



DOI: 10.18427/iri-2017-0081

Free School of Pécs – Educational innovation in Hungary

Bálint FODOR

University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary

razo42@gmail.com

As educational systems are trying to keep up with the growing and constantly changing demands of our societies, pedagogical innovations prove to be the most invaluable assets for the desired progress. A few Hungarian teachers possessing the irreplaceable know-how have decided to put their accumulated expertise into good use, and against the current trends of public education created Pécsi Szabad Iskola (*Free School of Pécs*). In my paper, I would like to introduce their institution, along with the background of my research in its early state, as I am also giving insight into the methods to be used and detail my future progression to an extent. The year preceding the founding of the school has provided numerous opportunities to observe the birth of an educational innovation from its very first moment. The reflective process of my participatory action research hopefully contributes to the successful and effective operation of the school as the constant evaluative process is greatly appreciated by its teachers in order to provide an objective viewpoint of their preparations and teaching practice.

So far I have completed document and content analysis, semi-structured and focus group interviews with the principal and the teachers of the school, as well as participatory observation of several events organized by the school. The latter includes workshops for teachers and parents alike, parents-teacher meetings (PTAs) and faculty meetings as well. Currently I am conducting my observations as a researcher teacher in close affiliation with and employed by the University of Pécs (PTE).

Educational environment in Hungary

The Hungarian public educational system has constantly been struggling to cope with its inherited flaws since 1989. The lack of diversification and the increasing pressure to force public schools into uniform practices make innovation ever harder. Recently the renewed Hungarian state curriculum (National Core Curriculum, 2012) has severely restricted the number of lessons for each complementary subject while further stressing the

necessity of questionable lexical knowledge. Diversity, as a fundamental value of democratic societies, still has not gained its rightful place in Hungary's public education.

The city of Pécs has traditionally been the cradle of pedagogical innovations. Throughout the 1990s several successful attempts were made to establish and run alternative schools, such as Apáczai Csere János Nevelési Központ (ANK) (G. Furulyás, 1999; Turi, 2010; Gerner, 2007) or Gandhi High School (Dezső, 2013a; Dezső, 2013b; Dezső, 2013c) both of which still operate based on their own individual curriculums and provide a living example of how schools can comply with national standards, yet stress different values and employ methods unlike other public schools. Free School of Pécs carries on the torch of innovations in Pécs.

At this moment one can hardly find a handful of alternative curriculums in Hungary: the one of Waldorf Association, Kincskereső Iskola (*Treasurehunter School*), Zöld Kakas Líceum (*School to the Green Rooster*), or Gyermek Ház (*House of Children*). As one of the earliest alternative schools in the country, Treasurehunter School was founded by Márta Winkler in 1988. According to their *ars peotica*, the founders of Free School regard Winkler's groundbreaking initiative as an example worthy to follow – hence she held one of the workshops for parents and teachers in April 2017. The child-centered, productive and involving approach defines the direction in which Free School is willing to go forth. Because of ongoing legal processes and restraints, Free School of Pécs is going to start its first year according to the already existing approved curriculum of House of Children.

Pedagogical Program of Free School of Pécs

Every new school defines its beliefs, mission, aims and goals through its Pedagogical Program – therefore I have paid special attention to Free School's such document (Csovcsics, 2017). The thorough details provided in it clearly light the way on which the staff has been proceeding since the first steps. Their well-structured Pedagogical Program contains a general introduction, a mission statement, detailed educational program and a local curriculum as well.

Introduction and Mission Statement

In its Pedagogical Program (Csovcsics, 2017) the school clearly states its primary mission and intention to function as an inclusive school, which focuses on children who cannot attend regular schools due to higher student numbers, who have to deal with learning or behavior challenges, who cannot match their attention with their curiosity or whose knowledge acquisition requires a different approach than regular public schools can

offer at the moment. First and foremost, they would like to create a school environment in which the surroundings, the teachers and the parents together provide all the motivation, opportunities, help and attention necessary for the students' improvement.

According to the Pedagogical Program the school has adopted the ideas and methods of several well-known alternative schools and their curriculums, such as the aforementioned Treasurehunter School and House of Children, the curriculum of School to the Green Rooster (specifically written for children requiring special care), the Hungarian Waldorf Association and the everyday practices of Jenaplan schools. These concepts all share the same ideas about their student-centered, holistic, humanistic, constructivist and productive approach of teaching and learning. They also concentrate more on social competences and focus on teaching values and norms. Free School emphasizes that they try to meet each individual student's personal requirements based on their motivation, cultural and social background by providing personalized activities to everybody.

In its introduction (Csovcsics, 2017:5) the document also states that the school will operate as a sister-school to Bártfa Utcai Általános Iskola (*Bártfa Street Primary School*). As a well-known school of Pécs founded in 1926, Bártfa upholds great reputation for its dedication to inclusive education. Free School is going to start with a single class on each grade level, after which the students may continue their studies in high schools or special educational institutions. Free School's own curriculum, however, is based on the state-approved curriculum of House of Children (2012), therefore it is totally independent in this respect from Bártfa.

In its mission statement the Pedagogical Program clearly defines its belief that meaningful life can only be experienced by the harmony of desires, self-control and dedication. It states that one should not be afraid of challenges brought by reality, but should try to find a task, which may also trigger change. Only the talented, creative, ethical, autonomous and integrated personality can build a livable future, therefore the school promises to create the prerequisites for developing such personality for its students.

Educational Program

The Pedagogical Program clearly defines its values, aims and goals in a concise way (Csovcsics, 2017:6). The mentioned values are:

- Respect of the individual
- Trusting each other
- Cooperation with the community
- Compliance with the rules that support work
- Keeping the school environment clean
- Constant improvement of the self and individual consciousness
- Curiosity

- Tenacity, finishing what one has started
- Presuming and looking for positive values, optimism
- Acceptance
- Traditions that provide safety for the individual
- Every new knowledge and skill, as it improves the self

The document also details the basic educational principles of the school. According to these, every child is a unique individual and as a part of a smaller or greater group he or she is in close contact with the environment. The teachers would like to build on the students' previously acquired knowledge, as the learning process is more important than the teaching process. Learning is regarded as an active, constructive and self-regulating process, and individual differences will define necessary differentiating. There is very strong emphasis on improving social competences. Trial and error facilitates learning, and assessment is done individually. The basic principles involve the cooperation of the parents, students and the teachers as well, as it is clearly stated that they are meant to be partners working together according to the same values and principles.

Interpretation of the teaching-learning process

According to the document (Csovcsics, 2017:7), learning consists of knowledge acquisition, the improvement of competences and skills and the changing of attitudes, during which the student is responsible for his or her own learning. Research, exploration and active learning is brought into the forefront, where cooperating children and teachers work together for their common goal. The teachers of Free School pay attention to the different age-related characteristics of knowledge acquisition, and base their methods on them. They also devote special attention to improve cognitive and problem-solving skills, creativity and decision-making. In order to achieve this, they try to make learning an enjoyable self-fulfilling experience, not to be regarded simply as a task to be done. All of these efforts help to shape and improve key competences.

The equality of school subjects is introduced by the analogy of "heart – hand – head" (Csovcsics, 2017:8). As the child entering the school sees the world holistically, therefore subjects (which, by nature, divide up acquisition) are not forced during everyday practice. Students learn by their own activities, experiences. From 1st to 4th grades students learn Natural Sciences and Crafts integrated into their Hungarian studies. In later grades Crafts are taught as an integral part of Mathematics and Visual Culture subjects. Because of their transfer effect, practical subjects are regarded as significantly important tools to harmonically improve the students' personalities. Facilitating the children's most important means of self-expression (locomotion, drawing, music), practical subjects intertwine with the everyday life of students.

Creating and modifying the curriculum, extracurricular activities

In order to fulfill the curriculum's requirements, teachers pay attention to the students' day-to-day suggestions about new topics and ideas. In this way children are also able to creatively participate in the teaching-learning process. As the process of acquisition stems from the children's world, learning proves to be a source of joy as a work well done, and it is an integral part of the students' personality improvement – while the learning goals still remain present during the process.

Extracurricular activities involve working around the school, for example looking after plants and animals. As Free School is located at the foot of the Mecsek Mountain, frequent excursions also provide an opportunity to students to learn about their local environment. Besides the countryside, urban life and traditions of the city of Pécs also play a significant role in learning outside the school. Proper behavior outside the school is being taught and practiced. As students are required to try themselves in various different activities, they have the chance to know their strengths and differences better. Success experienced this way improves confidence, as failures teach them a lot about themselves. Experiences like these also improve other fields of personality at the same time. Still, it is very important to stress that these ventures outside the school are carried out together as a class: the community and other students play a significant role in improving students' personality. Teaching and learning benefit greatly from experiencing each other outside the regular learning environment. As the size of the school permits it, every student, family member and the full staff of the school know each other. Families have an opportunity to form relationships. This friendly environment empowers the social growth of the students by not treating school and home as conflicting, separate or divided fields of life.

Freedom and responsibility – democratic values

The freedom of choice is provided on a daily basis in different tasks and activities. The students' individual freedom cannot constrain or endanger others' freedom in a community, therefore rules and regulations are very important in the life of Free School students. Every person in the school is held responsible for the improvement of their self and the school, as well as the preservation of the school's reputation and values. Teachers provide a worthy example with their behavior and pedagogical methods to help forming the students' proper views. Work and performance is acknowledged on an individual and on community basis – while performance may not only be school-related.

Teaching democratic behavior is present in the everyday life of the school. Student councils, group meetings, active participation in

curriculum formation, restorative techniques in conflict settlement and partnership with students and staff alike all contribute to this learning process.

Personality and Community

As Free School functions as a community, students' personality improves the most through interpersonal relationships in the school environment. The community itself thrives thanks to the individuals' experiences and interactions from day-to-day.

As cognitive competences, pace of progression, previously acquired knowledge and motivation may vary a lot between students, the school pays special attention to the differences and the required diversification, so that each individual receives the proper care, timeframe and activities necessary for his or her improvement. Free School is not performance-based, and it integrates children with behavioral and/or learning challenges into every class. Students are assessed professionally and individually to provide them the best care and attention necessary for their improvement in every respect. Parents receive continuous information regarding their children's progress, so that they may form an objective viewpoint about the efforts needed to help the most. Students with these kinds of challenges teach their classmates to accept diversity – not by words but everyday conflicts, becoming and integrate part of their personality.

The primary aim of the school is to improve social competences and harmonically enhance personality, and some social skills and habits may only be acquired during these years of education. However, some students show early signs of extraordinary skill levels. In order to manage their talents, they may get or choose different kinds of tasks. In these cases talent management professionals are involved to help parents and teachers to provide special care.

Children have the right to be children. While effort put into the learning process is emphasized, experience-based explorative studies are preferred. Students may call for the help of their cooperative community in order to find the best way for their own learning. Mistakes are organic parts of knowledge acquisition, and children have the right to make mistakes and learn from them. Trust, accepting milieu and positive feedback are the basic rights of every student in Free School.

Teachers do not function as sole sources of knowledge in the school, rather as cooperating partners during the learning process. They track the students' progress for the sake of optimal planning. They approve students' initiatives and integrate their motivations, ideas and creativity into everyday work, while paying attention to ethical, community-centered and self-reflective behavior during all times. Among many other tools, teachers employ day-starter conversations, folk games, boardgames, individualized assessment, regular approval of achievements, thematic

days/weeks, projects, community events, celebrations, student councils or presentations.

To maintain community life and create traditions, many events are organized in Free School. A city functions very differently than villages used to, as well as the lifestyle and day-to-day habits of students and teachers. However, traditional values of village life and folk traditions are tried to be kept and adapted to modern life. Community experience can be gained through traditional celebrations, during which participants create objects, learn songs and dances, while also have the chance to learn and to think about the meaning of the event. Preparations for such celebrations define the whole school year: the curriculum revolves around them, students read, write, count, draw or play music in relation with these events. Folk traditions are transferred by the teachers as well, as they are required to find their own way of celebrating and integrating these celebrations into their private lives, to provide an authentic personal example to students.

Teaching strategies

Improving social competences is the defining aim of Free School, and heavily influences the employed teaching strategies. Concentrated subjects, thematic weeks and modules provide life-like, practical, eventful and motivating activities for students. Besides the improvement of social competences, such teaching strategies enable the students to show off their talents and also create an opportunity for the teachers to help children with special needs.

Hungarian public schools teach in 45 minute-long lessons, typically 6 to 8 each day. Assessment is done by a 5-step grading system (in which the grade 1 means the students has failed). Subjects are randomly distributed throughout the week, and are typically organized based on teachers' schedules so there is no logic or system in the weekly schedule of students. Free School however organizes learning with the use of epochas or blocks. Depth and length of these blocks depend on the learning material, along with the mental state and activity of the children. The organizing principle of the blocks can be a theme, a story, a fairy-tale, a certain competence, a problem, a folk tradition or an event. Later on fragmented subjects are organized into learning segments. The epochas comply with the Hungarian National Curriculum, just in a different logical order (Csovcsics, 2017:16). They are typically 3 weeks (15 school days) long, and end with the testing of the requirements of the certain topic. Students preferably use printed material accompanying House of Children's curriculum (2012). These books introduce and discuss each subject on different levels.

As each learner group consists of students on different levels with different needs (even some requiring special attention), new teaching strategies are necessary to achieve the aforementioned goals of Free

School. Frontal teaching is rarely used, as cooperative learning, differentiating work and individualized learning supports the school's aims significantly better.

Cooperative learning in small groups or pairs provides a chance for students to develop problem-solving strategies based on their existing knowledge. It also enhances their initiative to cooperate, teaches dispute, reasoning and the respect for different opinions.

During differentiating work students receive tasks based on their skill levels, with respect to their individual needs and competences, so that their progress is optimal. The levels of differentiating are not fixed, they can be modified even during an epocha. The aim is to make students choose a proper task themselves according to their current level. If the class is accepting and friendly, constant positive feedback is given and received, and mistakes are considered a natural byproduct of learning. This way realistic self-image and self-assessment may develop.

Individualized learning is extremely important in the case of students who have special needs or talents, who are slower or lagging behind, or whose unique situation (eg. a longer absence) necessitates it.

Some topics are taught by experience-based projects or thematic weeks. Projects are thematically-based and run in defined timeframes. Teachers and students describe common goals and decide about activities together. At the end of each project an actual product is born as a concrete result of the learning process. Several projects are carried out during the school year, and each of them are aligned according to a defining subject. Some projects are outsourced, especially in cases where the city can provide better infrastructure.

Students also learn and practice methods and strategies for independent learning. Practicing, memorizing, algorithmic and problem-solving skills are built into the lessons, such as independent task choices, hypothesis-guessing-measurement-observation-deduction, memorizing, noticing and proving correlations, applying rules and algorithms, writing checklists and procedures, using tools, self-checking, noticing and correcting errors and mistakes.

Free-time activities are organized in a way to meaningfully spend the day together outside the classroom. It is very important to note that free-time should be literally free, and students should choose the way they spend it. Teachers function as partners during free-time activities. They provide the initiative, but during the actual activities students can decide whether to participate or not. Students can also organize events, start games or other activities. Work can be done for the sake of the community, as students are responsible for their immediate environment. They can and do help their classmates in need. Teachers and students participate weekly/monthly dancing programs, visits to the city, hikes, study-related research outside the school and other events together.

Further research

Free School of Pécs is going to start its first school year in September 2017. Throughout the following four years I intend to closely monitor its educational processes, with special attention to employed methods and teacher/parent expectations and feedback. I aim at conducting regular semi-structured interviews with the staff and students as well, and as the opportunity arises I am also concerned to carry out participatory observations of school events and workshops. Constant document analysis is a further tool of my research, as for the moment the school's Pedagogical Program is still under revision and editing.

References

- National Core Curriculum 2012: A Kormány 110/2012. (VI. 4.) Korm. rendelete a Nemzeti alaptanterv kiadásáról, bevezetéséről és alkalmazásáról (2012). *Magyar Közlöny*, (66), 3-215.
- House of Children (2012). *Gyermekek Háza alternatív alapozó program. Nyilvántartási szám: 21138-1/2013/KOIR*. [Manuscript].
- Csovcsics, Erika (Ed.) (2017). *Pécsi Szabad Iskola – Pedagógiai Program*. [Manuscript].
- Dezső, Renáta Anna (2013a). *Twenty years after: the Gandhi School and beyond: secondary education of the Roma-Gypsies in Hungary during the transition years*. Pécs: Viragmandula.
- Dezső, Renáta Anna (2013b). GandHistory - the Beginning. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal (HERJ)* 3: (3).
- Dezső, Renáta Anna (2013c). An Educational Experiment: The Case of the First Romani/Gypsy Nationality Secondary School. *PedActa*, 3 (1), 51-62.
- Gerner, András (2007). Átadták a felújított Nevelési Központot. *Pécsi Napilap*. 09.03.
- G. Furulyás, Katalin (1999). Az Általános Művelődési Központ, az ÁMK, mint elnevezés és intézményi forma kialakulásának története. *Szín*, 4 (4).
- Turi, Katalin (Ed.) (2010). *Apáczai Nevelési és Általános Művelődési Központ (ANK) Pedagógiai-Művelődési Programja*. Pécs: ANK.