PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF LINKING TEACHER EDUCATION WITH DISADVANTAGE COMPENSATION
THE EXAMPLE OF THE MOTIVATION STUDENT MENTORING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The Hungarian education system fails to compensate for the disadvantages experienced by students from less favourable backgrounds. One way of resolving this issue could be a reform of teacher education in Hungary. This paper highlights why it may be beneficial to give priority to the issue of disadvantage compensation in the theoretical and practical training of teacher education students. In order to reinforce this idea, the paper illustrates the possible positive effects on teacher education students with a real-life example. Through the results of an interview study and based on the experiences of project coordinators, we argue that linking the education of teacher education students with educational disadvantage compensation programs – which can have a favourable effect on the views of teacher education students concerning disadvantaged students, on their self-reflective thinking, as well as on the development of innovative pedagogical instruments – provides a unique opportunity in the professional development of teacher education students. Furthermore, these solutions may alleviate educational inequalities in the short term by providing a solution for certain challenges teachers have to face in the school. In the long term, teacher education students receiving a more adequate training may enter the labour market well-prepared for their profession.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The benefits of discussing the issue of disadvantage compensation in teacher education

The relationship between one's unfavourable family background and failure at school is a well-documented phenomenon; furthermore, it is very characteristic of Hungary. The Hungarian education system cannot mitigate the disadvantages of disadvantaged students; on the contrary, the system further amplifies these disadvantages, primarily by assigning students with unfavourable backgrounds to one school or class (Csapó et al., 2014). While it is true that the mitigation of this selection requires system-level reforms, this must be accompanied by reinforcing the importance of managing the differences among students in the classroom.

It is difficult to separate the problems resulting from the flaws in teacher education from those resulting from the selective, segregating mechanisms of the education system. However, most likely training in its current form is not effective in preparing

teacher education students how to teach students from different social backgrounds, especially students from poor families who often struggle with serious learning problems, in a personalized manner. Although it would be challenging to describe the society of teachers in a comprehensive way, we can conclude that the selective Hungarian education system and the practice schools – i.e. the schools where teacher education students teach during their practice – which are typically attended by students from more favourable backgrounds, train teachers who may not have any experience in teaching disadvantaged students at the start of their career.

A further starting point for linking teacher education with disadvantage compensation programs could be to include the organization of school programs which are not strictly linked to education, as these programs are likely to be terminated first due to the increase in the workload of teachers. Experience shows that extracurricular programs significantly influence students' attitude to school and their learning motivation, and this is especially true for students who are likely to experience failure at school (e.g. Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Pusztai, 2009). This is particularly important because teachers most often mention motivational problems in connection with the educational failure they face when teaching disadvantaged and Roma students (see Fejes, 2005).

Since in many cases the elimination of segregation also prejudices the – suspected or real – interests of middle-class parents, teachers, with their central role in the success of integration, may be the key actors in promoting social acceptance. However, this active role requires teachers to realize the relationship between disadvantaged status and school success and they also need to be confident in applying this knowledge.

The framework of the Motivation Student Mentoring Program

At the beginning of the 2007/2008 academic year, the University of Szeged, Institute of Education, with the support of the Roma Education Fund and in cooperation with NGOs, organised a mentor network in order to support the desegregation measures in Szeged (Szűcs & Kelemen, 2013). Within the framework of this Program, multiple disadvantaged and Roma pupils, who were transferred to new schools, received help from mentors at the school. The Program relied on the work of university/college students, especially teacher education students and other students training for helping professions (hereinafter referred to as mentors or student mentors). The primary aim of the Student Mentoring Program (known as the Motivation Student Mentoring Program as of 2012) was to support the academic development and social integration of children who were transferred to new schools due to the desegregation process. In addition, the facilitation of the professional development and social sensitivity of teacher education students was an indirect objective of the Mentoring Program.

In the 2008/2009 academic year, the primary schools affected by the desegregation measures (Szűcs, 2013) in Hódmezővásárhely also joined the Program. After the pupils affected by the desegregation measures graduated from primarily schools and continued their studies in other institutions, mentoring was not terminated at the primary schools, and other pupils requiring help at the participating schools were enrolled in the Program. Since the 2013/2014 academic year, the Program has been operating within the framework of the Motivation Educational Association as an afterschool program (Tanoda) in the buildings

of the Association. However, this paper focuses on the mentoring activity at schools.

The theoretical preparation of student mentors was supported by a university course looking at the relationship between difficulties arising from the disadvantaged and minority position and failures at school, as well as discussing actual research data in the field and possible practical solutions, with special focus on desegregation and mentoring. Another weekly course, the mentor meeting, created the ground for discussing administrative tasks, operational tasks, and other questions, problems and experiences arising from the mentoring work. The theoretical course was compulsory for every student mentor in the semester when they joined the Program, and attendance at the mentor meetings was expected from all student mentors throughout the Program. Furthermore, through methodological and internal training sessions, among others, the Student Mentoring Program provided several opportunities for the participants to acquire the competences required to be successful as mentors (see Fejes et. al., 2014).

Some of the student mentors received grants as a compensation for their work in the Program. Considering the time invested, the grant was a minimal amount: even the lowest hourly rates offered for any student work were higher than the grant. In our experience, the primary motivation for joining the Student Mentoring Program was the opportunity to put into practice the theory learnt at the university, as well as the opportunity for professional development. The 'exploitation' of this development in the labour market was made possible by a certificate students received for participating in the Program, as well as certificates from the professional training sessions they attended within the framework of the Program. Student mentors also had the advantage of receiving university credit points for the university courses they participated in as part of the Program. For many of them another attractive feature was that they could receive professional support and they found the research area for their papers and MA theses in the field of equal opportunities in education (e.g. Balázs, 2011; Bereczky & Fejes, 2013; Szabó, 2008). Students in receipt of the grant, that is, student mentors who spent at least 8 hours a week at their assigned school had the following tasks and duties: regular meetings with mentees, following up their situation, tutoring work, liaising with parents, organising joint programs with majority pupils, cooperative thinking with mentees and teachers in order to find solutions to school-related problems, development work based on the mentees' individual needs and requests, solving individual cases, supporting the channelling of information between the school and the parents, mediation work, data collection with regards to the Program, and administration.

Other student mentors, who did not receive payment for their work, were called volunteers. They spent an average of 3 hours at the school every week, thus their level of task involvement was different from that of the student mentors who received payment. Some of them carried out specific tasks just like the paid mentors but they worked with fewer mentees. Another group of volunteers supported the work of the student mentors, for example, in organising social programs and leisure activities.

The majority of the time spent with mentees consisted of learning together. Many combinations of learning support were formed within the Program. These can be categorized as follows:
– after school, as day-care or learning activities, in the form of individual or group learning,
– during school time, i.e. teacher education students could take the children out of the lessons (similarly to the practice of mentor teachers, special educators, and developmental

teachers), in the form of individual or group learning – mostly in the case of skill-related subjects, but sometimes including main subjects, too; depending on the decision taken by the teacher and the topic of the lesson,

– the teacher education student would sit next to the mentee during a lesson, usually supporting one mentee for the whole of the lesson,

– dual teaching: the teacher education student took part in the lesson and carried out the same or similar tasks to those of the teachers.

In most of the sessions, learning support was a group activity that mostly took place after school, where student mentors could support their mentees in completing their homework and preparing for lessons. They could also help school work by giving skill-related developmental tasks and activities to the children.

With the majority of the pupils, the most visible sign of difficulties was a significant lagging behind in their studies. At the same time, it was essential to involve the children in activities that could indirectly influence learning support, for example building a positive attitude towards school and learning. Besides, influencing social relationships was also one of the important objectives as regards peers, teachers and student mentors alike. Shifting mentor-mentee relationships towards a positive experience was crucial because pupils were often mentored in their free time, meaning they could decide whether they wanted to participate in the afternoon activities or not.

THE RESEARCH

In our qualitative research, we analysed the in-depth interviews made with student mentors participating in the Student Mentoring Program in the first (2007/2008) and fourth (2010/2011) academic years. We defined several research questions; however, the relevant research question from the perspective of this study was as follows: How can our initiative contribute to the process of becoming a teacher? We used the phenomenological in-depth interview developed by Seidman (2002) and analysed 54 interviews in total. We describe how the Program affected teacher education students by summarizing the results of the interview study (see Fejes & Szűcs, 2013) as well as our experiences as program coordinators (see Fejes et al., 2014). Due to length restrictions, we do not publish extracts from the interviews in this paper.

THE IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM ON TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

The results of the interview study

Working with the target group provided teacher education students with practical experience and made these future teachers change their viewpoints on certain issues so that they will be able to give more adequate answers to issues related to disadvantaged children as practising teachers. The results of our interview study suggest that by focusing on the problems of disadvantaged students, student mentors had the opportunity to consider the education of these pupils from a perspective which allowed them to see the shortcomings of the present educational practice. According to our analysis, this may have a positive

effect on the attitudes and views of teacher education students concerning disadvantage compensation. What is more, mentoring work required the teacher education students to take up a role which entails learning and expanding an innovative set of methodology techniques that take into account the differences between pupils as well as their individual needs. Student mentors often found themselves in situations where they had to take an active role at schools in adapting new activities or finding new solutions to some of the pupils' learning difficulties. Such a role surely supported teacher education students in taking an innovative and active approach in their career. The flexibility of the mentoring work and the learning problems of pupils which could not be ignored inspired student mentors to experiment with new techniques and apply a self-reflective approach.

Participating in the Student Mentoring Program not only supported the professional development of teacher education students but also had a significant influence on their attitudes towards the Roma minority. Although we were not faced with extreme views during the recruitment interviews, obviously the subject of the Program already pre-selected the candidates. However, some applicants stated that, among other reasons, they applied for the Program because they wanted to find out whether the negative views prevalent in Hungarian society about the Roma minority were true or not. We found that the Student Mentoring Program helped teacher education students to overcome many of their stereotypes and misconceptions.

Our interview study may not in itself prove that linking teacher education with initiatives like the Student Mentoring Program is definitely more effective than other forms of practical training. Teacher education students probably undergo similar favourable attitude changes as a result of other organized, practical experiences; however, our results bolster the idea that it is reasonable to renew teacher education in Hungary by giving more emphasis to certain topics that are currently ignored. Another question, which is difficult to answer, is whether the implementation of such programs in the training, i.e. the mandatory participation of teacher education students in such programs also leads to success, since the underlying motivation and attitudes of the volunteers who join such programs may play a key role both in the operation of the program and the personal development of the teacher education students.

PROGRAM COORDINATION EXPERIENCES

Reality shock, or the first critical year(s), refers to the phenomenon that after the sterile, theory-oriented teacher education, beginner teachers are caught unprepared by most of the tasks teaching at schools entails (Nagy, 2004). This was especially true for student mentors, since they worked with the most problematic pupils, they experienced success relatively rarely, and their relationship with the teachers was quite often not without conflicts (see Fejes et al., 2014). We believe that by providing the teacher education students with the opportunity to see the work of teachers in real-life circumstances, by creating ground for the regular exchange of experiences as well as by organizing discussion forums where mentors could tell the others their specific problems and by team building, our Program played an important role in alleviating the intensity of the reality shock.

Dual teaching and the two-teacher model are not unknown expressions at schools; however, it is difficult to define them and the Hungarian literature does not give us

much assistance here, either. In the Program, we used these terms when referring to the activities of the student mentors in certain schools, and when referring to the cooperation between student mentors and teachers in certain situations. In our understanding, dual teaching has various levels. At one end of the scale it means that the mentor supports the mentee during the lesson, while at the other end the mentor teaches a certain part of the lesson with or without the participation of the teacher. We are of the opinion that this kind of cooperation between the teacher and the teacher education student was especially important for the student mentors in their process of becoming teachers. The experiences gained by student mentors were valued by the labour market as well. We received feedback that in several cases, when our mentors applied for teaching positions or for positions dealing with equal opportunities in education, or when they applied for further studies abroad or for au pair jobs, the reference letter proving their participation in our Program brought them clear advantages. Moreover, the schools we cooperated with also benefited from the Program since they had the opportunity to get to know the student mentors and fill their vacancies with teachers who were already integrated members of the teaching staff. Several of our student mentors were hired on a full-time or part-time basis by the school where they used to work as mentors.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Initiatives like the Student Mentoring Program may contribute to mitigating the disadvantages of pupils in the short term, while in the long term, they may help to better prepare teacher education students for their profession. Such programs may also play a role in decreasing the level of counterselection in the teaching profession. Hungarian data shows that the composition of the teaching staff is less favourable at schools where the ratio of disadvantaged pupils is above the average (Varga, 2009). One of the consequences of teachers' counterselection is that teachers are usually less educated in these institutions; the proportion of less competent teachers is above the average. Preparing teacher education students within the framework of our Program or other similar programs may bring progress in this field through changing the prestige of the pedagogical work of dealing with disadvantaged pupils, through improving teachers' self-confidence and knowledge, and moreover through linking beginner teachers with schools. The practical experiences gained, as well as the relationships established during their training may to a great extent help in the future decisions of beginner teachers concerning their career (Maier & Youngs, 2009).

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