

## **A visit to an experiential, teacher preparation school and a dual-language Catholic school**

**Introduction:** As an educator, I've worn many hats since 1976-English teacher in Catholic school and public school, school principal in Catholic school and public school, program director and college teacher. I've learned to evaluate educational results from many perspectives and know there is no one recipe for a perfect education. After more than thirty years in the field, however, I've learned to not only be critical, but to also accept the fact that in the field of education, there are many unanswered questions. I am a product of the American education system, from kindergarten through post-graduate studies. But my interaction with many professional and social peers in Hungary quickly pointed out that there is something to be learned from each other to enhance what we already do well and to diminish those that are obstacles to learning. I know what happens in American schools on a daily basis. Now, with the benefit of much hindsight, I hope to learn much about Hungarian schools of all kinds. Starting with teacher preparation was a logical point. The fact that the teacher preparation programs are housed in schools with the highest academic results suggests that there is something worthwhile to examine. The evaluation of the teaching process is a continuous process whose effort is to increase the quality of pedagogy and education. According to students of Political Science, after a significant change in the political direction of a country, the first indicators of change will be seen in policy making, followed by economic and financial changes, social changes, and lastly, in education. Logically speaking, educational changes should be manifested in teacher preparation programs because universities and colleges are among the first institutions which are informed of policy changes which allow or disallow them to follow a particular course. This was my reason for choosing **the ELTE-gyakorló iskola** to visit.

The policy implications of the shift from communism to democracy and from a planned economy to a free-market economy resulted in major social changes as well. The obstacles to open practice and belief in a religion were reduced or eliminated and Hungarian parents enthusiastically came to support education connected to religious institutions and thought. The **Szent Benedek Iskola** near Kelenfold in Budapest is a school whose struggles, growth and development serve as a consistent example of what many religion-affiliated schools have had to contend with over the course of the past 25 years. Their stability and continued growth testify to both an appreciation of tradition as well as support of religion. In addition to being a religiously-affiliated school, Szent Benedek is also a dual language school, thus offering a learning opportunity in an area in which U.S. schools are struggling. Most importantly, the existence and health of the religious school implies a healthy society and a political system which is tolerant of varying beliefs. The health of both the public and non-public school systems has many implications. They can be examined historically and they can be examined from the perspective of what they offer to current society. Schooling is expensive; yet, it is schooling which most directly measures a nation's investment in growing its human capital.

**ELTE –Gyakorló Iskola (Kis Altabor u. Budapest XI ker) visit:** The Eotvos Lorand Tudományok Egyetem (ELTE)-teacher preparatory experiential school was among top five schools in the country in terms of student assessment scores. The student population consists of 600 students, 400 of whom are in the elementary division. . There is a Director for each division and two assistants for each. There are 62 staff members each of whom are expected to know and interact with kids and each other. Each teacher in Hungary is expected to spend 32 hours per week among the students. The ELTE teachers are to have no more than 8 preparations per week. (I'm not sure whether this also applies to non-ELTE schools) The master teacher in the ELTE program "spends" the 32 hours in the building in the company of the students, but only teaches 12 hours in the school. The rest of the time the master teacher is observing the teacher candidates, teaching and preparing them to teach in the ELTE classrooms. All the teachers in the ELTE school are Lead/Master teachers. The children attending the school are the children of the school's employees and the children from the surrounding neighborhood. Considering these two facts alone –the hours teachers spend in the classroom and the particular student population- might have considerable implications to statistical analysis of students' academic results in that school. Now, how exactly does the teacher education program work?

Teacher education students are assigned to one Lead teacher with whom they work throughout their teacher preparatory studies for 4 years. The lead teachers serve as advisors as well as evaluators and supervisors. The university studies consist of both a theoretical (classes in a traditional university setting) and a practical component (in an actual school setting) and may be described as following:

- 1<sup>st</sup> year: teacher ed. students observe in the classroom (relative to what they have learned theoretically)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> year: teacher ed. students teach micro lessons, most often in mathematics or Hungarian language/grammar ; teacher ed. student teams of two prepare for each class and never know when they will be called upon to teach. There are about 15 teacher ed. students in each cohort, each student prepares teaching materials for each class he/she will be observing ( lesson plans which include the learning objectives, educational goals, materials and methodology, evaluation of student learning, summa (what did I learn today? What can you connect this to that you learned about previously?), discussion of possible homework or other assignments
- 3<sup>rd</sup> year: teacher ed. students teach classes in non-science subjects (history, art, music, cultural history, civics), usually in the 5-6 grade level which is considered a transitional time for student development
- 4<sup>th</sup> year: teacher ed. students are teaching in all the subject areas including their own specialty area
- Elementary teacher prep and secondary prep is taught in homogenous groups of teachers (there is no differentiation between upper level and elementary level teachers; this is different from historic teacher ed. preparation; everyone has a specialty of some sort.

In most American teacher education programs, students observe up to 40 clock hours in a classroom at the beginning of their academic studies and a total of six weeks at the end of their academic studies in what is known as “student teaching”. Some researchers believe that the lack of adequate, experiential teacher education is a key component to teacher burn-out. While it is difficult to generalize without extensive research, I believe that the Hungarian teacher today is better prepared to be a professional teacher than his/her peer in the United States.

Teacher preparation is a key component to student success. Although in the U.S., teacher evaluation is currently the primary focus of improving student assessment results, professional educators would like to see improved teacher preparation programs in order to create positive growth in both teacher job satisfaction, as well as in student academic results. It is also interesting to note that Hungarian teachers work as teachers for five years before they are eligible for their professional teacher examination.

The classes I observed at the ELTE school could have been filmed because of the high level of professionalism demonstrated by the teachers. Research-based methodologies were readily observable. Cooperative learning principles (based on work of Kagan) created the balance between cooperation and competition while enhancing the importance of team effort. The child-centered school culture demonstrated a safe, orderly environment wherein each child is valued, and nurtured by a knowledgeable, structured environment. Interdisciplinary, project-based learning fosters the learning process and is instrumental in creating an avenue to authentic assessment of what a child knows within the context of everyday life. Didactic learning methods focused on baseline knowledge, where the teacher is both guide and resource. There is a strong moral component based on traditional, cultural beliefs which define standards of behavior. Summarily, the school is highly structured and content oriented within a positive learning environment. It would be interesting to see how such teacher preparation manifested itself in an entirely different kind of school.

**Szent Benedek Iskola (Mezokovesd u. Budapest XI ker.) visit:** Szent Benedek is a Catholic school serving students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Its stormy history includes administration by the Benedictine order, the Piorists, and since 2001, the Legionnaires of Christ. The theoretical framework of the school is the apostolic movement known as Regnum Christi. This worldwide movement seeks to form young people into Catholics who are committed to living their lives according to the teachings of Jesus Christ and His church through service to ALL people. In this school, the atmosphere is different from the ELTE School. Order, structure,

friendliness are part of the environment, yet there is something which is different. Perhaps it's the fact that there is a crucifix on the wall of every classroom, that students start each class with a prayer, that teachers are greeted with the traditional Latin, "Laudetur Christi", that everyone seems to know everyone else, that there is an enormous amount of energy wherever one goes. Teachers and students seem to be permeated with a sense of purpose that was different from other schools I've visited. In my actual classroom visits, I saw various degrees of expertise among the teachers, but all of them demonstrated good planning skills, preparation, and varied methodology to reach all students. If there were only one word I could use to describe this school, it would be "active". But in this school, there was a shift in the way learning happens.

In this school, frontal teaching was the preferred, official methodology. This style of teaching is the one most people are familiar with. It places the teacher in the center of the learning process. The teacher sets the pace for learning, directs and controls what is happening in the classroom. The mastery of content is the driving force. Differentiation which takes into account students' varying abilities does not fit well into this style of teaching. Yet, frontal teaching is highly effective under certain conditions and works well for students who are goal-oriented, motivated and competitive. Frontal teaching is efficient in that accountability for both teacher and student is clear and measureable. The school makes no secret of its attempt to appeal to students who are academically oriented. For someone raised in the pre-technology world, the clearly defined rules of this school created a comfort level not as easily found in a class where cooperative education is the defining methodology. What is most important to understand, however, is that there are many methodologies to learning and that no one methodology will work for all students. At Szent Benedek school, though frontal teaching is very much in existence, so are other methodologies.

**Organizational changes:** Hungarian education from the mid-1800's was patterned after the highly-esteemed Prussian methodology, organization of schools and academic content. Subsequently, political changes influenced the organizational and practical changes in compulsory, Hungarian public education. The question of centralization versus de-centralization has been continuously discussed and various practices have brought about both support and outrage in the teaching community. Currently, public education is becoming more centralized. Recent education law created KLIK, the centralized, administrative structure for directing teachers and schools. The current direction is seeking to create a centralized, national, core curriculum. In addition, there is governmental concern about the credibility of some textbooks in use as well as some of the methodologies used in the delivery of instruction. The ELTE experiential school is autonomous and does not fall under the regulatory arm of KLIK. Because of its very nature, political action relative to the public good, i.e. education, will always have supporters as well as enemies. Current political action is also bringing about a lively debate about what is best for most.. Considering the vastness of the educational enterprise, its significant history through various historical ages, and the comprehensive goals of today's Hungary, it is safe to say that there has been enormous growth, education on all levels remains dynamic and, at the heart of most reforms, there is a sincere desire to improve and create what is best for all Hungarians not only now, but in the future.

**Continuing challenges:** **The teachers with whom I met and discussed Hungarian education are dedicated , concerned and professional. They identified the following as their areas of concern:**

1. Alignment of educational goals and objectives within the framework established by the EU while maintaining Hungarian identity and autonomy in addition to preserving traditional cultural values.
2. Evaluating the reasons for a drop in Hungary's international academic standing and strategic planning to achieve better testing results.
3. Fiscal support of education: the national budget continues to allocate huge amounts of money to support teachers through better salaries and technologically-sophisticated resources; it attends to the overall well-being of students through increases to student meal programs and free textbooks to eligible students

4. Special education: many teachers are concerned about the increasing numbers of students who need the specialized services of specialized teachers. There is clear understanding that growing Special Ed populations are due to many factors, including the move from an agricultural to an industrial, then, a technological society. In addition, current models of education more access to more programs to more students than past models. As in the United States, many students who would never have considered an academic career, now do so as a result of intervention by specialists under the umbrella of Special Education. However, the fact remains that the area of special education is costly and, as in many, highly developed countries, remains under-served.

Please feel free to write me questions and/or comments. [taboropm@morrisville.edu](mailto:taboropm@morrisville.edu) subject line: Hungarian education.

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