

THE ANALYSIS OF THE PERFORMANCE OF THE HUNGARIAN CONFESSIONAL SCHOOLS IN BIHOR AND SATU MARE COUNTIES

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Abstract: After the collapse of communism, the confessional schools seemed to be potential elite-training institutions. The favourable preconditions included the specific value-oriented small groups in which the teaching activities could be organized, the general trust of the Hungarian population and example from other Eastern-Central European countries, especially from Hungary, where such institutions offered a higher level of education than the average public institutions.

In our paper we offer a comprehensive analysis of all the achievements and failures of these institutions in North-Western Romania, in Bihor and Satu Mare counties. We will not only show if this optimism was realistic, looking back after 20 years, but we will also analyze the various factors which led to these results.

Keywords: confessional education, secular education, value systems, educational achievements, social support

The confessional elements in the public and higher education have been seen for centuries as an organic element of the society. There's little to wonder about it, as many major artistic, philosophic and scientific movements from the middle ages until the XIX century all fought in a way against the religious dominance in the spheres of culture, science and education. The renaissance emphasized the return to the natural and human values and attitude, the humanism tried to put the man in the focus of the paradigmas while the enlightenment movement tried to promote pure rationality.

These movements hint that the religion and confessional beliefs had a great influence over the centuries in the scientific and of course, in the educational field too. Knowing the history of the science in Europe, there's no doubt about the importance of the church as preserver and developer of the continent's scientific achievements. The scientific activity in the empire of Charlemagne (with the famous scholar Alcuin as key figure), the chodexes and scientific-philosophic works realized in the monasteries and the church's role in the founding of the first European universities are clear milestones of the cooperation between church and science in the history of the continent.

Thus the confessional content in the education was not only accepted but widely supported until the arrival of the modernity, when as result of the civic society development a pluralisationing process has started and as a result the secular education has appeared as a rival form of education. From that time on, the choice of the school also reflected an inner conviction of the individuals and their families.

This dualistic educational system was replaced by a monopolistic educational system in Central and Eastern Europe after the World War II. As the communist-socialist governments dominated in these countries by the support of the Soviet Union, confessional education partly (or in some places, like in Romania totally) disappeared. The churches had to restrict themselves to often illegal forms of education, as they were forced into clandestine frames.

The fall of the communism and the re-appearance of the democracies in this region of Europe set back the dualistic educational model, as both confessional and secular education was available. In Romania and in many other countries the churches' former real estates were not fully given back, but more or less they managed to reset the countrywide educational networks.

In the region, mainly in Hungary the numbers of students learning in confessional schools has grown significantly. In the public perception these institutions are seen as elite, conservative schools which work and function according to traditional principals and methods, and which beyond the education treat as important tasks the shaping of the students' personality and community-building.¹

Until 1995 in Romania confessional high schools and departments requested functioning authorization from the specialized ministries and ever since there are 22 schools. Even if the educational act from 1995 created the legal framework of the confessional education, the churches are not acknowledged as institution holders, the schools can work as private-held institutions. In the changing of the act from 1999 it was already included, that under state control regarding the teaching plan, the schoolbooks and examinations – the churches can run institutions, but the state doesn't assure the financing.²

In the school year 2004/2005 in Romania the most Hungarian students in confessional schools were in Harghita county, followed by Satu Mare, Cluj, Covasna and Bihor counties. In Bihor 2 of the 12 high schools were confessional, in Satu Mare 3 of the 16.³

In Romania a special case could be observed, as the almost 1.5 million ethnic Hungarian inhabitants of the country were in double minority status, as they were not only Hungarians by ethnicity, identity and mother tongue but their confessional affiliations were also different from the dominant orthodox members of the society. The Hungarians dominantly belonged in 1989 to the Roman-Catholic church and smaller to smaller traditional protestant churches. This has not changed significantly ever since, the only dominant phenomena is the growing Hungarian population belonging to neo-protestant churches.

The possibility of choice of education was also a key element in the democratization of these societies. Choosing the confessional education for the children did not only reflect the parents' vote for a better quality education (if they thought so) but also many times the return to family traditions and the manifestation of free choice. The only question was, how can this reorganized confessional education be competitive with the secular institutions and whether these institutions will have elitist character (like in Hungary many such institutions remained elite-training schools, the most well known being possibly the Benedictian Gymnasium from Pannonhalma, traditional high school for the Habsburg family members) or they will remain behind the public schools as for the quality of education and the realized performances of the students.

The foundation of the Sulyok Istvan Reformed College (later It became Partium Christian University) in Oradea coincided with the democratic changes in Romania. At the

¹ Imre Anna. A felekezeti középiskolák jellemzői a statisztikai adatok tükrében. In *Educatio*, 2005/3 pg.475

² Pusztai Gabriella. *Társadalmi töké és az iskola*. Új Mandatum, Budapest, 2009. P 94-95

³ Murvai, Adalekok az erdelyi közepfoku magyar felekezeti oktatás történetéhez 1990-2003 in *Kulcsok és zarak*. Deva, Korvin Kiado, 2005

beginning of the 1990s Georgina Szilagyi, Flora Gabor and other teachers and researchers established a Research Center for Sociology of Religions, which carried out a complex evaluation of the Hungarian confessional educational networks in Romania⁴. They identified some key elements and problems which had seemed that would be major challenges but their conclusion was that there are good chances for the confessional institutions to gain the prestige and position of elite-training centers within the Hungarian public education in Romania.

The main missing elements and negative circumstances of the confessional networks have been identified as being the followings:

-The lack of continuity in the field of the transmission of confessional values, which can be observed not only in the attitudes of the population (mainly among the members of the middle-generations who didn't take part in any form of religious education(but also in the lack of persons belonging to the younger generations able to transmit religious values towards the youngest generations.

-Incomplete institutional frame, missing organizing experiences and infrastructural conditions.

- Little trust from the population and low level of acceptance towards the re-organized or newly appeared confessional schools.

In a research, realized by the above mentioned authors the researches were interested about the motivation and socio-economical background of the Hungarian families and parents who decided to choose the confessional education for their children. The main motivation has been the wish for a safer and better controlled education and for a community which shares homogeneous religious values.

The confessional beliefs of the family were a very influential factor, as the families who chose the confessional education were largely the same kind of families from socio-economical perspective which had proven to be the family-type with the strongest religious beliefs. We mean, that according to a former research realized by the same authors⁵, which focused on the religiosity of the population found that the most attracted to religious beliefs are the families with rural origins and with lower level of studies and less favorable economical situation. Most of the children who were participating in confessional education came from such families. There were few students with intellectual family origins, the only major exception group have been the sons and daughters of priests or clerical intellectuals.

The declared objective of the confessional schools was to offer a mobility channel for the children of those families who were more or less in a marginalized position in the previous communist era. They believed, that the following factors could play a key role in the efficiency of these schools in comparison with the secular institutions:

- Small groups for activities
- More direct and informal relations between students and teachers and families
- Various extracullicular activities

⁴Szilagyi-Flora Egyház az oktatás szolgálatában in Kereszteny szo 10 , evf 8. EPA 1999

⁵ Szilagyi Georgina. Atitudini religioase si multiculturalitate in Transilvania. Napoca Star, Cluj-Napoca, 2003

In the previous communist society the children of such families had very few chance to enter higher education, as the number of student-places have been highly restricted. After 1990, the expansion of the higher education became a reality in Romania too, so in a very short time the number of places in the higher education has been multiplied. These students and their families started to see the higher education as a possible and accessible target, and even the receiving of a Ph.D title seemed to be possible in the future. This on one hand offered a mobility for the whole family, as there was a clear chance for the children to become the first person who ever received a degree in the family and also caused a disrespect for the traditional professions and professional schools, like cooks, waiters, blue collar workers etc.

From the perspective of the Hungarian community in Romania, it was a chance to create a new generation of intellectuals and people with university level degrees and it also assured the demographical supply for the freshly founded Hungarian universities.

It also offered a chance, to multiply the number of the public education institutions, as next to the existing secular institutions new , confessional ones have been founded. As the secular institutions have been preferred by the traditional local Hungarian elite, the confessional institutions were mostly chosen by families with less favorable socio-economical indicators.

The authors also published the result of a survey, which tells much about the controversial attitudes of the Hungarians in that time. 83.12 % supported the idea of creating confessional schools, stating that in the democratic society the pluralistic values should be promoted, but only 21.87% of them said that they would prefer confessional education for their children.

However, the authors concluded that these institutions have the potential to become elite-training schools in 10-15 years and are able to offer a proper training for the future, often first generation intellectual elites.

Then and now: the achievements of the confessional educations in Bihor and Satu Mare counties based on high school graduation results

The former researches realized in similar topics have all used as main indicator the ratio of the students who studied and confessional schools and entered universities. However, as the expansion of the higher education is already a fact and there are numerous institutions (so entering a university does not reflect any outstanding performance anymore) we chose an other indicator, which we believe can be more adequate if we want to compare the results of the students of confessional and secular schools.

This indicator would be the students` results at the high school graduation. In this aspect, our research question also differs from the traditional approach. The most quoted numbers were the ratios of the students who passed this exam and of those who failed.

Our question is whether these institutions can really become elite training institutions as the authors of the formerly quoted research concluded? This could not be answered through ratios of passing or failing. The method through which we can formulate a proper answer is the analysis of the precise results and the comparison of the top results achieved by the students of both secular and confessional institutions. In this case we applied the document analysis as research method, using the documentation⁶ of the high school graduation exams⁶.

⁶ From www.edu.ro

This comparison can offer the chance to see the difference between the best students in the both kind of institutions and whether they have (based on this indicator which however reflects long years school performance mostly) equal chances for occupying future elite positions?

Best igh-school graduation results in Oradea- Bihor County in 2013

(source: www.edu.ro)

| Name of the school | Highest result | Number of students who tried to pass the exam | Number of students who passed the exam | Number of students over the mark „9” | Ratio of passing the exam | Ratio of students over the mark „9” among all the students who tried to pass the exam |
|--|----------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Ady Endre High School-S | 9.68 | 180 | 140 | 14 | 77.7% | 8% |
| Szent Laszlo Romano-Catholic High School-C | 8.66 | 55 | 26 | 0 | 47% | 0% |
| Lorantffy Zsuzsanna reformed high school-C | 9.03 | 52 | 19 | 1 | 37% | 2% |

S-secular

C-confessional

Best igh-school graduation results in Satu Mare-Satu Mare County in 2013

(source: www.edu.ro)

| Name of the school | Highest result | Number of students who tried to pass the exam | Number of students who passed the exam | Number of students over the mark „9” | Ratio of passing the exam | Ratio of students over the mark „9” among all the students who tried to pass the exam |
|---|----------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Reformed high school-C | 9.45 | 87 | 60 | 4 | 69% | 5% |
| Ham Janos Romano-Catholic High School-C | 9.62 | 40 | 39 | 7 | 97% | 18% |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|
| Kolcsey Ferenc high school-S | 10 | 158 | 134 | 23 | 85% | 15% |
|------------------------------|----|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|

Best igh-school graduation results in Oradea- Bihor County in 2012

(source: www.edu.ro)

| Name of the school | Highest result | Number of students who tried to pass the exam | Number of students who passed the exam | Number of students over the mark „9” | Ratio of passing the exam | Ratio of students over the mark „9” among all the students who tried to pass the exam |
|--|----------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Ady Endre High School-S | 9.21 | 194 | 120 | 5 | 61% | 3% |
| Szent Laszlo Romano-Catholic High School-C | 7.92 | 82 | | 0 | 24% | 0% |
| Lorantffy Zsuzsanna reformed high school-C | 8.18 | 60 | 26 | 0 | 43% | 0% |

S-secular

C-confessional

Best igh-school graduation results in Satu Mare-Satu Mare County in 2012

(source: www.edu.ro)

| Name of the school | Highest result | Number of students who tried to pass the exam | Number of students who passed the exam | Number of students over the mark „9” | Ratio of passing the exam | Ratio of students over the mark „9” among all the students who tried to pass the exam |
|---|----------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Reformed high school-C | 8.76 | 86 | 48 | 0 | 56% | 0% |
| Ham Janos Romano-Catholic High School-C | 9.46 | 40 | 37 | 7 | 93% | 18 |
| Kolcsey Ferenc high school-S | 9.91 | 149 | 124 | 16 | 83% | 11% |

S-secular

C-confessional

The data show that both in Oradea, Bihor county the confessional schools are significantly less performing in the terms of the best results than the secular high school. Our first reaction was that in our opinion this difference is partly due to the fact that as we mentioned above, only about 20% of the families affirmed in the early 1990s that they would actually choose secular education for their children. We also mentioned that the socio-economic background of the families who chose confessional education was significantly worse compared to the average Hungarian families in Romania. This also can be interpreted as the traditional intellectual and elite families didn't have trust in the quality of the confessional education, so those who have brought a higher level of intellectual capital chose secular education. As we can see, this original handicap could not be equalized in the past 20 years.

As a control-county we analyzed Satu Mare from Satu Mare county. The result was surprisingly different, as in the ratio of passing the exam among all the participating students and the ratio of students with at least „9” mark, the Romano-catholic students performed better in both 2012 and 2013.

The contradiction was solved as we made interviews key persons of education-organizing and students. It turned out, that while in Oradea, as we mentioned the population, and especially the former Hungarian elite did not trust the confessional schools, in Satu Mare the Ham Janos romano catholic high school was known for having good quality teaching staff. This trust towards the catholic school still exists, and it is result of the first two years after the founding of the school. As the teaching staff was incomplete, the teachers considered to be the best from other schools work as part-time job in the catholic school and so it gained popularity among the middle-and high-class Hungarian families in Satu Mare.

With the additional values, as we mentioned before, like activities in small groups, more close relations between teachers and students, with homogeneous religious and moral values and with a wide range of extracurricular activities in both years achieved better results not only in the ratio of passing the high school graduation exam but also in the ratio of excellent students with outstandingly high marks.

Conclusion

In our research we tried to answer a question set about 20 years ago, whether the confessional schools, which have been reorganized after the collapse of the communist system will have the chance to become elite-training institutions through some specific forms of added values which characterize such institutions?

We analyzed primarily Oradea, in Bihor county, where the first research was realized by the researchers of the Sulyok Istvan (later Partium Christian) University, led by Georgina Szilagyi and Gavril Flora. In this city, we observed that the secular education provides better results both in the field of passing-ratio at high school graduation and in terms of excellent results.

As control-location we also analyzed Satu Mare, from Satu Mare county, where the contrary happened. After having realized some qualitative research, basically interviews with key persons in education and former students we set the hypothesis that this is a result of local special circumstances which have increased the trust in the confessional education, as it

did not happen in Oradea. The effect is still lasting, as in the last 2 years the confessional school Ham Janos performed better than the secular high school.

The main question still is whether confessional schools can fill the role of elite-training schools? The answer is yes, with a condition : they must be trusted from the local elite and upper-mid class families and if it's so they are likely to achieve better results through the given values that they can offer and which can make them more efficiently.

As for the efficiency of the confessional institutions, there are two main professional opinions in the international specialized literature. One approach is the analysis less invisible, less measurable element which is the added value of the atmosphere and the homogeneous value-system⁷. The most notable author on this topic is Coleman.

The other approach focuses on the analysis of the publicly available and accessible statistical data, like the number of students and teachers, the ratio of these, financing issues and other quantifiable dimensions⁸. This view is the dominant approach, while the most influential author who applies this approach is Caroline Hodges Persell.

We believe that both approaches can be justified and the proper combination of the two analytical framework can lead us to obtain a clear image and a deeper understanding of the efficiency of the confessional education.

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