the centre for Hungarian teacher education in Romania and its significance increased by the departments for training teachers of religion and primary school teachers as well.

The institution did everything to become a university of sciences, especially in outward appearances and also by marginalizing teacher training. The institutional attitude to this area became absolutely negative. There are countless texts which prove that in the hierarchic order of the university scientific education came first, teacher education is the second and primary school teacher training is the third. Reflections of this false hierarchy can be seen in financing and in filling the teaching posts. This can be stated in spite that education has restarted in the psychology department which is an important segment of teacher training; also the pedagogy department started with good hopes but after having been functioning for ten years, the staff number of the pedagogy department is less than it used to be in 1990. Although the teacher education teams of the Hungarian department had had the opportunity to become independent at departmental and institutional level it still has not been completed. The university adopted the attitude that is characteristic of the whole society towards teachers and teacher education: a teacher is paid little attention and respect (not mentioning salary) in a Székler village, similarly teacher education is treated as a necessary evil at the university.

The options being provided structurally for teacher training are as follows: in independent or non-independent institutions; in accredited or in non-accredited state or church owned or in field-institutions; at secondary or higher level in a multi-channel or multi-stage system; in regular (day time), distance or correspondence education. Fluctuation has taken place in the past 15 years but these options are there at the same time and the vast majority of them can also be found within the framework of the University of Kolozsvár.

Parallel teacher education is no longer compulsory in any department. Under no measures can it be considered favourable that admittance has no conditions for being suitable, there is no selection at all and neither that there is only an 85-hour general pedagogic and school-psychology instruction in the multi-level structure.¹⁰ The recently initiated new system following the Bologna process

⁹ Until receiving final accreditation senior students of the Partium University and Sapientia sit for their final examinations at the University of Kolozsvár and where they also receive their degrees

¹⁰ Birta Székely, Noémi 2005. p. 323.

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would have demanded that teacher education would be scheduled at the second level in the magisterial education after proper training and a capability test. Led by the false argument which characterizes the attitude to the situation and teaching career that "a senior student cannot teach after three years of learning?", the Romanian law left open a side channel for teacher education by dividing the obtainable credit points between the lower and the middle level of university education. This has nothing to improve standards.

The first and most important condition of high quality and effective teacher educations would be that universities should take it seriously. It would be essential to organise Hungarian teacher education and teacher training in an independent institute within the university (it would also belong to the minimum of autonomy).¹¹ Such an institute could only provide necessary personal and professional prerequisites. More than half of the teaching jobs in the Hungarian department of the university are not filled; the teams responsible for teacher training are in even worse situation. While constantly talking about improvement this "line" of the Hungarian academic life is on the decline: there is one full-time teacher of pedagogy (an assistant lecturer, since pedagogy as a subject also exists, a team of minimum ten members would be necessary); there are few lecturers in the psychology department too (most of them are external lecturers); the same applies to methodology; there is not enough money to organise pedagogy practises etc. Though further teacher education has got an accredited programme because there are no tutors it is hard to operate. This independent institute would provide jobs for young experts who could establish the professional background for Hungarian public education: they would elaborate on curricula, exam programmes and materials etc. everything that is prepared by occasionally assigned teachers as temporary jobs. (This is the reason behind the scandals of public education.)

4. It is a matter of common knowledge that the most significant components of teacher education is linguistic competence (in the language in which s/he is going to teach); professional and didactic competence; familiarity in psychological, psycho-pedagogic and even in special areas; general pedagogic competence both in theory and in practice combined with lots of practice already in the preparatory period which could be a test for the suitability of the candidate. Hardly anything has been realised of this or nothing is executed at the desired level and in the required quality. The latest curriculum, which is being elaborated, is also dominated by sterile pedagogical subjects.

Teacher education is required to follow the general socialisation aims of education: training, education and pedagogy. After the decades preceding 1990

¹¹ The present Teacher Education Institute is practically a department of the university with special status where Hungarian teacher education has no authority.

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when the aims of socialisation followed the dominant ideology, in the new situation there has been a constant source of tension, namely that the socialisation expectations of the state, the autonomous requirements of the Hungarian community, expectations and requirements of the young people as well as that of the parents are different. These differences sometimes prove to be unbridgeable.¹²

Returning to the previously mentioned components of teacher education: if we examine the linguistic component that a future educator (primary/secondary school teacher) should be especially competent in the language and in the professional registers of it in which s/he is going to teach, we will see that this requirement is not met at all. Though the "Hungarian line" of the university is operating, the linguistic requirements are not clarified either here or in the teacher training programme. The consequences are known: students often have to correct the linguistic and spelling errors of the candidates during teaching practice. Partly because of the unclarified status of "linguistic lines" many native Hungarian or Romanian speaking students who were students of German start working in Hungarian or Romanian schools since there is no German instruction. There it becomes obvious that although they can speak some German they cannot communicate about their own subjects (i.e. history, geography etc.) in the language of teaching. This is the reason why county inspectors were forced to organise language examinations in the past few years. But these generally do not clarify the linguistic competence of teachers when teaching either. Therefore it would be essential to establish a strict and compulsory language training in every subject within teacher training and the university would be obliged to indicate language competence in the diploma.

Lack of linguistic competence is more vividly shown by the scandalous examples of translations of textbooks and examination questions and sometimes even of original education materials. The major success of the coalition policy between 1996 and 2000 was the immediacy government decree 1997/36¹³ which abolished restrictions concerning professional education as a prelude to the 1999 law modification. This made evident that there are hardly any professional teachers who had the necessary quality of education with the necessary professional linguistic competence in Hungarian. This

¹² In this particular situation it does not seem to be reasonable to request "a coherent teacher education programme which is elaborated centrally and is supported scientifically and also from psycho-pedagogic aspects" on behalf of those who should adapt to the particular tasks of Hungarian teacher education. Introduction and critic of the former and recent curricula can be read in the work of the same author: Birta Székely, Noémi 2005.

¹³ Ordonanță de urgență pentru modificarea și completarea Legii învățământului nr. 84/1995, Monitorul Oficial al României, Anul IX, nr. 152 din 14 Iulie 1997.

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shortcoming has not been eliminated and by the extension of higher education in Hungarian professional linguistic shortcomings of lecturers have also come to the surface.

5. The intention, which is embodied in the ideological discourse to increase the value of the teaching career by taking it as an important mission for the national community, cannot balance the existing circumstances, which ruin the prestige of the profession. This is for example the low salary, the living conditions which cannot guarantee to preserve humanity and pride and the lack of essential conditions to make settling in a given community possible. Teaching profession compromises itself by unqualified or poorly qualified teachers. The education authority finally realised that salaries have to be differentiated according to the local living conditions. Those who worked in more remote settlements or disadvantaged regions could receive equitably significant extra benefits. The next government abolished these extras. Repulsion of the career is still stronger than the attraction to it. These disadvantages cannot be balanced by any missionary commitment, nor by professional or human weaknesses.

In spite of several tentative reform initiatives the centralised system of educational management and supervision has been preserved together with the all mighty ministry as well as the inspectorates, which represent the ministry in the counties. Management of schools do not have rights to make decisions in issues of key importance but responsibility still lies upon them. So the institution has no a say in the employment of teachers; they also cannot dismiss those teachers whose unsuitability is evident. In 1999-2000 those institutions that achieved maximum score (altogether approximately 3000 schools) in the central evaluation of institutions, received distinct institutional status which entitled them to organise and execute employment examinations of teachers.¹⁴ This institutional right was also abolished from 2001. Job advertisements and school selection options of teachers are collected and matched at inspectorates. With the coordination of the National Examination and Evaluation Office the inspectorates execute the competition examinations, which are uniform nationwide, with the help of higher education institutions.¹⁵ In this situation both the institutions and the teachers are defenceless and it preserves the mentality of teachers and education managers typical of the earlier decades.

¹⁴ Kőrö 2000, pp. 98–99.

¹⁵ Only church schools can be disengaged from this obligation since only those teachers can work in these schools whose employment is approved by the leadership of the church.

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The distribution of the permanent teacher's jobs by a centralised competition examination because of its formal (and secret, therefore impersonal) character does not guarantee the suitability of the appointed teacher for the given job. Those teachers who manage to get a permanent teacher status in spite of their unsuitability cannot be removed or dismissed according to the present Labour Code. The inefficient work of such a "subject teacher" can result in the discontinuation of whole classes or school branches. This is the main reason why are there so many failed examinations in this rigid system and beside the unqualified teachers there is at least same rate of non-permanent, so called "substitute" teachers whose fate relies on the inspectorates.

Local communities and self-governments also have to bear watching the decline of local educational institutions. Although the appointment obligation of freshly graduated teachers was abolished, self-governments, who preserved the mentality and system of that era, do not try to provide better circumstances and conditions to make the local teaching jobs more attractive. Hiding their incompetence they are expecting whoever the inspectorate will "send" either in "permanent" status or as a substitute. Neither from central support resources (i.e. social scholarships of School Foundation), nor on the behalf of the self-governments has there been any attempt to support or inspire university studies of young people who would later strengthen the local teachers' communities. This situation makes impossible a value based selection and high standard of education. It is advantageous only for the apparatus to whom in fact everyone remains defenceless.

In this state of affairs one cannot be surprised at counter-selection, frequent career desertions and constant fluctuation. It frequently occurs that substitute or unqualified teachers are changed during the school term or well-educated teachers leave the school during the school term to go to work abroad.

6. Neither professional supervision nor the institutional background of Hungarian public education is provided. Although the minorities department of the ministry has got a Hungarian leader, in the 1996-2000 governmental period and in the present one there is a Hungarian secretary of state in the Ministry of Education and lately the Romanian schoolbook publisher has got a Hungarian managing director. At the top levels of the education authority and in the county inspectorates, partially depending on political situation, the representation of Hungarians is assured in managerial positions.

Representation itself cannot be effective if the leaders are not supported by professionals or by professional workshops. However, the most important insti-

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tutions of professional foundation, supervision, quality assurance and management do not exist. The background institutions of the Romanian ministry do not deal with Hungarian education. Work is done by committees as community service (curriculum, measurement of quality and of performance, tests, elaboration and translation of exam questions, etc.) and they are called upon by Hungarian officials of the ministry. There is not any specialised institution or expert who is paid for such work and would be responsible for writing, adapting curricula, elaborating tests and exam questions or who would be the expert of quality measurement or writing, translating schoolbooks. The education centres of Teacher Association do a very important job in organising further education but their activity is not connected to the everyday tasks of education in a close and expedient way.

7. Further education of teachers is in the same situation as teacher training. Its certain segments (final examinations, getting first and second teacher's degree) belong to higher educational institutions primarily to the University of Kolozsvár. The compulsory periodic education of teachers has been discontinued. Various new opportunities of this opened up in Hungary and at home here in Romania too.

As part of the educational reform, which started feebly and with great delay, the ministry elaborated the new system of further education of teachers after 2000. The main point was that it could take place only within centrally accredited programmes. Such programmes can be proposed by higher education institutions, professional associations or others. An accredited programme of this kind exists at the University of Kolozsvár, at Petru Maior University in Marosvásárhely (for students of Hungarian without lecturers of Hungarian). The Bolyai Summer University is not nationally accredited, similar to anything that is going on in the so called methodology centres. It is also not approved that the educational authority should accept credits, which were collected abroad or in Hungary in an educational programme, which is accredited abroad or elsewhere. Although this is the main sense of the credit system that the acquired credits can be brought home from the institution of another country or taken from one country to another.

8. With the increasing student body and institutionalisation the standard of teacher training has declined. Especially board of teachers of village schools weakened including those who teach in lower primary classes. This can be blamed on training without self-regulation, planning, quality improvement and coordination and on the assignment system regulated and supervised by authorities. It is also one of the reasons why schools are still excluded from the process. As part of the commonly demanded decentralisation and

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institutional autonomy the issue has to be settled officially and attitude appreciation and acknowledgement of teachers should change likewise.

Professional and civilian supervision of education in Hungarian should be made regular. It is also necessary to be familiar with the list of discontinuing classes, faculties, schools in order to be able to analyse the reasons. Likewise analyses of school leaving examinations, final examinations ought to be analysed school by school, subject by subject. Through objective evaluation the performance of individual institutions could be assessed independently on a clearly professional basis by the authorities.

It is also a task for the authority, the administration to provide for the operation of lower primary classes (I-IV classes) even at the smallest settlements with minimal number of pupils. Further on, from the age of 11-12, boarding schools could be the key institutions of Hungarian public education. It would provide an ideal setting and become the institution for education and care for gifted pupils. It seems applicable to adopt the Óradna-Ditró model, which organised the education of the Hungarian students of secondary schools, scattered in Szeklerland. This can have multiple benefits: students who speak the Romanian language well can go to school in Szeklerland where – while improving their mother tongue – they can also improved the competence in Romanian of the locals.

Modification of the already existing and established professional institutional background of Hungarian education cannot be postponed any further. An earlier decree of the minister, 1999.11.17./4906, prescribed the establishment of an educational background institution in Kolozsvár. It has not been executed because the department of teacher training of the university suppressed it, or more precisely Hungarian teacher education did not have and has not had an independent institution at the university ever since.

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