

## **THE EFFICIENCY OF THE CONFSSIONAL EDUCATION IN SATU MARE AND BIHOR COUNTIES` HUNGARIAN CONFSSIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS**

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*Abstract: The confessional education as a research topic has been widely marginalized throughout the twentieth century both by the representatives of sociology and educational sciences. However, findings of Coleman and other pioneers, who proved the confessional education through its value and community based character can successfully outweigh the negative effects of disadvantaged socio-economic family background in the case of high school aged pupils, turned it into a major research topic. In our paper we will focus on the confessional education with Hungarian teaching language in Bihor and Satu Mare countries and we will analyze if such a social-capital increasing effect can be noticed in the cases of these five schools, in concordance with Coleman`s original theories and findings.*

**Keywords:** confessional education, secular education, social capital, school performance

One of the most controversial topics of sociology of education is the issue related to school performance factors. European educational policies underline the fact that success or failure in current conditions are far from being a purely individual matter, but they are covering a much larger framework of interests, the one of the whole society.

In the current context of the education the issues of equality of chances and school abandoning are especially important. The issue of the equality of chances have been a key research issue eversince sociology has been professionally evolved itself with its own methodology and way of analysis. This stands as starting point to some of the most relevant

sociological theories, like social stratification, social mobility, status-related resources and many others.

With regard to school success factor, the opinions of specialists fall into two large categories. On the one hand those who argue and demonstrate that academic success is a result absolutely dependent on socio-economic factors.

Three analysis levels can be differentiated here:

1.-economic development of the country or the region, according to the authors Jimenez and Castellanos (2010)

2.- infrastructure related elements and equipping the school in the opinion of Wongsurawat (2011) and Qian (2010)

3-socioeconomic status and family status of origin (SES) according to Chiu, Xihua (2008) and McConney, Perry (2010)

On the other hand there is a rich literature on the factors, processes, which act within the educational institutions that determine school performance. Among these factors are: school atmosphere, the freedom of students to assert their options individually and to choose independently their curricula, etc. A special research topic is the issue of religious education, where the emphasis is placed on group atmosphere.

The main sources of specialized literature, mostly from The Netherland and from the United States suggest that the confessional schools have the potential to become more performing than the secular ones, and in this narrative the reason is that they are considered to be belonging to the sphere of the private education with an elite character.

The research conducted by Coleman (1988) and Carbonaro (1999) transformed the study of religious education, which was until then an area somewhat isolated, peripheral study, had a modest interest for research in one of the areas most researched in the US, but also globally, because for the same period in general belief of the field was that the chances of social mobility

of those who come from an unfavorable familiar environment presents limited growing opportunities for mobility, which is markedly reflected in school performance.

In this context Coleman's and Carbonaro's research have identified a subsystem of social action, religious education, where children with unfavorable background managed to achieve superior performance compared to those with the same status, schooled in public or private system. According to Coleman, in a group dominated by certain accepted and promoted values by all group members form a dynamic and a mechanism that is capable of producing added value (called by the author social capital) that is able to counteract the cultural disadvantages that come from the socioeconomic background of students, enabling upward mobility. Professional interest of sociologists and educators turned to the question: how to identify and describe the action mechanisms of these schools, which attributes added value so obvious that question the dominant beliefs up to this moment?

This issue takes on meanings of particular interest in the context in which it appears with certainty the fact that, as in all the post-Soviet education and research are underfunded areas, funds allocated for these purposes expressed on the gross domestic product (GDP) is situated below the percentage of European Union (Wigger, 2010). This fact reflects also in the absence of higher institutions of lists with the best universities in the world. It is obvious that in countries with significantly smaller territories, where funding of the system is more generous, (GDP is higher), there are more efficient universities (Stolz, Hendel, Horn, 2010).

Based on this finding that on the plan of the entire system, the quality of education relates to financial resources allocated to this sector it seems that we have modest expectations if the financing of this sector remains at this level. In this case an adequate and in the same time a saving solution would be to identify resources that can produce favorable results replacing material resources. Such resources appear to be such as those raised by Coleman: community resource, the resource of solidarity etc.

The issue of the importance of the effectiveness of the education system appears increasingly larger in the current conditions of free movement of labor force within the European Union and knowledge based society. In these conditions education performance is one of the

main pillars of guaranteeing equal opportunities for labor force on the global market. Comparative studies done in recent years in countries of Central and Eastern Europe on the performance of Hungarian religious high schools (Pusztai, 2008) reported that unlike religious high schools in Hungary and Ukraine, where the added value of these schools is evident in all the studied cases, in regions of Transylvania that were included in the study, the performance of these schools shows a different spectrum. Research cited did not extend to the analysis of the causes that led to this differentiation. This fact seeks to fill this paper by the proposed objectives.

Our researches have been carried out in the years 2014-2015 in two north-western countries in Romania, in the Romanian-Hungarian border area. The area has, on the Romanian side of the border a rather extended area (central northern part of Bihor county and south-western part of Satu Mare county) which has predominantly ethnic Hungarian population majority. This is also reflected in the fact that we could identify five mid-level schools where the teaching language was exclusively Hungarian (but the teaching curricula included of course Romanian language and grammar). We intentionally extended our research into these schools only, in order to get comparable results with the ones carried out regularly by the Center for Higher Educational Researches in Debrecen, Hungary (Pusztai, 2008). As a control group we picked 4 secular schools, carrying out the research on the same age groups. This gave us the possibility to statistically analyze the differences which are relevant for our research topic.

The applied research methods have been on the one hand dominantly the interrogative techniques and on the other hand the document analyses. We used both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The quantitative approach meant survey research, on a sample of 540 pupils from the four high school years (in five confessional schools) and a sample of 460 pupils, in all the four high school years from four secular schools. They were selected randomly from official school lists, and the quantitative data were analyzed by the SPSS statistical software.

The major dimensions of the survey research were the followings: social, economic, cultural status of the origin families, financial situation of the families, the structures of the families, the motivation and reasons of school choice, the school relations and group atmosphere,

the level of religiosity of the pupils and of their parents, the relation with the confessional community in the case of confessional schools, future plans after leaving high school, especially focused on the future studies.

The qualitative research methods included structured interviews with teachers and parents. Until now there have been carried out a total number of twelve interviews. Another applied method has been the qualitative interview realized among pupil groups. So two focus group interviews have been realized in each high school.

In the frame of the document analysis we focused on the school performances achieved in the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> school years. After classifying the pupils individually, we classified the schools along two indicators. As for the performance indicator we calculated the share of students who had a school year average mark of at least 9 (on a scale from 1 to 10) while the exam-passing indicator we analyzed what percentage of the students pass the school leaving exam at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> form.

The research hypotheses were the following:

1. We assume, that in concordance with the findings of Pusztai, our research findings will indicate a significantly larger share of pupils with disadvantaged family background in the confessional schools in comparison with the background of the secular high schools.
2. We Assume, that due to the confessional characted of these institutions
  - a. most of the students live their lives consciously according to the regional prescriptions and indications
  - b. most of the students chose confessional education because of their own or their parents` religiosity.
3. In concordance with Coleman`s theory we assume, that in our case we will also found proven that the students with disadvantaged family backgrounds from the confessional schools present better school performances than their counterparts from secular schools with similarly disadvantaged family background.

## Preliminary results

In a first stage of the results' assessment have emerged conclusions that are likely to change the original plan of research. At an early stage of analysis it appears clear that institutional performance factors are differentiated by certain criteria that appears to be independent by the so called - group atmosphere - based on collective values - reported by Coleman.

Comparative analysis of the socio-economic background of the students in the two counties appears to show a differentiated picture. It turned out that the pupils from the confessional schools show similar cultural level but significantly more disadvantaged family background in comparison with their counterparts from the secular education. It seemed very interesting to see the differences among schools belonging to the same confession but in different regions.

Contrary to expectations, this differentiation does not occur depending on the confessional specific of the Hungarian educational institutions, but it seems that the motivational factor of choosing of high schools, especially by parents, has the primary role in differentiating performance. The difference in performance between two schools of the same denomination in different counties can apparently be explained by the different status, which the institutions have in local public opinion. In case of the efficient high school, the observed added value is apparently not coming from the religious specific but it is linked to the tradition of local high school performance, which later turned into religious guardianship. In this case performing high school has preserved the local elite status and the motivation of parents to enroll their children in this school appears to be primordial in dual aspect: elitist school traditions and moral values.

In case of two schools of the same kind in the other county, relatively poor efficacy reflected by the mentioned indicators, it seems that comes from specific motivations and expectations of parents towards newly established religious institutions, without traditions and experience in this field.

In the cases of these schools, parents' primary expectations are focused on helping the school to keep students in the flow of education and dropout prevention. Common value consistency

within these groups seems to affirm with difficulty only by the efforts of teachers in this regard and seems not to present an element of strengthening institutional efficiency.

Having in mind that hypotheses presented by us are only partially confirmed, research should be focused on other parameters, which initially escaped our attention.

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