Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Developing the non-cognitive skills of disadvantaged schoolchildren in the study hall

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Debrecen, 2021
The objective of the thesis, the definition of the topic, the theoretical framework

The study hall is a complex service that increases the social integration chances of disadvantaged, mainly Roma, schoolchildren studying in primary and secondary public education institutions, reduces educational differences and provides individual development affecting the whole personality with the help of tools outside public education (Bihari – Csoba 2018). In Hungary, the need for the provision of an after-school with a study hall programme/service for extra-curricular activities is justified by the increasing school drop-out rate in recent years. The share of early school leavers among the population aged 18–24 increased from 11.4% in 2014 to 12.5% in 2018 (Eurostat 2020). The share of Roma (65%) and children from disadvantaged groups among early school leavers is high (Oktatási és Képzési Fgyelő 2019: 7, Radó 2018).

Young people with no more than primary education, low cognitive skills and a lack of non-cognitive skills, which have become more valued in today's labour market due to technological progress, are very likely to be excluded from even routine jobs and to inherit their parents' disadvantages. Social inequality is increasing and the chances of social inclusion/adoption are decreasing due to the lack of specific competence required in the new labour market for the young people concerned (Fazekas 2016, 2017, 2018a, b, Varga 2014, 2019b).

School failure is not only an individual (micro-level) problem but also a social (macro-level) problem, as a new replacement of the long-term unemployed is produced every day on this failing life course that starts with dropping out.

Early school leaving is often caused by socialisation deficits (e.g. lack of non-cognitive skills), the absence or dysfunctional operation of institutions and services for correcting early failures and disadvantages. As a service to compensate for disadvantage, the study hall has therefore played a special role in recent decades. For more than two decades, the Government of Hungary has been supporting the development of study hall programmes/services, mainly run by NGOs, through grant funding, to prevent school drop-outs without qualifications and to improve the educational achievement, integration and development of the abilities of disadvantaged schoolchildren, mainly of Roma origin (Baráth 2016, Cs.ovcsics et al. 2014, Fejes 2014, Fejes – Szücs 2016, Hajdu – Mike 2013, Kerényi 2005, L.Ritók 2012, Polyacskó 2012, Messing 2008, Nagyné Árgány 2015, 1672/2015).

To date, there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the functioning of study hall-type programmes, with only four major national studies available, complemented by several
The studies did not answer the key question of the extent to which the study hall contributed to the development of competence, particularly of non-cognitive skills, or to the improvement of the further schooling rates of the participating schoolchildren. The analyses so far have focused on the organisational and operational framework of the study hall, the satisfaction of participants (children, parents, teachers) and the measurement of achievements in terms of improvements in school grades. Similarly to national research, the case studies focusing on the practical work of the study hall focused mainly on the development of basic cognitive skills within skills development and almost exclusively on the improvement of grades within academic achievement. There is little or no discussion of the role of non-cognitive skills, their development or the need to examine them (L. Rítók 2012, Fejes 2014, Vámos 2016).

Taking all this into account, my thesis examines the contribution of study halls to the development of non-cognitive skills and thus to the original aim of out-of-school services: to the reduction of socio-cultural disadvantage. The novelty of the research on which this thesis is based is demonstrated not only by the topic chosen – the analysis of non-cognitive skills – but also by the methodology used in the research. Instead of the "hard" indicators used in previous analyses (e.g. grades), we attempted to develop "soft" indicators to measure the development of competence (e.g. communication and conflict management). Given the importance of basic and key competence within the set of skills required in today's labour market, and the key role their development plays in improving employability, we consider it essential to have a better understanding of competence through the use of new measurement tools.

Taking Fazekas' (2018) definition as a starting point – expanding and elaborating on the content of the definition experiment – we call all those skills non-cognitive that help schoolchildren to integrate into institutions (family, school, study hall), communities (class, study hall, friends) and to build relationships and cooperate with individuals, groups and actors of institutions and communities (e.g. classmate, teacher, friend, family member, etc.).

On the one hand, the present study aims to explore how the socio-cultural and socialisation deficit of schoolchildren is related to the disadvantage of the three non-cognitive skills identified as the most important by the World Economic Forum (WEF 2016) – communication, problem solving and cooperation – which the current educational institution cannot compensate. On the other hand, the present study aims to analyse how the activities of the study hall, the pedagogical and social work methods used and the personnel conditions
employed can contribute to the reduction of the non-cognitive deficits examined, and thus to improving the learning and living conditions of the children attending the study hall and to increasing their chances on the labour market.

I have built my research on three main theoretical pillars, taking into account the widely known correlation that language disadvantage and school segregation are the main causes of school failure among disadvantaged schoolchildren from low socio-cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, the main theoretical pillars of the thesis are language disadvantage, school segregation and the theory of non-cognitive skills.


Similarly, reviews of disadvantage compensation programmes that measure *non-cognitive skills* have shown that early childhood development is a key priority, especially for disadvantaged children, to achieve success in later school and employment. However, the importance of skills development for this group is equally underestimated in the economic, educational and social fields (Balás et al. 2016, Fazekas 2019, Heckmann et al. 2009, Heckmann 2011, McCoy et al. 2017, Schweinhart et al. 2005, WEF 2016). This is the reason why the study of three key non-cognitive skill areas of disadvantaged study hall schoolchildren, communication, problem-solving and cooperation skills, which were taken up in this thesis, is justified and represents a gap-filling area. It is worth noting that the study was
hampered by the lack of measurement tools for assessing non-cognitive skills, which also had to be developed within the framework of this thesis.

**Description of the research methodology**

The exploratory research on which the thesis is based was carried out in the framework of the Horizon 2020 project entitled Innosi between 2014 and 2018. In this project, the research group of the Department of Sociology and Social Policy of the University of Debrecen – in which the author of this thesis was also a member – investigated the study hall as one of the social innovations in Hungary.

The qualitative research method was used to collect the data. The study measured eight dimensions of activities, mainly family and school, that hindered or supported the development of non-cognitive skills of study hall schoolchildren. The first three dimensions – locality, family, household – were used to explore the socio-cultural background of the schoolchildren. The next four dimensions aimed at exploring family socialisation, family functions and dysfunctions that promote/inhibit the development of the personal and social skills under study and school integration. Learning about family relationships provided a good basis for analysing cooperativeness. And by exploring the characteristics of communication within the family, we wanted to measure communication skills. The dimension of problems within the family was designed to measure problem-solving skills, and the activity dimension was designed to measure changes in schoolchildren's leisure activities before, during and after entering the study hall. The eighth dimension was based on the experiences of the study hall programme, covering goals, expectations, activities, changes during the study hall programme, forms of assistance and cooperation, the role of professionals and finally the outcomes. We consider as a new outcome of this thesis a measurement tool developed for research in this specific skill area, which is currently in an experimental phase and, although not yet a standardised measurement tool, our results on the application of this method are promising.

In the exploratory study, we targeted the study halls operating in cities with county status in all three counties of the Northern Great Plain region. The reason for our decision was that this region is one of the most disadvantaged areas of the country and one of the geographical units benefiting from the tenders for the operation of study halls. We focused on all three big cities/cities with county status within the region for several reasons: the central location of cities allows for more services to be available, unlike in villages and small towns;
social, educational and cultural institutions are physically accessible locally for children living in different neighbourhoods; and the majority of the supported study halls are based in cities.

When including them in the study, we targeted the study halls in all three cities with county status, where the qualitative method is applicable, i.e. the majority of the marginalised target group entered the study hall as upper primary schoolchildren. The identification and selection of these study halls were made difficult by several factors (e.g. a complete list of the successful applicants was not publicly available at the time of the sample selection, the contact persons of the study halls contacted did not wish to be involved in the research, some of the study halls focused on lower primary schoolchildren). Finally, taking into account the obstacles as well, five study halls were selected for the sample. One of the five study halls studied was chosen because it had been recognised as a model project and we wanted to understand the reasons for its excellence and its impact on the development of the skills of the study hall schoolchildren attending it. The overall four study halls in the other two cities were chosen for the control group function.

The sample for qualitative research comprises schoolchildren, parents and professionals involved in the study hall programme. In total, 98 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Of these, 60 interviews were conducted with study hall schoolchildren – both former and present – 17 with parents and 21 with professionals. The snowball method was used to select the interviewees. The criteria for inclusion in the sample were as follows: the schoolchildren were participating in the study hall-based programme at the time of the interview or had participated in the programme previously. The schoolchildren were mainly upper primary schoolchildren who agreed to participate in the study hall programme, but a small number of fourth-grade children (4 in total) were also included. The gender ratio was identical with 30 girls and 30 boys involved in the study. The schoolchildren lived in neighbourhoods and school enrolment districts considered segregated in the cities. The majority of schoolchildren are Roma, but the proportion of Roma varies from programme to programme. The condition for parents was that their child(ren) were enrolled in the study hall programme. The parents who agreed to be interviewed were all mothers. We considered as professionals all adults, regardless of their educational background or their position in the study hall, who were involved in any way in the development of the study hall schoolchildren and in compensating for their disadvantages. Therefore, the experts included study hall directors, teachers, mentors, mentor teachers and facilitators.
The child, parent, expert interviews were divided into identical blocks of questions. The interviews were conducted between May 2016 and May 2017. Interviews with schoolchildren and parents averaged between 20 and 30 minutes in length, while interviews with experts lasted a minimum of 1 to 1.5 hours.

The instrument developed to investigate the specific skill area of non-cognitive skills is in an experimental phase, so the validity of the conclusions based on our research can be considered to be limited. Nevertheless, we believe that the measured results have revealed important correlations and that our conclusions could provide orientation for policymakers.

A thesis-style list of results

My thesis has produced new scientific results in six areas.

The first result is a new approach to the role and effectiveness of study halls in order to measure schoolchildren's non-cognitive skill deficits and the identification of the links related to this skill set aiming to effectively reduce disadvantage. Similarly to national research, the case studies focusing on the practical work of the study hall had focused mainly on the development of basic cognitive skills within skills development and almost exclusively on the improvement of grades within academic achievement. There had been little or no discussion of the reduction of the socialisation deficit and the role of, development of and the necessity to examine non-cognitive skills, while non-cognitive skills are of particular importance within the skill group expected in today's labour market, their development plays a key role in improving employment opportunities and in strengthening the integration of schoolchildren.

The second result is the development of a qualitative measurement tool, currently in the pilot phase, for research in this specific skill area. Instead of the "hard" indicators used in previous study hall analyses (e.g. grades), we attempted to develop "soft" indicators that allow measuring the development of competence (e.g. communication and conflict management techniques).

The third outcome is the commitment of the study hall and the schoolchildren in developing the non-cognitive skills tested to strengthen the inclusion and integration of the schoolchildren. The purpose of the study halls and the reason for their commitment can partly be explained by the fact that, in contrast to the results of previous studies, the social situation of the family and/or the children's academic performance and cognitive skills are not, or less, the decisive criteria for selection in the study halls. It is, rather, a new factor not tested so far,
the non-cognitive skills and skill deficits of the study hall schoolchildren, which are determining, the background of which is either previous negative study hall schoolchild experience or the decision or compulsion of the school/day school. The schoolchildren's goals for the study hall were ignored in previous studies, but a significant proportion of schoolchildren identified non-cognitive – learning, problem-solving and cooperation – skills deficits as a need at entry, in addition to cognitive skills development and social disadvantage compensation.

The fourth result is the exploration of the disadvantage compensating activity of the study hall that supports the development of non-cognitive skills along three main groups of activities: low-threshold services, professional skills activities that enhance specific competence and services that compensate for social disadvantage. Within the framework of professional skills development activities to enhance specific competence, the study hall provided learning-to-learn and learning skills activities to prepare schoolchildren for academic achievement and career development, as well as specific skills development leisure activities to promote inclusion and integration – communication, problem-solving, cooperation, creativity, tolerance. The results of the study hall case studies and those of the national surveys mainly analysed activities to develop schoolchildren's cognitive skills and activities to compensate for social disadvantages, with little or no mention of non-cognitive skills.

The fifth outcome is the exploration of the development of schoolchildren's communication, problem-solving and cooperation skills in the study hall. The literature, case study, or national survey results of the study hall have so far addressed the narrowing of non-cognitive skill deficits only marginally or not at all. In this thesis, we have explored the main factors that hindered the development of the three skills of the schoolchildren under study, how the study hall intervened in their development and what changes in the schoolchildren's development could be identified during their time in the study hall.

The sixth new finding is the categorisation of the study halls along three types of study halls – segregated, integrated, inclusive – because the development of non-cognitive skills, the improvement of the learning and living conditions of the schoolchildren attending the study hall and their future labour market chances are significantly determined by the composition of the target group, the environment and the direction of development. When creating the typology, I further developed the three types of institutions identified in the first national study hall survey in 2008 (Németh 2008-209) on the basis of the operational objectives by the
concept of school and study hall segregation and integration, the main reason for this being that two study halls, based on their self-categorisation, already called themselves segregated at the time of the survey due to the target group and the environment. I classified two study halls as segregated type. Skills development for homogeneous, mainly Roma schoolchildren living in the segregated area started in the segregated school of residence and was carried out in a segregated study hall setting. I classified one study hall as an inclusive type. Roma and non-Roma, colony and non-colony schoolchildren were co-educated in the only primary school and the only study hall in the segregated neighbourhood of residence, but the disadvantage of the schoolchildren compared to the schoolchildren in the segregated type study halls was smaller but significant. I classified two study halls as integrated type. The study halls selected their schoolchildren from inside and outside the enrolment area of the district, and when selecting the schoolchildren to enrol, one of them selected schoolchildren with a less problematic social competence profile for the study hall group, while the other newly starting study hall preferred volunteer schoolchildren with better skills.

My first research question was how the activities of the study hall, its pedagogical and social work methods used, and the personnel conditions used can contribute to the reduction of the non-cognitive deficits examined, and thus to the improvement of the educational and living conditions of the children attending the study hall, and to the increase of their chances on the labour market.

The study hall provided low-threshold services, professional skill-building activities to strengthen specific competence and services to compensate for social disadvantages for disadvantaged schoolchildren from low socio-cultural backgrounds and some of their family members, intending to improve the learning and living conditions of children.

The low threshold services – educational/learning, social and recreational, cultural – attracted, activated, motivated and provided an experience (relaxation, recreation, tranquillity) for schoolchildren and established a continuum of non-cognitive skill development.

In the context of professional development activities to strengthen specific competence, the study hall, on the one hand, reduced the learning skills deficit that underpins the academic achievement and career development of low and medium-achieving schoolchildren by teaching them to learn. The development of learning skills did not mean simple mechanical preparation of homework and tutoring, as in the day-care school, but much more: it taught schoolchildren of upper secondary and secondary school age to learn in a
differentiated way, using mainly individual and small group methods, partly through special development task sheets with ICT and playful development tools. The sense of achievement and motivation made the schoolchildren interested and curious, and most of them became accustomed to regular learning, a better understanding of the curriculum and developing their individual learning style.

On the other hand, the integration and inclusion of schoolchildren in the study hall, the family, the school and the community was strengthened through leisure activities that addressed socialisation and cultural deficits by improving communication, problem-solving and cooperation skills. The development of the content of communication was ensured by the study halls mainly through small group, community and partly training methods, in addition to student and expert discussion, in the context of playful, cultural, artistic and leisure activities (e.g. drawing, painting, singing, dancing, drama, cinema, theatre, museum visits, excursions, camps, visits to the lido). The development of the communication toolbox was typically facilitated by expert modelling and tasks using assertive communication, presentation skills and conformist speaking style learned during in-study hall skills-building activities, and its practical application was reinforced by leisure and cultural activities outside the study hall. The management of individual and family relationship conflicts was developed more in the context of individual facilitative discussions, mediation and partly conflict management training, while the management of conflicts of values and interests was typically developed by the experts in the context of small group and community activities. Games, competitions and activities in a regulated framework taught schoolchildren self-control, helped them to solve problems, make decisions, to learn rules and manage their emotions.

The teachers, mentors and mentor teachers with pedagogical and social qualifications, to a great extent with professional qualifications, having practice and study hall experience, knowledge of disadvantaged situations and special competence, were open to innovative methods. In addition to the consciously organised activities to develop the content and tools of communication, the experts’ use of language and communication in the language of loving care reinforced the use of the schoolchildren's elaborated communication code and the change in the content and form of communication. Emotion-handling and problem-solving activities were mainly carried out by mentors and mentor teachers, but sometimes teachers and facilitators were also involved.

Space/environment, tools, activities and services provided through social disadvantage compensatory services contributed to the reduction of socio-cultural deficits of families and
supported the development of non-cognitive skills. The study hall provided a model of a family-like warm, tidy, hygienic environment, and made up for the lack of quiet space, tools, objects and equipment needed for learning and developing special competence in the schoolchildren's homes. Regular leisure and cultural programmes are organised for children and some of their family members both inside and outside the study hall, which most families are not even occasionally able to finance themselves, while free programmes organised by social, cultural and educational institutions and organisations are rare in the peripheral area of the municipality. The provision of meals was also an important means of reducing social deficits, as inadequate nutrition also hindered student performance and learning ability. Parallelly, the study hall cooperated with parents in solving health, social and administrative difficulties.

The results proved that the disadvantage-compensating activities of the study hall, in parallel with the reduction of material, cultural and socialisation deficits, developed the schoolchildren's social competence system, thus significantly ensuring the conditions necessary for improving the schoolchildren's learning and living conditions and strengthening their future employment opportunities, and reinforced the schoolchildren's integration.

*My second research question was to explore how the socio-cultural, socialisation deficit of the schoolchildren is related to the disadvantage of the three non-cognitive skills identified as the most important by the World Economic Forum (WEF 2016) – communication, problem-solving, cooperation – which the current educational institution cannot compensate.*

I analysed the development of schoolchildren's communication skills through the dimensions of family background and communication within the family, as well as activities and experiences with the study hall programme. The results of the development work of the study hall show improvements in 3 areas: the content, tools and form of communication.

The narrowed content of the communication was expanded to include culture, leisure, art, health awareness, future planning, behaviour/etiquette, and the taboo subjects of deviance, partnership, sexuality, having children, and having a well-functioning family in the schoolchildren's families. The schoolchildren's horizons were no longer limited to the day-to-day issues and needs experienced in the family, they were broadened by communicating the successes and experiences they had had during the skills-building activities and a significant number of schoolchildren became open to discussing any topic. As a result of the expert
model and experience, the young mothers who had been former study hall schoolchildren even read stories to their children.

In the area of communication tools, schoolchildren developed a change in language expression, from linguistic aggression to assertive communication, and they acquired rules, norms and manners of civilised and polite behaviour, such as the rules of informal and formal addressing, forms of greeting and feedback. In addition to the schoolchildren's conversational style, their performing style also improved.

In terms of the form of communication, schoolchildren tend to use an elaborated code (less situational language use, more varied/diverse vocabulary, structurally more sophisticated, complex sentences) rather than the limited language code acquired during family socialisation, and the level of linguistic abstraction increased.

I analysed the development of problem-solving skills through the dimensions of family background and family conflict and problem solving, activities and experiences with the study hall programme. Problem-solving skills show improvement in 3 main areas as a result of the development work in the study hall: reduction of problem sources, problem-solving tools and problem-solving form.

When analysing the mitigation of problem sources, the results showed that schoolchildren came to the study hall with a variety of family and school problems and conflict types, which had often been treated with punishment by the family and to some extent by the school. As a result of the intervention of the study hall, the number and extent of schoolchildren's relationship, value, interest and information conflicts were reduced, their rule awareness was strengthened and they were better able to learn and learnt to learn.

Schoolchildren growing up in the context of closed roles used inappropriate problem-solving tools (verbal and/or physical aggression, anger) and forms (typically win/lose, self-submissive strategies), which they had learned in the family and applied these in the same way as the parent, educator, or foster parent in their position of power, both at school and initially in the study hall, both with their fellow schoolchildren and with teachers and experts. A significant change in the means of problem solving was that the schoolchildren used assertive communication instead of verbal and physical aggression and bullying, in cases of disputes and expressions of opinion, they consciously tried to manage their emotional reactions, and their self-control and anger management improved. In terms of the form of problem-solving, they sought the advice of mentors and mentor teachers when taking a decision, and used a new problem-solving strategy. The schoolchildren tended to favour
problem solving and compromise seeking strategies, and even some of the schoolchildren consciously applied different conflict management strategies depending on the situation to achieve effective problem solving, and to a small extent, they also communicated what they had learned to their parents and family members.

The study halls have made a conscious effort to mitigate the three main non-cognitive skills deficits of disadvantaged schoolchildren from low socio-cultural backgrounds. The direction, the way of intervention, the personality, the competence and the approach of the experts of the study halls effectively and differentially developed the three key communication, problem-solving and cooperation skills of the schoolchildren as defined by the World Economic Forum (WEF 2016) and thus not only strengthened the integration and inclusion of the schoolchildren but also contributed significantly to the reduction of the inherited social disadvantages, the improvement of their learning and living conditions and their future labour market opportunities.

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Letöltés ideje: 2019.05.12.


Letöltés ideje: 2016.01.15.

Letöltés ideje: 2020.02.15.


List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (3)


2. Ábrahám, K., Bihari, I., Csoba, J.: Az oktatás/képzés szerepe a munkaerő-piaci keretek-linálat összhangjának kialakításában, a munkajövedelem biztosításában.

3. Bihari, I.: Út egy második esély iskolába?

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

   Acta med. sociol. közlésre elfogadva (-), 1-20, 2021. ISSN: 2062-0284.

   DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18392/metsz/2019/3/9

   Metszetek. 7 (2), 3-27, 2018. ISSN: 2083-6415.
   DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18392/metsz/2018/2/1
Hungarian abstracts (1)


List of other publications

Foreign language Hungarian books (1)


Hungarian book chapters (2)


10. Bajusz, B., Bihari, I.: Hogyan alakul a végzett hallgatók pályaképe?

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)


The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudöstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

12 May, 2021