



**Institute of Political
Science**

THESES OF Ph.D DISSERTATION

Lilla Erzsébet Bauer

Forces and Scopes for Action in Public Policy

*Public Policy Analysis of the Results and Failures of
the Hungarian Public Education Management after
the End of Communism*

titled Ph.D. dissertation

Supervisors:

Dr. György Jenei
Professor Emeritus

Dr. György Gajdusчек
Associate Professor (Habil.)

Budapest, 2014

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I. Defining the Topic

This thesis takes a holistic approach to public education in Hungary.

It attempts to understand public education in its entirety. I did not choose a too narrow, scientifically easily manageable and at the same time a – from all perspectives – easily “defendable” topic. Rather, I opted to analyze the whole political sphere on a relatively wide range. This thesis will discuss the Hungarian public education as a whole (with the exception of higher education) including its institutional (more closely the managerial structures), political, pedagogical and effective educational aspects, as well. The period from 1990-2010 will be the primary focus. (The full English text of my publication about the changes of managerial structures is attached to the theses.)¹

The fact that I have spent my whole active career in the field of public education – where I have filled various positions for several decades – was a decisive factor in choosing this topic. As a teacher, I have learned about implementation from the lowest level of educational management while as a ministerial expert I took part in policy-making processes and worked at the educational-managerial (middle) level as well. I am familiar with both centralized and decentralized approaches to public education. My professional experience not only influenced my choice of topic, it also provided a vast range of knowledge I could tap into and utilize here.

¹ BAUER Lilla (2012) Organizational Changes and Challenges of Public Administration in the Sectoral Management of Hungarian Public Education between 1998 and 2010 in the Aspect of Public Policy. *Journal of International Scientific Publications: Economy and Business*. 6. pp.302-316. **The Dissertation appeared in the** Third International Conference’s „Education, Research & Development” (ERDD) (7-11 September, 2012, Sunny Beach Resort, Bulgaria) **Electronic Publication.**

II. Research questions and method

Basically, I dealt with the topic with the explorative research method. My aim was not to systematically test the previously determined hypotheses, but to reveal and present inner connections. Due to this, neither did I formulate precisely operational research questions nor such hypothesis.

However I formulated research questions which indicate the direction of the research; those standpoints on which I want to focus in my thesis. In this light I formulated three questions:

1. In what respect can Hungarian public education be claimed successful (successful in the sense of “fruitfulness” and “efficiency”)?
2. What features and characteristics can be determined in decision-making and the execution process of national public education policy (considering features in the light of deviation: deviating from the ideal practice of public policy and from the international best practice, especially from the evidence-based public policy formation)?
3. Is there a connection between the lack of success of public education policy and the features of public policy processes (in light of the above-mentioned)?

In connection with these three questions I have formulated three presuppositions (distinct from “hypotheses”):

- a) Public policy cannot be viewed as successful. Even the public policy discussion is about the unsuccessfulness.
- b) There are several anomalies in the public policy process.
- c) The anomalies of public policy process and its relative unsuccessfulness are connected in as far as the first significantly explains the second.

A forth presupposition could be that reforms given as an answer to the public policy's unsuccessfulness do not improve but rather reduce the performance of public education.

In order to answer these questions, I apply a relatively wide range of sociological methods because it suits both the above-mentioned holistic view and the explorative approach. In this way, the thesis contains a numbers-based analysis (e.g. PISA results) as well as quantitative statistical analysis (e.g. parents survey). I particularly rely on the method of document-analysis, mainly on its qualitative analytical line. I conducted numerous half-structured interviews with people who work in various fields of education policy (mainly in the execution and implementation part) and with many experts. Furthermore, the research highly depends on the "participant observation" method, primarily on my previous experiences. I also made use of the method of hermeneutic-phenomenological discursive public policy analysis. I was motivated to use this approach because Gadamer's thought made a serious impression on me and has deeply influenced my own.

I hope that with the help of these various techniques for gathering information I will be able to familiarize myself with the topic more thoroughly. The main goal is to understand the Hungarian public education and its processes as thoroughly as possible.

III. The structure and content of the thesis

The thesis contains, together with the Introduction and Conclusion, eight chapters.

Chapters 3 and 4 outline the theoretical background, defining or more precisely clarifying the conceptual apparatus on which I rely throughout my thesis. I took into consideration most relevant pieces from the international literature, but also put effort into thoroughly examining the Hungarian

relevant literature, as it is unavoidable in connection with the examination of the national public education's characteristics. In Chapter 3 I discuss public policy while in Chapter 4 I clarify the conceptual framework and approaches of public management. The third chapter deals with the content-functional while the fourth deals with the institutional-structural aspect of education policy. Furthermore, in Chapter 3 I go into the Hungarian literature about the failures of public policy, which has a significant relevance to my topic.

The structure of Chapter 5 and 6 is the same as the one applied in the theoretical part (functional – structural distinction), but here the focus is on the educational sphere.

In Chapter 5 the effect of the governmental role-taking and structure on public education is highly emphasized, meaning; for instance, that the centralized or decentralized institutional frames predominantly influence the scope of public policy that can be chosen and the opportunities for execution. In Chapter 6, I go through the educational reforms, both their contents and the reforms themselves. These reforms can be identified with the public policy-making process. This chapter will be of great importance in answering my research questions.

Chapters 7 and 8 show the results of my own research. Chapter 7 analyzes the public policy reform which ended with the introduction of the two-level finals², while Chapter 8 analyzes the answers given to the parents' survey conducted by myself.

IV. The results of the dissertation

Let's see what types of answers can be given to the three questions formulated above based on the relevant literature and the analysis carried

² See on this in detail: BAUER Lilla (2012) A Case Study in Hungarian Education Politics: The 2005 Reform of Middle School Final Exam and University Entrance Exam.

out here. First, I will summarize the answers given to the question regarding successfulness; then I will discuss the answers to questions 2 and 3 together. The reason for this, in addition to the need for analytical separation, is that the features of a process can be best outlined with the difference from the ideal state. Due to this, the characteristics of the Hungarian public education policy can be understood as the reasons for failure. In this sense the description of the characteristics is unavoidably connected to the presentation of their consequences.

The successfulness of public education

According to the classical view on public policy, the way to define any public policy's successfulness is to compare the set goals with the achieved results.

The first conclusion of this dissertation is that there are no such goals. A precise, explicit definition that can be measured with numerical indicators of the goals is missing. The political parties, immediately after the end of Communism, emphasized public education's state over politics; however, differences soon appeared which manifested in radical institutional reforms when a new party took office. Still neither the fundamental dispute questions (regarding the relationship between instruction and education, lexical knowledge vs. improvement of abilities) nor a clear-cut aim were formulated, at least not on the level of public policy discussions.

Overall it seems, and my thesis follows the same view, that on the one hand the overall performance of education, and on the other hand the ability to "adjust to level," holds the most weight when it comes to evaluating education. Overall performance refers to the ability of education, how well it is capable of transferring knowledge and skills to the students. Education's ability to "adjust to level" refers to the capability of how well

the school system is able to reduce the entry disadvantages among students that were brought from “home”.

Utilizing the classical public policy view by the two evaluation criteria, I found, as have many professionals, that the overall performance of the Hungarian education system compared to international performance is average and fits into the Central and Eastern European countries’ group which also includes Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovenia as well. Even the PISA-results and other factors indicate the same; these factors are presented in Chapter 6.

At the same time, empirical research proves that the Hungarian education system performs very poorly in balancing social differences. Researchers claim that the Hungarian school system even increases the differences in students’ knowledge-level. According to the analysis of the PISA results, our system’s balancing role is the second worst among the 16 countries involved. Hungary, out of 18 countries, showed the worst performance in “the school system’s selectivity”, in other words, in how significant the differences among schools are (how defining the school is where one is studying). My survey of parents shows that they are very much aware of this fact. Based on the facts it can be stated that Hungarian education performs on an average level regarding overall performance; however, it performs extremely badly in the “balancing” role.

In contrast to this, the public policy dispute shows a totally different picture. The Hungarian public education system’s extremely poor performance in balancing students’ disadvantages brought from home has a peripheral position; it only plays a significant role in the discussions of a small group of professionals interested in this topic. The political messages delivered to the wider public deal with the system’s overall performance and they see it, and let it be seen, as very bad. It is common that politicians discuss a crisis, without defining the term “education’s performance” (not

to mention that they do not even try to clarify it during the political discourses). However, the public policy's decision making is primarily influenced by this crisis-atmosphere.

The characteristics (anomalies) of public policy's process and its consequences (questions 2 and 3)

I deal with the process of public policy in detail in chapter 5 and 6; moreover, my research in connection with the introduction of the two-level finals is focused on there, as well. During these examinations various anomalies unfolded. Out of them the most important are the following:

1. Permanent crisis management, reforms' negative effects
2. Distortion of the public policy period
3. The lack of strategic standpoints and coordinated action
4. The inadequately applied means
5. The "slipping" of actors and roles
6. Communication problems – the lack of communication and its distorted figure

These incidents can only be separated in an analytical way; in reality they show significant overlaps. Still, in the summary, these anomalies (reasons of failure) were named.

Permanent crisis management, reforms negative effects

My thesis proves the presupposition that the reforms intended to solve the unsuccessfulness actually worsened the performance of the Hungarian public education, let alone improved it. In the last quarter century the education policy ran the vicious circles' rounds again and again. The feeling of crisis in public education and the answers given to it, present the defining counterpoints of the period. It is difficult for an outsider to

determine whether, in this highly over-politicized process, it is the crisis-perception that triggers the need for change or rather the need for change that makes the situation look like a crisis. Either way, the education policy can be characterized by reforms that followed each other in a fast succession. The pace of change in politics, especially in contrast to the characteristics of the educational processes' timespan, is startling. It is obvious that the quality of the primary school education will be visible after eight years, but in reality only after employment, i.e. after at least twenty years. The changes however, are more frequent.

This means that the formation of public policies was neither based on facts nor the thoroughly-learned and analyzed correlations. What we experience is definitely not the oft-quoted, evidence-based policy making of both the national and international literature; rather it is more like a blind flight, where even the most basic knowledge is missing in decision-making. Even here, a vicious cycle can be found. The actual course of proceedings is not taken into consideration when implementing changes, even if they wanted to, the act could not be done. One reason is precisely the rapid rate of changes where – as we have seen – the results are not visible and often the new processes themselves (which were accepted to change the previous ones) are not well-formed.

It is a well-known fact that changes involve a considerable budget and will incur costs which will only be recovered (and even then, only in the long run) when the changes would have an aim and that aim would be achieved. Compared to this, the Hungarian public education is in a state of constant change: therefore, in theory, an already suboptimal state has become the norm. To this situation personal tensions are added, which are felt by those working in the system day-to-day and which tensions, in the long run, obviously will have an impact on the standard of education (e.g. through the performance of the frustrated principal and teacher).

Due to this, even among the elements of public policy decisions and execution there is a vicious cycle, in which the decision-makers with their constant changes make the execution of reforms more difficult. Unfortunately, they do not pay attention to the remarks made on this occurrence, comments which claim the problem is to be the problem-solving itself. However, they feel the difficulties, to which they react with a new top-down type of change. In this situation, the pressure to meet the requirements induces such a behavior in the executioners where satisfying the political power is more important than the performance itself. This is also due to the fact that both the measuring of the education's actual performance, both on the macro and micro levels and to it an incentive system is missing.³ Additionally, this further hinders successful and effective performance.

The presentation of these vicious cycles with theoretical and empirical means will hopefully be one of the main achievements of my thesis.

Distortion of the public policy period

In connection with the national public policy period's distortions I have presented many authors' thoughts. Some anomalies identified in other fields are characteristic to the education policy as well. Going through the elements of the period, it can be seen that the professional capacity to solve the problem has been there for decades; however, it has never been utilized. In the first phase of the process the weaknesses of checking and communication are undeniably present. I have already pointed out that the outlining of goals did not occur in the process, which makes both the rational decision-making and the evaluation of performance impossible. It is easily perceptible that there has not been a detailed planning of the

³ BAUER Lilla (2014) Educational Public Policy in the Years of Transition - Some remarks (comments) on the centralization of the public education system in Hungary. In the Conference Proceeding of the 22nd NISPAcee Annual Conference.

realization or the defining of necessary inputs. The reader could have seen in the previous point that in the education policy often even the beginning of realization stopped, or was left unfinished, because of then-upcoming reforms. The lack of evaluation (monitoring, program evaluation), as a typical occurrence, is visible in the education policy, too.

I have referred to these distortions in several sub analyses in my dissertation; furthermore, many of them (e.g. the lack of checking, the avoidance of evaluation – remarks – questioning sessions) have been analyzed in detail in the form of case studies. I also refer to the extremely important consequences of the anomalies.

The lack of strategic standpoints and coordinated action

Compared to the topic's literature, the thesis uses the phrase 'strategic standpoint' in the sense of a view and action method which (a) thinks in the long run, (b) develops the aims of an appropriate tool system which takes into consideration the current and upcoming environmental requirements and (c) works according to it in a coordinated way.

I have already referred to the lack of rational action in achieving the goals in the previous two points. I have also referred to the lack of long-term planning. The public policies' "short-wave" cyclic character (one-year budget plan and four-year governmental terms) is well-covered in the public policy's literature; however, in the national education policy it stands in sharp contrast to the time of the appearance of the policies' effects, which take decades.

Operation, based on strategy, makes coordination necessary in order to have every act going in the same direction at the same time and to make it fit into the overall strategy. In connection with this, my thesis presents two imperfections. On the one hand many professionals remarked that reforms started during the period between 1990 and 2010 were often random and

that they did not fit into one homogeneous strategy. On the other hand, a more important problem during the same period was a lack of coordination. The reason for this is structural constellation: the operation of the public education's institutions – in the above-mentioned form – is in the hands of local governments, who enjoy an unusual amount of autonomy, while to create a homogeneous (e.g. defined minimum standards, guarantee of equal opportunities etc.) education policy is a central task. The enormous tension between these two structural and functional factors was not solved in the last period, as I demonstrate it in the dissertation.

The inadequately applied means

After the end of Communism in Hungary, a radically different situation evolved: having a look at both the social environment, the presenter of public policy's demands and the system of requirements to accomplish them, and the education policy, its managerial and actual institutions, have changed. Such fundamental changes mean enormous challenges in adaptation and in this respect the education policy it cannot be claimed that the education policy is successful.

Probably the biggest challenge was the radical increase in social inequalities. As is seen here the handling of this problem would be the most vital point in the performance of the education system. This was exactly the area where Hungarian public education was the least successful compared to both expectations and international data. The means, which could have been used to balance the inequalities, were neither found nor systematically applied in practice. Furthermore, the processes, where the differences in performances among schools radically increased (and where the appearance of segregated schools is only the tip of the iceberg), are perceptible.

This is influenced by – the above-mentioned anomalies – such homogeneous strategies, directed to balance inequalities, and the lack of

assistance programs, which, for instance, would apply their effective means systematically to every school, teacher and student in need of help to close the gap. We have seen that it was mainly the local governments' autonomy that hindered the efforts and where the *modus vivendi* could not be found.

In general, it can be stated that the elaborated good components of public policy cannot be implemented successfully, let alone establish it in practice. One of the reasons is the fact that the implementation's systematic planning almost never happens. Another problem is the radically one-sided, top-down view combined with the legal way of thinking. Due to these, decision makers neither respect nor are familiar with the main elements of everyday practice. It is remarkable that at the level of realization (local governments, some schools, school boards, and teachers) the interested parties are left without notice, which involves either the lack of appropriate incentive and interest mechanisms or the systems distorted form. Paying attention to the cultural aspect is also missing. Many of the otherwise good public policy programs failed due to this lack. The system of knowledge-measurement, introduced by the first Orbán administration, cannot have a real effect because this view is missing from the education culture and because it does not have a real incentive-system.

The “slipping” of actors and roles

Publications that deal with national public policy processes show that the problem that the actors' picture and their roles in the process significantly deviates from the role in which their position would pre-destine them to appear.

The most likely cause is the lack of “balance”. The entire process is dominated by politics and politicians. Comparing the public policy cycle both to the ideal model and the international practice means that not only is the decision-making the privilege of the politicians (which is natural) but

they are the ones who “deal the cards”. Politicians decide who participates and how in the process and how big a role those people play. The politicians determine whether they rely on the apparatus and, if so, in what form: which external professionals to involve in the job, whether to check with the plan, and if so, how often, in what way and with whom exactly (stakeholders).

On the one hand it brings an enormous turbulence to the system, which depends on the personality of the politician and the style of the government, but on the other hand it continuously distorts the process, which has an effect on results. The most obvious consequences:

- The logic of politics governs the process, the standpoints of education policy (successfulness) success is only in the background
- The politicians standpoints to trigger change dominate (against the strivings of the apparatus which are directed to keep the current situation)
- From this follows the already-mentioned extreme cyclical character and the negative effect of the reforms (that are denying each other) on morale and performance
- In all probability the lack of defining the exact goals can also be explained by the political aspects (what does not exist cannot be questioned).

Besides other factors, this is primarily the reason for the distortion of other roles. Professionals, who are otherwise well-prepared, call themselves educational politicians, and yes, then and only then are they capable of having an effect on the formation of education policy, if they have “good relationships,” if possible, with the given minister.

The apparatus – which politicized the entire Hungarian public administration, but especially the ministries (that are the center of decision making) – assists in everything (as is shown in many facts-based national analyses). Due to this it does not fulfill its task, which in terms of decision-making in the field of public administration would be the following: analysis of the necessary data, testing the alternatives, etc., and especially forecasting the anticipated difficulties (or in some alternative cases the impossibility of a successful implementation).

Communication problems – the lack of communication and its distorted figure

Due to my interest and approach I found the courses of communication and the analysis of content especially important. In this field I have identified numerous problems.

The fractured relevant literature should be mentioned first. During my research, I found that in connection with education policy-politics three sources have remarkable significance: writings of professionals in the education sector, dissertations from the sciences of public administration and pieces of public policy science. Unfortunately among these three fields there is no communication to discuss their findings regarding the topic of public education.

In practice, the communication problems were more visible. A type of communication vacuum formed around the politicians. Out of the professional opinions only those that fit into the political ideology or to the politician's attitude gain access, therefore not even the real debate points (like contentious questions regarding public policy) are clear meaning, that the expert is choosing the values on a latent basis. The apparatus is silent and tries to serve the politicians, which in this culture means the doctrine of

“tell them what they want to hear”. Regarding implementation and evaluation there is no information because there are no evaluation systems. Underlying the communication problems I assume a more deeply-rooted cause which I would define as negative cultural innervations. I think that the same view that rules national politics is visible even in the field of public policy communication. This view – citing Gadamer, who mentions this as a drawback – is the following: “in speech, what is important [for them] is to be right and not to have an insight in the subject” (translated from Hungarian Gadamer [1984] p.254). This type of communication makes rational argumentation and the decision-making based on understanding of the processes impossible. This connection and its reasons and/or consequences are visible in the field of public education.

Summarizing the possible values of the dissertation

I wish to have convincingly answered the questions of the thesis supported with facts. I have examined the Hungarian public education’s successfulness and performance from various aspects; moreover, I have presented the contradictions that have aroused from it. Based on the relevant literature, mainly on the Hungarian literature, and on my own research, I have tried to present the overall characteristics of the education policy processes, showing those anomalies that arise during them. I have also shown how these characteristics lead to the public policy’s unsuccessfulness and its suboptimal state.

Furthermore I hope to add with my new results to the Hungarian scientific discussion. On the one hand my aim to holistically analyze public education can help to gain a better understanding of the field. On the other hand, the examination of public education can serve as an example or quasi case study to the national public policy’s empirical research.

At many points I demonstrated that the typical national public policy failure is also present in the field of public education. Those failures are the political dominance (“disturbance of equilibrium”) and its consequences (e.g. disturbance of roles, distortion of communication, etc.), problems of coordination, the anomalies of political cycles (formulation of goals, the unpreparedness – or even cancelation – of implementation, the lack of evaluation, etc.).

I have identified some occurrences that appear in the Hungarian relevant literature, but they would deserve more serious attention, such as the rapid speed of changes. Although it appears heavily in the field of education, I consider it a more general occurrence. Its essence is that in this region the elections often bring changes along ideological lines, due to which a full transformation is needed in many parts of politics. The changes become permanent with all of their negative consequences. My research brings attention to the intertwining of corporate culture and the interest mechanisms, and to the exclusive practice of the top-down view.

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