

# CORRELATIONS BETWEEN GOVERNMENTAL FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATION AND THE AUTONOMY OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN HUNGARY

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## Abstract

Besides state-funded schools, private schools play a role in public education both abroad and in Hungary, however the financial aid they receive from the governmental budget is different from country to country. There are countries where they receive the same amount of support that state-funded institutions get. Whereas there are other private institutions that cannot gain any financial resources from the subsidy. Financial contribution by the government to educational costs, however, always goes together with a restriction of the autonomy of schools by said government. These restrictions may include forcing the exemption of tuition fees or mandating that private schools cannot control the admission of pupils. Moreover, it might convey the restriction of the pedagogical autonomy of alternative private schools according to the educational system's degree of centralization. The liberal and decentralized Hungarian education system has become centralized again due to the current government's aspiration of creating an integrated and unified educational policy. In this study, we seek to answer the question of how the financial contribution of the state to the operation of alternative private schools affects their pedagogical autonomy.

**Keywords:** *Public education, alternative education, educational financing, autonomy.*

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## 1. Introduction

Besides state-funded schools, private schools play a role in public education both abroad and in Hungary (Ercse & Radó, 2019). The state also plays a significant role in financing public education in most countries (Varga, 1992), however the financial aid they receive from the governmental budget is different from country to country. There are countries where they receive the same amount of support that state-funded institutions get. Whereas there are other private institutions that cannot gain any financial resources from the subsidy (Varga, 1998).

In Hungary, the majority of alternative schools are private schools, which have a cooperation agreement with the state for the provision of educational services and therefore receive some financial support from the state. Financial contribution by the government to educational costs, however, always goes together with a restriction of the autonomy of schools by said government. These restrictions may include forcing the exemption of tuition fees or mandating that private schools cannot control the admission of pupils (Langerné Buchwald & Muiy, 2020). Moreover, it might convey the restriction of the pedagogical autonomy of alternative private schools according to the educational system's degree of centralization.

The liberal and decentralized Hungarian education system has become centralized again due to the current government's aspiration of creating an integrated and unified educational policy. It was worth examining the effect of state-funded support on the autonomy of private schools' education.

## 2. Methods

On the one hand, laws pertaining to the operation of alternative schools were investigated: the 2011 Public Education Act and its amendments, the subsequent curriculum regulations, and the budget laws that determine the level of the state's financial contribution.

On the other hand, pedagogical programmes of well-known alternative schools were analysed, and interviews were conducted with their professional and educational leaders. The study included alternative schools that were already in operation before the period under review, before 2011 and after 2011, and can be considered alternative in pedagogical terms because they had an approved alternative curriculum and/or a ministerial pilot licence. Accordingly, a total of seven alternative schools were

included: the Alternatív Közgazdasági Gimnázium (Alternative Economics High School), Rogers Általános Iskola (Rogers Elementary School), Rogers Akadémia (Rogers Academy), Zöld Kakas Líceum (Green Rooster High School), Montessori Oktatási Központ (Montessori Education Centre), Színes Iskola ("Colour" Elementary School), Novus Gimnázium (Novus High School) and the Hungarian Waldorf Association, which brings together Waldorf schools in Hungary, as the development of Waldorf curricula is one of the tasks of the Association. The study sample does not appear to be large, but with the exception of two schools, it covers almost the full range of alternative schools that meet the selection criteria.

### 3. Results

The results of the study showed that private alternative schools in Hungary have continuously received state budget support during the period under review. Prior to 2011, private schools were required to receive at least the same level of state budget support as state and/or municipal schools, but the 2011 Public Education Act no longer states the need for an equal level. As a result, alternative private schools receive only the minimum necessary subsidies, while other institutions receive additional subsidies (Langerné Buchwald, 2020), and the real value of state support has steadily decreased over the past period. This has led to the closure of some alternative schools due to a lack of financial resources to implement their alternative pedagogical programme, and the decrease in state budget support could not be compensated by an increase in the tuition fees paid by parents.

Prior to 2011, the 1993 Public Education Act regulated the operation of alternative schools in areas where alternative schools could define their specific character: the curriculum taught, the requirements, the preparation for state examinations, the building regulations, tools and equipment used, the system, methods and tools of quality policy, the management model in operation, the organisation of education, the qualifications and qualifications of the teachers accepted. In the first version of the Public Education Act of 2011, the paragraph allowing the operation of alternative schools was omitted and was only included after the Hungarian Waldorf Association indicated its absence. It extended the areas in which alternative schools can define their specific character and added principles concerning the compulsory number of hours for pupils and the rules on teachers' fixed and flexible working hours.

The biggest change, however, was the amendment of the Public Education Act of 2011, which removed the term "alternative school" from the Act and thus from Hungarian public education and introduced the term "schools licensed to apply individual solutions" instead, and took the licensing procedure away from the professional committee established for this purpose and placed it under the authority of the Ministry of Education. On the other hand, it has capped at 30% the degree of deviation from the central framework curriculum for the subject structure and has also restricted the possibility of setting specific principles for the qualifications and specialisations of teachers, by allowing alternative schools to deviate from the qualifications of the teachers employed only if there is no equivalent national higher education qualification for the subject or subject module.

Interviewees involved in the licensing process said that, although the government's declared intention during the ministerial discussions was not to limit the deviation of alternative schools from the central curriculum, by the end of the process of licensing individual school solutions it was clear that the aim was to reduce the number of alternative schools and to align them as much as possible with the central curriculum. In this way, the pedagogical freedom of alternative schools, particularly in terms of curricular choice, timetabling and subject structure, was severely restricted, and it was made more difficult for institutions that departed to a greater extent from the current centrally regulated institutional education and training, such as Waldorf schools or Montessori schools, to operate.

The constant adaptation of pedagogical concepts to changing content standards puts alternative schools in a difficult situation. For schools that have not been able to adapt their pedagogical concept to the 2013 curricular framework without significant loss of content that would affect the specific alternative character of the school, two pathways have been identified. In one case, where the restriction of pedagogical autonomy was coupled with difficulties in financing the school, this led to the complete closure of the school (Montessori Education Centre). In the other case, in order to preserve its pedagogical freedom and the alternative nature of its programme, the school's director opted for an alternative form of education, the Rogers Academy, which is limited in the Hungarian education system. Pupil communities are autonomous democratic communities, completely independent of the state, whose 'pupils' are private students of formal schools and undertake the preparation of students for the final examinations in an organised framework (Langerné Buchwald, 2019).

Those alternative schools that undertook to adapt their pedagogical programme to the 2013 curriculum standards for the first time and participated in the ministerial approval procedure for the application of individual solutions in 2020 reported that the interviewees reported that the freedom of

schools to formulate and implement their pedagogical programme was constantly being restricted and that they were increasingly obliged to implement and follow the central curriculum. As a consequence, they were forced to make a number of compromises in order to survive, which were also experienced with difficulty by the teachers and pupils of the school and which, to varying degrees, but in all cases, led to a reduction in the alternative nature of the programme. This was confirmed by the analysis of the pedagogical programmes. The need to record and thus authorise their operational specificities from the point of view of pedagogical work became more and more detailed and more and more widespread, which in turn often made it difficult to implement the specific elements of alternative programmes. "In the end, practically everything was prescribed, as the years went by, there were more and more constraints" (Interviewee 2). They did not support the use of methods and forms of teaching organisation and assessment that were more divergent from traditional school practice, such as course and credit systems, mentoring, text-based assessment, different ways of structuring the curriculum, or yoga instead of traditional physical education (Interviewee 3). In the case of Waldorf schools, text-based assessment was one of the critical points of the concept, which they did not manage to fully preserve, since from grade 11 onwards, since in Hungary the marks of the school-leaving examination and the marks of the last two grades form part of the admission scores, they have to assess pupils with a merit mark. Another negative change in their case was the abolition of the possibility to take the Euritmia exam.

Regulations that have steadily reduced the pedagogical autonomy of alternative schools have led to a specific solution. The interviewees said that in the process of revising their pedagogical programmes they had to look for the 'loopholes' left open by the legislation that allowed them to use alternative methods and procedures, and that despite the fact that 'the programme became more and more schematic to comply with the legislation, the practice did not really change. This in turn resulted in a widening gap between the paper form and everyday practice" (Interviewee 2).

#### 4. Conclusion

In Hungary, alternative private schools are only partially independent from the state, as the state also contributes financially to their operation. However, this does not negatively affect the autonomy of alternative schools in the case of a liberal and decentralised education policy government and leaves them free to shape their pedagogical work. As the results of our research have shown, the change in educational policy and the government's efforts and measures towards centralisation and unification have also affected alternative private schools, steadily reducing their pedagogical autonomy and the extent of alternation. From the point of view of the pedagogical work in schools, the period from the regulation of the curriculum to the granting of licences to use individual solutions is seen as a restriction of the freedom of movement of alternative schools: 'A narrowing tunnel in which we can hardly move anymore and we see it narrowing further. It is really narrowing our possibilities, our freedom of thought and our freedom of method" (Interviewee 1).

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