Overview

During the two decades that have passed since Hungary’s transition to democracy, the most significant undertaking in Hungarian education has been the attempt to define Hungarian educational policy, especially as it is influenced by and related to the major European educational systems. Aside from attempts to distance Hungarian education policies from socialist models, recent changes have been characterized both by nostalgia and a desire for greater educational freedom. On the one hand, there is great nostalgia for the continental model of schooling, which emphasizes high-quality secondary education but does so in the context of a comparatively centralized model of educational policymaking. On the other hand, there is also an affinity for the transatlantic model, which emphasizes local and institutional autonomy.

In the past twenty years, Hungarian public education has been exposed to international trends that have shaken more stable educational systems. The influence of these trends is noticeable: the right for the free choice of schools has become not only legal but also widely accepted, and denominational and private (foundational) schools have integrated into the system. Schools also enjoy a high degree of autonomy; Hungary is among Europe’s leaders in this respect (Key Data 2005). Many
view these changes as systemic improvements; however, Hungary still faces enormous challenges, especially when it comes to serving pupils of all backgrounds and abilities. In rural areas and some urban communities, pupils are segregated by socioeconomic background. Moreover, culture has a great impact on the school system’s ability to serve some children. In some communities, school attendance is not yet an accepted norm. Other important issues in Hungarian education include the low social and financial prestige of teaching and the ageing of the teaching profession more generally, a lack of qualified teachers in certain subject areas, and—despite a strong demand—growing uncertainty about the role of schools in the teaching of values.

**The structure of schooling**

Both the structure and the functioning of the school system are characterized by the dichotomy of central (state) and local control. The central government strictly regulates both the structure of the education system overall and the structures and functions of individual institutions with regard to the actual work they do and their economic and organizational parameters. With limited exception, the same demands of quality, structure, and content apply to state schools and to non-state or non-municipal schools alike.

Most of the legislation that currently regulates the Hungarian system of education was passed after the transition to democracy, between 1990 and 1993. Even considering these new regulations, the system continues to operate on the same basic foundations: the centuries-long traditions of European and Hungarian Christianity, general human rights, and the aim of preparing citizens for the demands of a global, post-industrial society.

The Ministry of National Resources, which is also the supervising body of culture, health care, and social issues, regulates the Hungarian education system. An additional state agency, the Educational Authority, oversees and gives assistance to individual institutions and performs all administrative and authoritative tasks emerging in the field of education. The Educational Authority works in close cooperation with the heads of individual institutions.

In Hungary, any individual or organization (for profit and not-for-profit organizations as well) that meets certain legal criteria can establish a school. School founders are practically entitled to exercise control; they have general administrative and decision-making freedom.

Four fifths of school-aged children attend schools operated by local governments and one tenth of pupils in Hungary attend schools operated by county governments. The remainder of pupils attend church and independent private schools (6.3% of pupils
and 3.7% of pupils, respectively). (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2010). During the past five years the number of pupils attending municipal schools has been steadily but not sharply decreasing for demographic reasons. At the same time, there has been a slight increase in the number of pupils attending church or independent private schools. There are two apparent reasons for the decrease in the number of pupils attending municipal schools: First, parents are making more conscious choices about the pedagogies and value-systems to which they would like their children to be exposed. Second, due to decreasing resources and the educational budget being unseparated from other local expenses, insolvent local governments have found it difficult to maintain some schools; they have closed schools and instead relied upon private education providers (whose resources are specifically allotted to educational purposes) to provide free compulsory education to the public. (Halász-Lannert 2006, Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2010).

Compulsory education in Hungary begins at age six and ends at age 18. Between the ages of three and six, children attend kindergarten, and from the age of six they attend eight-year primary schools, after which there are a number of different types of institutions to choose from. Some pupils enter academically oriented secondary schools. These schools offer programs ranging in length from four to eight years. Pupils who do not aspire to academically oriented secondary schools may choose from two vocational options: vocational secondary schools allow pupils to sit for a secondary school leaving exam, much like the exam given in academically-oriented secondary schools. Purely vocational institutions are also an option for some pupils after the eighth year of their primary education; these vocational institutions provide training in a four plus one or four plus two-year system: a four-year general learning programme and one or two years of apprenticeship, and they differ from their counterparts in that pupils do not sit for a leaving exam but instead earn a vocational qualification.

Institutions of compulsory education vary in terms of pedagogical features, ranging from the over 100-year-old traditional continental school to virtually all branches of reform pedagogy, such as Waldorf, Montessori, and Freinet kindergartens and schools. In addition, there are schools catering to pupils with special needs. These schools, in particular, enjoy a high degree of pedagogical freedom, but they are not entitled to state funding because of the tuition fee they charge and that their curricula are essentially different from the centrally prescribed one, and this often makes their operation difficult.

In the years following Hungary’s political transformation, control over the centralized and ideological curriculum was loosened substantially. A new National Curriculum, an essentially liberal core curriculum, did not name specific school subjects but only areas of knowledge that should be taught in schools. These areas of knowledge served as a basis for schools to compile their own curricula. This arrangement placed a heavy burden on the teaching staff in schools. Moreover, the delivery of education came to
be unequal, in terms of curricular opportunity, from locale to locale. Thus, at the turn of the millennium, the conservative government introduced a more detailed curriculum framework, which was broken down into subjects and lesson frames. This framework proved more helpful to schools and teachers.

Accountability for pupil achievement exists in the school-leaving examinations for which secondary school pupils must sit and in the vocational qualifying system that is a part of vocational education programs. At the primary school level the main tool for ensuring school quality is textbook content; textbooks must appear on a list maintained by the Ministry of Culture and Education in order to be used in schools. Textbook content, however, is not based on clear requirements.

Despite this criticism, the open market for textbooks and other school resources does guarantee some degree of pedagogical variety. The official accredited list of schoolbooks maintained by the Ministry of Culture and Education contains over 3000 schoolbooks and auxiliary materials (task sheets, atlases and anthologies). Schools may choose from this list the materials they deem most suitable for their own curricula. (Ministry of Culture and Education, 2010).

The legal framework

Hungary has signed a number of international treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration of Children’s Rights. The ratification and subsequent integration of these treaties into the Hungarian legal system have brought about major changes in the structure and operation of the educational system.

The Hungarian Constitution (Act XX of 1949) provides the right for education. The state is therefore obliged to provide its citizens with access to cultural and educational institutions. The Constitution lists the following specific elements of education: children’s right for the care and protection necessary for their satisfactory physical, mental, and moral development [Article 67 Section (1)]; parents’ right to choose the form of education given to their children [Article 67 Section (2)]; national and ethnic minorities’ right for education in their native languages [Article 68 Section (2)], and free compulsory primary schooling and the availability of secondary and higher education to every person [Article 70/F Section (2)].

Citizen rights stipulated by the Constitution as well as universal human and children’s rights are issues of utmost sensitivity in compulsory education; in recognition of this, in 1999 a new post, commissioner for educational rights, was created to supervise their enforcement. During the past decade, issues and initiatives related to equality of educational opportunity, social integration, and national and ethnic minority education have received a great deal of attention. Government has launched large-
scale initiatives to address these issues, the results of which are increasingly visible in the appearance of legal guarantees, the proliferation of institutions offering support and assistance (including non-government organizations), and a perceptible change in attitudes surrounding preferred pedagogies in schools.

In addition to constitutional provisions, the educational system is also supported by a whole network of laws and regulations. Separate legislation exists on compulsory education, vocational education, higher education, and adult education. At a lower level, various governmental and ministerial decrees define specific operational tasks related to schools and the conditions of their fulfilment.

On the whole, the Hungarian educational system is characterised by strict and comprehensive formal control: apart from central control (carried out by the aforementioned Educational Authority), there is also strong control on the part of school sponsors (such as local authorities or religious organizations or for-profit enterprises) focusing primarily on conformity to the law and financial regulations. Their professional control in the narrow sense is formal rather than practical; instead, schools rely on various further specialisation courses and professional counselling organisations to enhance the quality of their work.

**Freedom to establish non-state schools**

In order to create the legal conditions for free choice of schools, it was necessary to broaden individual rights (e.g. choice of schools, freedom of conscience and religion) and to provide, by law, the conditions necessary for exercising those rights (e.g. the operation of churches or founding private schools). Act IV of 1990 on churches and the freedom of conscience and religion enabled parents to make a free decision on the “religious, moral, antireligious, or - in terms of religion - neutral or indifferent” upbringing of their underage children. The above rights became reality when it became legally possible to establish non-state schools. Act IV of 1990 stipulated the separation of the church and the state and declared that the state is not allowed to set up any body to control or supervise the churches, which, in turn, have the right to practice education.

The Education Act, amended in 1990, made it possible for legal entities and natural persons to maintain educational institutions. In doing so, it created the legal conditions of a pluralistic school system and affirmed parents’ rights to direct the educational upbringing of their children. The Education Act of 1990, however, did not address the issue of how parents would be able to obtain the education desired for their children. For if free choice of schools was to be a reality for all parents, it would be necessary for the state to ensure that all parents could afford the cost of any tuition that their school of choice might charge.
Consequently, in accordance with the European norm of sector neutrality, state funding of non-state education was introduced and systematized. Act XXXII of 1991 settled the ownership of former church real estate confiscated in the communist era (Pusztai 2004). Constitutional court decisions related to the act clarified the requirement of neutral local schools and the concepts of positive and negative freedom of religion (State schools and church schools satisfy different aspects of the freedom of religion). After the political transformation the basic principles of the practice of funding have been task-oriented normative funding and sector neutrality. By now it has become a consolidated system.

Political change in Hungary has resulted in an educational system that looks very different from those of the communist and pre-World War II eras. Before World War II, about half of primary schools were run by churches, and the number of denominational secondary schools was only slightly lower. In contrast, during the communist era there were only ten denominational secondary schools, functioning under strict government control (Tomka 2005). In the academic year 2000-10 academic year, there was a greater proportion of non-state educational institutions at the secondary level than at the primary level; the total proportion of non-state secondary institutions was still under one-third, however.(Table 1).

Within the non-state sector, the proportion of denominational founding organizations - owing to their wealth of experience - is higher in general academic education and in the area of education for pupils with special needs. In contrast, non-denominational foundations represent a larger number of vocational education providers (Fehérvári-Liskó 1998). The vocational church schools that do exist cater to a niche market. They tend to support disadvantaged pupils who have dropped out of the school system. By and large, educational institutions maintained by foundations, non-profit and for-profit entities either base their work on an alternative pedagogical system or are educational enterprises preparing their pupils for jobs that are in demand (Várhegyi 1997).
In Hungary, two-thirds of pupils in denominational schools attend Roman Catholic schools. Over one quarter of pupils attend Reformed Schools, and about one-tenth of pupils attend Lutheran schools. Half of the existing denominational schools are located in small towns; the rest are in the capital or in county seats. This does not mean, however, that pupils in rural areas are not benefiting from denominational schools; one of the strengths of the denominational secondary school system is the central role of boarding schools as educators and as a path to social advancement. Denominational secondary schools are concentrated in the eastern and other peripheral regions of the country, which makes schooling accessible to social groups that were previously excluded from secondary education because of the uneven distribution of the institutions (Pusztai 2004). Half of the existing foundational schools in Hungary are located in the capital, and a third of the remaining are in other big cities (Imre 2004). As the resurgence of denominational and foundational secondary schools coincided with structural reforms in secondary education, a significant feature of non-state schooling has been experimentation with vertical expansion (Pusztai 2004, Imre 2004).

With regard to the beliefs of pupils attending denominations schools in particular, the picture is mixed. On the one hand, denominational secondary schools are favoured by an actively and ecclesiastically religious circle of school users (39% of the pupils); on the other hand, these schools also enroll a lot of pupils from families with no religious affiliation (45%) or of mixed faith (16%). In many cases, school choice was based on either a family’s hope for a specifically religious education and the moral development that such education suggests or on the expectation that religious schools provide a caring and safe atmosphere grounded in social norms that are not perceived to be present in the public system. That is to say, the main line of expectations is
related to religiosity or its consequential dimensions (Pusztai 2004). The population of private or foundational schools is made up of school-age pupils excluded from mass state education because of their specific value expectations (reform pedagogy, for example [ED: generally what in the US is known as “progressive education”]) or special needs deriving from learning difficulties, and young people who have already left compulsory education and look for accessible vocational training.

**Homeschooling**

Legislation on public education allows for home schooling. Choosing the most appropriate form of education is among the parental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. On the basis of parents’ choice, compulsory education can be completed by daily school attendance or as a home schooled pupil (Act LXXIX of 1993 on Public Education, Article 7 Section 1).

Very few parents in Hungary opt for home schooling. In most cases, children are homeschooled due to illness or other special circumstances, such as permanent residence abroad, or engagement in some kind of profession (such as sports or the arts). The law requires that homeschooled pupils be enrolled in a specific institution, which, in accordance with its own rules, is obliged to help pupils complete their education by offering regular consultations and personal assistance from teaching staff.

Homeschooled pupils have to be tested at regular intervals (at least twice a year). They usually participate in end-term exams, which are administered by an examination board that decides whether the pupil can continue on to the next grade (11/1994 Decree on the operation of educational institutions, Articles 16-26).

There are strict legal conditions attached to homeschooling. For example, the law requires that a local child welfare service approve the arrangement. The restriction stems from a trend in the late 1990s for schools to persuade pupils with behavioral or academic difficulties to exercise their homeschooling option.

There is also the tendency for pupils with special educational needs to be homeschooled. Indeed, this is so common that in the most recent official statistics for the country’s education system homeschoolers and students with special educational needs are counted as one category (Statistical Yearbook of Education, 2009-2010).

Recent analyses conclude that most homeschooled pupils are older than their traditionally-schooled peers or complete their primary education later than the average. This supports the assumption that private homeschool status in Hungary does not fulfil the internationally accepted definition of home schooling (Educational Authority, 2010).
All in all, in Hungary those who choose to homeschool cannot evade the traditional school system completely. Parents who attempt to provide schooling for their children without support from a designated school are, technically, in breach of the law. Local notaries keep regular contact with school headmasters and bring action against parents who fail to comply with the requirements for compulsory education.

**School choice not limited by family income**

Social inequality in Hungary is significant and multidimensional. It also exists on a different scale than in many Northern and Western European countries. This is in part because the social and economic transformations that have taken place in recent years have resulted in a widening gap between the social classes. Besides the traditional categories such as education, job opportunities, and the social class into which people are born, social status in Hungary social status is also determined by one’s position in the systems of interest-assertion, power, and disadvantaged physical location (Pusztai 2003). Inequalities of social class, income, and geography strongly influence a family’s ability to exercise choice in schooling. For example, in regions with high proportions of youth, the economy tends to be underdeveloped and unemployment tends to be high (Gíörgyi-Mészáros 2011). In these regions, which are also disproportionately populated by the Roma people in Hungary, parents and children have fewer opportunities to make meaningful choices among schools (Forray-Kozma 2010).

Although public authorities in Hungary have undertaken a renewed effort to integrate public schools, it is difficult to achieve real integration, in practice, because poverty and other social characteristics tend to be concentrated in certain areas. Poverty and other social problems can make access to education difficult—families are not always well equipped to effectively navigate schools and the educational system in general, and teachers are not always attracted to teach in areas with concentrations of poverty, which is perceived as a barrier to educational achievement. The result in Hungary, as in most countries, is school districts with concentrations of impoverished, low social status groups and other school districts with concentrations of wealthier families. Families that fall into the latter category rarely make the choice to send their children to schools that serve large concentrations of low social status children, in large part because they perceive that the quality of education that will be available there is inferior. Generally, parents prefer to have their children attend schools with pupils who share their culture. Thus, in spite of political efforts to integrate schools, many families “vote with their feet” (Lannert-Mártonfi 2006).

In the non-state sector, one-fifth of the schools maintained by churches are in the capital and mainly attract middle- and high-income pupils. However, two thirds of the pupils in denominational boarding schools come from middle- and lower middle-class families who reside in small country towns and villages. Although they also serve some pupils from
high-income urban areas, denominational schools are more successful at integrating pupils of different social (and economic) backgrounds than are state schools. (Pusztai 2004, 2008, 2009). Other marked features of denominational pupils’ backgrounds are that the number of children per family is higher (2.36) than the Hungarian average and the proportion of single-parent families is also high. The fact that denominational schools are more successful in helping disadvantaged pupils catch up is due to the more efficient learning environment created by the organizational features of these schools (boarding-school, abundance of extracurricular activities), and the values-oriented attitudes of both parents and the schools (Dronkers-Róbert 2004, Pusztai 2009).

In private and foundational schools in the capital (where half of such schools are located), pupils generally come from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds. Foundational schools with alternative pedagogical methods are mostly favoured by upper-middle class families in the capital and big cities (Imre 2004, Budai 2009). Vocational schools founded as enterprises are popular in peripheral regions with lower middle-status children who have left secondary school but do not aspire to higher education (Ádám 2007).

School distinctiveness protected by law and policy

During the era of socialism (after 1956) Hungary enjoyed a higher degree of intellectual freedom than did other communist countries. That level of freedom was still very far from today’s level, which can be described as democratic. Although in the 1970s the state uncompromisingly clung to its right to maintain schools and promote doctrinaire ideological views, some remarkable and modern curriculum development projects were launched toward the end of that decade. Thus, the democratic transformation of the Hungarian school system began well before the transformation of the political system in 1990. The Act on Education of 1985 made it possible for teaching staff to employ innovative educational processes and elect headmasters who could design and implement their own pedagogical and programmatic agendas. The most spectacular organisational change, however, was thanks to a loophole in this law that helped alternative pedagogical trends to find their way into mainstream pedagogical practice. The loophole allowed for the establishment of “experimental schools” with the education minister’s permission. After the transition to democracy, secondary schools were allowed to design their 6- and 8-year programmes to be “experimental” in nature. These so-called “structural reform” secondary schools were established with the expectation that they would enable a return to Central European continental educational traditions. In this way, they were emblematic manifestations of Hungarian independence and high-quality education.

The Act on Public Education, which was passed in 1993 and has undergone only slight modifications since then, is based on the principles of catering to the needs of children, families, society at large and the provision of the best possible education for all children. Both principles presuppose a colourful and differentiated school system capable of serving global social and local needs alike.
The greatest benefit and novelty of the act is that it not only guarantees but also prescribes the distinctiveness of educational institutions by obliging each to compile its own, school-specific pedagogical program, so long as that program is aligned with certain curricular and extracurricular requirements. School programs are comprised of a school’s local curricula (or vocational training plan) and its educational program for regulating extracurricular activities. Programs should also provide a means to differentiate curricula as needed and ensure equality of educational opportunity. Schools are also mandated to work closely with families and/or child protection and welfare agencies.

While allowing for pedagogical and curricular variation by requiring each school to write its own program, government also ensures that school distinctiveness cannot be fully realized because it funds all schools centrally and can prescribe sometimes burdensome administrative regulations for schools to follow. Problematically, the state, in recent years, has been funding schools at lower and lower levels. This happens at a time when the expense of maintaining schools is rising and other sources of income for schools, such as private funding, are decreasing. The vast majority of schools in Hungary are struggling to survive. The situation is especially tenuous in communities with high concentrations of poverty and low concentrations of social capital. As schools have to turn to families to finance an increasing number of activities and services, institutional distinctiveness could be threatened.

Despite these important issues, there still exists in Hungary the freedom to choose from a wide range of pedagogical and curricular offerings, the range of which requires a high level of preparedness and responsibility on the part of the teaching workforce. Indeed, ensuring that teachers are properly trained in variety of educational theories and approaches is more difficult than simply passing legislation that allows for innovative options to exist. For this reason, the network of professional development options and professional counseling that exists for Hungarian teachers is very important.

Of course, it should be mentioned that an important part of school distinctiveness in Hungary stems from a relatively newfound freedom for different political and educational ideologies to flourish. One of the most exciting challenges of the restructuring of the educational system in the past 20 years has been determining how, after the fall of a monolithic ideological regime, various social groups can obtain schooling that is in line with their world views and religious convictions. After the downfall of the socialist economic system, the idea of the free market became irresistible to many. Along with free market economics came the idea that political neutrality was best; for some such neutrality was equal to the lack of a dominant political ideology. With regard to education, however, this posed a problem. There was fierce debate as to whether it possible or desirable to have an “ideologically neutral” school. In the early 1990s, when freedom rose in value, the role of schools as conveyers of values was mostly rejected, and the liberal idea of self-realization more accepted in public education. In the late 1990s, however, public sentiment changed, and schools were expected to take a more active part in character formation (Szabó 1999).
The ability to impact character formation in children suggests that there are aspects or qualities of character that are desirable to develop. This stance is inherently ideological. In the socialist era, representatives of institutional education regarded parents as ideologically unreliable—the state was charged with developing the character of its citizens. Since the 1990s, however parent rights have been emphasized over the needs of the state, and choice of schooling is viewed as an important facet of parental rights. This is not to suggest that all Hungarians believe that parents should be allowed to choose their children’s schools. Advocates of denominational schools tend to argue for their existence on the basis that they give priority to parent choice. These schools are often seen as an extended arm of the family that is responsible for child-rearing. This idea is essentially different from the principles preferred by public schools, which emphasize the moral autonomy of children in contrast to the restrictive ideological influence of parents and teachers.

In the non-state sector, church schools offer a definitively religious worldview, although they are required to do so while also fulfilling the requirements of the state curriculum. In the growing denominational sector, it was for a long time an open question as to who would add the religious element to school life and how. This is because the senior generation of teachers, most of whom were trained before the transition to democracy, was burdened with the common experience and charge of trying to suppress “clerical reaction.” Before the political transformation, teacher training in Hungary did not offer any pedagogical theories that were clearly based on a religious view of man and the world. Even today, in the name of ideological neutrality, state universities do not offer any special training for teaching in church schools, so it is the teaching staff and teachers’ associations in denominational schools that formulate pedagogical missions and train teachers in them.

Decisions about admitting pupils

Since 2007, laws governing admissions have become much stricter at primary level. Public-sector schools are not allowed to organise entrance examinations, but denominational and foundational schools are. In communities with more than one school, districts are to be marked out in such a way that pupils of disadvantaged backgrounds are represented in an approximately equal number in each district. If a school has vacancies for non-district pupils and an overflow of applicants to fill the vacancy, admission is determined by lottery. However, a lottery is not necessary in the case of schools that explicitly serve pupils with special educational needs (such as those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with language needs). In such cases, the catchment area for admission is the whole municipality instead of the district. Local governments can establish criteria that can override the district division. Siblings of attending pupils, for example, may get priority.

The transition to democracy impacted the manner in which secondary schools admit
pupils more than any other level of schooling. In the 1990s, admission to secondary schools was based on principles of competition. However, because the majority of very popular six- and eight-year secondary schools attracted children from high-status families, at the turn of the millennium the conservative government took various measures to limit the schools’ right of selection; they did so in the name of equality of educational opportunity. Since 2000, entrance to secondary schools has been determined with the aid of a centralized information system. Each school maintains a list of eligible pupils; eligibility is based upon school grades or/and points scored on a written competency examination that is administered by the state. Each school compares its list with a list of each pupil’s choice of schools. Pupils who do not meet the eligibility criteria for any of the schools of their choice continue their education in an institution that does not admit pupils based on academic criteria. Despite the presence of such non-discriminatory institutions, secondary education in Hungary is very selective. In elite secondary schools requiring a high score for admission, at least four-fifths of the parents have a higher education degree, and a large number of families provide “shadow education”, or tutoring, for their children. They do so despite research suggesting that such programs do not add much educational value (Neuwirth 2005).

Decisions about staff

People employed in the Hungarian school system have the status of civil servants, just like people working in other fields of the public sector. Such status gives public employees, including teachers, considerable protections, providing them with the financial security necessary for doing their work but, at the same time, making it difficult to dismiss those whose work is unsatisfactory. However, outside of the state sector, teachers and other employees do not always have civil servant status.

Teaching positions in state schools, like other civil service positions, can be filled only by way of public competition. With the exception of first-year teachers, who are on “probationary status,” teaching jobs are granted for an indefinite term. Increasingly, however, school leaders are opting to employ teachers on the basis of a fixed-term contract (usually one or two years), which provides institutions the flexibility to respond to rapidly changing conditions.

Teachers are employed by the leader, or principal, of each school, and the Act on Public Education regulates the qualifications necessary for various teaching posts. Formally, the length of time one has spent as a teacher matters only with regard to pay scale and the ability to fill a leadership position. Expectations regarding quality and expertise can be specified by schools in job postings. Only applicants to denominational and foundational schools and schools serving large concentrations
of ethnic minority pupils are expected to have special qualifications and expertise.

Within the present system, teachers’ opportunities for promotion are rather poor. The only real possibility of professional differentiation is filling a leadership position. Compulsory and voluntary further training may affect one’s earning capacity and enhance teachers’ informal prestige.

**Accountability for school quality**

The problems of measuring achievement in Hungarian schools are similar to those elsewhere in Europe and the world. School grades and various indices mainly focus on academic achievement. At the same time, apart from individual achievement, the overall ability of institutions to impact pupil achievement has been receiving a great deal of attention.

The state has administered national competency examinations for almost ten years. The results are relevant only at the level of the institution (or, at the most, at class level) and their task is to give a picture of the work of a particular school. If a school does not reach a certain achievement level, it is obliged to create and implement an action plan to increase pupil achievement.

Because Hungarian society is becoming increasingly diverse, measuring achievement has become a contested issue in the post-communist Hungarian school system. It is linked to well-known EU/OECD tests. During the past ten years PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS data lists have been published regularly. Policy makers have reflected upon the results of these tests and taken some action. However, in recent years, the complex interpretation of the pedagogical process and the emphasis on educational-socialising tasks have been gaining ground, as a result of which achievement tests have started to include contextual and relationship elements (Lannert, 2006).

Not only does legislation require external examinations, it also makes inner control and accountability possible by requiring each institution to implement a “compulsory quality management system.”. The system must be conceived and implemented by each school founder/leader. Accountability for quality is also ensured by the presence of school boards or various professional groups, parental organisations, and pupil governments. Despite efforts to produce better achievement outcomes through accountability, it is still very difficult to establish standards for curricular processes. Pedagogical events and interactive decisions, as parts of pedagogical culture, are very difficult to standardize.
Teaching of values

After the transition to democracy, teachers’ and educational policymakers’ views on the role of schools as conveyers of values were most powerfully shaped by the pluralism of values appearing in society and schools on the one hand, and by a liberal attitude toward education as a reflexive response to socialist pedagogy on the other. According to the liberal view, children should have a high degree of autonomy in value choices, and influences coming from actors traditionally involved in their upbringing (parents and teachers) should be limited in this respect (Mihály 1998). Although the Hungarian National Curriculum mentions some values that are advisable to be passed on to children, they are primarily values related to citizenship (democracy, European humanism) (Szabó 2009).

Research has also shown that although the central element of the public sector’s ideology is value neutrality, different sectors of the school system convey different values to their circles of users. Surveys reveal that public and denominational school users hold significantly different views on educational values at home and at school. An important measure of educational values is the relationship of the individual to the community. Pupils in the denominational sector more often identify themselves as part of a community, while public sector pupils value individual freedom more than solidarity with the community. (Pusztai 2011).

Among the values schools are supposed to teach, church school users give highest priority to the importance of teaching honesty, morals, cooperation and the protection of the environment, and they cite the loving treatment that prevails in the school as paramount.

Socialist education looked upon teachers, beyond their role of instructor-educator, as the mouthpieces of the one and only ideology. This contrasts with the liberal view that teachers are neutral and unbiased experts and organizers of information (Mihály 1998). Meanwhile, a lot of research has proved that in our Hungary, a country still struggling with the political change, one of the most important keys to schools achievement is the security of norms (Pusztai 2009, Szabó 2009). Not only is the concept of the value-neutral teacher not present in denominational institutions, the provision of education in such institutions is rooted in the idea that all agents in the schools and surrounding the schools hold the same values. This is evident in parent-teacher relationships and among teaching staff. Not surprisingly, teaching staff show a much more uniform attitude in denominational as opposed to public schools, especially with respect to norms of behaviour at school, studying, communication with partners at school, and norms of teacher behaviour (Bacskai 2009).

As for the intersectoral comparison of pupil-teacher relationships, our information from pupils reveals clearly that in denominational schools and some private schools that employ alternative pedagogies, one of the most remarkable features of teachers’ pedagogical practice is the more varied nature of keeping in contact with the pupils. Public
and non-public schools differ even in the opinions of their respective users about the teaching profession. A larger number of denominational school users consider that a value-oriented upbringing requires expertise; they are satisfied with teachers and do not tend to blame them for pupils’ failures. This same population also tends to believe that teachers in Hungary deserve to be better paid. In contrast to the public-sector, where the role of the teacher can be described as limited, in denominational schools a much greater appreciation for teacher work is evident (Pusztai 2009).


