Research Article

The 'Oecumenical Schools': A Forgotten Civic Initiative in Hungary

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Abstract

A few of the public schools in Hungary declared themselves 'oecumenical' during the first period of the political transition of 1988-1993. 'Oecumenical' meant in that context the faith-based but non-denominational school program and curriculum developed jointly by the parents (PTA) and the teachers of the institutions concerned. At the same time, local authorities still remained the owners of the schools, as regulated by the reform minded 1985 Act on Education. Under the new Act on Public Education (1993), however, 'oecumenical' schools proved illegal, since institutions operated by local authorities had to have neutral curricula and educational programmes. The 'oecumenical schools' discussed in this paper are considered as a historical case of the 'socialisation of schools' by local communities under the impact of liberation from the former political regime. Three case studies of former 'oecumenical schools' were prepared and analysed in order find out who the leading actors were in the process. It transpired that young, well-established middle class parents with relatively high levels of education were successful both in establishing and allowing their 'oecumenical schools' to survive if they had the support of the school and the local Churches. The local ministers (priests) were rather more supportive than negative; higher ranking leaders of the established Churches proved to be rather negative. The local authorities usually joined the Church authorities in rejecting 'oecumenical' schools; while the teachers were partly enthusiastically supportive, and partly hostile. School heads associated with PTA leaders became the 'agents of change' of this civic attempt of school makeover.

Keywords: Government-school relationship, community action, citizen participation; faith-based schools, East-Central Europe, political transition

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1. Introduction

This study addresses the creation of the so-called oecumenical schools. The authors think it is an illuminating contribution to the unwritten history of Hungarian civic initiatives in the field of education including the rise of faith-based schools in the years of the political transformation. Today the history of oecumenical schools is all but lost for the professional and scientific discourse. Only two documents provide a starting point for research. One is the memorandum of Tamas Deme to the then minister of education (Deme, 1999) in which he refers to a research about oecumenical schools, as far as we know unpublished to date (Deme et al, 1994). Deme's memo to the minister is essential for familiarisation with the history of, and education in, oecumenical schools. The other source is an article by L. Aliz Somogyi (2001) published much later which offers an insight into the educational program of oecumenical schools.

We visited three formerly oecumenical schools that are partly still in operation. Two of them retained the epithet 'oecumenical' in their name; the third one had to scrap it (as defiantly noted on the school website). A total of ten partially structured interviews were conducted with the founders of the schools and other stakeholders in their history; at the same time, the main statistical data relevant to the schools and the (local) communities were collected. Three case studies were compiled on the basis of the interviews about the emergence of the erstwhile oecumenical schools. Available on the Internet courtesy of the authors, the three studies constitute the empirical foundations of this paper.

To interpret the empirical we started out from the horizontal and vertical embeddedness educational institutions. The authors relied on social network analysis to understand embeddedness – a method that, to our knowledge, had not been applied in Hungarian educational research before. The empirical findings were analysed by means of the narrative research method in the form it had been developed in the course of our earlier studies of minority institutions (Kozma, 2005: 35-36).

This paper describes our first results. First, a summary and classification of our present and past findings from professional literature are presented. Then an overview of the historical context of oecumenical schools is offered. This is followed by the presentation of three schools which one way or another exemplify the oecumenical development. Finally, lessons will be drawn from the three histories.

2. From embeddeness to partnership

Theoretical considerations

Civil society and schools are topics looking back upon long traditions in educational research. They already existed before the evolution of Hungarian educational research (Kozma, 2016, 37-65) and we may rightly think they will continue to stay with us for a long time still. They take shape in research and policy in new guises (embeddedness,

public-private partnership, new localism, etc.). However, looking at it from an appropriate distance, the new narrative is also about the old topic: the cooperation of the school and its social community, successes and failures (Hungarian oecumenical schools being one case).

As far as we know, Gabriella Pusztai's excellent book (Pusztai, 2011) was the first in Hungarian professional literature to bring the theory of 'embeddedness' into the educational research discourse. Although she addresses the sociology of higher education, the theory of 'embeddedness' as she presents it (Pusztai, 2004) has a much wider scope and a further reaching effect. It can be clearly recognised in the so-called 'school research' that lay the basis of educational research where the terminology of educational sociology was applied when the connections between the school and its environment were examined (Havighurst, Neugarten, 1962; Havighurst et al., 1962; Havighurst, 1966). These early studies put the relationship between the school and the local community into the terms of reference of socialisation, and their conflicts were also explained by the terminology of socialisation (see e.g. Forray 1988). The socialisation approach originates from Margaret Mead (Mead 1970) and was for a long time the only, or at least the ruling paradigm regarding the school and its wider community. (Hungarian educational sociology drew on the American socialisation theories rather than German and French milieu theories that prevailed earlier. (On the former, cf. the telling parallels of Mead (1930) and Havighurst et al. (1962). On the latter, see for instance Wurzbacher's (1968) important handbook.) The theory of embeddedness Pusztai has introduced into Hungarian educational research is not far from this prevailing paradigm – especially if its fashionable terminology were translated to the language of education sociology.

The relationship between schools and the local community has long featured in education history and in academic textbooks on education science (pedagogy) going as far back as the Middle Ages (Olah, 2013), albeit in annex to the books (Agoston, Jausz, 1963; Nagy, S., Horvath L. 1966). The 'local educational system' as the Polish A. Lewin (1973) put it, was a new voice in education science. While less has been said about it, the local educational system clearly implanted the importance of local community in the bureaucratically centralised educational systems of the East European countries. No wonder the initiative was taken by the Poles, or that mainstream Hungarian education was relatively unresponsive.

Part of an American textbook series, Ronald Corwin's (1965) sociology of education was among the first to leave behind the rut of the socialisation paradigm of education sociologies. Corwin put power and interests into the focus of school–community relationships, thus radically changing the customary discourse. The literature researched, presented or just referenced by him represents a different approach compared to what had been adopted by Hungarian educational research up to that point, and also different from the approach to education of mainstream Hungarian sociology as reflected by academic sociology textbooks (social stratification and mobility theories, cf.

Ferge, 1968, Gazso, 1971). The problems addressed by Corwin (school bureaucracy, changes in education policy and system, teachers as employees, the place of the school in the 'local field of power' etc.) planted new questions in the educational sociology discourse.

This new perception of the relationship between schools and the local community developed in Hungarian educational research in the 1980s. These new terms of reference stem from the sociology of organisations (Szentpeteri, 1985; Etzioni, 1964). The ties between the school and its social environment are interpreted as the relationships between the organisation and its environment, discovering laws between the internal relations of the organisation and its interactions with its environment. If we remember the lessons we have once learnt about the connections between schools and (local) community (open and closed organisations; manifest goals and latent functions; relations or organisations and groups, etc.), what comes to our mind today is probably the 'dual allegiance' of schools. In the reference frame of organisational research, the school is part of two structures at the same time. It is part of a vertically structured nationwide system, and it is also part of the local community which, unlike the national educational system, is horizontally organised. This dual dependence can be a constraint as well as an extended scope of movement (Kozma, 1985).

Obviously, educational policy is not driven by theories, particularly not by those borrowed from the literature – it is the other way around; fashionable 'ideologies' are sought to underpin educational policy intentions. This is what happened at the time of the change of the political regime, when the monolithic educational administration system of the Kadar era irretrievably fell apart to give way to a newly emerging educational administration. The theory of mutual dependences suggested by organisational research and, later, by Hungarian educational policy research and researchers (Halasz et al., 1981) fit well in with the transition period. They explored the distribution of goods, interests and power in the relations between the school and local community. School autonomy, the 'socialisation' of schools, the relationship between schools and local self-government – efforts familiar from the first stage after the fall of communism – were embraced by the debate on the rising autonomy of local communities in a transforming Hungarian society.

This was not far from the public-private partnership trends developing mainly in Europe from the turn of the millennium to become a national education policy slogan in the United Kingdom, at least for a while (Crowson, Goldring, 2010). Seeking PPP at a local level was termed 'new localism' in the United States. Crowson and Goldring (ibid.) classify relevant research and development into four categories: the local embeddedness of the school and a new 'local education' (which very much akin to A. Lewin's 'local educational system' quoted above); the performance of the community and the social capital of local inhabitants (related mainly to Hungarian stratification and mobility research); the 'learning performance' of communities and families (which points at the investigation of Hungarian student cities and communities); and a new local policy

related to the above-mentioned partnership efforts, and which takes them one step further towards the appreciation of localities in the regional research discourse on globalisation.

If we understand social network research recently appearing also in Hungary (e.g. Takacs, 2011) correctly, there seems to be a new appreciation of the 1970s' educational sociology and the embeddedness paradigm of the 2000s in the research of the school and its community (Schuller, Theissens, 2010). Reference could be made, for instance, to Granovetter (1973; 1985), also cited by Buchanan (2002). He sees two drifts in networking: clustering and weak ties. Both are indispensable for the expansion of networks. Clustering (or, could we say, embeddedness) involves the individual in the group and forms the group into a community. This type of network protects the individual or group by 'embedding' them but at the same time, also constrains. Clustering leads to insularity and isolation. There is another drift running against isolation: weak links (weak because they lead out of the group). As Granovetter emphasizes, it is weak links that allow networks to spread out and become increasingly dense.

These ideas are strongly reminiscent of Etzioni's description of dual organisational processes (Etzioni, 1968). No wonder; Granovetter published his findings and analyses from the mid- 1970s; his realisations are roughly contemporaneous with other, perhaps better known, theories about organisational processes and social capital (Coleman, 1988). Similarly to all educational sociology approaches, be it in a more traditional or a more modern form, clustering (embeddedness, grouping) primarily helps to investigate the development of ties and partnership between the school and its community. It explores their emergence and strengthening, and helps us understand their absence and put an end to it. The organisational and political approaches seek (and perhaps give) explanations to development, change and transformation. It is this answer that we seek when unravelling the history of oecumenical schools in Hungary.

3. Historical background

Oecumenical schools are the products of the change of the regime. They were organised in the first euphoric stage after the fall of communism when the old controls in education loosened and almost disappeared, similarly to many other state controls inherited from the Kadar regime (ownership, enterprises, employment, security, trade, etc.). This first euphoric stage is not remembered too much these days, except perhaps in the non-Hungarian literature on the change of the regime (cf. in more detail Kozma, 2016: 24-36).

It should be remembered. In this first stage of the changeover, roughly until the end of the first government term in 1994, citizens were faced with an unsure state and political system; consequently, their consciousness, freedom of action and activity soared. Due to the earlier party control civil service still seemed to be more an organisation of power

than of service – and this organisation of power (and particularly its bodies at lower levels, closer to their citizens) suffered from a severe lack of legitimacy. In some cases, even its day-to-day functioning was hampered by difficulties and resistance. Moreover, against a background of a rapidly changing legal and political environment civil servants were inadequately prepared for continuous problem management. Lack of regulation combined with lack of preparation resulted in the typical phenomenon of anomie.

Members of society perceived this as a serious lack of security, but also as an increase of their individual liberties in leaps and bounds. The two simultaneous processes: the rapid disappearance of state paternalism (e.g. insecurity of jobs, shaky administration, collapse of institutions previously thought unshatterable), and increasing civil freedoms led to a quick evolvement of self-reliance, entrepreneurship and civil organisations.

In this period of anomie political demands could be fulfilled that had already been formulated in the 1980s, the last decades of the Kadar regime, indeed, realised as experiments, albeit in a lopsided fashion. Free enterprise enabled GMKs, the so-called 'working communities' set up in the '80s organise themselves as market-based business associations. Reinstatement of real property ownership and registration triggered a process of clarification and settlement of title (as far as demanding reprivatisation). Local communities' demand for self-governance was expressed in Act LXV of 1990 on Local Government restoring the autonomy of municipalities and dismantling county level administration as former power centres. The state's exclusive monopoly to establish schools was replaced by freedom of education (putative or real, regulated or not yet regulated by law).

Although it is less discussed in the relevant literature (cf. for instance Tomka, F., 2005; Molnar, 2012; Mirak, 2014), the anomie following the change of the regime also spread to the Churches. The Churches' constrained internal and external stability that emerged during the Kadar era became wobbly while their latitude and scope of engagement increased exponentially. The Act on the Freedom of Religion (Act IV of 1990) freed them from the state's supervision, restored their right to social engagement (social work, school operation, religious education), and returning and maintaining former Church property and other assets, as well as new forms of supporting religious life by the state were raised. One of the many opportunities was to have the different Churches and their organisations registered as NGOs. This led to internal changes in the organisation of religious denominations.

Mention of Churches is generally associated with the pastoral corps or Church property; however, the real strength of religious denominations resides in their believers and congregations (Schreiner, 2013; Pusztai, 2013). The movement described above involved not only the Churches but also the congregations and religious people in general (Hanesova, 2013). In the early stage after the fall of communism churches were often full (especially at major holidays) as free practice of religion became part of the newly defined civil liberties. Redefined civil liberties were, of course, a challenge for the

Church organisations, withdrawn and ridden with forced compromises during the Kadar era. Public opinion and its spokespersons tried to have a voice in the future Church policy, and particularly in the social engagement of the Churches, with more or less determination. This led to seemingly endless debates in, for instance, school affairs (see e.g. Tomka, M., 2005; Papp, 2005; Polonyi, 2005).

The educational formation termed oecumenical school was conceived by the peculiar encounter of teachers demanding school autonomy and local community 'religious in its own way.' The oecumenical school is religious but non-denominational; the religious education it provided was not determined by the Church but by laypersons, parents (and teachers). The owner of the oecumenical school continued to be its original owner (generally the local government), which allowed parents to create a school board through which they determined or at least influenced the education provided by the school (this was later enshrined in the 1993 Public Education Act, specifically in Section 14 (1) of Act LXXIX of 1993).

Thus oecumenical schools were the first typical euphoric achievements of the change of the regime. Their significance falls behind many political decisions or legal institutions created at the time, yet they sprang from the same ideology and civil awakening. Their initial form is past, as is the moment they were engendered. By today, oecumenical schools – these civic or teachers' initiatives – are either history or have been integrated into the state and government system that was consolidated and solidified in the later stage of the change of the regime. Therefore for the researcher their story is strongly reminiscent of the 'newborn universities' – minority educational institutions, community colleges and local and regional initiatives – that mushroomed in the initial period after the fall of communism not only in Hungary but in the entire Carpathian Basin and, indeed, in all areas of Europe populated by minorities (Kozma, 2005; Kozma, Pataki, 2011). Their inception, ascent, stabilisation and waning was not only a curiosity in the history of the change of the regime but at the same time an edifying example for the relationship between school and (local) community.

4. Inception

The following stories are narratives. The stories were built by the researchers on the basis of interviews and documents. They are intended to clarify the role of the various stakeholder groups in the events, and to highlight the uniqueness of the events. These narratives will be referred to in our further considerations in the hope that some regularities will arise from the comparison of the unique features.

4.1. "It was the best decision of my life." (From an interview with a teacher)

This is about a primary school in X. Situated just outside Budapest, X had undergone substantial changes in the last decade before the change of the regime. Its pleasant location and rural looking streets attracted those who were looking for a new home and could not or would not find it in the capital. In terms of social structure, X comprised

mostly young middle class parents with high educational attainment, consolidated financial status and children under 14. The fall of communism roughly coincided with the ascent of their careers, as did their moving out from the big city (most of them built detached houses). This 'migration' was not new for the locals, as it had been going on for decades. While we are not aware of relevant research, it is fact that the movement of the population resulted in a fundamental change in the life of the sleepy little Swabian village. Although signs of the old lifestyle are still apparent – mainly in the buildings – it has scarce indications socially. Therefore, it can be said that the inception of the school coincided with the waning of the original host community as it once was.

Those who moved into the village looked for a school for their children but they were deterred by state of the existing ones. They tried to take their children's future into their own hands. As newcomers they sought contacts with each other outside the workplace – connecting through the workplace would not have been possible anyway as most commuted to work in Budapest. It had to be done in their leisure time. In the spirit of the age, a group of these young parents spent some of their free time going to church, which gave them an opportunity to start organising. The common problem they tried to solve was their children's schooling. Schooling – but propelled by the winds of a new world, preferably according to the principles the parents (and not the teachers or the local councils of the time) considered important.
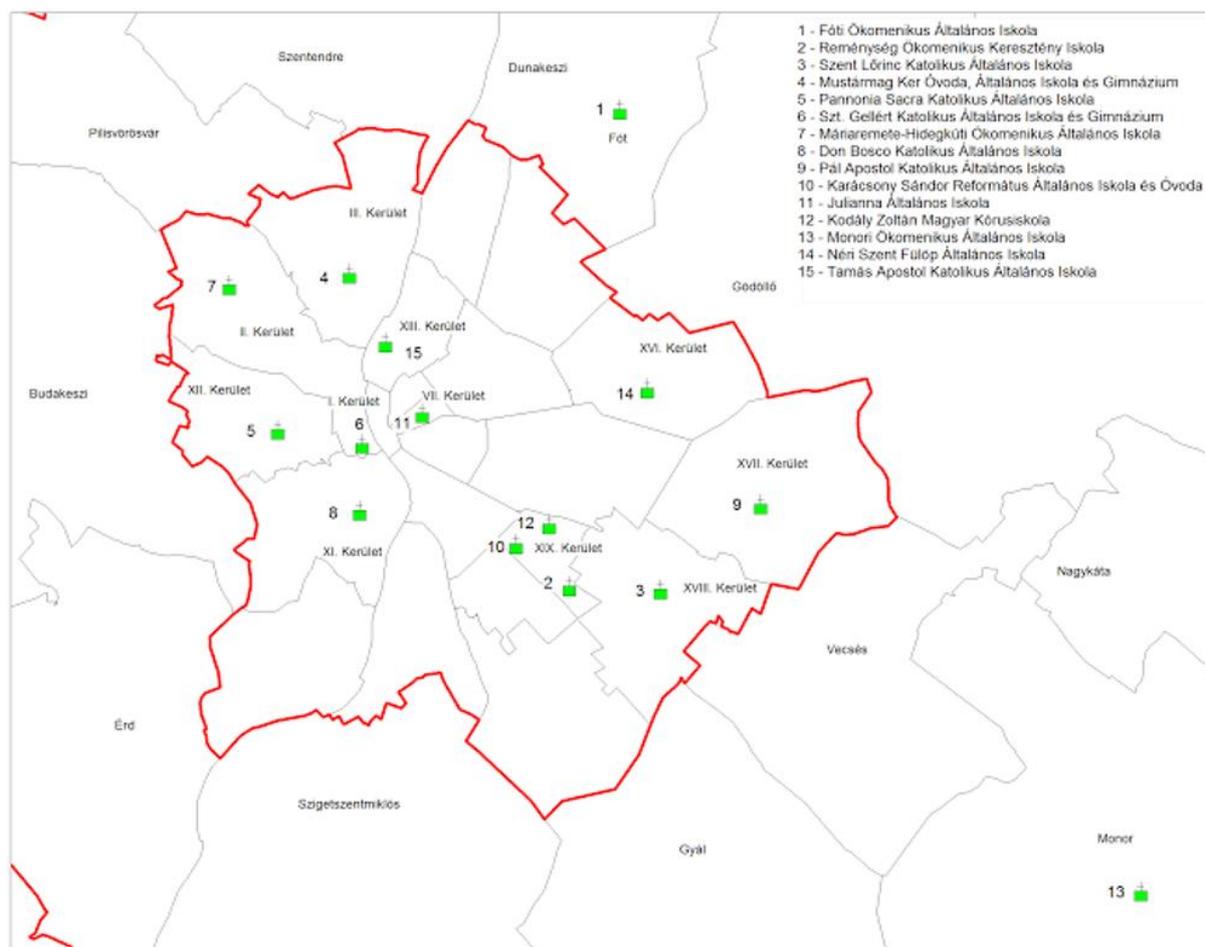
Of course, the head and teachers of the local school would not hear of it. For one thing, it had been unprecedented for parents to have a say in the educational content of the school; for another thing, the newcomers were far removed from the locals socially as well as culturally. In accordance with the spirit of the age, these affluent, confident and well-connected young newcomers decided to establish a school. The local council (not the old village council as the village had, by then, belonged to Budapest administratively) rejected the idea, as did the teachers. However, connections helped. The opinion leader group, which realised the new Association Act gave them the legal opportunity, sought support from the public. They got as far as the national television and even the minister of education appeared. The battle was won: they founded a school and could be directly involved in shaping its ideology.

The school they 'took over' was small (only just big enough for the four lower grade groups) and there were only a few teachers. But the new principal was known for his Church affiliation (not something to brandish about during the old regime) and the parents had a say in his election. (The novel practice of election of school heads was legitimate although not yet promulgated by statute). Also, the principal instantly fell for the cosy little school and these committed and resolute parents.

Although most of the parents belonged to the biggest Hungarian denomination, their educational program was wisely and deliberately formulated in a way to include preferably all Christian denominations (this was also in keeping with the rationale of school organisation). The biggest Hungarian Church did not veto this expansion – indeed,

the local priest was a dedicated supporter of the school until his death. In this way nothing kept parents from 'taking over' the school, which was supported by the Council – by then, Local Government – of X, willy-nilly at first, given its political composition, but later without reservation. The pioneering example of the X school was the starting point of an entire movement of oecumenical school foundation in Budapest and its vicinity (see Map 1).

Map 1: Oecumenical schools in Budapest and its vicinity

1 - Fóti Ökomenikus Általános Iskola
2 - Reménység Ökomenikus Keresztény Iskola
3 - Szent Lőrinc Katolikus Általános Iskola
4 - Mustármag Ker Óvoda, Általános Iskola és Gimnázium
5 - Pannonia Sacra Katolikus Általános Iskola
6 - Szt. Gellért Katolikus Általános Iskola és Gimnázium
7 - Máriaremete-Hidegkúti Ökomenikus Általános Iskola
8 - Don Bosco Katolikus Általános Iskola
9 - Pál Apostol Katolikus Általános Iskola
10 - Karácsony Sándor Református Általános Iskola és Óvoda
11 - Julianna Általános Iskola
12 - Kodály Zoltán Magyar Kórusiskola
13 - Monori Ökomenikus Általános Iskola
14 - Néri Szent Fülöp Általános Iskola
15 - Tamás Apostol Katolikus Általános Iskola

Source: Tamas Hives ed., 2005

4.2. *"It was a fantastic opportunity at the time, even today, there is nothing like it."* *(Catholic priest)*

The second school presented here is a primary and secondary school consisting of multiple units. It is also situated near the capital, in Y, a locality that is directly connected to Budapest but is not part of it in administrative terms. Like all villages in the region, Y has a special image, and this uniqueness was a determining factor in the emergence of the school. The original local population was Protestant (affiliated to the biggest Hungarian Protestant Church). In the 19th century the Catholic count and lord of the manor settled Catholic labourers in the village. Religious antagonism between the two groups has been passed down from generation to generation up until and beyond the change of the regime (although smaller Protestant denominations have also been active

or organised themselves in the local community). It was, so to speak, religious antagonisms that gave rise to and perpetuated the school.

Re-emergence of the school was based primarily on the building stock. Some of the buildings had originally belonged to the Protestants, others to the Catholics. As both the Protestants and the Catholics lost their schools in the wake of nationalisation, the need for a Church school arose even before the political changeover (and was promoted mainly by the Catholic priest). However, to implement the idea, a *modus vivendi* had to be found with the Protestants, which would have been impossible without the active involvement of parents. Similarly to X, the oecumenical school of Y was created and kept alive by the parents – albeit from a different political position. In Y the determination and desire of parents to establish a school was mainly organised by the pastors (the Catholic priest and the ministers of the smaller Protestant Churches), who recognised the need for cross-denominational collaboration. The municipality's help was also indispensable (parents who did not want their children to have a religious education send them to the new municipal school built as a result of the settlement of Church property).

Parents tended to be middle class rather than upper class or senior management. They had an advantage, which made their situation considerably easier both in their dealings with the initially reluctant local government (the school in Y started up in 1991 after the first local elections), and when faced with other, potentially threatening, local leaders. This advantage was their proximity to the capital. Although they inherited interreligious strife, many of the local inhabitants worked outside the locality, mainly in the capital. This gave a certain degree of independence. Added to this was the fact that the pastors representing the religious denominations also had a varied career path and come from outside of the community, some of them not long before the change of the regime. Therefore they were somewhat more removed from the denominational clashes the Kadar regime tried to exacerbate from above and attenuate from below (as articulated in a revealing fashion by the municipal officer quoted above).

The inter-denominational ideal was embodied by a duly established civil society organisation (a public education association). A legal entity in its own right, independent from both denominations and the local government, the NGO could act on behalf of those who wanted to establish a school. The head of the NGO and the pastor of the smaller Protestant Church found allies in two key figures: the Catholic priest and the person who subsequently became the first principal of the school. With joint forces they represented the pull factor to which other religious leaders and, more importantly, groups of dedicated parents could join.

Initially, the local government, particularly the then opposition members of the body of representatives would not hear of having a religious school in their locality (as was the case elsewhere, too). They were afraid of a rekindling of the old inter-denominational enmity and also feared for the so-called ideological neutrality of the school. However,

the key figures assisting at the birth of the oecumenical school in Y managed to defuse their concerns. Eventually, both the local government and one of the prominent local educational institutions (that held and possessed substantial real estate property) proved to be supportive, especially after the key actors had managed to give a legal footing to the parents' movement.

In this story parents appear somewhat faceless; yet their support was indispensable for Y to have an oecumenical school in two ways. One of their major contributions was to demand an ideologically (but not necessarily denominationally) committed education. In the new democracy emerging in their village after the first free elections this demand could hardly be ignored. The other contribution of parents was their dedicated work, which often meant labour (as they physically built the interior, then furnished and kitted out the school themselves). Recognising this, the organisers of the Y oecumenical school cleverly built on parents' joint purpose and tried to bring them even closer together at various events (mainly because of the latent religious antagonisms, as each denomination had its own deeply rooted grievances going back to the Kadar era).

So this is the story of the birth of the oecumenical school in Y. It started out as one or more church school(s) and this beginning was a determinant factor regarding its life. For a start, education had to be organised in different buildings traditionally located in geographically separate parts of the village. The curricula – and particularly the teaching of Scripture – required constant inter-denominational coordination and careful balancing (and for the most part, giving up ultimately resulted in relinquishing school-based divinity teaching because denominational divinity teaching separated rather than united key actors and perhaps even parents. (The oecumenical idea grew to become a whole ideology and the debate was published in several Christian press forums, cf. Raiser, K, 2009). Ultimately, representatives of the different religions obviously wanted to see their own standards reflected in Y, which required a lot of organisational effort and even more consultation and diplomacy.

The inception of the oecumenical school in Y is also an example of civic unity. But the local citizenry of Y wanted to take over the schools from the municipality at least as much as from the Churches. This was an example for externally induced Church unity leading to an agreement on oecumenical collaboration. At the same time, it is an example of denominations themselves acting as NGOs, getting away from, or at times even opposing, their Church superiors (who may even have become tainted during the previous political regime).

4.3. "A really grotesque and typical Hungarian story." (From an interview with a parent)

The third example is the central primary school of Z. It functioned as an ISCED 2 lay school from the early 20th century when the population was below ten thousand (today, in 2016, it is almost twice as many). The locality is situated in the vicinity of Budapest

and has assumed administrative functions throughout its history (serving as a micro-regional centre or a district seat). Z is as big as a medium-sized town on the Great Hungarian Plain but has a very different character. Its image is determined by the proximity of Budapest, yet it is not a dormitory town for the capital. Industry and services have moved here from Budapest. This process was so strong in the 1960s that it has given rise to two new districts. Although by now they have more been or less integrated into the original fabric of the town they are still separated from it by the main railway line and highway that cuts across the place and disrupts the settlement patterns. All this adds to the central and, in a way, elite nature of the school. The school is the local 'posh' school; it is an institution of particular importance, nay an elite school. While it cannot compete with the elite schools of Central Budapest, it has impressive continuing education statistics. Also it has a staggeringly high number of disadvantaged students.

It was not the parents intent to have an oecumenical school in Z (if the term can be used at all), nor was it the initiative of the pastors of the four denominations in the town. It was the school's own initiative and thanks to its enterprising teachers. Here, too, the change was connected to the restructuring of institutions and redistribution of buildings and premises. But the reason was the fact that these areas, while parts of the town, were cut off from it by the main transit lines, and the initiator was the local government. As a result of the institutional restructuring, the building had become available, and the local government embarked upon establishing a new school. This was the starting point of the oecumenical 'ideal,' as our respondents tend to put it, and the specifically, it started with an application for the post of principal.

Why wasn't the school returned to one of the Churches – the Catholic Church or the more dominant Protestant Church? The answer is similar as in the case of Y: neither Church was strong enough to be able or willing to operate a school in the town. The erstwhile Catholic and Protestant schools still exist but are operated by the municipality. So the applicant who initiated the oecumenical institution and applied for – and was awarded – the principal's position was thinking in inter-denominational terms right from the outset.

He was dedicated to the project; it became his mission. Formerly an instructor in a vocational educational institution, he found himself in public education by commitment (despite his strong religious affiliation), and by a conviction that the only way to organise a religious school in the community was with cooperative support of several denominations – as in many other places. (This support was best gained in the context of a civil society foundation, which continues to work with the school decades after its establishment, strengthening its inter-denominational character and maintaining its ties with the Catholic and Protestant parishes as well as priests and pastors involved in the school's inception.)

The 'oecumenical school' in Z was launched in 1991 when the local government supported and approved the application of the would-be principal, being fully aware of

the applicant's intent. As the school has been operated by the municipality from the outset and the municipal leaders were prepared to overlook its tacit or overt religious character, unlike other oecumenical schools, it was not faced with the difficult dilemma of affiliating to one or the other denomination. Its ideology transpired from the school documents, first in a covert fashion, then later it became increasingly conspicuous. Indeed, it was the school's strength as well as its vulnerability: it has become oecumenical without asking or being granted permission, and the local community took note of, and approved it. The principal and those who agreed with him banked on being able to preserve this spirit simply by pointing at the independent nature of the school's educational system and programme (and relying on the latent but tangible support of the local government, which approved the 'oecumenical' name of the school).

This worked in Z until the turn of the millennium. Although a district school, the traditions of Z coupled with the school's central situation and special character attracted teachers who embraced the ideology it represented (the school was regarded as a new institutions since its re-launch by the local government after the restructuring mentioned above). The same applied to parents. While the Z parents were not actively involved in school organisation, unlike in the case of the oecumenical schools in X and Y, they were interested and keen. Thus the process that gave rise to the school was continued peacefully for a long time. Parents outside the school district who were attracted by the school's orientation strove to enrol their children. (They tended to represent traditional Z families and/or groups with high educational attainment.) Conversely, those who were repelled by the same enrolled their children in another school even if they belonged to the oecumenical school' district.

This state of affairs lasted until a parent, who wanted his child to go to the district school but did not want the child to be nurtured on religious ideology filed a complaint against the school with the local government as well as the public administration authority. He challenged a district school's right to be ideologically non-neutral and argued that the local government was not allowed to operate a district school that is based on religious conviction. The matter ended up in court and dragged on for years. The result was that the school had to delete from its documents all wordings referring to religious conviction, thereby restoring the lawful status set forth in the public education law as follows: "State and local government-operated educational institutions may not be committed to any religion or ideology" (Section 4(2) of Act LXXIX on Public Education).

The decree was accepted by the local government, which, as some of the stakeholders put it, backed out of the school and left the then principal (not the original founder) and the teachers supporting him to their own devices. But educational bureaucracy was set in motion and held recurrent checks and inspections to see if the court decree was duly complied with. The principal and his supportive teachers turned tricky (they removed the cross from the wall and put up a painting instead that had a cross in it). Moreover, through their foundation they were relying on the Churches so that they could continue with the religious ideology even when it was formally no longer allowed.

Parents' perception of the school moved in opposite directions. Those with religious conviction as well as the pastors themselves continued with their customary activities: school celebrations were staged in the church and religious holidays were celebrated in the school too. Others – and not just outsiders – felt the school was grim and secluded. Just like the persecuted. The more they define themselves as persecuted the more they close their ranks and become isolated from their local environment.

5. Stakeholders and 'local heroes'

Comparison of these inception stories highlights startling similarities and thought-provoking differences in the attitudes of stakeholders. Recurrent actors (or groups of actors) are clearly depicted and typical 'local heroes' stand out (Nemes, Varga, 2014; Janko, Andl, 2015).

5.1. Local population, parents and NGOs

In most of the school histories (in two out of the three detailed above) it is conspicuous that it was the parents and their organisations that partly (like in Y) or entirely (like in X) took the initiative. This makes parents the lead or at least one of the lead actors in the birth of oecumenical schools. In X the oecumenical school was unequivocally championed by parents; in Y, the foundation and organisation of the school was only possible because of the parents' dedication. The contrary is also revealing. In Z, where the inception of the oecumenical school was not a parental initiative and in fact, the school came into existence partly against the parents' will, it was the parents' veto that led to the liquidation of the oecumenical school.

The fact that it is parents (the groups of people concerned) that are the key figures of the creation of oecumenical schools is an atypical consequence of the first period after the fall of communism. The political and education policy events of this period was the counter-effect of all that happened in the final stage of the Kadar regime: the highly centralised educational administration was dismantled, as was the ideological hegemony radiated, supported and accepted not only by the omnipotent ruling party but also by public administration. In this way, oecumenical schools were not so much institutions of their time in the eyes of the pioneering parents as a response to all that had happened to them at school some two or three decades before.

Naturally, there was more to it. The pioneers wanted, and were able, to make use of the loosened (educational) policy standards that characterised the turn of the decade in 1990. They also wanted to avail themselves of the strengthening freedoms extended by the first free elections and the newly developed political system. (Freedoms they hoped would or should be extended.) Other factors such as the proximity of the capital, the easing of the relative isolation of rural areas, and a certain kind of independence from the local exercise of power also reinforced the need of parents to embrace, almost take possession of, the school as their own. The frequently quoted typical argument (Deme, 1999) was that parents have a right to the child's education, and it is the duty of the

school owner (council, then later the local government) as an user of taxpayers' money to provide schools required for it.

We have presented the huge energies released by civil awareness and horizontal organisation in X and Y (and how much they were missing in Z). Similarly to the ascending curve of all civil society organisations, the inceptions depicted above resonate with the enthusiasm and success whose memory has determined the attitude of those involved for decades. The story of oecumenical schools will be over, or will continue along a different trajectory, when this civic enthusiasm is on the wane or disappears entirely. The conflicts that had to be accepted or tolerated intensified rather than reduced enthusiasm and dedication (this holds even for the Z school, although there it was the teachers' rather than the parents' dedication that was strengthened).

In each of the three cases civil society organisations (association or foundation) were established that provided a legal foundation for parental initiatives. It transpires from the later stages of the oecumenical schools' history that these NGOs managed to survive the school foundation and have stayed active. They played an important role at the time of their foundation, so much so that in X and Y some of the founders and/or heads became leaders of the movement. Based on our findings, the respective heads of the school and the NGO have grown to be the driving engine of the foundation, and also of the operation and survival, of oecumenical schools.

5.2. Teachers and principals

In this context, teachers and schools have a double role. They function, on the one hand, as a local social environment (which is exclusive rather than inclusive) and, on the other hand, as the founder and operator of the new school (enabling strong dedication and offering teachers an opportunity for self-fulfilment Sometimes – as in the case of the school in Z – they also function as filters: a school that is launched successfully and regards itself as oecumenical with growing awareness starts attracting people from other schools.

Although in the years before the fall of communism – basically as a result of and citing the 1985 Act on Education (Act I of 1985) – school autonomy movements became more widespread, the schools visited took a different path of development (mainly because they were either newly established or re-established). It seems that this fact was either unknown to local or neighbouring schools or no such practices were pursued. However, the elections of principals (as they evolved and took place in 1990 ad 1991) affected the evolution of oecumenical schools, provided that new principals (in the case of X, the founding principal) enjoyed a position where they could initiate a new pedagogical programme and could get them approved by the institutions' owners and teachers. The turning point of breaking free of educational administration was the objective factor that made it possible for parents' groups and organisations to try and take over the school and re-create it to meet their own demands.

Undoubtedly, the recently appointed principals, along with the leaders and influential members of the NGOs referred to above, became the 'local heroes' discussed in our previous studies. (See the history of the above mentioned minority institutions and community colleges that were established after the fall of communism for comparison.) The facts about the motivation behind the 'newborn universities' discussed in our previous studies cited above more or less hold true for the 'local heroes' of oecumenical schools. They were unknown persons who risked their jobs, their reputation and sometimes even their financial status. Those who could establish and manage an institution could function as leaders or representatives of the given group and were supported by parents' groups and the above mentioned NGOs. This proved to be a force that could put considerable pressure on those against oecumenical schools, especially in the period of the fall of communism. Principals (the 'local heroes') sometimes used tools that cannot be regarded as democratic or – as the stories subsequently evidenced – regular. Nevertheless, later they (whether they liked it or not) needed to become democratic and 'representative' as they proposed their initiatives in a grassroots manner, representing their supporters and making references to them.

The 'oecumenical school' was the ideology of such local heroes. In the beginning (and, as time passed, with a growing intensity) the ideology was debated, explained, interpreted and positioned in the denominational, religious and theological-philosophical scales by many (see the technical literature referred to above). However, only a few recognised it as a motto for the movement and for organisation activity. The motto of 'oecumenical schools' meant, among others, separation for the other groups of parents and other schools of local societies. It also involved religious education as opposed to the formerly atheistic – yet practically neutral – school pedagogy. At the same time, it marked a break from the official education management which, hesitating in the wake of the new elections and, at the same time, acting in its new role, was looking for its role as an owner. The oecumenical school was a challenge for those local government representatives who opted for a neutral school, but it was also a point of reference for those who embraced new religious ideologies.

Nevertheless, the motto of the oecumenical school signified not only separation but also integration (a factor that contemporary technical literature emphasized more than separation). Obviously, the integration was not based (or was only partially based) on theoretical principles but on factual and necessary understanding, as in the given villages (especially in Y and Z) the number of denominationally committed parents or the amount of money simply did not suffice to launch denominational education. Whether 'local heroes' were aware of this fact or not, the oecumenical school proved to be an excellent motto for looking for and identifying the gaps the fall of communism created in the hitherto normal management of education.

5.3. Religious denominations and communities

Similarly to schools and teachers, denominations and their communities played a double role in the history of the evolution of oecumenical schools: they acted as forces of integration/supporters and as forces of isolation/rivals. The former (integration and support) is directly evidenced, especially by the history of the school of Y, while the latter (isolation/rivalry) is mainly detected in the subsequent phases of the history of oecumenical schools (as clearly shown by the history of the schools of X).

Y would not have had an oecumenical school if the pastors of the local denominations had not started to cooperate. The driving force was undoubtedly the Catholic priest. (In X, the Catholic priest supported the oecumenical school, albeit it was not his own initiative.) The story of Y gives a vivid example of cooperation and support. But it also illustrates that oecumenical schools were organised for want of better solutions. As at that time the premises of the former denominational schools were fragmented, at the time of the fall of communism it was impossible to restore former denominational schools. (Those denominational leaders who worked on launching the oecumenical school of Z were motivated by the same understanding.)

Quite clearly, the motto of oecumenical schools was accepted (or, as the pastor in Y related, was initiated by the fact that denominational education lacked adequate legal background, there was no national practice for school the takeover and in local communities none of the denominations was stronger than the others. Obviously, this condition strongly determined the educational plans and pedagogical programmes of oecumenical schools. During the creation of the 'image' or, what is more, the premises of the school, harmony (or tolerance) prevailed, but when it came to the pedagogical programme or to the translation of the 'image' to school subjects, the views of original denominational founders started to differ. (The story of the school of Y is a story of euphoria and a sense of community only in part; it is also an example of disheartening hassle and of the assertion of denominational interests).

In the long run, the motto of oecumenical schools was contrary to the interests of the denominations, even if the pastoral leaders who worked in and integrated into the local society did not realise (or hardly realised) this fact in the beginning. (This was contributed to by the variegated ways of the organisation and management of denominations; theoretically, Protestants were granted bigger local freedom to manoeuvre than Catholics were. Obviously, bigger local freedom to manoeuvre also brought greater isolation, as a shown by the example of Y.) As a comment cited by Tamas Deme (Deme, 1999: 4) states, as far as denominations are concerned oecumenical schools can be tolerated yet they are not desirable. It could undoubtedly be tolerated until the restoration of denominational schools started and took place. And, as soon as the reorganised denominational schools appeared in local societies, oecumenical schools were qualified as undesirable for the denominations.

The motto of oecumenical schools – which seemed to be attractive and impressive in the beginning, as evidenced by the example of the school of X – in the course of the debates that started later came to be regarded as a problematic rival and, what is more, a dangerous alternative. Exploiting the wave produced by the Act on the Freedom of Religion of 1990 (Act IV of 1990, which rendered possible the establishment of numerous new religious organisations that did not qualify as traditional Churches, denominations accused oecumenical schools of propagating wrong teachings (see Deme, 1999: 4–5). Consequently, the motto of oecumenical school gradually became less attractive and came to denote an educational experiment that – albeit of a different approach – had already been present in the Kadar regime.

5.4. National and local authorities

Most probably, in the turmoil of the fall of communism, local authorities were taken by surprise by this civil society initiative. In the Kadar regime, school experiments were authorised at the level of the ministry. After the Act of 1985 came into force, this practice came to be less restrictive, yet it was not until the Act on Local Government (Act LXV of 1990) came into force that the tasks of the operation of schools (more specifically, of ensuring that the obligation of compulsory schooling is met) were actually delegated to the local authorities. At that time democratic initiatives and NGOs organisations defined the general background, but no rules had yet evolved that the local authorities could comply with. For them, it seemed to be safer to close themselves off than to be permissive (see especially the case of X). This attitude gave an opportunity for exerting pressure and finding loopholes. In this respect, it can be stated that oecumenical schools had been illegal from the very beginning, and, as far as education administration is concerned, they did not become legal until the late 1990s. (See the section of the 1993 Public Education Act cited above.)

As evidenced by the cases of X and Y, it was possible to turn the initial resistance of education administration. In X, this happened with a unique exertion of pressure (minister, national television), while in Y the process was somewhat more democratic (reference was made to the constituents). The examples show that, most probably, the general atmosphere was gradually turning democratic. The history of X started before the first free local authority elections, while in Y the new local authorities had had some experience of the importance of the elections (and, with the election of the former local council president a more pragmatic style of governance was introduced that was less affected by national politics). In those cases where the establishment of oecumenical school was initiated not by the citizens (parents) but by the local authority (or at least the process was controlled by the local authority), the process was smoother. (This was the case in Z. However, it is to be added that the school of Z was launched later, seemingly with more experience on the part of the local authorities.)

Nevertheless, local authorities had remained uncertain until the inherently illegal status of oecumenical schools became legal and clear. The attempt to ensure that civil society

organisations take over the control of schools in terms of content and organisation proved to be successful only in X and only temporarily. In Y, the NGOs did not intend to take over education; instead, they organised educational services offered by foundations. In Z, NGOs did not participate in the formation of the oecumenical school; it was the local government that adopted the programme of the oecumenical school along with the director's application. Such a 'takeover' by the civil society would not have fallen in line with the traditional Hungarian (and European) approach to education management, according to which there are no grassroots initiatives in education. This fact holds true even if those who initiated oecumenical schools considered – in harmony with the general contemporary spirit – civil society initiatives valuable, even if such initiatives seemed illegal on the one hand, but fair and just on the other.

Therefore, as shown by the case of Z, as soon as they could they ceased to support those very oecumenical schools they had authorised (and, as authorities, they were compelled to do so). Although the heads and teachers of the institutions probably felt betrayed, the authority still was loyal and supportive. Among the fierce debates of the takeover of schools by denominations it almost seemed reassuring to them that decisions were taken at higher levels, that is, they did not had to make decisions and could avoid confrontation with their own schools. The Authority – which visited Z several times to check the legality of the 'oecumenical school' – was just an added manifestation of an education management system that operated legally (albeit, according to some, unfairly). The removal of the symbol from the oecumenical school of Z had unhappy connotations; however, what was done had to be done. An attempt had failed; an illegal situation had been eliminated.

5.5. The end of the story

This event shed light on the outcomes of the civic initiative named "oecumenical school" and marked the end of the story. Tamas Deme (1999: 5–6) specifies the following possible outcomes: 'churchification,' 'concealment' and 'ancient bisons.'The note cited above was written in 1999, when the momentum of the fall of communism was still tangible or at least was still remembered. After 15 years, the situation seems to be clearer. The stories discussed above illustrated the actual outcomes of the civic initiative named 'oecumenical schools.'

One of the possible solutions was to *become a part of denominational education*. In the stories discussed above, none of the schools took this path, yet other oecumenical institutions (or institutions that defined themselves as oecumenical) did undergo this process, all the more so as a state secretary proposal based on the 1993 Public Education Act (cited by Deme 1999: 10) expressly proposed this possibility for institutions that defined themselves as oecumenical. This was partly due to their commitment; as discussed above, oecumenical schools were often established under pressure, that is, in situations where none of the denominations that established an institution managed to operate the institution independently but one of the founders

was stronger than the others). Today, those institutions that followed this path are not regarded as 'oecumenical schools,' even if their attempts to operate in an oecumenical spirit are not questioned.

Another possible solution was to become *a foundation-operated institution*. This path was taken by X and Y. Thus oecumenical schools fell into the same category as other foundation-operated schools did, although their spirit (along with the parents, students and teachers) was markedly different. As far as their spirit is concerned, they could expect the support of right-wing governments – but this is only a label. Their operation are governed by the same rules that regulate other foundation-operated schools and they face the same challenges.

The school of Z is an example for the third solution. If they remained local government schools *and continued to be operated by local governments*, schools obviously had to conform with the neutrality of worldview, an obligation for state-operated schools even if their original founders and local heroes are still convinced that there is no such a thing as a 'neutral school.' An oecumenical approach may be detected in the organisations of teachers and parents in the form of a non-denominational religiousness, but officially, it is freedom of conscience based on individual preferences. And, as in the case of the use of minority languages, collective rights cannot be enforced.

6. Conclusions

The *first conclusion* pertains to the role of parents' groups (citizens' groups) in asserting their own political interests in educational matters in Hungary. It was shown that parents play a decisive role in the formation of local educational policies; that is, parents' groups (citizens' groups) are factors in the formation of educational policies that cannot be ignored. This holds true even if other factors of educational policies (in this case local authorities, schools, their teachers or the representatives of denominational education) make attempts to gain access to the rights and opportunities of policy making. As discussed elsewhere (Kozma, 2006: 137ff), educational policy is a multi-players game of several actors where all actors try to assert their own rights with the tools available for them. Keeping local initiatives on track and channelling them into higher-level policy making is an art that needs to be mastered and practised; otherwise, one group of the actors may overcome the others and render the political game inoperative.

The *second conclusion* is related to the possibilities and dangers of policy borrowing. Throughout the history of the evolution of oecumenical schools, there have been civil society attempts to take over the operation of schools from the owner, while the owner is obliged (should be obliged) to operate the schools. Such attempts were based on attractive mottos and real-life (or presumably real-life) foreign examples. However, as the conclusions of the stories discussed above show, such attempts are not compatible with the system of management, finance and control that have historically evolved in the educational matters (and in other public services) in Hungary. Only those policies can be

adopted and implemented that fit into the traditional structures. Such innovations can be properly implemented within the existing structure, but outside the structure, unfortunately, they are non-viable in the short or in the long run.

The *third conclusion* is related to the role of the 'moment'. Successful innovations, policy borrowings and creative problem solving can happen only in a given moment of history. At other times and in other places different solutions need to be sought. In this case, the 'moment' was the fall of communism, more specifically, the first, enthusiastic and anomic of the democratic transition. Those oecumenical schools that were established at that time have managed to survive in some way or another, with more or less conflicts, either in an embedded or an isolated manner. Later, however (that is, after one or two years or even only a few months), the same socio-political innovation cannot be implemented any more. Undoubtedly, it takes time for the information to spread and the experience to accumulate; however, the solutions born in the moment cannot be re-employed later. New situations call for new solutions.

This research is neither comprehensive nor concluded. Rather (and similarly to the most of such studies), it is an exploration. The details related to oecumenical schools – including the history of not only their evolution but their paths of development as well – call for further research that may shed light on the possibilities and limitations of centralisation and decentralisation, more specifically, of the cooperation between authorities and the civil society. We are convinced, however, that the results in their present form may contribute to drawing relevant conclusions on the two-way (horizontal and vertical) links of educational institutions.

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