

Doctoral (PhD) Theses

**WHAT IS THE WORTH OF A TEACHER
IF CENTRAL-EUROPEAN?**

**EFFECTIVE TEACHERS IN TWO CENTRAL-
EUROPEAN COUNTRIES TEACHING LOW-
STATUS STUDENTS**

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1. The objective of the thesis, outlining the topic

Researches concerning teachers' (and school) effectiveness have a history of almost fifty years. Researchers have tried to find answers to questions like when the teacher is effective, what makes this job effective. Most of the researchers agree that teachers' effectiveness- which means first and foremost the teacher's influence on students' academic success- has no clear, easy to grasp indices. While searching for explanations, researches focus on the teacher as an individual in the first place, examining his or her qualifications, experience, methods used, etc. The other group of researches, which studies school effectiveness, concentrates on the school as a whole, examining everything from infrastructural conditions to learning environments, paying particular attention to the headmaster. However, while searching for explanations, only a few researches integrate the following factors into the analysis: the teaching staff as a corporate body, the joint work or its consequent result, the development of pupils and classes as a collective outcome. As a matter of fact, though, it is impossible to assess the effectiveness of teachers' work on its own, without context.

Several researches emphasize that the success of primary school pupils is mainly determined by the parental status. Since the sixties some remarkable findings have pointed out that the social composition of schools has a strong influence on students' performance in many respects. The school composition has also come to the fore in researches concerning teachers' work and

its effectiveness. The English-speaking technical literature refers to the schools examined by us as 'hard-to-staff', 'most challenging schools' or 'at-risk schools' too, where the majority of students have worse socio-cultural environs than the average. The English expressions also suggest that the teachers have to meet much more challenges here during their work, and it is important to draw a distinction between schools of low-status student composition and average schools.

The Hungarian educational system is characterized by a considerable segregation in terms of regions or settlements, attributed to social differences. According to researches, this segregation does not decrease; in fact it seems to be increasing in the long run. We think that this is a characteristic of our educational system that could not be changed in effect by any educational policy. By studying the results of the schools where low-status students are taught in majority, we wished to contribute to a realistic appreciation of the achievement of these educational institutions.

In this study we relate to the examination of two fields of issues. On the one hand, we explore the features that can make a teacher and a given school dominated by low-status students successful. The success, as we understand it in this study, is that the students are more effective in academic and non-academic aspects than students from schools with similar composition. On the other hand, this study considers a type of international analyses as a model, namely the comparisons based on statistical analyses, as we compare and contrast data and results of Hungarian schools and teachers with features and achievements of Slovakian schools and teachers.

2. The methods used

In this study the method of contextual statistical analysis was used. Contextual analyses can be applied to out-of-school and in-school conditions. We deal with mainly the latter, and examine the school's inter-generational and intra-generational systems of relationships. We examine the composition and characteristics of both the teaching staff and the pupils. We approach the entire social characteristics of a school from the social capital and the theory of school climate.

The empirical study was actually a secondary analysis of the databases of the 2008 TALIS (*Teaching and Learning International Survey*), carried out according to a new, individual concept. TALIS is a research examining the conditions of teaching and learning, which was conducted in spring 2008 by OECD. During the research, teachers and headmasters were asked about their job, methods and working conditions in 23 countries. The survey was conducted at ISCED level 2 in each country, among the teachers teaching at the second stage of basic education (grades 5-8). The sample units were the schools. 20 teachers were interviewed from 150 schools each, so altogether about 3000 people got into the sample per country. In the course of the domestic research, we linked TALIS data to the student data of the 2008 National Assessment of Basic Competencies (NABC) survey, from which we gained outcome variables and background information. Then we formed indicators from these independently. Since there is not a similar survey in Slovakia to our National

Assessment of Basic Competencies (NABC), the analysis was carried out there only on the basis of TALIS data.

In our thesis we want to focus on teachers who teach in schools where they have to play extended roles, and where the students' home environment, scale of values are supposed to be left behind the ones appearing in an average school. What stands in the forefront of our interest is the teachers' characteristics, their work and results in schools characterized by low-status parental composition.

As former researches showed that the parents' level of education is the most powerful influence on students' careers, in our databases we removed the schools from the whole sample where the number of students whose parents have a degree was either less than 10 % or more than 40%. We considered these groups of institutions disadvantaged or advantaged respectively, in terms of the parents' educational level. In this way we also generated a group representing an average school composition, which means about half of the sample. While testing hypotheses, using mainly Lazarsfeld's elaboration model, we conducted partial and marginal correlation studies as well. That means we carried out statistical analyses separately in the above-mentioned institutions, then we compared the findings. We thought we get a more accurate picture if we contrast the results of schools with different compositions, and also the power of the factors influencing these results. Thanks to this comparison, the differences between the teachers and students in schools with different compositions are tangible.

3. The results of the research

The research has methodological results, namely the variables that we worked out, as firstly, most of them are generated by us, the examination of which has not been common so far. Secondly, the way we treated the rest of the variables went beyond their traditional interpretation.

In our dissertation we applied three dependent variables. In order to measure educational effectiveness we created a variable in which we separated the influence of students' social background from NABC findings. In addition, throughout the research we put the same emphasis on the non-academic success as on the indicator of academic efficiency, which is quite unusual. We took into account the teachers' own perception of effectiveness, too (which also showed differences). We interpreted classroom discipline as a socialization effectiveness factor which represents in our analysis the willingness to work together. This interpretation is not common in Hungarian studies yet, but it can be shown that the indicators of non-academic success are gaining more and more importance as influential predictors in the literature, as they efficiently reveal abilities, skills which tend to be very important later in the labour market or in family and social life at adult age. Not to mention that the results of academic tests do not reflect academic effectiveness entirely, due to the spread of competency tests, and because students are trained for them.

Our explanatory variables are based on the theory of human and social capital. We studied the traditional sources of human capital (qualifications, experience, etc.), but we also studied the various levels of the social

capital resources. Researches generally lay emphasis on teacher-student relationship out of the resources of social capital. We also dealt with it concerning both structural aspect and content. A less frequently examined resource of capital is the intra-generational group of capital resources based on the teacher-teacher system of relationships. We included both its structural features and its content elements in our analysis. The structural side is represented by the indicator based on the frequency of certain joint activities, while the content side is represented by the variables expressing the level of common values. As the teachers in schools today have to face more and more external challenges, we examined resources coming from outside, too. In this dimension of social capital resources, the characteristics of the parents' community and the characteristics of the school's immediate social environment appeared in the analysis.

We proposed four hypotheses at the beginning of the research, which were primarily based on literature and field experience. We examined these hypotheses in three chapters, summarizing the empirical research findings. The first hypothesis was that on the basis of Hungarian experience, teachers teaching in schools of disadvantaged composition are not the best-qualified or the most experienced. The rate of teachers for whom the given school is the first workplace is high, and they quit as soon as possible, choosing an institute where they have more sense of achievement, more teaching tasks and talent spotting, but fewer pedagogical problems. This assumption was mostly confirmed in both countries. In the domestic data it can be seen markedly that the rate of new-fledged teachers is higher, there is a great number of

teachers who are employed only for a year with a contract, and most of the teachers graduated from a college, not a university, in schools dominated by low-status student composition. We found, however, that the proportion of male teachers and the young is higher here compared to the whole sample. Besides, teachers' 'migration' to schools of better composition (happening at a point of their career) results in a more homogeneous institution regarding age and gender.

The first group of hypotheses could be confirmed almost entirely. With the help of some essential variables, we demonstrated students' home environs (a lot of inactive, unemployed parents, fewer durable consumer goods, etc.). It was also proved that the parents do not help with the studying, and the value of learning/knowledge is less in the families of these students.

Researchers try to determine teachers' effectiveness with the help of human capital resources, which can be measured quite well. We could see that according to these indicators, schools educating low-status students are less strong. In our second hypothesis, we assumed that sources of social capital have a greater impact on teachers' effectiveness in disadvantaged compositions than in other compositions. It turned out that several of these factors are outstandingly important, and make a distinction between the successful and less successful schools. We have to emphasize the importance of class size, which we interpreted after Coleman as inter-generational, structural capital resource. We proved that in schools where the rate of parents having a degree is less than 10%, it is extremely important to have a

better balance of teachers-students proportion. In this environment, it is especially important to have a multiplex and caring relationship of teachers to students. Nevertheless, we have to state that the importance of inter-generational capital resources was striking in all the different school compositions.

We pointed out in our analysis that the parental support given not only to the individuals, but also to the school and the staff, along with the appreciation coming from the environment, can influence the results of teachers' work efficiently and significantly. Parental participation in meetings affects students' academic performance, while home control, which we measured by the frequency of discussing school events, affects classroom discipline, appearing as a non-academic effectiveness indicator. In schools with low-status students, teachers typically feel little appreciation from outside, although it can inspire their work to a great extent if this resource is somehow available.

Our third hypothesis referred to the features that we considered important, regarding what is an effective teacher and teaching staff like. We supposed that the human capital represented by teachers can reach out to students efficiently if it can be passed on in an atmosphere characterized by proper social capital.

We found that teachers' intra-generational resources in disadvantaged school compositions have a much stronger impact at all levels of teacher's effectiveness than in any other composition. The findings of the analysis reveal that the co-operation between teachers, which also establishes a common pedagogical value system, contributes to school success to a great

extent, what is more, this source of capital is even more important in disadvantaged compositions than in the sample's average. The data show that Hungarian teachers in schools with challenging student composition work together more often in any case –maybe out of necessity.

We separated the structural and the content dimension in the inter-generational sources of capital. It is important to stress that in low-status student compositions, there is not only more frequent joint work, but teachers also accept their colleagues' assessment better than in other types of compositions. We pointed out that this intra-generational content resource has an obvious impact too on boosting effectiveness both in the field of academic and non-academic achievement.

Our last, fourth hypothesis is based on the results of the international comparison. We assumed on the basis of our prior knowledge that teachers' distribution, successes, effectiveness, and students' characteristics tend to show a more or less similar trend both in Slovakia and Hungary. The geographical distribution of institutions of low-status student compositions showed a very similar picture in the two countries both regionally and locally. The headmasters reported similar problems, too: infrastructural difficulties, shortages in human resources, administrative load of teachers (it is higher in both countries in low-status school compositions than in other compositions). The class sizes were similarly smaller too in the compositions surveyed. Students' background, level of aspiration, school problems were also largely similar in both countries. What is even more important, and the reason why we chose Slovakia as a control country is that the background of students per

school determines their performance here almost as considerably as in Hungarian schools. However, testing our hypotheses concerning the impact of human and social capital resulted in different findings.

We observed similar tendency in the distribution of teachers among schools in both countries. In Slovakia in challenging school compositions, the number of part-time employees is outstanding compared to the sample's average, besides, the rate of new-fledged teachers is slightly higher too, but the difference is not as striking as in Hungary. We can conclude that the selection of teachers among schools in Slovakia is not as strong as in Hungary. This fact in itself is worth examining further, but its effect is important too, because it does not seem to be the main reason for this high level of academic segregation. Our hypothesis referring to the transfer of social capital proved to be similarly justified, however. The difference lies in what was more important concerning the impact on dependent variables: in Hungary it was a good working relationship among teachers, while in Slovakia a better teacher-student relationship. We think the explanation is that Slovakian teachers have less administrative and training load, fewer lessons, which means more free time. According to the data, they spend some of this free time with students in the school, building inter-generational relationships in this way. As the selection of teachers among Slovakian schools is less, we can also conclude that teachers do not perceive teaching in these schools as a trap, which promotes good relationships with students.

We can learn from this experience that even if schools or educational systems seem to have similar

characteristics, it is not advisable to adapt uniform solutions. It is particularly no use comparing Hungary or any other post-socialist country to the social context and apparatus of the 'Finnish educational miracle'.

We proved in our research that the teachers in schools characterized by low-status student composition- the number of whom is almost one-fourth of all the teachers in Hungary- are different and struggle with different problems from the teachers in schools with different compositions. In the fight against inefficiency, there are also other factors to help, the effect of which is negligible in institutions where students probably have a more favourable attitude towards school and learning, due to their background. First and foremost, it is extremely important to have a good quality social milieu in school, to have a balanced teacher-teacher and teacher-student relationship. However, in Slovakia with a similar educational system, in schools with similar background, the composition of teachers is different, but the problems they face are still the same. A good social milieu, which makes it possible to transfer cultural and human capital, proves to be efficient means to solve these problems. The basis of this milieu is the system of relationships which acts as an inter-generational social capital resource, and the intra-generational teachers' resource of capital, which gets less attention, but it is clearly tangible. Given the same conditions, what separates effective and less effective schools of disadvantaged composition is just these characteristics.

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