

Summary of Doctoral (PhD) Thesis

**An Education-Sociological Analyses
of Investment and Return into
Studies of Students Bringing up
Small Children**

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1) Research Statement

The objective of the thesis is to show the investment into education and the return of this investment among a special group of part-time students in higher education, women who are bringing up small children during the period of their studies. Relatively few research projects have been devoted to groups with special circumstances entering higher education. Educational aspiration of individuals temporarily inactive because of childbirth is a subject not only interesting for education-sociological researchers, but also raise far-reaching sociological questions. This topic, relatively unaffected by scientific and scholarly discourse, has been chosen because the studies undertaken during a period of absence from the labour market because of childbearing are of high importance for the direct community of the mother concerned and for the entire society.

The focus of the doctoral thesis is finding out whether an investment in advanced studies during a planned break in one's career has been useful in the re-integration of women in

the labour market in the decades following the change of the political system. The importance of the issue is underlined by the low number of inactive women participating in various study courses, adverse demographic indicators, and the difficulties women encounter when they return to work from a maternity leave.

I examined the careers of the students in the framework of the three major scenes of their lives: advanced studies, paid job and their private lives. Based upon this concept, a multidisciplinary approach was necessary to carry out an examination of the relevant literature as well. Out of the branches of pedagogical studies, I primarily relied on the results of education-sociology and education-politics so as to survey the topic, but andragogical, work-sociological, family sociological, demographic and social-political aspects were also examined.

The complexity of the topic is not only indicated by the wealth of the disciplines involved, but also the lack of comprehensive works dealing with the problems caused by the breaks in the careers of temporarily inactive people. Gender

studies examine the situations of various groups of women, but the present study is still a pioneering work in Hungary and abroad as well. A novelty of the thesis is that it examines the investments of female employees in education in a period that they spend away from their career. The examination takes place at two levels: investments and their short- and long-term returns at an individual and at a collective level.

I did not intend to deal with subjects outside the scope of the various disciplines used for the purposes of the thesis, I therefore did not discuss in detail economic and educational interrelations, and did not include in the thesis groups in various special situations (e. g. minorities, migrants, single and divorced women) either. As far as the various ways of studying are concerned, only formal studies and, within that, investment into studies for a college or university degree are subject of the thesis.

2) Research Methodology

The investments and the return of the investments made by female students were examined in a longitudinal research in which the individuals were followed from their decision to start a study course at a college or university all the way to the moment when they utilized their degree in the labour market. Women on a maternity leave constitute a special, not very easily accessible, a "hiding" group of society, it was therefore necessary to prepare for the process of sampling with great care.

Samples were taken from the students bringing up small children at two major regional institutions of higher education, the University of Debrecen and the University College of Nyíregyháza. A regional approach was used, as the return of the investment into education was to be examined in similar education-ecological environments. Ten faculties of the University of Debrecen, and four of the University College of Nyíregyháza were involved in the research. Because of their particular situation and problems, female students receiving a

maternity benefit usually choose corresponding courses, so students attending these part-time courses were found to be most suitable to be approached first. The difficulties in finding a number of individuals in a similar situation, and the data protection rules binding the administrative units of the universities, a random systematic sampling appeared to be the most suitable method for the purposes of the research.

The first phase of the research took place in 2006, when female students receiving a maternity benefit and studying at the two institutions of higher education were contacted. Students selected for the sample received the questionnaires designed for self-respondents by mail. In phase two of the cohorts examination, in the spring of 2009, I met graduates of the two institutions of who obtained their degrees during their maternity leave and had been working for at least one year. In this phase I was not able to rely on any kind of data base or register, so I did not continue the research with a probability selection method. The employees chosen through a snowball method completed the questionnaires with the assistance of interrogators.

The research sought an answer as to *why* the students embarked on a college or university course, and as to *how* it yielded a benefit to them: what were the motivations and strategies of students receiving a maternity benefit to invest in higher education studies during their years of inactivity, and what was the return of these studies when they re-integrated into the labour market. When examining the investment into education, I revealed the decision making mechanisms of the individuals, the motivation to obtain a degree, the direction, type and scale of investment, but I also inquired about the processes of studying, and the behaviour of those investing in education. In the course of the research, I followed the concepts of Becker and Rosen in analysing the individual expenses of the students investing in higher education, arranging the resources they used into two categories: individual and collective.

I examined any potential return of the investment into education after the individuals were active in the labour market again. The competences maintained during the inactive period, and the new college or university degree were a definite

advantage at the very moment when the graduates began working, so it was possible to detect the return of the investment even in the short run. The yield of the college and university studies was examined with the three-pole model developed to detect the short- and long-term return of investments. Following Bourdieu's works, I took into consideration the different social backgrounds of the students, as their social background influences their decision-making mechanisms, the efficiency of learning, and the quality and quantity of the expected return.

3) The Results of the Thesis

Cultural reproduction, rational decision making theories and various domestic and international literature related to various types of capital and assets constituted the theoretical framework of the thesis. I constructed a model of investment into higher education and its return at individual and collective levels by using Becker's concept regarding investment in

human resources, combined with the ideas outlined in Bourdieu's and Schultz's capital theories.

The model is based upon the assumption that the purpose of the investment into higher education and its return extended beyond the world of paid jobs. In addition to calculating the direct return in the labour market, I also calculated the types of return in what I refer to as the "field of intellectual expansion," using among others Bourdieu's, Weber's, and Pléh's ideas. Furthermore, I expected returns in the field referred to as social embeddedness, according to the observations of Heuser, Prins and Zrinszky. In the theoretical part of the thesis, I sought the connection points between the fields mentioned above and the human capital, incorporated cultural capital and social capital, related to the college and university studies of women with small children.

The theories and features of the various parts of the model were surveyed according to the results and findings described in related international literature. The appearance and attributes of female students in higher education, from the aspect of the intellectual field, were discussed primarily in the

mirror of the works of Goldthorpe, Forray, Kozma, Hrubos and Ladányi. The influx of women into higher education resulted in a rapid levelling of the genders all over Europe, and induced, together with other factors, the expansion of higher education. I discussed the process of the expansion in detail, using the works of Archer, Collins, Kozma, Galasi, Kertesi and Köllő, as the value of a college or university degree in the labour market depends on a number of factors and influences the decision-making strategies regarding studying.

I applied the observations of DiMaggio, Bukodi, Pusztai and Fényes in order to demonstrate the attributes of female students and increase in their (educational) assets. In this process, the most important factor was the difference between the assets of men and women. My observations, based upon the research findings of Bourdieu, Boudon, Ferge, Róbert and Kozma among others, suggest that members of various social layers inherit their different investment strategies from generation to generation. Members of lower social strata often underestimate the future benefit of higher education, so

they tend to be unwilling to undertake spending a lot of money in the present, as opposed to those belonging to higher classes.

In the theoretical model, the most tangible assets appear to be those that emerge in the process of integration into the labour market. These advantages, being material, are more apparent than those in the other two fields. When examining the processes in the labour market, I paid attention to the analytical studies that deal with the connections between financial activities, and within that employment, and qualifications. The examinations confirmed that a higher qualification means better chances in the labour market (cf. Nagy, Kertesi, Köllő and Galasi).

When demonstrated some of the disadvantages suffered by female employees, for instance horizontal and vertical segregation, gender discrimination, differences in wages, I primarily relied on the research findings obtained by Nagy, Koncz, Frey and Thun. These problems were, however, only involved in the observations insofar as they influenced the return of the investments of students with small children in higher education when they return to the labour market.

Despite the anomalies in the labour market, some of which were listed above, an analysis of the interrelations between the economic activities of the population and education revealed that higher qualifications of an individual increases his or her opportunities in a re-integration into the labour market, stabilizes his or her abilities to preserve a job and reduces the chances of becoming unemployed.

For an analysis of the third field of returns, I used Coleman's classification of social assets in order to demonstrate the effect of the studies of a young mother within her family. When a mother accomplishes college or university studies, generational transfers improve somewhat, but it only becomes ideal when the connections between the members of the family are good. The positive effects of the time a mother spends with her child on the transfer of assets was not only demonstrated by Coleman; Bourdieu, Pusztai and Róbert also had similar results.

When examining the return area of social embeddedness, the focus of the analysis was the difficulty of bringing a woman's paid work and unpaid (home)

commitments into harmony. The researchers who have dealt with the three-way commitment of women were, among others, Cseh-Szombathy, Bukodi, Goldin and Beck, and I relied on their research findings when I examined how women coordinated their commitments in their jobs and homes. Women with higher qualifications managed these problems a lot more efficiently. This observation was underpinned by the research findings of Pongrácz, Spéder, S. Molnár, Frey and Blaskó, who found that women with a higher qualification were more willing to undertake a job, and are also more successful in coordinating their professional and private lives, than women with a lower education were. Another positive social effect of studying on the life of women on a maternity leave is that their sense of isolation is not so acute, and they are more easily able to find their place in a community after the period of the maternity leave. This observation is in accordance with the research findings of Zrinszky, Prins and Durkó.

In addition to the individual advantages derived from education, a number of long-term collective advantages were identified in the course of the research project. As a result of

permanent studying on the side of the employee, the employer is to be prepared for a shorter period of making up for the time lost during the maternity leave of the employee, and in this way the employer may save costs. In another words, employers will have more competent employees returning to work. Successful re-integration of women into the labour market reduces unemployment, and through it, the whole economy saves money. Hidden unemployment also diminishes. In the long term, social and health care expenses reduce, as a result of reducing employment problems and, last not least, demographic indicators may improve (cf. Frey, Koncz, Krémer, Dobossy and Galasi).

Below I provide a description of the findings of my empirical research project, which was based upon the theoretical hypotheses and models using related literature and other sources.

My initial hypothesis regarding investment into education, based upon theories of cultural reproduction, rational decision-making mechanisms and capital theories, was that social background, primarily the status of parents,

determined the entire educational career of the individuals concerned. When examining the decision-making strategies of students related to higher education, I attributed great significance to their previous qualifications. I therefore arranged students into two categories: those with a secondary education (GCSE), and postgraduate students (those who had a college or university degree before starting another degree course), and the research programme included a comparison of the two groups.

My assumption was justified, as there were major differences between the two sample groups in terms of decision-making strategies related to higher education and also in the accomplishment of the study courses. Highly qualified students, usually working as professionals, who were financially also in a better position, had a more elaborate decision-making strategy usable for a longer period of time, showing signs of a homogeneous family atmosphere. Undergraduate students, also in a lower financial status, although calculated with the potential benefit of obtaining a degree, but tended to be able to measure the risks and

advantages of investment into higher education in the short term. It explains that the families of students with a secondary education suffered most from the mother's educational efforts, as they were able to coordinate their educational and family commitments with difficulties only, they lacked the necessary flexibility in organizing their tasks, and their educational efforts caused regular conflicts in their lives.

I also assumed that the educational attitudes, efficiency and motivation of the two groups were also different, and this assumption was also justified. There was a considerable difference between the two groups in terms of motivational background. Postgraduate students were characterized by a largely positive attitude towards learning in higher education in general, whereas in their selection of the specific subject major they were motivated by pragmatic aspects in the first place, the expected benefit of the subject major concerned. Students with a GCSE were motivated by the possibility of obtaining a degree and expected advantages in connection with finding a job later on. They had similar motivations in their selection of a specific subject major. The higher degree of

learning efficiency of postgraduate students was not only reflected by their better grades, but also by their choice of learning methods, their ways of preparing for examinations, as well as by their ways of organizing their work and acquiring the information necessary for them.

My third assumption in connection with the advanced studies of mothers with small children was that they intended to compensate for the losses they suffered because of leaving the labour market. It is clear from the answers provided by the respondents that they really recognized the loss of knowledge and skill caused by their absence from their jobs, and they wished to compensate for the loss by studying. The results suggest that for students with a GCSE learning is a way leading to achieving the desired status, whereas postgraduate female students wish to utilize their new studies in order to improve or further specialize their already possessed professional qualifications. The time spent in higher education is a qualitative change for undergraduate students. During that time, their learning aspirations continually increase, their inner

motivations grow stronger, and they acquired apparently effective learning strategies and plans for the future.

I made efforts to survey the return of investments into higher education in three fields. As a result of the investment into human capital, a number of assets were generated in the field of re-integration into the labour market, and this is unmistakably the result of the studies accomplished during the inactive years of the individual concerned. The first result is that three-quarters of the women involved in the research had a rapid and problem-free re-integration into the labour market, they were able to avoid unemployment and find a job suited to their new qualification. During later years of employment, the years spent with studies had advantages such as a better job suited to the new qualification, higher wages, and an ability to avoid downward mobility.

The field of return at intellectual expansion was found to be full of elements of return as early as the period of research. The number of elements increased during the time the individual spent in the labour market: the desire of the participants in the research to learn increased, they paid more

attention to self-instruction and, most important of all, they were successfully involved in professional work in the process of re-integration. It is an important development that the willingness and commitment to continue learning increased the most among women who were initially less successful in the labour market.

The first return in the field of social embeddedness was found to be the individual's ability to join the community of students, the end of isolation at home. It was a new social capital, and it allowed the student to re-join the community of co-workers more easily again later on. The return of a college or university degree in private life was the increase of the individual's ability to coordinate the commitments in their job and in their private life, and the cultural consumption of the family began to follow patterns characteristic of intellectuals and professionals.

It is an important result that, contrary to my initial assumption, the return of the investment in higher education in the labour market proved to be independent of the socio-economic background of the employees, the size of cultural

and other types of capital. No interrelation was found between the efficiency of learning and the success of the individual in the labour market either. The key to the implementation of investments into higher education in the labour market lies in the appropriate preparation for the decision (selecting the most suitable subject major, gathering information about the institution, surveying the supply and demand) and in a positive attitude to studies (the recognition of the importance of continual studying, the interpretation of studying as a source of pleasure and in a commitment to working hard).

An important result of the research into studying in the period of bringing up a child or children for the experts dealing with higher education and andragogy is young women living in an inactive period and exposed to a low level of intellectual challenge are characterised by a high degree of primary motivation. The primary elements of motivation to start learning (a love of learning, professional interest etc.) may serve as a good foundation for further studies, and for creating the demand and need of the individual for permanent studying.

A major incentive for young mothers to invest in education was the cancellation of tuition fee, which was automatically open and available to young mothers receiving some form of maternity benefit or support. For economic- and social-political decision-makers it is a noteworthy outcome that the cancellation of tuition fee considerably reduced the financial burden for those wishing to enter higher education, and it was a major factor for the young women participating in the research project. Without the cancellation of the tuition fee, a lot of the individual and collective return of the investment would have been void, as the respondents simply would not have began their studies. This observation is well illustrated by national statistics that show that after the law had been changed, a considerable decrease of college and university students with small children.

Out of the numerous forms of the return of investment into higher education, one of the most important factors is the positive influence on demographic procedures. All the students with small children made it clear that in possession of a college or university degree their positions in the labour market

were safer, their chances of returning to work increased, and they were willing to have more children. The results of the longitudinal survey suggest a close correlation between the studies accomplished during the inactive period of the individual and her positions in the labour market, studying therefore plays an outstanding role in the decision to leave the labour market because of childbirth and to return there afterwards.

An important result of the research for the decision-makers of the business world is that the re-integration of women into the labour market after a maternity leave during which they have accomplished a successful training course positively influences the economic activity of the population thorough increasing employment, reducing the number of unemployed people, and hidden unemployment also recedes, as it is not necessary to maintain the status of forced inactivity. As a result of the successfully completed training courses, labour market will receive professionally competent employees. The highest proportion of the respondents found that the most positive effects of learning were the better chances of re-

entering the labour market and the proper maintenance of knowledge and skills.

It is necessary to launch new research programmes in order to examine the questions raised by the thesis. One of the possible directions of further research is following the career of women who have graduated during their maternity leave. The objective of such a monitoring project is revealing further returns of the educational investment. An even longer term research is required to monitor the generational transfer in the families concerned. On the other hand, it is also necessary to extend the research both vertically and horizontally. A vertical expansion means the potential involvement of other types of schools within the formal educational system as well as the informal ways of studying during the maternity leave. A horizontal, geographical expansion of the project will provide representative, nationwide results, and makes it possible for the researcher to compare the various regions within the country.

***4) The Publications of the Author in the Topic of the
Dissertation***

Chapters in Books and Essays Published in Periodicals

A társadalmi háttér szerepe a kisgyermeket nevelő hallgatók
felsőfokú tanulmányaiban [The Role of the Social Background
at the Studies of Young Mothers with Small Children] (2010)

In Kozma T.-Perjés I. (eds.): Új kutatások a neveléstudományokban.
Neveléstudomány – Integritás és integrálhatóság. Budapest: MTA
Pedagógiai Bizottság. (közlésre elfogadva) 1-13.

A felsőfokú tanulmányok hatása a munkaerő-piaci
reintegrációra [The Effects of Studies in Higher Education on
the Re-Integration into the Labour Market] (2010).

Educatio, 19 (2) (közlésre elfogadva) 1-14.

A felsőfokú tanulmányok szerepe a szándékolt karriertörésben
[The Role of Studies in Higher Education on Deliberate Breaks
in the Career] (2009).

In Bajusz B. et al. (eds): Professori Saludem. Tanulmányok a 70 éves Kozma Tamás tiszteletére. (lektorálta: Brezsnaynszky L., Fényes H.) Debrecen: Doktoranduszok Kiss Árpád Közhasznú Egyesülete, 295-305.

Motivációs hatások a levelező tagozat hallgatóinak tanulásában
[Motivations in the Studies of Correspondent Students]
(2008).

In Kiss E.-Buda A. (eds): Interdiszciplináris pedagógia és az eredményesség akadályai. (lektorálta:) Debrecen: Kiss Árpád Archívum Könyvtára-DE Neveléstudományi Intézet, 48-58. (Co-author: Fekete I.)

Tanulmányokat folytató kismamák motivációs háttere
[Motivation of Young Mothers with Small Children Studying
in Higher Education] (2008).

In Juhász E. (ed): Andragógia és közművelődés. (lektorálta: Sári M.) Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem Művelődéstudományi és Felnőttképzési Tanszék, 129-137.

A felsőfokú tanulmányokat folytató kismamák tanulási
attitűdjéről [Educational Attitudes of Young Mothers with
Small Children Studying in Higher Education] (2007).
Educatio, 16 (4): 687-695.

Egyetemi és főiskolai hallgatók jövőképe egy regionális kutatás alapján [The Image of Future of College and University Students in a Regional Survey] (2006).

Educatio, 15 (1): 163-189. (Társszerző: Nagy Zs.)

Felsőfokú képzésben résztvevők családtervezési attitűdjei [Family Planning Attitudes of Students in Higher Education] (2005).

In Pusztai G. (ed): Régió és oktatás. Európai dimenziók. (lektorálta: Berényi Dénes) Debrecen: Doktoranduszok Kiss Árpád Egyesülete, 183-190. (Co-author: Bocsi V.)

Fehér folt a felnőttoktatásban: a kismamák képzése [A White Spot in Andragogy: the Education of Young Mothers with Small Children] (2003).

In Éles Cs. (ed): Nézőpontok és Látletek. (lektorálta: Sári M.) Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem Művelődéstudományi és Felnőttképzési Tanszék, 31-44.

5) Further Publications by the Author

Essays

”Two are better than one?” – Youth’s Family Founding Intentions in Accordance with their Religiosity (2008).

In Pusztai G. (ed): Religion and Values in Education in Central and Eastern Europe.. (Reviewed by Török B., Rosta G.) Debrecen: Center for Higher Education Research and Development University of Debrecen, 209-217.
(Co-author: Tornyi, Zsuzsa)

Potenciális demográfiai tartalékok. Fiatalok családalapítási tervei [Potential Demographic Reserves: Family Planning among Young People] (2006).

In Juhász E. (ed): Régió és oktatás. A „Regionális egyetem” kutatás zárókonferenciájának tanulmánykötete. (lektorálta: Enyedi György)
Debrecen: Doktoranduszok Kiss Árpád Egyesülete, 317-325.

Regionalitás és oktatás [Regionality and Education] (2005).

Debreceni Szemle, 13 (3): 469-471.

A szociális kompetencia fejlesztése [Developing Social Competence] (2004).

Magiszter, 2 (2): 13-31.

Translations

Joseph Zajda (2006) Élethosszig tartó tanulás és felnőttoktatás: Oroszország találkozása a nyugattal. [Lifelong Learning and Andragogy: Russia Meets the West] In Mark Bray-Tóth Péter (eds): Összehasonlító pedagógia. Folytatódó hagyományok, új kihívások, új paradigmák. Budapest, Magyar Pedagógiai Társaság. 112-135.