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Motivations for school choice and minority perspectives¹

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The study focuses on general economic and sociological school choice models, and tries to analyse to what extent these models can be applied to the understanding of the school choice of Hungarian minority students. The author argues that in the case of minority language education, not only the community aspects are important but the so-called equity movements as well. Because of the limited nature of human resources among any kind of minority, minority language education should deal with minority students of different family backgrounds, otherwise the process of assimilation among members of the minority group will accelerate. The second part of the study analyzes the motivations for minority school choice at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels, and the author emphasizes that school choice is in fact the result of the interplay of motivations on different levels.

¹ This is the written version of the presentation (entitled School choice "strategies") given at the conference organized by the National Policy Research Institute of Budapest on 18 July 2012. While writing this paper, the author benefitted from the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Currently the author is a senior research fellow at the Institute for Minority Studies, Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The studies of the present thematic block were prepared in the framework of research entitled "School choices of the majority and the minority living in diaspora" supported by the Scholarship Programme for Hungarian Science Abroad of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The research was directed by Barna Bodó; the special adviser of the research was Attila Papp Z. Further participants included Viktória Ferenc, Magdolna Séra, Éva Szügyi, János Márton, Tünde Morvai, and László Szarka.

1. Introduction: the macro-level models of school choice and minority perspectives

1.1. Macro-level models

The transition from kindergarten to elementary school is of key importance from the perspective of children as well as individual parental decisions making. At the same time, this choice also has social, public welfare, and economic relevance. From a minority perspective, these decisions involve further special considerations.

First of all, the significance of school choice can be examined in a simplified economic (market-oriented) model. According to this model, education is interpreted in the framework of job market relevance and usefulness: the success of school choice is determined by future job opportunities and vice versa: job market demands shape schooling strategies. In this relation, a good individual/parental decision is the one that puts children on an educational path that will guarantee their success in the job market. While the latter consideration may arise when first choosing a school, all that parents can base their decisions on are mere assumptions. In many cases, the functioning of schools is not transparent, and all that parents can formulate about the future educational path of their children are suppositions. In other words, schools resemble a "black box" whose input parameters are – supposedly – known, but whose output remains uncertain while students complete the various levels of education. Moreover, there is a continuous structural distortion between the education and the job market: while the "production time" of the educational system is 10-20 years, labour demands change much more dynamically. This also shows the impossibility of establishing a direct correspondence between schools and the labour market. It is no wonder that in international circles, it has been demonstrated² today that on top of fundamental knowledge, education should rather pass on competences that will enable future job seekers to pursue their training continuously and be able to renew their opportunities.

² OECD (2010): *Pathways to Success. How knowledge and skills at age 15 shape future lives in Canada*. Download: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2006/44574748.pdf>

Thus, according to this economic model, school choice affects the economic performance of a country. Eventually, the output of education exerts an indirect influence on the GDP of the country, which also means that less talented students and drop-outs are more likely to become unemployed (which in turn affects the access to social benefits and economic opportunities).

In this economic (market-oriented) model, the person making a choice about schooling is visualized as a rational actor striving for cost effectiveness who is faced with the following essential question: which school is the most efficient from the perspective of future returns? In everyday life, this question may raise a number of issues for the parents. Which school should they enrol their children in? Which school type is better: state schools or private schools?³ State schools or religious schools? Which school has a better performance?⁴ Naturally, no universal answers exist for these questions. The relation of educational performance and school types must be examined on the national, regional and local levels. At the same time, the types of information available with respect to the various institutions and the extent of their availability for the public is still an additional consideration.

The sociological-pedagogical model of schooling leads to the question of equity. Along the lines of this logic, the act of choosing a school lose its significance, because every school is equally prepared to admit children coming from the social backgrounds that exist in its district or vicinity. Therefore, parents do not have to make a choice, and schools do not select future students. In theory they are prepared to accept any kind of students. On this view, schools strive to produce

³ It should be noted that more recent analyses distinguish between state-dependent private schools and completely autonomous private institutions. More than 50 per cent of the budget of the former is provided by state funding, while this value is less than 50 per cent in the case of the latter. Musset, P. (2012), "School Choice and Equity: Current Policies in OECD Countries and a Literature Review", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 66, OECD Publishing. Download: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k9fq23507vc-en>

⁴ It is noteworthy that these questions are relevant both in general and in a minority context. For instance, there are private schools in Slovakia, church high schools are considered to be elite institutions in Transcarpathia, and church schools have greater prestige in Transylvania as well. Whether the competence level of the students attending these schools actually confirm the higher prestige assumed is a question unanswered.

pedagogical value added; that is, they try to develop the performance of children in comparison to themselves (instead of adjusting it to a pre-determined level that is obviously unattainable for some). Naturally, the event of school choice is present in this case as well, since in practice, there are no two identical institutions. Individuals may decide what educational and (consequently) career path they would like to follow, but the structural obligation that is crucial in the market-oriented model is not present here.

In the economic (market-oriented) model based on selection at all levels, there is a great probability that based on the parental background, the educational paths of a cohort diverge right at the beginning of the school selection period. On the other hand, the lack of structural obligation implies equity as well as the freedom of individuals to choose their paths.

“Educational equity refers to an educational and learning environment in which individuals can consider options and make choices throughout their lives based on their abilities and talents, and not on the basis of stereotypes, biased expectations or discrimination. The achievement of educational equity enables females and males of all races and ethnic backgrounds to develop skills needed to be productive, empowered citizens. It opens economic and social opportunities regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or social status.”⁵

In this sociological model of school choice, we, once again, run into the notion of assessment: pedagogical value added – regardless of its definition⁶ – has to be based on some kind of (external/internal, input/output) measurement. In order for the stakeholders of education to guarantee and/or accept the value added of schooling, there have to be (standardized) tools for measuring school performance and publicly available channels for publishing the results of measurement.

⁵ Definition from a 1997 report of the OECD. Cited by Radó, Péter: *Méltányosság az oktatásban. Két jelentés az oktatás méltányosságáról*. OKM Budapest, 2007. 12.

⁶ See e.g. OECD 2008: *Measuring improvements in learning outcomes: best practices to assess the value added of schools. Best Practices to Assess the Value-Added of Schools*

The market-oriented and sociological models of school choice are considered to be ideal-typical descriptions, but in practice, there are a multitude of mixed models. Both models have advantages and drawbacks. Those arguing for the market-oriented model claim that the competition between schools contributes to the increase of performance, while its opponents regard it as a potential seed-plot of segregation and the reinforcement of the polarization of the system, since choosing between different schools is more available for middle-class families than for others. The principle of equity supports the sociological model, but the critics of the latter emphasize that limiting people's choices may infringe human rights and it does not necessarily enhance the performance of schools.

A recent analysis takes inventory of the school choice related policies of the OECD countries, and it states among others that the debates surrounding these choices contain a lot of ideological posturing, and rely on empirical data only to a limited extent.⁷ Arguments in favour of school choice usually draw on three premisses: a. the introduction of market mechanisms into education increases efficiency; b. from an individualistic and liberal point of view, school choice is a parental right; c. school choice is a way to introduce more equity into the educational system. Therefore, the school choice can be examined from several perspectives, and different expectations can be set up: it should be a tool that ensures the diversity and efficiency of schools, but it should also make it possible for parents to select the school they consider the "best" for their children, while the educational system should also provide equal opportunities for the most disadvantaged groups of society.

1.2. The minority perspectives of school choice

The question I am interested in is how these considerations can be interpreted and applied with respect to the school choice of the Hungarian ethnic minority living in the Carpathian Basin. If, by somewhat simplifying the situation, we classify ethnic Hungarians living abroad into cluster (local majority) regions and dispersed population in (scattered regions), it seems evident that in the cluster regions, both market-oriented and sociological models may play a role

⁷ Musset 2012..

while in the dispersed areas, considerations related to the language of education will be more manifest.

However, in order to understand minority school choice, one needs to make it clear that besides the labour market considerations typical in any system of education, the schooling of minority ethnic Hungarians has two unique elements: a community and an equity feature. The *community element* of minority education in the mother tongue⁸ means that education in the mother tongue is carried out in an institutional framework that serves the long-term survival of the minority community. The mere existence of education in the mother tongue is the guarantee of community survival, and this fact is accepted by the stakeholders (the majority of minority politicians, experts, parents, and learners) more or less consciously. Seen in this light, minority school choice is of great importance, since where there are not only different institutions, but institutions of different languages in the local educational market, opting for non-mother tongue educational institution leads to the 'self-extinction' and assimilation of the minority.

At the same time, minority education has another element that is less elaborated on: the so-called *equity element*. This equity dimension can be included in the above mentioned sociological-pedagogical model, and it implies that the schooling of all the members of the minority is assured. That statement is valid on a "minority-free" social level as well, but in a minority context, it has an increased relevance because the human resources of a minority group are inevitably more limited than those of an entire state or society. Commitment for education in the mother-tongue in an interethnic environment goes hand in hand with a limited range of educational options, which, from the perspective of the school, puts equity even more into focus. Since a school or class in the minority mother tongue can select students to a much lesser extent than a majority school, greater emphasis has to be laid on the improvement of learners with respect to their own achievements. Generally speaking, a minority school cannot afford to let certain students lag behind in the same way as a

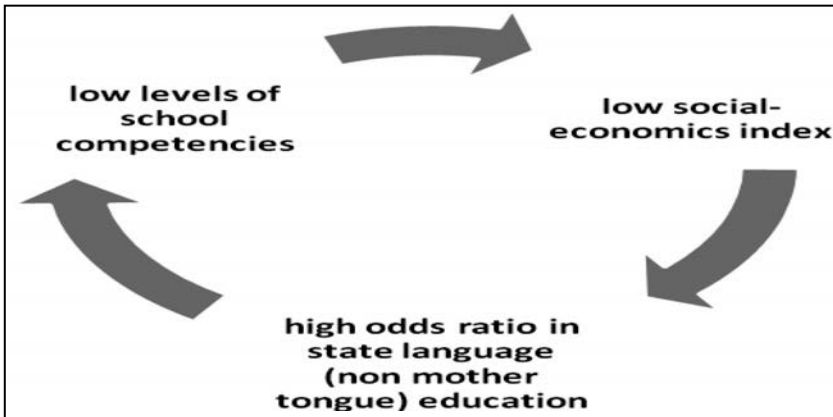
⁸ Our present considerations regard minority education in the mother tongue. The notion of minority education is much broader than that. See Papp Z., Attila: *Kisebbségi magyarok oktatási részvételének értelmezési lehetőségei*. EDUCATIO 2012/1 3-23.

minority community cannot allow itself to give up any of its elements and social subgroups.

If the operators of minority education leave certain children behind, they not only increase the group of the potentially unemployed (according to the economic/market-oriented model), but they also reinforce the creation or re-creation of a social strata that will be even less mother-tongue conscious when choosing a school for their own children in the future. Based on census data, I have already shown⁹ that some minority groups tend to become hollow from the bottom. In other words, the smaller the minority, the higher the number of people with higher education. Those people who have a lower socio-economic index seem to be more likely to leave the community; that is, they choose to follow the assimilation path sooner than the members of the minority intelligentsia.

Graph 1.

Assimilation spiral



Source: Papp 2012a¹⁰

In light of the Romanian and Serbian PISA-findings, the picture can be further refined by demonstrating that those who are not educated in their mother tongue usually have a lower family back-

⁹ Papp, Z. Attila : *Itt és ott: iskolai integrációs kihívások a magyarországi kisebbségi és a határon túli magyar oktatásban*. REGIO 2010/4. 73-108.

¹⁰ http://www.mnt.org.rs/container/container_attachments/download/491

ground indicator and also, a significantly poorer school performance than those who study in their mother tongue. One can say that an assimilation spiral is created here: due to non-mother-tongue education, the number of those with lower competences expands, and the latter fact increases the chance of their having lower socio-economic indicators. Meanwhile, the low family background indicator produces less conscious parents with respect to choosing a mother-tongue school, which in turn reproduces the decision in favour of non-mother-tongue education (see *Graph 1*). All of the above is, of course, reinforced by the language shift processes within interethnic marriages and generations.

The school choices of ethnic Hungarians living outside Hungary follow two significant educational paths. One of them could be called the ethnic (mother tongue) educational path, and it designates the case when transitions between the levels of education show a continuous preference for education in Hungarian. The other extreme is the above mentioned case leading to potential assimilation when going towards higher educational levels, ethnic Hungarians opt for non-mother-tongue education.¹¹ In the course of the schooling of ethnic Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin, but outside Hungary, the fight for the institutionalization of these two opposing educational paths characterizes the bulk of minority political activities, because at stake is the survival of ethnic Hungarians as a community.

When thinking about minority school choice in terms of educational paths, we have to start from the lowest schooling level and draw attention to the importance of kindergartens. Statistics reveal that attending a mother-tongue kindergarten increases the chances of going to a Hungarian school. Although occasionally, there are parents who, after enrolling their children in a non-mother-tongue kindergarten to facilitate the acquisition of the national language, still return to education in their mother tongue, such cases are few and far between. Among language shifters what happens more frequently is that those who attend a Hungarian mother-tongue kindergarten and lower elementary do not pursue their studies in Hungarian on the higher levels of education. This also calls attention to the fact that in a minority context, the transitions between the educational

¹¹ For further details on the subject, see *Papp 2012 i. m.*

levels may imply a potential language shift, which is usually accompanied by a negative, assimilationist perspective to be avoided on a community level.¹²

Regarding kindergartens, it is important to note that out of the five reference values of the strategic framework for *Education and Training 2020*¹³ of the European Council, one pertains to kindergarten education. The document states that "by 2020, at least 95% of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education." This means that the member states and candidates of the European Union should set as a goal to involve nearly all children of kindergarten age in kindergarten education because that is the key to their eventual success in school, especially – as stated by the document – with regards to the those coming from a disadvantaged background. With respect to the ethnic Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin, this argumentation raises at least three major issues:

1. Can the Hungarian-language kindergarten subsystem and the enrolment ratio of their countries concerned differ from the respective national trends?

2. Can we define the notion of disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of language? If the answer is yes, mother-tongue and/or efficient bilingual kindergarten education should receive extensive support, especially in regions with dispersed minority populations.

3. Interpreting the notion of disadvantaged backgrounds in social terms leads to the integration of Romas with Hungarian ethnic ties into Hungarian-language kindergarten education. The question in this regard is whether or not the regional and local (teacher) communities are open to and prepared for that?

In Western European countries that perform well in terms of school competencies, the European indicator regarding childhood education usually has a high value. (*Figure 2*). If one examine the same indicator in our region (*Figure 3*), one can see that Hungary has

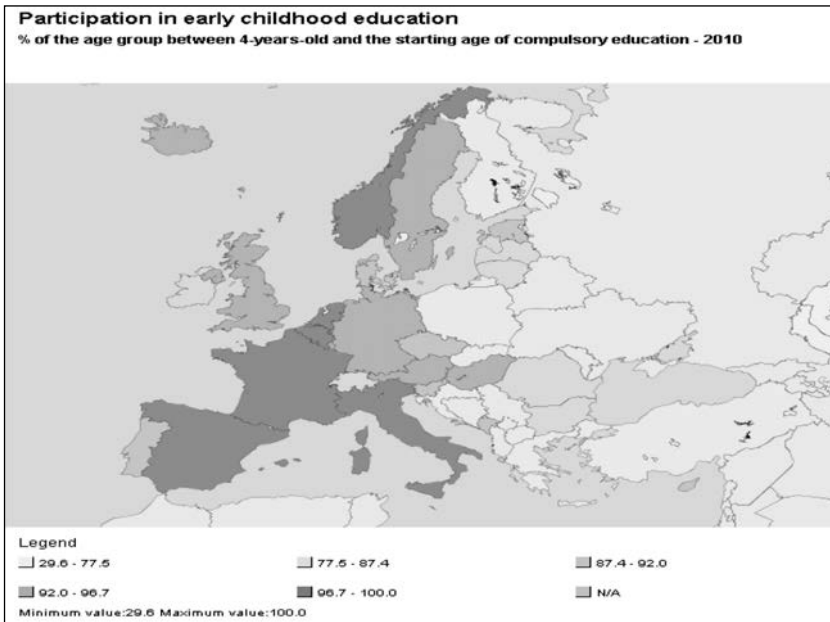
¹² The only exception to that is probably the transition from (Hungarian) secondary and (national language) higher education, for it may occur that the professional preference may not exist in the mother tongue, therefore minority students are forced to change their language of education due to structural reasons.

¹³ See the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 (2009/C 119/02). <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:119:0002:0010:en:PDF>

basically reached the benchmark value with an above average figure, whereas the averages of Austria and Slovenia are in correlation with the European Union. Although showing continuous improvement, Romania and Slovakia, containing the two most numerous Hungarian communities of the Carpathian Basin, have remained far below the EU average and the benchmark value. However, it also follows from that that in these countries, one can expect the further extension of kindergarten and/or pre-school institutional networks, and with due attention, all of that might entail the reinforcement of Hungarian language enrolment.

Figure 2.

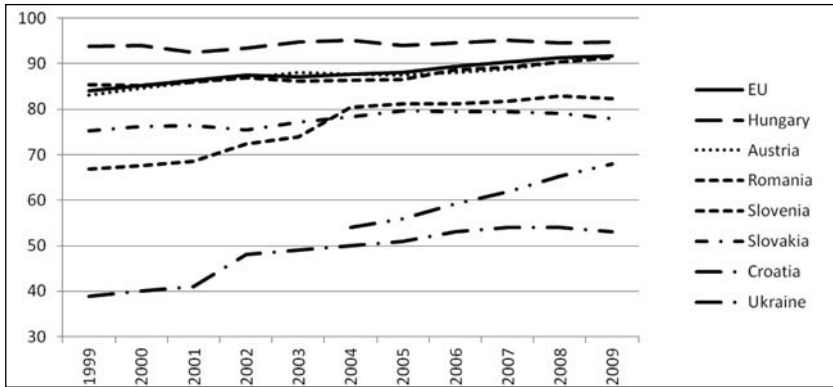
Participation in early childhood education (EU, 2010)



Source: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/web/_svg/Eurostat_Map_tps00179_04091721453_download_tmp_embed.png

Figure 3.

Chronological participation in early childhood education in the EU, Hungary, and some neighbouring countries (%)



Source: EUROSTAT, Ukraine: <http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/>

As *Figure 3* shows kindergarten enrollment is quite low in Croatia (68 percent in 2009), but it is even lower in the Ukraine and within that, in Transcarpathia where only 42 percent of kindergarten-age children attended kindergarten in 2010. In the villages (where about two thirds of Transcarpathian ethnic Hungarians live), the situation is even worse: this figure is only 34 percent.¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that from 2011, the Ukraine has introduced obligatory pre-school education, so this indicator is expected to improve in the near future.

Thus, the importance of kindergarten education lies in the fact that in the case of ethnic minorities, it can be regarded as the foundation of schooling in the mother tongue.

2. Minority educational paths from the perspective of educational statistics

It is a recurring professional challenge that the educational data concerning ethnic Hungarian learners are not easily retrievable in any of the neighbouring countries. While participation in mother-

¹⁴ The Statistical Yearbook of Transcarpathia 2011 (*Statizticsnij Scsoricsnik Zakarpattyá*) 449-451.

tongue education is relatively easily traceable, (see *Table 1*), one of the most relevant pieces of information regarding school choice (namely, whether ethnic Hungarians participate in mother-tongue or national-language education) is not nearly as up-to-date and registered in detail in official records in all the countries of concern for us. It is probably in Slovakia that we have the most detailed information in official statistics¹⁵ which involve the language of education and the ethnicity of students as well. Nonetheless, we have various estimates about three major regions (see *Figure 4*), and on the basis of them, we can say that about 20 percent of elementary school learners do not study in their mother tongue, and this proportion grows as we move to higher levels of education. It can also be stated that among Slovakia's ethnic Hungarians the ratio is the highest of those opting for secondary-level non-mother-tongue education.

Table 1.

The number of learners studying in Hungarian in some neighbouring countries by level of education

	Number of children in kindergarten	Number of students in elementary school	Number of students in secondary school	Number of students in higher education*
	ISCED 0	ISCED 1, 2	ISCED 3	ISCED 5,6
Slovakia 2010/11	9 836	34 664	17 417	6 133
Romania 2010/11	42 747	90 779	37 192	40 000**
Serbia 2010/11	4 448	15 810	6 754	3 758
Transcarpathia 2008/09	2 522	14 290	2 117	1 923

* Data regarding higher education contain the data of those of Hungarian ethnicity and are valid for the academic year of 2009/2010, with the exception of Transcarpathia. The Transcarpathian data is based on the academic year of 2006/2007.

** Estimation.

Sources:

Romania – www.insse.ro, Ministry of Education;

Slovakia: <http://www.uips.sk/statistiky/statisticka-rocenka>

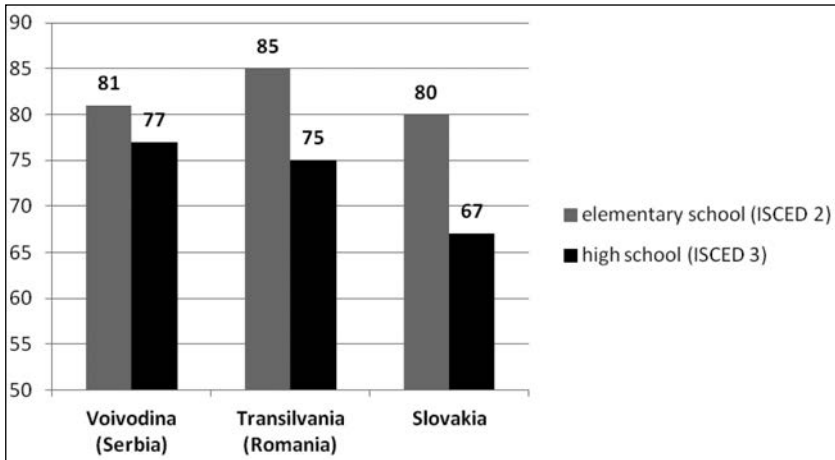
Voivodina: Hungarian National Council of Voivodina

Transcarpathia: KÖTÉL, Emőke (ed.): *Kataszter. Kárpátalja*. Balassi Intézet, MÁSZ, Budapest, 2011; Educational Committee of the County Council.

¹⁵ See data available on www.uips.sk

Figure 4.

Participation rate of ethnic Hungarian students in mother-tongue education by level of education



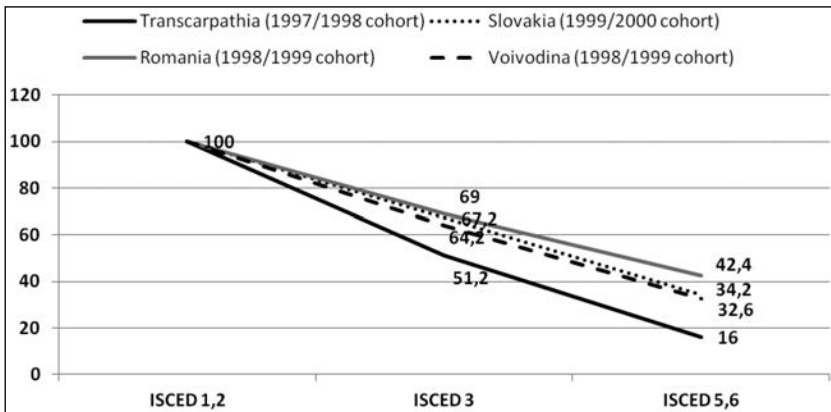
If one interprets the figures of mother-tongue enrolment of educational paths, one can also examine what percentage of students of the same cohort, starting their educational career in Hungarian, go into higher education in their mother tongue in their homeland. In other words, one can calculate that at a given time, what percentage of students enrolling in first grade will continue their studies (after secondary school) in their mother tongue at the university or college level. Based on the estimated data at our disposal¹⁶, one can see (from *Figure 5*) that Romania's ethnic Hungarians and Transcarpathian ethnic Hungarians are at the two extremes of the scale. According to the Transylvanian data, about 40 percent of the cohort can be absorbed eventually by the Hungarian-language higher educational system of their homeland. At the same time, one also knows from data not specified here that this minority mother-tongue educational path grew wider after the revolution of 1989, in which the expansion of mother-tongue higher education played a significant role. At the other extreme, one can find the ethnic Hungarians of Transcarpathia, where the dropout rate within the system is extremely high, and it

¹⁶ Although the data are based on official statistics, the estimates also involve those who did not enter higher education right after completing their secondary education.

has been made even worse by the introduction of the new system of school completion exams in recent years. It is easy to point out that the internal dropout tendency in Transcarpathia is most likely related to the fact that the ratio of kindergarten education is also the lowest in this region. Besides the above mentioned factors, there are probably other system-level reasons for the high dropout rate such as the methodological skills and training of teachers, and the high proportion of social disadvantaged Hungarian mother-tongue Romas on the lower levels of education.¹⁷

Figure 5.

Minority educational paths in the homeland



Sources: Papp 2012

To sum up the educational statistics data of the past two decades, one can identify two seemingly contradictory trends regarding ethnic Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin. On the one hand, as a result of the demographic decrease, the school age population shrank in every region. However, parallel to that, mother-tongue secondary and higher education rates based on enrolment in Hungarian-language schools shows a growing tendency. In a certain sense, one can be a witness to the saturation of the mother-tongue educational

¹⁷ For instance, in the academic year of 2010/2011, there were more than 2,000 Romas of Hungarian mother tongue in Hungarian schools, which is about 17-20 percent of learners studying in Hungarian.

system, but that does not mean that the enrolment ratio should drop at the respective levels. There are reserves within the system that could be exploited by increasing the autonomy and appeal of schools, by giving methodological support to teachers to enhance their creativity, and by operating quality assurance systems committed to watch over the everyday activities of schools.

3. Creating a taxonomy of the motivations of school choice

Since school choice can be motivated by a number of factors, it is difficult to treat this area as a unified whole. At the same time, research conducted at different sites and in environments diverse from a minority perspective (in cluster and dispersion) shows several similarities.¹⁸ Factors underlying the choice of schools can be grouped in several different ways. From a pragmatic point of view, one can distinguish between symbolic (transfer of language and culture) and rational motivations (the qualities of a school). Adopting an interethnic approach, one can differentiate between the specific motivations of those living in a dispersed settlements and in a clustered settlement, while if one considers the actual decision maker, one can draw the line between the decisions of parents, students or teachers and other specialists.

In order to preserve the characteristics of these diverse typologies while organizing diverging motivations into some sort of a system, I will now turn to the analytical schemes used for explaining the specificities of minority education.¹⁹ Accordingly, the motivations of school choice should be taken into consideration on macro, mezzo and micro-level on the one hand, and on the other, a distinction should be made between factors related to minority education directly and indirectly. (*Table 2*) The macro level refers to the motivations of school choice related to the whole educational system, whereas the micro-level indicates the motivations underlying individual decisions.

¹⁸ See other research papers in this number. (ed.)

¹⁹ See Papp 2012

Table 2.*Factors influencing school choice*

	Macro	Mezzo	Micro
Ethnically neutral	Legal background: Free school choice vs. school districts Who is the school's proprietor? (Who is the maintainer?) Accountability and autonomy of schools Characteristics of school structure horizontal and vertical inclusion Characteristics of the settlement village, town, city	Question of "quality" (competence of teachers, after-school activities, alternative programmes: step-by-step, art class) BUT: what about quality? Local prestige of school - "small town elitism" Vicinity of school Equipment of school Recruitment, self-marketing	Socio-economic background of family and its impact on schooling (PISA) Family pattern/tradition At higher levels: child's decision Peer group pressure, kindergarten social networks Informal channels of communication
Related to ethnicity	The prestige of the Hungarian language Normative financing – extra financing of minority schools Ethnic ratio of settlement Educational support	Ratio of Romas ("white flight" phenomenon)	Interethnic marriages Linguistic strategies of family (majority national language, career paths)

a. Macro-level factors

The predominant factor determining school choice is the legal environment. In other terms, the area of school choice as such depends on whether legal regulations allow for freedom of choice or not. If they did not, the whole issue would become meaningless. Only in a hypothetical situation with the introduction of rigorous district boundaries, would parents who are better off still have their choice, even if at the price of moving (to another district). However, there are most likely other legal loopholes as well, if different in every country, which make choice possible without the obligation of moving.

Although there are school districts in each of the countries examined, when it comes to the issue of minorities, parents so-inclined have no difficulty in crossing them both officially and with the help of loopholes.

Another group of macro-level motivations derived from the legal environment can be generated by the maintainer of the school. The choice is, of course, more acute in places where there are schools

maintained by different entities (hence, their presumed or real differences in prestige). In our region, the maintainer is most frequently the local government or the state, but there also exist some institutions founded by private entities or churches. Private schools are usually seen as an alternative to state-run schools and also as innovative and autonomous institutions, and as such, they are often have higher prestige. To translate it into OECD terminology, it is important to mention that private schools in the Carpathian Basin are in fact state-dependent private establishments, since their functioning is supported by state subsidies or quotas.

The question of the school owner or maintainer is relevant not only from a legal aspect, but also because it is strongly related to the accountability of schools. Schools are not islands, for they depend on their socio-economic environment, and they can also contribute to the evolution of social relations and the enhancement of equity.²⁰ If schools really belong to the community, they would have to pulsate to the same rhythm as the local milieu, and they could fulfill important community functions, especially in small settlements and in the dispersed settlements. The accountability of schools is not only an administrative and economic issue but a professional and pedagogical challenge as well. If the performance of schools can be measured uniformly by tools approved by the mutual consent of the stakeholders, accountability could rest on professional grounds (such as achievements on competence tests, higher education ratios, pedagogical value added, level of satisfaction and so on).

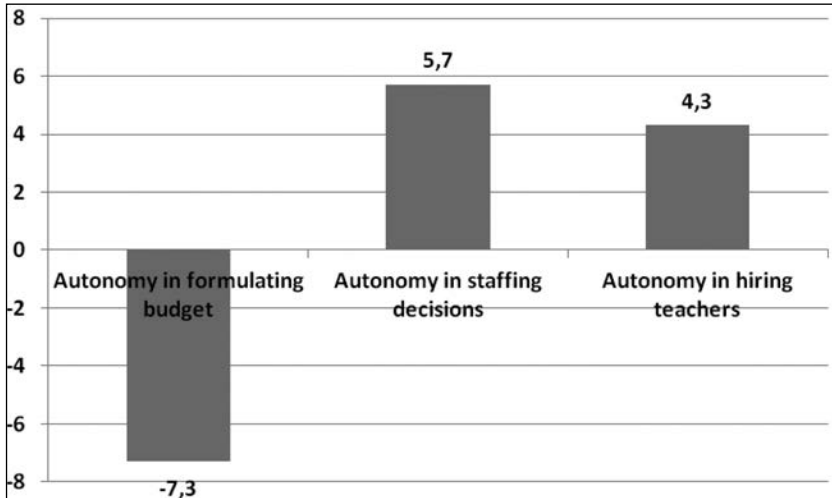
Accountability and school autonomy are, in fact, complementary notions. The greater autonomy a school has, the greater financial and professional accountability should be assigned to it. Although autonomy means freedom in matters of finance, pedagogy, and human resources management, in exchange, the institutions should be held accountable for their level of performance. Nonetheless, on the basis of international experience, it can be stated that it is autonomy in human resource management (as opposed to finance) that contributes the most significantly to boosting school performance.²¹

²⁰ *Equity of the European Educational Systems. A set of indicators.* European Commission Project Socrates SO2-610BGE. 113.

²¹ Ludger Wößmann, Elke Lüdemann, Gabriela Schütz, Martin R. West: *School Accountability, Autonomy, Choice, and the Level of Student Achievement: International Evidence from PISA 2003.* OECD, 2007.

Figure 6.

Relationship between different types of school autonomy and school performance (B-coefficients, regression model, significant effects at level: 0.01)



Source: OECD 2007. 36.

With the help of the international PISA surveys, we can get an idea about the extent of differentiation of schools by ability and family background, or the rate of the so-called vertical and horizontal inclusion. The *vertical (academic) inclusion* indicator refers to the separation of educational paths and the school arrangement of learners by their abilities, while the *horizontal (social) inclusion* indicator shows the extent of coeducation by family background on the various levels of education.

In the OECD countries, there is a strong and significant correlation between the two types of inclusion ($r=0,68$),²² which means that early school (type) choice goes hand in hand with the selection of the social environment of the school. If schools are homogenous on the inside and there are great differences between the various schools, it is obviously not indifferent to parents which school their children attend. As the saying goes, choosing a school also means choosing a social class. If schools are heterogeneous on the inside, and they reflect social diversity, there will not be significant differ-

²² Own calculations based on the figures of PISA 2009 Table II.5.1 and Table II.5.2

ences between schools, and in theory, it makes no difference which school a child goes to. These choices would not pose a problem in themselves, since the characteristics of a school system are inevitably affected by the traditions and legal framework of a country and many other factors. However, the PISA results also reveal that (in OECD countries), both high-level inclusion indicators significantly correlate with the increase of competence achievements.²³

Another important pillar of school choice is whether strictly speaking, there is a real choice even if the legal framework allows for it. To put it differently, one can make a choice when there are several schools of similar educational status. This seemingly banal idea leads us to the consideration of the specificities of settlements, and obviously, a distinction should be made between the narrow and broad range of school choice options in villages and towns, respectively. (For this very reason, we looked into cases for both settlement types in our research.)

On the macro level, some factors that are more clearly determined ethnicity-wise is the prestige of Hungarian and that of the majority national language, the ethnic quota used in financing and the ethnic ratio of the settlements. The prestige of Hungarian is determined, among others, by the current economic and political status of Hungary: if the mother country is appealing, so is the Hungarian language, and not only for the members of the Hungarian minority, but for the majority as well. The prestige of the language can affect the school choice of parents and children.

The quota used in financing indicates that minority education receives more subsidy from the state (e.g. in Romania). This could be considered as equitable, but it is questionable whether this principle should be or could be also applied in a local majority clusters situation, in the same way as in the dispersed settlements. Theoretically, this financing also helps to make schools more "minority friendly", and it can promote the recruitment of minority learners of schools.

²³ The Pearson correlation coefficient with the horizontal and the academic indicators and the reading comprehension competence levels: 0.61 and 0.45 (sign.: 0,000, respectively). These correlations are lower and insignificant in non-OECD countries. It is also important to know that the OECD countries perform significantly better than the partner countries participating in the PISA survey.

It is another matter whether the institutions take advantage of this opportunity or not.

The ethnic ratio of the settlements has an impact on the language of education in schools, and among others, school choice also means language choice for parents. From the perspective of parents, language choice is based on the prestige of languages and the (true or false) assumptions that one language can assure a more successful career path for their children. The decision for non-mother-tongue education is made on an individual level, but as it reinforces the assimilation processes, its impact will be exerted on the macro level of the community as well (see *Figure 1*).

b. Mezzo-level institutional factors

Factors on the mezzo level include features that are closely related to the external and internal life of schools. Undoubtedly if we take the event of choosing as our point of reference, the school selected must have some sort of a *differentia specifica*; that is, it must have certain characteristics that influence the decision. The most obvious factor is physical closeness: the school should be easy to reach (by bus or other parental investment). Going beyond that, the material state and infrastructure of the school building also constitute an asset. Another factor that often emerged in the interviews conducted during the research was the existence of "high standards". Naturally, it is to be determined what parents or children mean by high standards. One of its components is, of course, the rate of learners going into further education, and another one is the competence of the teachers working in the school. The smaller a settlement, the more information circulates on the local grapevine about the teachers working in the school: we could say that the social visibility of teachers is greater here. In bigger settlements, schools have to sell themselves for the outer world in order to attract children.

It should be noted that in scholarly literature, a difference is made between high standards and quality.²⁴ While high standards refer to an external performance, the paradigm of quality is based

²⁴ See e.g. Dr Setényi, János: *A minőség kora*, Raabe, Budapest, 1999; Mandel, Kinga – Papp Z., Attila: *Camogás. Minőségkonceptiók a romániai magyar középfokú oktatásban*, Soros Oktatási Központ, Csíkszereda 2007.

on the correspondence of the external expectations of the school and the internal demand-side expectations. As mentioned in relation to minority education, the notion of quality has a dimension of equity in it, since it implies that every learner should be accepted as they are; that is, children have to be admitted regardless of their family background and differences in ability. At the same time, the logic of high standards demands fighting for talented children and "topping off" children of good abilities. Based on these considerations, we can assert that minority schools should become quality institutions. Within the institution, this quality should be guaranteed with the help of a quality assurance system, and continuous external assessment would also be necessary to monitor academic performance.

The social composition of the learners of a school is also decisive in the assessment of institutions. This may have an ethnically neutral effect that we can call "small town elitism": if locally acknowledged people send their children to a certain school, the majority of the parents may take that as a sign that it is a "good school" where they can enrol their own children with confidence.

At the same time, the interpretation of the social background of children can also take place in terms of ethnicity, for it is important to emphasize the presence of Romas in the schools outside Hungary as well. A high Roma ratio may represent a disincentive force for parents who, consequently, will enrol their children in other schools. However, choosing a different school is often equal to choosing a language, as manifested in several Hungarian minority contexts. In many places, the school presence of Hungarian speaking Romas is "resolved" by setting up segregated institutions, which is what we saw at our research locations of Mukacheve (Munkács), Berehove (Beregszász), and Gheorgheni (Gyergyószentmiklós).²⁵ The maintenance of segregated institutions, once again, raises the issue of equity, since it is common knowledge that in these schools, the quality and performance of education leaves a lot to be desired.

c. Micro-level factors

All in all, school choice is a matter of individual and family decisions. Research has shown that parents with a higher socio-economic

²⁵ See relevant studies. (ed.)

status are more likely to have both the ability and the willingness to select a school for their children. For middle-class parents, the schooling of their children and thus, the re-creation of resources is part of some kind of a family strategy.²⁶

However, a family may determine the school choice of the children even without a conscious strategy, simply by family tradition, which might mean that the children will go to a similar school or to the very same school as their parents did, or that all the other children within the family attend. The latter family tradition is also supported by legal regulations in several countries because it is often considered as an advantage if the elder sibling also attends or attended the same institution.

School choice can be classified according to educational levels as well: on the lower levels, it is usually the parents who decide about it, while on the higher levels, students have increasing freedom and responsibility in making this decision. These decisions are often influenced by peer pressure, and the re-creation of shared kindergarten experience or lower school level social relations. It should be noted that peer pressure may also have ethnic dimensions: at one of the research locations, it turned out that opting for non-mother-tongue education was decided by the existence of an ethnically mixed circle of friends. Logically, this kind of school choice can happen primarily in a dispersed settlement context. At another research location, we identified a source of "adult peer pressure": in an interethnic context, parents have to "come out" at their workplace regarding the schooling of their children, which also entails that they have to reveal their ethnic identity. In an interethnic environment, that might lead to internal conflicts, and in order to avoid that, parents prefer to enrol their children in majority national-language education.

According to our respondents, the prestige of schools and the local opinion about them are usually established on the basis of information received through informal channels. That is partly understandable as in the countries examined, the practice of external school assessment is not really widespread. Although the institutions participate in national tests, the results are usually not communicated publicly,

²⁶ See Bourdieu's classic description of these strategies: Bourdieu, Pierre – Passeron, Jean-Claude: *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. Sage, 1990.

so parental decisions can rely on such information only to a minor extent.

Choosing the language of education poses the most acute problem in mixed marriages. On the basis of the accounts of the respondents, several schooling strategies can be identified within interethnic marriages. In some cases, parents decide the language of education of their future children even before getting married. In other cases, the decision is made on the basis of the current school market and the plans regarding the children's future. Although it cannot be demonstrated statistically from the present research, it would be a safe guess to say that in mixed marriages, parents are more inclined to enrol their children in majority-language education.²⁷

Translated by Judit Pethő-Szirmai

²⁷ According to data by Ferenc Dobos, 45-70 percent of mixed marriage parents in the neighbouring countries enrol their children in majority national-language education schools. See Dobos, Ferenc: *Asszimilációs folyamatok az erdélyi, felvidéki, kárpátaljai és vajdasági magyarság körében 1996–2011*. B Fókusz Intézet, 2011. Retrievable from: <http://www.kmkf.hu/tartalom/asszimilacio.pdf>

