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ABSTRACT

The effects of recent political and social changes in Hungary on that country's educational system and society and on Hungarian educators are examined. Responses to five interview questions put to 18 Hungarian educators representing the university, secondary, and elementary levels form the basis of the findings presented. The questions were: (1) What are the most significant changes occurring in education in the past year? (2) How are economic and political factors in Hungary influencing educational policy and/or grassroots movements? (3) How do teachers compare educational changes in Hungary to changes in other Eastern European nations? (4) What opposition to change exists and to what extent? and (5) Is any minority group large enough to have a voice in educational change? The analysis of the responses revealed a general resistance to and distrust of change both among Hungarian teachers and among the population at large. A 14-item list of references is included. (DB)

# Hungarian Education in Transition



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# HUNGARIAN EDUCATION IN TRANSITION

## An Ethnographic Inquiry into How Hungarian Educators Define the Educational Impact of Social Change

RATIONALE:

Political changes in Eastern Europe received unprecedented attention in late 1989 and early 1990. Hans Weiler, over a decade ago, argued that much of what we interpret as "surprising" social change reflects the innocence of our ideas more than the dynamics of change itself. (Weiler, 1978, p. 179) The research presented here attempts to reduce such "innocence" through a qualitative, interpretative, inquiry into Hungarian political, economic, and educational transitions.

French sociologist Alain Touraine suggests that these interacting societal elemerts are of special significance at the beginning of new historical periods when fundamental questions about society and education and defined and established. (Touraine, 1989, p. 70)

Will the changing Hungarian educational system evidence distinct differences from the former soviet model, experience slow incremental changes, or exhibit rhetorical shifts in terminology while resting on the same structural framework? Hungarian policy planner, Tamas Kozma, argues, "What [goes] on in the

classroom influences the political future of Eastern Europe much deeper than what [happens] in the public arena." (Kozma, 1990, p. 12) He critiques the research of comparative education and concludes that it has not yet coped with new political and ideological realities of Eastern Europe. He types the research of the 1950s as reflecting either anti-communist or anti-capitalist rhetoric, the 1960s works as mere fact collecting, statistic-crunching efforts producing little useful knowledge, and the 1970's as works of cultural tourism more than comparative research.

Research in comparative education has additionally been accused of over-simplification of the Marxist dimension in social and educational analysis. (Antweiler, 1975, pp. 3-11) Comparative educators are challenged to explore national peculiarities of socialist education evident in Eastern Europe and the Baltic in addition to the traditional Soviet Union, Chinese, and Cuban focus. This paper look at Hungarian peculiarities heavily influenced by Marxism.

METHODOLOGY:

Political commentary on this area gave more attention to crumbling structures than to individuals within societal institutions. Attention to the central role of people and to their meta-narratives in the process of change is currently an encouraged alternative to large macro-classification studies. (Wagner, 1964, pp. 572-74 and Watkins, 1971, p. 271) Richard Sack calls

for increased attention to the disaggregate data in educational change. (Sack, 1981, p. 52) Vandra Masemann calls for social scientists to establish subjective methodology as an important research consideration and to collect data reflecting the actors' version of social reality. (Masemann, 1982, pp.1-14.)

This research examines the social reality constructed by eighteen Hungarian educators who served as the consultants for this work. They represent instructors at the university level, secondary level (gymnasium) and elementary level (primary) of the Hungarian educational system.

Formal and informal interviews and taping were used in data collection. Data analysis was based on reduction and display techniques, and categorical typing. (Miles and Huberman, 1984)

Data was gathered for this research during a six month period from late 1990 to early 1991. Initial contacts with the involved consultants were informal as we shared with and learned from each other as fellow educators. During this time we compiled many notes about what each other said. This ongoing data collecting was compiled into inquire units and organizing domains (Spradley, 1980) and served to identify reoccurring topics in the conversations. This served as the basis for five interview questions which were the focus of formal interviews. These questions were:

1) What are the most significant changes occurring in education in the past year?

2) How are economic and political factors in Hungary

influencing educational policy and/or grassroots movements?

3) How do teachers compare educational changes in Hungary to changes in other East European nations?

4. What opposition to change exists and to what extent?

5. Is any minority group large enough to have a voice in educational change?

At the time of the research, eight consultants were involved in educational exchange programs at three eastern colleges in the United States. Two were exchange professors. Additionally, eight of the consulted educators responded from within Hungary to my interview questions as presented to them by visiting Fullbright lecturer, Eugene Thibideau, during the same time period.

FINDINGS:

#1 CHANGE

"What are the most significant changes occurring in education in the past year?"

Within the theme of change, educators identified three distinct domains:

1. The curricular change dropping mandated Russian language instruction.

2. Redefinition of the meaning of "school." Formerly schooling was a state concern. Present transitions represent the

dimensions of private language schools and church affiliated schools.

3. Reorganization of the entire system. This includes economic and political restructuring, but directly impacts education with a legally enabled decentralized educational plan.

- Educators indicated the single most dramatic change following the 1989 political changes as the removal of the Russian language from a place of curricular prominence. For forty years this was an undisputed requirement. Consultants described this as an "overnight difference." At the beginning of the September term in 1989, there were thirty seven sections of intermediate Russian at one of the four major Hungarian universities. The day following the announced break with Moscow, enough students attended to warrant one section for the remainder of the semester. Needless to say, the result is a large number of unemployed former Russian teachers, four of whom were my consultants.

- Hungarians have redefined the socialist meaning of schooling. Hungary is witnessing a rapid growth of private schools which are sponsored by religious groups or private organizations. The growing number of Catholic schools produces both positive and negative educational changes. Churches are reclaiming the physical plants (cathedrals, convents, and monasteries) taken from them under Soviet rule. Those parents who can afford it now have greater latitude in the education they choose

for their children. However, state operated programs, such as art institutes which formerly occupied these sites, have been displaced, and their students now remain "stranded" midway through disbanded programs.

▪ Decentralization of the economy in 1977 established a need for a decentralized educational system. Educational decentralization was legally enacted in 1985, and the "free" elections of 1987 gave added credence to the idea of public input. Political restructuring in 1989 lent attention to decision making at the local level, but currently it appears that what was legally enabled has not been largely actualized. Local municipalities are entitled to elect their own local boards and hire their own supervisors and principals. In addition, they can add previously prohibited courses to the curriculum. These courses include religious instruction if there is local demand, additional languages, literature of the instructor's choice, and textbook choice accessed from inside or outside the country.

Problematically, local citizens have no prior experience in setting up or conducting such elections for governance boards. Additionally, there is the lack of belief that the new system will work any better than the old. Educators noted parental fear that if they vote against the current director they or their children as students will be "hurt." Consequently, 92% of those in local governing positions in the schools prior to 1985 were still in those positions in 1990

Moreover, there is no provision for the national exams to be

changed. Therefore, teachers say that deviating from what is currently taught and choosing other materials and subject areas within the curriculum will cause their students to fail the tests. As a result, both local parents, teachers, and students reject curriculum change. Many language classes have been added as an after hours opportunity, but students who cannot afford the tuition or a way home cannot participate.

In spite of the appearance of nonchange regarding decentralization, Hungarian educators involved in this study insisted it was an area of significance in the current context. One consultant said it this way, "It's just that things are *changing* so fast, that nothing is *happening*."

#2 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FACTORS:

"How are economic and political factors in Hungary influencing educational policy and/or grassroots movements?"

An area strongly tied to possible curricular changes within schools, but motivated by individual political bias, is the key issue of nationalism. Hungarians differ regarding the emphasis new social science programs should place on, "What it means to be Hungarian." Only one of the eithteen consulting educators felt Hungarians should look inward, build national pride, and concentrate on national uniqueness. The majority favored a Western focus. They expressed concerns about how the European community

views Hungary. Most do not feel their culture is "as accepted as are the German, French, or British cultures." Although they themselves are proud to be Hungarians, they contend that a national educational movement would isolate them at precisely the time when international financial agreements are integral to the success of the economy. The consulting educators emphasized that this is largely an urban rural debate in Hungary with the majority of the rural population favoring strong nationalism, and the majority of the urban population desires a European focus.

The political parties represented by this division reflects that Hungarian Democrats want national values and an educational system reflecting conservatism. Young democrats, Free Democrats, and Reformed Communists are against national values taking precedence over a westward focus in finance and assistance.

The educators involved in the research variously refer to the past system as socialism, totalitarianism, state capitalism, politbureaucratic dictatorship, Stalinism, or the Soviet-type system. But all identified economic change as the catalyst to the current social and educational change and agree that the current emphasis on English and German reflect the current concern over establishing international business ties. Four of the exchange teachers enrolled as journalism majors, were taking extra course load credits in the business and marketing departments of their exchange university.

#3 COMPARISON TO EDUCATION ELSEWHERE IN EASTERN EUROPE:

"How do teachers compare educational changes in Hungary to change in other East European nations?"

Hungarians see their nation as a leader in change for the former Eastern Block. They also see themselves as educators in a special position to establish direction. Consulted educators see themselves as equally important as "politicians" in determining the future policies of their nation. They emphasized the importance of decision making at the major universities. It should be noted that the educated intelligentsia is a small minority of the general population, and that there are only four universities in the entire country. Many professors at the university level hold government consulting jobs, and it was pointed out to me that I would encounter as many Hungarian professors traveling in the United States as Hungarian businessmen. Professors appear on television on a daily basis discussing events of the world and their implications for Hungary.

Many point out that they have been leaders since the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. They claim the revolution brought the concept of political enlightenment to Eastern Europe in spite of the disastrous immediate results. Additionally, they cite the dual economic system operating for the past thirty years in conjunction with central planning as evidence of incremental progressive change over the past twenty years which now enables them to lead the former Eastern Block nations.

## #4 OPPOSITION

"What opposition to change exists and to what extent?"

A knowledge hierarchy is currently emerging where certain teachers are more highly valued for their subject knowledge than others and are paid accordingly. This creates dissention within the profession. For example, teachers of German and English can earn up to three thousand *forints* per month more than teachers of natural and social science. Additionally, there is conflict within the ranks of language teachers themselves. Although a ten year period is established to get the new curriculum in place, former Russian language teachers are being given only two years by the government to update their skills. They are given time off and paid an expense budget to obtain twelve hours per week of English or German instruction. Those who are financially able or who can make exchange arrangements with colleges in Europe or American are perfecting their Erglish while teaching Russian to college students abroad. Teachers within Hungary repeatedly used the term "disillusionment" when describing their contrasting situation. They claim that although they have been trained as linguists, they "cannot cope" with the pressure of learning all the nuances of a new language in two years with only twelve instructional hours per week and limited opportunity for oral practice. Teachers within and without claim they are "over-worked." Teachers at the primary and secondary levels are

required to teach 16 hours (45 minute segments) per week. None of the interviewed educators held less than two other jobs in addition to their teaching post. Hungarian occupational status and job affiliation is dependent not as much on the choice of an occupation as on the number of occupational opportunities.

Teachers acknowledge that much is now happening through trial and error. Most of the old established lesson formats are still in use because of the national exams which have not been altered, and because they "need something to go by." Teachers who are innovating new class ideas complain that the sharing of successful teaching ideas is difficult in the absence of a network of colleagues. They also note a severe lack of space at the university level caused by a baby boom in the 1970s when the economy was experiencing a tremendous growth.

Along with conflicting views about nationalism in education, educators interpret one constraint as a prevailing mood of uncertainty and hesitancy. Hungarians describe themselves as "victims." They have never won a major battle. After the 1848 revolution they were required not to speak Hungarian for twenty years. They have been trampled and brutally treated historically. They lost 75% of their land after World War I, motivating them to side with the Nazis in World War II, where they lost almost half of the male population. Following a brief period as a nation they were betrayed by the Soviets and subjugated for the following forty five years. Most marvel that their language is still being taught in schools.

Learning to survive has meant learning to "deal with the system." To Hungarians, a large part of such "dealing" means basing their transactions in life on each other in one to one relationships with acquaintances. Change is impeded by this factor similar to the Soviet concept of *blat*, since people trust only those who have proven themselves on the basis of personal favors. Change and action in Hungarian daily life takes place through personal relationships. There is a lack of identity with change through impersonal election.

#5 MINORITY GROUPS:

"Is any minority group large enough to have a voice in educational change?"

The answer to question five is a definite "No," in terms of minority group "influance." There is, however, a minority group large enough to "require the immediate attention" of educational policy planners. This group is a Gypsy population of 500,000 Hungarians. Hungarian Gypsies define themselves as Gypsies who are Hungarian, not as Hungarian Gypsies. Because they represent a large segment of the population of the nation, they have been the focus of current policy changes. They themselves have not initiated such educational changes and in areas where change has been implemented, resistance is more common than acceptance. There existed an attitude ranging from extreme negativity to

great skepticism on this subject with educators themselves.

Government policies are currently designed to improve the health, employment situation, and education of Gypsies. There is not for the first time in the curriculum a willingness to make changes to instruct children in their own language. Hungarians are determined not to have one in five uneducated new citizens. Neither are they willing to increase the Gypsy population, and borders are closed to Gypsy immigrants from surrounding countries. Since 1950, only 5,000 Gypsies have attended elementary school.

Previous access of Gypsies to state education was not sought either from within or without either the educational community or the Gypsy community. Only 400 have entered the gymnasium level. Of a national population of ten million seven hundred thousand people, only twelve Gypsies in history have taught at the kindergarten level. Only one Gypsy female was ever a teacher at the gymnasium level.

CONCLUSIONS:

CHANGE

A predominant historical characteristic from the Ottoman Empire, through the long Hapsburg reign, to Soviet domination was control. There is today great resistance to change from a population who is used to a central government dealing with problems while the people wait. This is evident in local re-

sponse to community determination of education. Grassroots movements have always been suppressed. Passivity and nonaction constitute a safe stance in light of the past. Whenever Hungarians have attempted to rectify social injustice in the past, they have suffered because of it. In 1919, protesters and innocent bystanders alike were slaughtered by Communists and Rightists. In 1956, thousands lost their lives in rebellion against Soviet occupation. Martha Lampland contends that the real reluctance to embrace radical change rests on pragmatic experience. (Lampland, 1989, p. 15) Timothy Ash claims that recent social change has revealed just how important the "residual veil" of Marxist ideology is. He questions whether ideology provides legitimization or deception about the real nature of power. His argument that ideology today still performs a blocking function is confirmed by this research. (Ash, 1990, p. 6)

There is no model of local governance. Hungarians have no behavioral history of effecting change, only a history of waiting for decisions to be made elsewhere.

## ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Miabeau said on the eve of the French Revolution that, "The nation's deficit is the nation's treasure." Timothy Ash claims that if we substitute "hard currency debt" for "deficit" we have the main reason why Hungary has led in the reform movements of the 1960s and 1970s, in the free elections of 1987, and in the

1989 break with Socialism. (Ash, 1990, p. 3)

Educators shared how the freedom to use the Lake Balaton vacation area for family reunions with relatives from the west exposed Hungarians to many consumer goods and whet appetites for increased access to them. Everyone today has some stake in the faltering economic system, and however small that stake -- an apartment, a car, a German stereo set -- it is more than owners care to lose. (Volgyes, 1982, p. 57) Therefore, it is a common practice to hold three or four jobs.

The educators involved in this research say that they now realize that what came about politically in 1987 could have happened in the late seventies if the people in general had known how fractured the party was at that period. Yet at the same time, educators criticize a lack of "commitment" on the part of local parents to help change schools. An account related by the visiting English graduate student illustrates this point. She was hired to privately tutor an eleven year old student who had had neither German or English lessons for a month, because the regular teacher had broken her leg and had not returned to teach. No replacement was employed, but students in the class were instructed to report to the room for that forty five minute instructional period each day nonetheless. When questioned why concerned parents had not approached the school about hiring a temporary replacement, the girl's mother informed her. "You don't make trouble."

Forty-six percent of Hungarians surveyed by the press,

Magyar Nemzet, in 1989, stated that they were uninterested in politics and 24% considered themselves active participants in political life. (Magyar Nemzet, 1989. 1.6, p. 4) Many see the plans put forth by educators who they view as the current elite intellectuals will leave them as much in the cold as the old socialist practices did.

## COMPARISONS TO OTHER EAST EUROPEAN CHANGES

Valclav Havel, playwright and Czechoslovakian president, argues that the "line of conflict" does not run between the people and the State, but through the middle of each East European. The term "back to normal life" if frequently voiced by the political leaders of Poland, Hungary,Bulgaria, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. Nonetheless, what is meant by "normal life" varies. For some it is terms of a market economy and the recovery of agriculture and industry. For others such a life must be stated in terms of political pluralism and parliamentary democracy. (Kozma, 1989, p. 7)

## OPPOSITION

Teachers interviewed see levels of distrust among people as an impediment to union organization for educators. They classify educators into two basic groups: the few who embrace the idea of making curriculum and instructional determinations, and the

majority who wish to be guided in the instructional process. Hungarians conditioned to take orders resist taking control and making decisions. They see their choices as resting upon the advisement and decisions of others. Speaking at a University of California Seminar, Martha Lampland said that Hungarians,at this juncture in history, are extremely cautious. Both in 1919 and 1947 they saw their attempts to achieve a transition to democracy and social justice thwarted. Lampland argues, "Uncertainty is about as close to hope as we get." (Lampland, 1989, p. 13)

MINORITIES

Educational planners in Hungary acknowledge the importance of school attendance for the present Gypsy population. However, Hungarian local areas are at very different stages of development. Educational objectives have seldom been reached by Gypsy students, either because of past educational bureaucracy or because of parental suspicions. In the past, parents showed resistance to Marxist assimilation techniques by kidnapping their children from schools. (see Tamas Kozma, in Mitter) Teachers express lack of preparation for the task. Wolfgang Mitter argues that teachers trained in a socialist environment currently do not have the skills to implement innovative change. This combines with a local population where choice has been legalized through decentralization, but has not been actualized.

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