

**THE MAKING OF THE KNOWING SUBJECT:
THE POLITICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN
EDUCATION SYSTEM**

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To the students of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Abstract

The past decade's centralization of education in Hungary led to the curtailment of educational institutions' autonomy and introduced several measures that control the knowledge transfer happening in the classrooms. As education is one of the main socializing mechanisms in one's life, every political penetration to the education system can have a serious influence on students' identity. This thesis analyzes the Orbán Government's education policy, with a focus on some of the most recent regulations of it through the questions of authority, autonomy, identity, and subjectivity. The paper uses critical education theory as a framework to shed light on how government policies are aiming to produce a certain type of knowing subject and to look for the spaces left to resist the political pressure. The interviewed elite high schools in Hungary use their greater scope of autonomy to allow space for critical pedagogy in their classrooms. These daily practices are successfully used to contribute to the knowledge formation of students and produce autonomous thinkers within their institutions.

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Introduction

It has not been too long since my high school graduation. The memories of those years are still vivid, but what is more interesting is how from a different perspective I started to evaluate, make contrasts, and think more critically about the knowledge I have received during my high school years. The school leaves a major impact on everyone's life. Schools represent not only the primary space for education but also a space for socializing, learning how to act, and take part in a group or a community. Students are given a certain set of skills that can be utilized outside the school's premises too, and eventually, add up to how the younger generation acts as citizens in society.

The position of the young person as a student of a school resembles the position of the citizen within the state, as argued by Harry Brighouse.¹ He goes further by saying that the school and the education a young person receives heavily influences the type of citizen the individual becomes. In agreement with this, Henry A. Giroux argues that education is fundamental to democracy and democratic societies, for they cannot survive without a formative culture shaped by pedagogical practices capable of creating the conditions for producing citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable, and willing to make moral-judgments and act in a socially responsible way.² The most beneficial outcome for society is, if they gain these traits and become well-functioning citizens, meaning they will commit fewer crimes, they will be more considerate towards others and will carefully express their political views.³ Society expects children to gain a certain set of values and a sense of understanding of the world, more specifically the country and its culture they are raised in through the compulsory years of schooling.

The school curriculum helps to develop the young generation's national identity through learning about the nation's shared heritage, history, and literature. This shows how schools can act as moral and political regulation agencies, as Stanley Aronowitz and Giroux note.⁴ The

¹ Harry Brighouse (2006). *On Education*, Routledge, New York: Ch. 1, p. 73.

² Henry A. Giroux (2011). *On Critical Pedagogy*, The Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, p. 3.

³ Ibid, p. 62.

⁴ Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux (1991). *Postmodern education: Politics, Culture and Social Criticism*, University of Minnesota Press, Oxford, pp. 87-113.

authors argue that the curriculum itself is a form of politics, for it expresses and enforces particular power relations, and its structure and discourse reveal particular relations of power and oppression in schools, as well as the possibilities left to resistance.⁵ The school in this sense becomes a space for developing identity, and by injecting politics in the creation of the curriculum, the power politics of knowledge is revealed. The question is, to what extent are we at the stage where students are seen as empty “containers” to be filled with a suitable narrative, as Paolo Freire warns us?⁶ His banking concept of education problematizes the notion of education, where knowledge is considered to be a gift from the ‘knowledgeable’ given to those who know nothing.⁷ This, he argues to be a characteristic ideology of oppression that is ignorant and refuses education and knowledge to be a process driven by self-interest and query. The latter is what he calls the liberating notion of education, one that gradually empowers students to engage in the process of inquiry and connects them with their decision-making ability.⁸

Students are tailored to suit the system.⁹ Once they graduate, they roll out on the production line, as a product designed by various factory managers: the state government, principals, and teachers. Whoever is more influential in this process depends on the current state of education politics. We, students, are put together and our pieces are made from the curriculum, the textbooks, the teaching practice, and the degree of freedom left in the system. As an MA student, I have gone through the different stages of public education, and currently, I study at a university that is an island in Hungary’s education system. This educational institution was the first where I felt empowered and pushed forward to think critically. I found myself in a cooperative learning space where I have first felt that my opinion is valuable. It did not take long until I started telling myself how I wish I had experienced such teaching-learning practice earlier.

Education can be liberating as well. The classroom that bell hooks envisions shows the positive potentials of teaching, and how including the practices of critical education can turn the classroom into a collaborative workshop where through dialogue students can challenge oppressive ideologies and “transgress” against existing social boundaries.¹⁰ Ira Shor identifies

⁵ Aronowitz and Giroux. p. 87.

⁶ Paolo Freire (1993). *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Books, London, p. 53.

⁷ Freire, p. 53.

⁸ Ibid., p. 66-67.

⁹ John Walsh, (2008). The critical role of discourse in education for democracy, *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 6, (2), p. 68.

¹⁰ bell hooks (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*, Routledge, New York

a few practices of critical pedagogy resting on cooperation and dialogue, activities that can help the transformation of knowledge, resist against the oppression of the text and the hierarchy of education.¹¹ By identifying these practices, Shor highlights the culture of resistance already at work in schools, through which students can undermine authority and open up space for democratic dialogue in the classrooms.¹² This way, they can achieve what Giroux points to as the aim of democratic education, raising autonomous students capable of critical thinking.

The following pages are a quest to reveal how, and to what extent the contemporary centralized Hungarian education system contributes to the production of a specific knowing subject. Its goal is to uncover those spaces of resistance left in the daily negotiation of authority, autonomy, and the practice of teaching itself. The research aims to find answers to the following questions: *How does the contemporary Hungarian secondary education system affect the subject formation of young people as future citizens, particularly in the light of the current education reforms of the Orbán government? How do principals of high schools that have traditionally enjoyed greater degrees of freedom in defining their curricula negotiate the current reforms?* While the first question reflects on the analysis of recent policy changes and how it manifests in the daily practice of education, the second focuses on the above-mentioned spaces left for resistance.

The significance of the research lies in its topicality. The centralization of the school system started 10 years ago, and new policy changes have been implemented ever since then, the last package of changes introduced in January 2020. The new national curriculum provoked mixed emotions in those working in educational institutions. While its preamble reflects the much-anticipated modernizing attitude, the structure of the subjects, and the remaining heavy workload of it was met with harsh criticism.¹³ The changes affecting the Hungarian literature

¹¹ Ira Shor (1992). *Empowering Education: Critical teaching for Social Change*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 117-118.

¹² Shor, pp. 112-116.

¹³ See protest letters: Magyar tanárok Egyesülete, *A Magyar tanárok Egyesülete állásfoglalása a nemzeti alaptanterv 2020. január 31-én nyilvánosságra hozott szövegéről* (Resolution of the Association of Hungarian Teachers on the text of the national core curriculum published on 31 January 2020) Accessed 31/05/2020 <https://magyartanarok.wordpress.com/2020/02/01/a-magyartanarok-egyesulete-allasfoglalasa-a-nemzeti-alaptanterv-2020-január-31-en-nyilvánosságra-hozott-szovegerol/>; Péter Bohus, *Több tucat egyházi iskola több száz tanára tiltakozik az új NAT ellen* (Hundreds of teachers from church schools are protesting against the new national curriculum), Index.hu, Accessed 31/05/2020 https://index.hu/belfold/2020/02/28/egyhazi_iskola_tanar_tiltakoznak_nat/; ÉGIG, *Az Élenjáró Gimnáziumok Igazgatói Grémiumának közleménye a Nemzeti alaptanterv kiadásáról, bevezetéséről és alkalmazásáról szóló 110/2012. (VI. 4.) Korm. rendelet módosításáról* (Announcement of the Principals from the Leading High Schools' Board on the 110/2012 issuance, implementation and application of the National Curriculum (VI. 4.) amendment

and history subjects are argued to reflect the nationalist attitude of the Government, by the inclusion of questionable authors and topics in the subject material.¹⁴ The consequences of the government policies on education are yet to be measured and detected on the societal level, for the first generation of school students who had been studying in the new school system is just finishing their high school studies. The research aims to reveal the differences the Government's changes have brought to education as well as the possible consequences of them, analyzing these from a theoretical point of view with the help of critical education theory. Although the findings might picture the sad reality of how oppressive the politicization of education has become, there is also hope in the everyday examples of resistance, learned from the interviewed principals.

To understand the complexity of the education system and the place of the teachers and the students in the process, I interviewed eight principals from the highest-ranking¹⁵ high schools in the country. These principals are all very experienced, innovators of their kind, and working to provide the best for their students, both as practicing teachers and managers of their institutions. I chose to examine high schools since those are the last compulsory and arguably most formative years in education for students who then become voting citizens, leaving high school at the age of 18 or 19. Since there are no great changes within the prominent 'club' of the best high schools, the interviews gave a reliable insight into the practice of these institutions and how they negotiate their autonomy. Their long-standing good reputation earned them a distinctive autonomy and allows them to engage in some form of alternative education, although the scope of this has also been affected in the past few years. During the interviews¹⁶,

of the Government Decree), Accessed 31/05/2020 <http://www.egig.hu>; See commentaries/news coverage: Barna Borbás, *Ezer pedagógus arconrúgásáról* (Kicking a thousand teachers in the face), Accessed 31/05/2020 <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/03/02/egyhazi-iskolai-pedagogusok-nat-vita-velemeney/>; Judit Wndisch and István Balla, *Új NAT: "A nacionalizmus less a vezérlő ideológia"* (New national curriculum: "Nationalism will be the leading ideology"), Accessed 31/05/2020 https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200203_uj_nat_nacionalizmus_honvedelem_csepe_takaro

¹⁴ See Történelemtanárok Egyesülete, *Történelemtanárok a NAT-ról: Torzított történelmi képet ír elő* (History teachers about the national curriculum: It prescribes a distorted historical picture), Accessed 31/05/2020 <https://tte.hu/tortenelemtanarok-a-nat-rol-torzitott-tortenelmi-kepet-ir-elo/> and Litera.hu, *Teljesen korszerűtlen – Magyar tanárok az új NAT-ról* (Completely outdated - Hungarian teachers about the new curriculum), Accessed 31/05/2020 <https://litera.hu/magazin/osszeallitas/magyartanarok-a-natrol.html>

¹⁵ This is decided according to an independent national ranking survey. This ranking is calculated on different factors: 10th grade country-wide competency examinations in mathematics and literature and grammar; grades of the student's school-leaving exam in mathematics, history, literature and grammar, and foreign languages; the number of students engaging in further undergraduate studies. The author finds it better to keep its name anonymous.

¹⁶ The original research design aimed to interview 10-15 principals, which due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of all educational institutions in Hungary resulted in 8 interviews. However, I managed to include principals both from the capital and from other cities in the countryside, as originally planned.

I was also given a taste of how principals become political actors, balancing within this politicized atmosphere, responsible towards the political body and teachers, parents, and the students as well.

In the following pages, I will attempt to guide the reader through the current state of education in Hungary, starting from the legislative and policy level, then going deeper to the institutional and finally, the very individual level. Chapter one is our entrance to critical education theory. It reveals the political nature of education through different subsections on the politics of education, the textual authority of the curriculum, the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, and how resistance can be practiced through critical pedagogy. Chapter two gives an overview of the Orbán Government's education policy with a focus on the currently enforced regulations and with Freire's concept of the educational scenario, it reveals how the respective policies affect schools, teachers, and students. After introducing the theoretical and country-specific context of the thesis, I start presenting the findings of my interviews through four different aspects of education. Chapter three discusses the dimensions of authority and power relations, how the Government aims to extend its authority, and how this endeavor appears on the institutional level. Chapter four is a continuation of this matter, as it ponders upon the question of autonomy, on whose decision matters within the school – is it the government, the principal, or the teachers. Chapter five is an inquiry on how the knowing subjects, the students are created in this system, by contrasting the government's aims transmitted through the national curriculum with how and to what extent schools use and implement it. The final chapter -as a glimpse of hope- presents the scenes of resistance already at work in the interviewed schools, and displays their critical practices, those very few doors of freedom and instances of autonomy.

Chapter I.

On the politics of education

Even though we all take part in education, we are not necessarily aware of the deeply political nature of it. As Louis Althusser once put it, schools are not the only ideological state apparatuses, but they are the most powerful ones since they have the “obligatory audience of the totality of children”.¹⁷ To rephrase it, until you are 16 years old, you are obliged to sit in a classroom six-seven hours a day, five days out of seven a week in Hungary. As expected, you are not only sitting there but by listening, learning, memorizing, you are taking part in a process of identity formation through the knowledge you receive in the classroom. This is why every political penetration to the education system becomes an act of great consequences. The political nature of education can be traced in the policies, in the relationship of the government and the educational institutions, as well as in the teacher and student scenario, how the curriculum is written, and in the space left for alternative education. The following sections take account of these and pave the way for understanding the complex effects of the recent policy changes in the Hungarian education system.

Pedagogy as political

Schools are moral and political regulation agencies.¹⁸ As Clarissa Rile Hayward puts it, power is a social phenomenon that takes various forms and wears many faces.¹⁹ Those who have power decide how and in what form to use this power, and as such it can be used to change or maintain social structures. Here is where all sorts of education scenarios become important. Power shapes freedom via rules, norms, identities, or other boundaries through defining pedagogical practices and educational institutions.²⁰ Pedagogy here means all aspects of the educational process - from deciding over the curriculum to teach in classrooms – all acts through which a particular knowledge is transferred and student subjectivity are produced and legitimized.²¹

¹⁷ Louis Althusser (2001). *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press, p. 105.

¹⁸ Aronowitz and Giroux (1991). pp. 87-113.

¹⁹ Clarissa Rile Hayward (2000). *De-Facing Power*, University Press, Cambridge, p. 2.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 9.

²¹ Ibid, p. 46.

Continuing this line of thought, the politicization of education happens when power politics overwrites public needs when it comes to designing education policies.²² This contained power and authority over knowledge production is the reason why education becomes an important battleground of politics. Authority on the educational scene reflects on the unilateral power and the undivided, concentrated responsibility for knowledge, how it is produced and legitimated.²³ Education can and often does, function as a political sorting mechanism that reproduces and legitimizes social hierarchy by naturalizing dominant forms of knowledge and subjectivity.²⁴ It can work as a mediator of nationalist values, racism, and exclusion by transferring, imposing, and strengthening those values and beliefs that enhance these social issues.²⁵ Thus, education can contribute to the creation and maintenance of social divisions.

However, it can also help in dismantling them. bell hooks²⁶ introduces us to another side of the politics of education, which is her concept of liberation pedagogy. hooks examines education as a practice of freedom and sees the classroom both as a source of oppression and as an opportunity for liberation. She merits from her personal experiences of segregated education in the United States and calls for a new form of pedagogic practice, that is teaching students to “transgress” against boundaries of race, sex, and social class to achieve freedom.²⁷ She sees the classroom as a communal place that enhances collective effort, and through practicing critical pedagogy in that space, education can become enabling instead of oppressing.²⁸ Therefore, education has the potential for different, liberating forms of politicization as well, if students are allowed to challenge existing ideologies and channels in their critical vision.

Authority of the curriculum

Educational institutions reveal their moral regulatory attitude, as they are places where a sense of identity, worth, and possibility are organized through the interactions among teachers, students, and texts. Accordingly, schools are analyzed as places where students are introduced to particular ways of life, where subjectivities are produced, and where needs are constructed and legitimated.²⁹ Education happens through a curriculum that sets the fundamentals of teaching

²² György Jakab (2019). Pedagógiai „változásipar” (Pedagogical „change industry”), *Iskolakultúra*, 2019/9.

²³ Hayward,

²⁴ Hayward, p. 46.

²⁵ Mikael Hjerm (2001). Education, xenophobia and nationalism: A comparative analysis, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27:1, pp. 37-60.

²⁶ bell hooks (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*, Routledge, New York

²⁷ hooks, pp. 1-12.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 1-12.

²⁹ Aronowitz and Giroux, p. 87.

and gives a framework for what happens in the class. Students are taught by the curriculum that is delivered to them and not created with them.³⁰ Thus, the curriculum plays an important role in transmitting these values, and the knowledge that contributes to the formation of such subjectivities.

Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux introduce the theory of curriculum, a lens through which we can better understand the formative power of it, or as they call it, its textual authority. They argue that the curriculum, seen as a discourse and as an organized structure of social relations, represents both the expression and the enforcement of particular power relations, one that is deeply entrenched in the world of politics.³¹ Analyzing the structuring principles of the curriculum allows us to understand how it contributes to the way knowledge is produced, mediated, consumed, and transformed as part of the overall pedagogical process.³² The curriculum can also reveal the particular relations of oppression in schools, and the possibilities left for resistance.³³

The reason why the curriculum is so important in discussing the politics of education is that it provides the standards of the teaching practice. Theorizing the curriculum is a form of cultural politics, and understanding it as part of a broader struggle between dominant and subordinate discourses has critical implications for the ways how teachers read and rely on the curriculum in their teaching practice.³⁴ While the textual authority of the curriculum is there, its usage is definitive in the educational process, a lot depends on how teachers and students will eventually use it in the classroom.

The teacher-student relationship

In terms of individual educational experience, the most formative relationship is the one between the teacher and the student. Teachers are empowered by the authority to grant or withhold texts from their students and thus govern their reading and education.³⁵ Freire writes that a careful analysis of the teacher–student relationship either inside or outside school, at any

³⁰ Ira Shor (1992). *Empowering Education: Critical teaching for Social Change*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 117.

³¹ Aronowitz and Giroux, p. 89.

³² Ibid., p. 88.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 94.

level, reveals the fundamental narrative character of education resting on the narrating Subject (teacher) and the listening Objects (students).³⁶ The teacher leads the students with the narration, telling them what to memorize, fills them in with the knowledge he or she finds valuable, and through this process turns them into human containers.³⁷ Aronowitz and Giroux agree with Freire, and call the student a ‘passive consumer’ and the teacher a ‘dispenser of information’.³⁸ The metaphors refer to how students are removed from active participation in transforming knowledge and reveal how education is a practice of domination.

When this subject/object relationship between teachers and students is turned into creative collaboration, it can provide opportunities for critical consciousness.³⁹ This can be achieved by introducing dialogue to the classroom to avoid reducing schooling to a telling – repeating exercise.⁴⁰ Hence, the key to this transformation and resistance of oppressive hierarchy within the classroom is the introduction of a critical mindset.

Critical pedagogy as resistance

The critical mindset mentioned above and placing a dialogue within the class reflect on what we call critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy draws attention to how knowledge, power, desire, and experience are produced under the specific conditions of learning.⁴¹ According to Giroux, it is a moral and political practice that emphasizes the importance of critical analysis and moral judgment and provides tools to unsettle commonsense assumptions, theorize matters of self and social agency, and engage the ever-changing demands and promises of a democratic society.⁴² As such, one of its most important tasks is to illuminate how educational policy and practice are connected to the relations of exploitation and domination.⁴³

Ira Shor identifies practices of critical pedagogy, such as encouraging participation, cooperative learning, codeveloping the class curriculum with students, and covering what is left out of the official textbooks and from the curriculum.⁴⁴ By exercising them, teachers offer a critical

³⁶ Freire, p. 52.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

³⁸ Aronowitz and Giroux, p. 94.

³⁹ Walsh, p. 71.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴¹ Giroux, p. 3.

⁴² Ibid., p. 3.

⁴³ Michael W. Apple et al. (eds.) (2009). *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education*, Routledge, New York

⁴⁴ Shor, p. 117-118.

rethinking of the existing ways of socialization. He calls this process *desocialization* and makes the important argument that it is not just about questioning existing knowledge, but also recognizing how the curriculum is a political process of inclusion and exclusion, and it presupposes what knowledge is excluded is essentially left out of students' personal development.⁴⁵ Through such inquiries and reflexive practices, critical pedagogy can educate students to lead a meaningful life, learn how to hold power and authority accountable, and develop the skills, knowledge, and courage to challenge commonsense assumptions while being willing to struggle for a more socially just world.⁴⁶ This way, it can eventually contribute to the creation of an autonomous human agent.

This overview shows why education is political and how the politicization of knowledge transmission happens in schools. It does so by revealing the different levels of this process, starting from the institutional level, looking at how politics shapes knowledge formation and maintains oppressive social structures, and also how it can be a tool to transgress these and liberate from such boundaries. The concept of the authority of the curriculum helps to understand how particular power positions are enforced and entrenched within the daily practice of education. This is in strong connection with the teacher-student relationship, which becomes oppressive if it rests on narration, but can be liberating if the discourse is introduced to the class, as an example for critical pedagogy. The practices of critical education included in the final section show how the oppressive politicization of education can be challenged on the classroom level, and how that can lead to the democratization of education. The following chapters analyze the contemporary Hungarian education system and the most recent policies of the Orbán Government, resting on the above-detailed notions of education and its relationship with power politics. The analysis follows the structure of the theoretical sections, and after introducing the policies, it guides through the three scenes of politicized education: the institutional, the classroom, and the individual level, and finally, uncovers the space for resistance.

⁴⁵ Shor, p. 119.

⁴⁶ Giroux, p. 7.

Chapter II.

New battleground: Changes in the education policy

The past decade brought many changes regarding values and identity in Hungary since government politics shifted the emphasis to prioritizing those traits that aid national cohesion. This change is represented in the Hungarian Government's education policy as well, the reforms brought in the last ten years started with the introduction of a new approach to education. The regime change in the early '90s and the transition to a democratic state prioritized the aim to move towards de-centralized, democratizing, and more liberal forms of education.⁴⁷ It meant nearly complete freedom to educators and institutions, and alternative education was blooming.⁴⁸ While governments changed and so did their approaches to the education system, the difference between schools and their extreme socio-cultural conditions grew regardless. In 2010, to solve the problems of education and erase the growing cast system of schools, the then-elected Fidesz Government was enabled to take a heavy-handed approach.⁴⁹ They turned their backs on the previous system and introduced a heavily centralized, hierarchic, and rule-bounded form of education. The steps taken led to a significant limitation of space for local authorities, teachers, and parents to decide over the institution and staff management, financial questions, syllabus, and choice of textbooks.

As the thesis aims to uncover how the contemporary Hungarian secondary education system affects the knowledge and identity formation of students, I will center my focus on the most recent, presently in-force legislation regarding the education system. In the coming paragraphs, I am going to collect those radical reforms that led to the creation of today's educational landscape. As such, the nationalization of all educational institutions, lowering the compulsory school age, the introduction of new compulsory literacy elements, and the standardization of the curriculum. There are also some long-standing issues that, despite their embeddedness and overarching importance, have not been addressed during the reforms. Amongst the others, the

⁴⁷ Gábor Halász (2011). Az oktatáspolitikai két évtizede Magyarországon: 1990-2010 (Two decades of education policy in Hungary: 1990-2010), *Magyarország politikai évkönyve*, Budapest

⁴⁸ Sándor Joób, *Elmúlt nyolc év: Permanens reform és kudarc az oktatásban (Past eight years: Permanent reform and failure in education)* Accessed 10/05/2020
https://index.hu/belfold/2018/valasztas/2018/04/05/oktatas_fidesz_orban-kormany_elmult_nyolc_ev_klik_pisa_reform_nat_beremeles/

⁴⁹ Judit Rajnai (2013). *Közoktatás-politikai irányváltások és tendenciák a rendszerváltás utáni Magyarországon (Changes and tendencies in public education policy in Hungary after the regime change)*, ELTE Pedagógiai és Pszichológiai Kar, Budapest

key element of this discussion is the current national curriculum that was passed by the Parliament on 31 January 2020. While it is coming to force starting the next school year, 1 September 2020, it is already visible and sensible how it is affecting and how it will be changing public education institutions and how the envisaged reforms are affecting schools, teachers, and students as well. Understanding the nature of the legislative and regulative measures allow us to grasp the institutional and everyday practice of negotiating contemporary education policy.

The policies and their effects

Paolo Freire says that every educational situation implies the same factors: the educator and the learner, a specific knowledge material, mediate and immediate objectives, and the methods and tools through which the teaching happens.⁵⁰ His understanding of a learning scenario can be adapted as a framework to assess the education policies that are (still) in effect and are relevant in our discussion. While the first one, the presence of the educator and the student seems obvious, two very important factors of the current Hungarian education system make us doubt the clarity of the picture. As of the first instance, the Orbán Government reduced the compulsory age for education from 18 to 16 years in 2012. It led to an enduring increase in the number of early school leavers, as ever more students from disadvantaged backgrounds leave the school for work.⁵¹ This also further fuels the existing social inequalities, stretching the gap between “good” or “talented” and “bad” students, failing one of the proclaimed goals of the government’s education policy.⁵² As such, some students are failed by the system and leave their chairs empty in the classrooms.

The other one, a very threatening and also long-standing problem is the low prestige of teaching and the contra-selection that results from this. By contra-selection I mean the general phenomenon that those applying to become teachers are not from the more skillful, intelligent students since those rather pursue high-prestige and well-paid careers. When it comes to the elite institutions, it is the other way around, for some of the best graduates end up returning to their high schools as teachers. However, becoming a teacher is not the desired goal among graduating students in Hungary. As the recent PISA survey also reveals, it is only 2,1% of 15-

⁵⁰ Freire (1993).

⁵¹ Sándor Joób, *Elmúlt nyolc év: Permanens reform és kudarc az oktatásban* (Past eight years: Permanent reform and failure in education), Accessed 10/05/2020 https://index.hu/belfold/2018/valasztas/2018/04/05/oktatas_fidesz_orban-kormany_elmult_nyolc_ev_klik_pisa_reform_nat_beremeles/

⁵² Ibid.

year-old students who want to pursue a teacher diploma.⁵³ Another issue is the inadequacy and bad quality of teacher training, lacking any form of modernization that makes the programs even less enticing. Adding to all these, educators receive an awkwardly low wage and are paid below the national average of jobs requiring diplomas.⁵⁴ The simultaneous presence of the above-mentioned factors perpetuate the low prestige of teaching and the contra-selection, and hence fuel the huge lack of teachers in the country.

The second point of the analysis is the content of education, what are the objects of knowledge taught by the teachers, and what students need to learn.⁵⁵ Here is where the new national curriculum comes into the picture. As it is written in its preamble, it combines the most modern and most effective forms of pedagogical practice with the traditions and values of Hungarian education and strengthens the national identity.⁵⁶ Examples of the modern elements are supporting active learning, the use of digital tools in class, individualized learning opportunities. Unfortunately, only the latter half is traceable in the teaching material, the modernizing approaches are not reflected in the curriculum itself. The novelties introduced by the national curriculum are the new subject of civic knowledge, and changes in the structure and included material of certain subjects. Literature and history are the subjects most affected by the changes. In literature, it is reflected in the appearance of Hungarian authors from beyond the border and those representing a conservative tone, and at the same time, the omission of important authors without any justification.⁵⁷ In the subject of history, it is the approach that has changed from an experience-based education, filled with historic resource driven and problem posing education to a chronological, narrative style of education.⁵⁸

The most disputed and fierce disapproval of their new content is against the alterations affecting the subjects of literature and history, as the new content resembles the government's political

⁵³ Illés Szurovecz (2018). Mégis ki a fene akar tanárnak menni? (Who the hell wants to become a teacher?), Accessed 01/06/2020 https://index.hu/belfold/2018/09/04/tanar_oktatas_oecd_abcug/

⁵⁴ István Polónyi (2017). Finance Teeter in Education, *Educatio*, 4:603-624.

⁵⁵ Freire, p. 85.

⁵⁶ Klebelsberg Központ, *Kásler: elkészült a módosított Nemzeti Alaptanterv* (Kásler: the modified National Curriculum is ready), Accessed 11/15/2020 <https://kk.gov.hu/kasler-elkeszult-a-modosított-nemzeti-alaptanterv>

⁵⁷ Sándor Joób, *Nézzük meg, mi szerepel a NAT-ban, és mi a baj vele! (Let's see what is inside the national curriculum and what is the problem with it!)* Accessed 27/03/2020 https://index.hu/belfold/2020/02/13/nemzeti_alaptanterv_nat_magyar_irodalom_tortenelem_modszertan_tanari_szabadsag_oraszam/

⁵⁸ Ibid.

views.⁵⁹ Within these subjects, there is a clear emphasis on the national and European Judeo-Christian roots and values of the Hungarian society, in an attempt to help the development of the student's national identity.⁶⁰ The emphasis on family values, the role of the man as a provider, and the woman in the family as a caregiver, the often recurrent element of history discussion is the reflection on the Hungarian culture as Christian in opposition to pagan or Muslim culture are a few instances of this notion. It is also noticeable in what knowledge elements are included in the curriculum and what has been taken out. As such, it has been highly criticized how some authors were taken out from the literature curriculum (e.g.: Géza Ottlik, Imre Kertész) and how some politically questionable are now included in the material (e.g.: József Nyirő, Albert Wass – all claimed to be fascists with extreme views of nationalism.). In somewhat more closely to the ideal type of educational scenario, the teacher would have the freedom to design the local curriculum. However, the current national curriculum limits this freedom to differ from it to 20%, which in reality is even less since the workload does not leave enough room for alternative materials.⁶¹ When teachers are in a rush to satisfy the teaching goals dictated by the curriculum, it is unlikely to have spare time to introduce new materials or teaching techniques or even to spend extra time on something that remained unclear for the students. Hence, the objects of knowledge are designed by government officials.

The third element regards the mediate and immediate objectives of the educational practice. Freire argues that this is where education gets political since education directives do not allow for neutrality in practice. In his view, teaching requires the educator to decide whether to 'create' participating subjects or manipulated knowing objects from the students.⁶² These objectives direct and orient the educational practice itself.⁶³ While this idea emphasizes the role of the educator in this hierarchical relationship, my research focuses on the 'absence' of this immediate power of the teacher in the current Hungarian system. It is absent from the teachers' hands since it has been drawn away to the state through a centralized bureaucratic system. The objectives are set by the Ministry of Human Resources and under its coordination, the

⁵⁹ TanárBlog, *A hazafias tanterv* (The nationalist curriculum) Accessed 27/03/2020 <http://tanarblog.hu/cikk/a-hazafias-tanterv>

⁶⁰ Sándor Joób, *Kásler bejelentette, hogy elkészült a módosított Nemzeti Alaptanterv* (Kásler announced that the National Curriculum had been finished) Accessed 12/05/2020 https://index.hu/belfold/2020/01/31/nemzeti_alaptanterv_modositas_emmi_kasler_miklos_hajnal_gabriella/

⁶¹ Sándor Joób, *Nézzük meg, mi szerepel a NAT-ban, és mi a baj vele! (Let's see what is inside the national curriculum and what is the problem with it!)* Accessed 27/03/2020 https://index.hu/belfold/2020/02/13/nemzeti_alaptanterv_nat_magyar_irodalom_tortenelem_modszertan_tanari_szabadsag_oraszam/

⁶² Freire, p. 85.

⁶³ Freire, p. 85.

Klebensberg Center, which centrally governs all educational institutions from the capital, and it is responsible for the decision makings and supervision of operations all over the country.⁶⁴ These educational circumstances bring in the question of autonomy. As previously discussed, the national curriculum with the overwhelming amount of subject materials limits the space for teachers to design and direct their classes. Principals have to submit every local curriculum, institutional decision and as such, every employment data to receive approval.⁶⁵ Local autonomy has been curtailed by the centralization process, it is no longer the teacher or the local institution management setting the mediate and immediate objectives of education, everything is governed through a massive bureaucratic system.

As the final element of an educational situation, Freire accounts for the methods and processes, the teaching techniques, and materials used, which must be coherent with the objectives of the current education policy.⁶⁶ The typical Hungarian classroom is a traditional one lacking modern approaches to education, relying heavily on textbooks in a lecturer - listener scenario.⁶⁷ As previously mentioned, the quantity of the compulsory subject material puts the teacher in a rush to meet the expectation of the national curriculum. Often what is left out of the class discussion is given as homework to read from the textbooks. Hence, textbooks play a key role in the everyday teacher-student learning situation.

While previously, textbook publishing was organized by market needs, after 2013 the Hungarian Government took the lead. They set up a government-led textbook publishing and distributor company, named Kello Könyvtárellátó Nonprofit Kft., that limits the competition on the textbook market and controls which companies can take part in textbook publishing.⁶⁸ The Ministry of Human Resources accredits publishers and it also supervises the content, what needs to be included in the study material, and what should be omitted.⁶⁹ Taking over the control

⁶⁴ Zoltán Rónay (2019). A hazai tanügyigazgatás jogszabályi keretei (The Legal Frameworks of the Hungarian Educational Administration). *Educatio*, 2: 228-239.

⁶⁵ Oktatási Hivatal, Kerettantervek jóváhagyása (Approval of local curriculum), Accessed 22/05/2020 <https://ofi.oh.gov.hu/kerettantervek-jovahagyasa>

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ágnes Kende (2018). *A Roma gyerekek méltányos oktatását segítő programok lehetőségei az oktatási egyenlőtlenségek rendszerében (Opportunities for programs to promote the equitable education of Roma children in the system of educational inequalities)*, Socio, Budapest

⁶⁸ Jazmin Topuzidu (2018). *Planting the seeds of 'othering': Centralized history textbook publishing as a tool for identity politics*, CEU, Budapest

⁶⁹ Tbg. *Jövőre sem adhatnak ki közismereti tankönyvet magánkiadók (Public school textbooks cannot be issued by private publisher next year)*, 444.hu, Accessed 12/7/2018 <https://444.hu/2016/12/30/jovore-sem-adhatnak-ki-kozismereti-tankonyvet-magankiadok>

of textbook publishing has led to a deterioration of their quality and opened the doors to politicize their content.⁷⁰ A telling example of this is the latest edition of the 12th-grade history textbook, published at the time of the European refugee crisis, which reflects on refugees as “migrants” and “millions of unqualified workers” who will “cause tension and deterioration to European standards”.⁷¹ Such excerpts on refugees, minorities - especially the Roma minority - represent the Government’s political rhetoric.

Since 2010, the Orbán Government digs deep into the roots of the education system in an attempt that lacks cooperation, extensive consultation, and adequate professional insight – as most of the principals expressed it in their opinions. The above-listed reforms are only a smaller, but the most recent and relevant portion of what has been passed by the Parliament and pushed through the far-reaching system. The political impetus of the policies can be traced in the hasty creation and implementation of those, resulting in fierce oppositions, demonstrations, and the indicators of Hungarian education hitting rock bottom in international surveys, such as the annual PISA test, which measures the competencies of 15 year old students around the world. The latest survey shows how Hungary is lagging behind the OECD average in every category, such as reading comprehension, mathematics, and natural sciences.⁷² The PISA test also measures the inclusiveness of an education system and how it can help underprivileged students. The findings reveal the system-based selection of educational institutions, and how Hungary is particularly bad in eliminating the sociocultural disadvantages and differences of students.⁷³

In the following chapters, the consequences of the above-listed policy measures are analyzed, in respect of how authority and power relations have changed by introducing them and how these affect the autonomy of educational institutions. What might not seem an obvious result of these policies is how students and their knowledge are subjected to the changes. The conducted interviews with the principals reveal the daily effects of the Orbán Government’s education policy and show how their implementation is negotiated on the institutional level,

⁷⁰ See Topuzidu (2018).

⁷¹ Péter Borhegyi et al. (2016), *Történelem 12 (History 12)*, Oktatókutatató és Fejlesztő Intézet, Budapest, p. 220.

⁷² See PISA 2018 results of OECD, Accessed 12/05/2020 https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA-results_ENGLISH.png, and Illés Szurovecz (2019). *PISA-teszt: Végtelen pénzből és görnyedésből még nem lesz jó oktatási rendszer (Endless money and crouching are not enough for a good education system)*. Accessed 19/04/2020 <https://444.hu/2019/12/03/pisa-teszt-vegtelen-penzbol-es-gornyedesbol-meg-nem-lesz-jo-oktatasi-rendszer>

⁷³ Szurovecz (2019).

focusing on the playing-field of principals, how they can maneuver in such educational climate, and how this appears in the teaching practice of teachers and the knowledge and identity formation of students.

Chapter III.

Power in the educational scene

Education has become an important scene of politics in Hungary, as the analysis of the changes and the theoretical considerations on the politics of education can attest. Since these reforms affect society on a wider scale, educational problems become social ones, requiring collective action.⁷⁴ The following chapters aim to find answers to the following questions: *How does the contemporary Hungarian secondary education system affect the subject formation of young people as future citizens, particularly in light of the current education reforms of the Orbán Government? How do principals of high schools that have traditionally enjoyed greater degrees of freedom in defining their curricula negotiate the current reform?* To do so, the following pages are an examination of the interviews conducted with eight principals from the highest-ranking high schools of Hungary. The discussions were based on structured interviews, creating a formal environment with the interviewees, and allowing for better comparability of their answers. The previously planned questions were derived from critical education literature, focusing on the important structural traits of oppressive politicized education and factors enabling critical pedagogy. The discussions were aimed at uncovering the daily negotiation and sensible effects of the Government policies. The questions seeking the presence of power politics in the institutions were regarding the ongoing implementation of the new curriculum, the evaluation of it, and concerns regarding it in the respective institutions.

Power is introduced to all educational situations since those who have power can define the pedagogical practices that can take place in the educational institution.⁷⁵ As discussed earlier, education is not only a tool to transmit knowledge, but also values, norms, and a certain morality, thus it becomes an important source of power.⁷⁶ The policy changes of the Hungarian Government suggest the recognition of this, and an aim to have exclusive control over this power. The authoritarian attitude of the Government can be seen in how teachers, principals, and experts are brushed aside when it comes to developing policies, rules and regulations, programs, and the curriculum. They are completely left out of the decision-making procedures, as the most recent development of the national curriculum can testify this. The majority of the

⁷⁴ Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge, and action research*, Deakin University Press, p. 31.

⁷⁵ Hayward (2000).

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

principals I interviewed could also further underpin this with anecdotes of their joint actions and how those were hitting walls. As representing high schools with the best results when it comes to exit exams and university acceptances, these principals have a ground to share good practices and their constructive criticism towards education reforms. At least normally they should be able to act as opinion formers.

When the new national curriculum was introduced, these principals not only publicly shared their disagreement with how those actors working in the education were left out of the process, but wrote letters to all respective politicians, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán included, and offered their help in improving the curriculum and suggested postponing the implementation of it with a year. But they found deaf ears. As Principal A notes regarding their experience: *“We were brushed aside. A dozen of us were there at the Secretary of State because they called us in. We had a two hours long dispute, but that’s all. They even told us that this is happening, because the Prime Minister ordered it this way, since it can’t be done in the year of elections and neither one year before it, so it has to be implemented now. Period.”* Principal E was one of the principals who wrote a letter to the Government before the introduction of the curriculum, and described it as follows: *“The content part, if it had gone through a multi-year discussion within the pedagogical society and within the faculty, it could have made a real difference. At the time of writing the letter, well, we didn’t see the coronavirus coming, it made the situation even worse. But the attitude is, that even if you eat damn hell, this curriculum needs to be introduced now. So, of course, that’s what we will be doing.”*

Apart from those who took action and discussed it with me, some principals see some opportunities in the new national curriculum and also some who refrained from expressing their personal opinions and strictly shared the institution manager’s point of view. Principal D said: *“I personally, and perhaps I can also say it as the opinion of the faculty, believe that there is a real need for a new national curriculum, a need to reduce student overload, a need for modernization, but we do not see the new national curriculum as fully mature. For the profession, fine-tuning will definitely be needed in the future.”* Similarly, principal H said that *“all actors in education policy have now recognized the need to change the core curriculum”*, the debate is only around how it should happen. Principal G and F were on the same argument, said that for them the new curriculum will not be of any particular problem, and it might allow for improvements.

The experience of the principals, who tried to reach out and offer their help to the Government shows how authoritarianism aims to dismantle such critical approaches, even if they are done with good intentions.⁷⁷ An authoritarian approach to the education system is a one-way road. It banks on its expertise, proposals, and evaluations tracking whether the changes have been adhered to.⁷⁸ Just like that, theorizing the national curriculum without consultation is not only an example of authoritarian politics in education but also of cultural politics. By that I mean the relationship between knowledge and how power defines schools as places where a sense of one's identity, worth, and possibility is organized through interactions with teachers, texts, and fellow students.⁷⁹ Schools become the scene where subjectivities are produced, where needs and certain knowledge are constructed.⁸⁰

Questioning textual authority and the authority of the curriculum in education can be done and achieved by the principal, other administrators, and by teachers, by challenging the assumptions inscribed in them and thus the discourse of power that is captured in the text.⁸¹ This can be done through the creation of a theoretical framework, tailoring the system to their own by having in mind what their real purpose of teaching is. This can be done both on an institutional level by the principal or the individual one, by the teachers. A pattern I identified through my discussion with the principals was that their primary aim is to customize the text to their own profiles. They take the curriculum, learning outcomes, texts, and textbooks, and implement it by sifting it through a sieve, adapting it so that it resembles the institutions' core values and educational principles. This is, even more, the case now when the new national curriculum needs to be implemented in such a limited amount of time. Thus, the described education scenario can be understood as a struggle between different sources of power, having textual authority on the one side and institutional power on the other. There is the authority that the government exercises through the curriculum and the textbooks, and the authority the institutions and teachers have. This struggle is a part of the broader picture where the dominant and the subordinate discourses clash, having critical consequences on how teachers read and use the curriculum, and how teachers negotiate it in their daily teaching practice. In this process, students are passive actors, while it affects their student experience and how they will define

⁷⁷ Giroux, p. 3.

⁷⁸ Donaldo Macedo (ed.): *Critical Education in the New Information Age*, Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc., p. 87.

⁷⁹ Aronowitz and Giroux, p. 87.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 93.

their roles as future public literates.⁸² According to Aronowitz and Giroux, what is at stake here is to control the grounds on which knowledge is produced and legitimated.⁸³

The high schools I took as a sample are working with great teachers, ones that can live up to the expectations the institution has. When it comes to putting the teaching plan together and following the national curriculum, the interviewed principals appear to empower their teachers and authorize them to do as they think it is best. The basis of this is the mutual trust they have within the institution, something that is missing from the government's side towards schools. *"In every case, designing the class and the course material is dependent on the intelligence of the teacher"* – as Principal C disclosed their practice. Another example from Principal A is the following: *"Now we're getting ready by seeing how we can pull this [curriculum] on our profile from September 1st. (...) and from September 1st, we will be trying to highlight the opportunities and what is good in this and emphasize them. (...) I think everyone is a pretty responsible adult anyways and does what they have to do."* Principal B added in a witty way, that to ensure the word-to-word implementation of the curriculum *"a cop should be placed next to every teacher to push them in the head when they say something different"*.

This final point arches the discussion of authority to autonomy nicely, highlighting how power politics can change the scope of autonomy. In educational settings, textual authority is an effective way to exert power and hierarchy. However, the quotes from the principals about the examples of their daily practices underpin the theory of Aronowitz and Giroux and show how this authority can be questioned or bypassed by empowering the teachers when it comes to the reading, understanding and then the daily implementation of the curriculum or the policies. A certain level of freedom is practiced through the reading of the curriculum, as the teacher can choose how to work with the framework that is the curriculum. By granting more freedom to their teachers on the classroom level, principals also exercise a higher role of autonomy in their decision-making and micro-management of their institutions.

⁸² Ibid., p. 94.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 96.

Chapter IV.

The struggle for autonomy

Autonomy in our discussion reflects upon the opportunity to differ from Governmental decision-making, centralized political orders, and the products of those, such as the curriculum and its authority. This chapter's purpose is to see how educational institutions are influenced by politics in their daily practices and how principals, as representatives of their institutions act in this regulated environment. My interview question on the 20% freedom to alter from the subject materials of the national curriculum revealed whether the principals see this as certain autonomy, and how teachers can utilize it in their daily education practice. Regarding the interviewed schools, we are talking about special institutions in very privileged positions. This is something they all confirmed, and also many highlighted how the situation of schools in nearly forgotten corners of the country are far worse than theirs. The difference lies in the scope of their autonomy and how they manage to negotiate with it. As it has been discussed above, the centralization and growing interference of government politics curtailed and keeps restricting the autonomy of educational institutions.

Sarah Amsler⁸⁴ voices her critical view on conformity, hierarchy, and constrained autonomy legitimized through certain cultural practices, which cultural practice is education in our discussion. She calls out on how educational institutions are becoming confined, monitored, and economized to an extent that it shrinks the freedom of teachers.⁸⁵ This stems from her experience as a professor in British higher education and how formalized her role has become as an educator. Since education is marketized, certain standards and educational outcomes need to be achieved, which makes it hard to incorporate any principles of critical pedagogy to her practice.⁸⁶ The system she describes as alarming is similar to the contemporary reality of Hungarian education. She is looking for space where critical thinking and critical education can fit in the everyday practices of education so that it could contribute to the expansion of human freedom and autonomy.⁸⁷ However, the system where educators need to provide detailed documentation of their teaching plan, where students are required to meet predefined 'learning

⁸⁴ Sarah Amsler (2010). Education as a critical practice in Sarah Amsler et al. (eds.) (2010). *Why critical pedagogy and popular education matter today*, C-SAP, UK

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

outcomes' set by teachers or central institutions, and where critical discussions are repressed by the erosion of space and time for such dialogues, is one not supporting individual autonomy.⁸⁸

The principals I talked to were all in their position at the same institution for more than a decade. They were able to sense the changes carried out by the current government on their skin. Some were a bit more careful with words, and some explicitly said that the government steps led to the curtailing of their educational institution's autonomy. They are experiencing growing surveillance, they are left out of decision making, and there are other instances as well where their lack of choices is noticeable. A telling example of this is the case of a recently introduced cultural program, the Lázár Ervin Program funded by the government, where certain classes of every school need to attend a certain theatre play once or twice a year. As Principal A told me, after consultation with the parents, a class decided to deny the 'invitation'. *"Can you imagine what I got after this? How dare I say no to the superior school maintainer. (...) This direct ordering of what to do is very difficult to bear. After all, what we could experience in public education in the past 10 years is that autonomy is declining continuously and intensively."*

In most of the cases, the practice of the principals from these elite institutions was similar, producing identifiable patterns of daily negotiations of politics in education, except for one very interesting diverging point. It is how they see their current state of autonomy. There is a group who admitted to having a greater autonomy than 'normal' schools, due to their excellence. This allows them to provide more freedom to their teachers and engage in alternative forms of education, one that they believe is closer to what is said to be a 21st century modern teaching. This is resembled in their attitude in how they exercise and negotiate the 20% restriction of alteration from the new national curriculum, a government policy that makes the sustenance of alternative education institutions impossible from the next year.⁸⁹ Principal C accounted for their autonomy as follows: *"We operate in a more autonomous way, with less control than in an average school."* Another interviewee, Principal A, who is also a superintendent, said the following: *"When I'm going somewhere elsewhere, I have never looked at this in my life and I never will. (...) I have told you so many times today that our autonomy has been curtailed, that*

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁸⁹ RA, *Megszavazta a parlament az alternatív oktatást nehezítő köznevelési törvénycsomagot* (The Parliament has voted for a public education package that makes alternative education difficult), *Index.hu*, Accessed 16/01/2019 https://index.hu/belfold/2019/07/12/megszavazta_a_parlament_az_alternativ_oktatast_nehezito_koznevelési_torvenycsomagot/

even if I, as the head of the institution, followed these central instructions, that would be a big problem. Then we would have a say in almost everything, or the state would have.”

While some are thinking in this more liberal way of education within their institutions, others did not express such views and worded their concerns about how the freedom that the 20% alteration offers is impossible to live with. The immense subject material put forward by the national curriculum forces teachers to *“rush the kids to do it somehow”*, as Principal E put it. Another opinion from Principal D criticizes the lack of opportunity to go deeper or spend more time on class materials when needed. *“In some cases, which is a big heartache for me, it becomes a crash course, and what would be much needed is to deepen certain contents in students or practice something is impossible due to timely concerns, let alone to deepen a particular topic according to the teacher's personal freedom.”* What happens here is that the unrealistic design of subjects and workloads take away the already curtailed autonomy of the teachers to alter from the curriculum. The authority of the text prevails. What is at stake here, as Aronowitz and Giroux identify it, is to control the grounds of knowledge production in the classroom.⁹⁰ The circumstances created by the curriculum eliminate the opportunity for teachers to practice their authority over the classroom material even in their limited 20% freedom left by the government.

Understanding the nature of autonomy in the education system brings us closer to a more individual level of inquiry, to see how knowledge is related to power and how students are subjected to this fight over the autonomy of thought and action. Our discussion until now was moving on the policy plane, accounting for the recent governmental changes and their effects. One, if not the most important consequence is curbing the autonomy of the respective institutions. This not only takes away the decision-making power of principals but also sinks to the level of educators, who do not necessarily have the autonomy to design their classes and tailor them to the needs of their students. While some elite institutions are granted more autonomy for their excellent results, this is not an overarching pattern, not even among the best high schools, let alone those functioning in much worse circumstances. But what is at stake in this whole discussion, is how this politicized nature of education affects the learning of young people? What people are they going to become after public education? The following chapter reveals how an oppressive politicized education system can influence the knowledge and

⁹⁰ Aronowitz and Giroux, p. 96.

identity formation of young people and how long-lasting this effect can be. However, despite the heavy influence the Government has in the current education system, there are still ways to counter its effects.

Chapter V.

The knowing subject

As the previous chapters show, politics in education affect the autonomy of the principals in decision-making and the freedom of educators in their practice of teaching. What is yet to be revealed is how such circumstances and the struggle to control the knowledge and identity formation of students affects young people currently in schools. The interview questions were aimed at values, identity traits, and patriotism/nationalist traits, focusing on how these are nurtured in the institutions of the interviewed principals. The discussions with the principals revealed the importance of transmitting a certain set of values to students, characteristics of their institutions, and how these values are prioritized in their daily practices. This way, there is genuine opposition to the government policies targeting to control the formation of the knowing subject.

The education system allows for the production and legitimization of particular forms of knowledge and student subjectivities through all aspects of the educational process, starting from designing and writing the curriculum.⁹¹ This formation of knowledge and student subjectivity is, however, also filled with power dynamics. Power shapes freedom in the classroom when the ‘hegemonic intellectuals’ present dominant forms of knowledge and cultural capital as objective and neutral.⁹² These hegemonic intellectuals are, in this case, government officials and politicians, and those who work in the bureaucracy designing the curriculum and editing textbooks. Students are developed in this educational culture, that is delivered to them, not created with them.⁹³ Good students memorize what is written in the book, answer the questions, and certainly do not ask back – then they can get a good grade. As Ira Shor argues, these patterns of socialization stick with people, who will eventually grow up dependent on this status quo. ⁹⁴

Pedagogy is a tool that serves the maintenance of order and the regulation of populations.⁹⁵ This new battleground of political control over meaning happens through the manipulation of

⁹¹ Hayward, p. 46.

⁹² Ibid., p. 49.

⁹³ Ira Shor (1992). *Empowering Education: Critical teaching for Social Change*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago

⁹⁴ Shor, pp. 117-118.

⁹⁵ Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (1992) (eds.). *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, Routledge, p. 16.

messages and symbols.⁹⁶ According to Giroux, here is where the standardization of a national curriculum enters the discourse as a dominant practice of ordering, licensing, and regulating structures of the pedagogical apparatus in public schools.⁹⁷ Resulting from this, knowledge becomes positioned as an object of control in the curricula.⁹⁸ Therefore, the new curriculum is an important tool for the current Hungarian Government to influence and regulate how students are formed and what they are going to be as citizens.

In the past years, the Government set the formation of a new Hungarian identity to strengthen nationalist sentiment. In the core of this identity lies the shared national myth, the historical and cultural origins of Hungary.⁹⁹ This is reflected in the curriculum as well, in the choices of included and dismissed subject materials. This attitude is also present in the latest Public Education Act of Hungary¹⁰⁰, which was adopted in 2011. The Act starts by defining its aims: “As a pledge of the nation's rise, combining the noble traditions of Hungarian education with the expectations of the present and the possibilities of the future, to provide patriotic education and quality education to the rising generations (...)”. As can be seen from this, the state aims to impact the formation of students this way and produce knowing subjects that are raised to have a nationalist sentiment and hold those values important that are either highlighted or hidden in the curriculum. However, there seems to be a difference in its daily negotiation in practice.

When asked about what schools can provide for students and as such, for the citizens of the future, every principal stressed the importance of values that are thought in their schools. These institutions have clearly defined values, a profile that they are proud of (e.g. conservative, liberal, etc.) and teach their students according to these. These values are present in the school's everyday practices, education, programs, even national holiday commemorations are designed through them. This does not mean that these institutions are raising their students against nationalism, more so on the contrary. When asked, each of the principals said that nurturing nationalist feelings and sentiment is necessary, but all of them doubt the way it is currently

⁹⁶ Macedo, pp. 30-31.

⁹⁷ Henry Giroux (2000). *Border, Youth, Difference and Postmodern Education*, p. 100., in Macedo (2000).

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

⁹⁹ See Ágnes Heller in Jan Smolenski, *Ágnes Heller: Orbán is a tyrant*. Political Critique, Accessed 11/05/2020 <http://politicalcritique.org/cee/hungary/2018/agnes-heller-orban-is-a-tyrant/> and Antal Örkény, Hungarian National Identity: Old and New Challenges. *International Journal of Sociology*, vol. 35, no. 4, Winter 2005, 6

¹⁰⁰ 2011. évi CXCV. törvény a nemzeti köznevelésről (Public Education Act 2011), Oktatás.hu Accessed 09/05/2020 <https://www.oktatas.hu/hivatal/jogszabalyok>

channeled into the education system. As Principal G said: *“I think those who want to declare this [the importance of nationalist education], so to speak, are on the wrong track. Especially if you want to make a subject out of it. (...) A school needs consistent cultivation of traditions, which implies the love for our homeland.”* In a similar approach, Principal B believes that *“civic education, education for the love of the homeland, healthy nationalism is a fundamental task of education”*, but added that it should not be done through pressure, and definitely not in negative contrast to other nations, as he experiences it in the current curriculum as a teacher of history and literature. Principal H also highlighted the importance of having an identity, a tie to the country you live in, but said that it needs to be taught in connection with diversity. *“I consider the development of the two to be important at together, to draw attention to it and to make ourselves aware of our belonging to one group, and at the same time acknowledge our relations to other groups.”*

The interviewed institutions prefer to form the national identity of young people through their value systems and traditions, rather than relying on the government’s methods. As Principal F noted: *“there are certain regulations and rules, well now obviously in practice it's very different. So, on the one hand, it also depends on the culture of the school, and on the other hand, it even depends on specific teachers what they think about it”*. Principal D and E praised a Government program called Határtalanul (Without Borders), that provides financial support for traveling to the disannexed territories of Hungary in the bordering countries, and agreed that these experiences nurture better the patriotic feelings.

As it has been discussed before, the new national curriculum prescribes such an immense amount of subject material that it makes principals and teachers already concerned about the consequences of it. It is important to understand why and how this is problematic in upbringing the next generation of citizens, other than exhaustion. Freire argues that public education suffers from ‘narration sickness’ that creates narrators from teachers and listeners from the student, who memorize everything mechanically that is narrated in class.¹⁰¹ This turns students into ‘containers’ that are filled by the teachers. He calls this the banking concept of education, where knowledge is a gift from those who consider themselves knowledgeable given to those who are considered to know nothing.¹⁰² Freire argues that this is a characteristic ideology of oppression that is ignorant and refuses education and knowledge to be a process driven by self-interest and

¹⁰¹ Freire, p. 53.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 53.

query.¹⁰³ Any situation or circumstance where some individuals prevent others from engaging in this process of inquiry is one of violence, or it alienates people from their decision-making and turns them into objects.¹⁰⁴

As the first generation of students who are affected by these political interventions of the government are still in school or close to finishing it, it is hard to evaluate the success of the policy changes. The attempt is visible, the government aims to form students on their face, raise them with strong nationalist sentiment, and does this by designing the curriculum to suit the purpose. However, their impact on the formation of students is disoriented on the school level, where the values coming from above are redesigned to suit their local values. The contest on whether the state or the school will have a bigger influence on the formation of the knowing subject is heated, but yet undecided. The next chapter introduces some local practices of critical pedagogy, resisting government control over student knowledge.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

Chapter VI.

Resistance: Making of the autonomous thinker

The previous discussions aimed at showing how, and through what ways the contemporary Hungarian education system affects both the identity and knowledge development of students. When going through the questions regarding current legislation, the national curriculum, teaching patriotism or civic values, the answers painted a picture of the current state of education and its politicized nature. However, the interviews also revealed that despite the circumstances, there is still some space to resist the heavy burden of centralization. The answers regarding my question on whether it is important to teach students to think critically brought out all sorts of practices, and showed how critical education is present in the interviewed institutions. The hegemonic control of the Hungarian Government over the education system is not different from how Gramsci describes it. It is powerful, diffuse, and complex, yes, but as he puts it, it is not seamless.¹⁰⁵ Those very seams are where critical education can make a difference and make a move towards raising autonomous thinkers.

When critical pedagogy slips through those seams, it calls for progressive practices in education. It rests on the assumption that if the text and the experience of teaching are changed, students are given an equal chance to form their own identities with the supportive help of teachers.¹⁰⁶ Also, students will have the critical tools to act in morally responsible, socially just, and politically conscientious ways against individual and collective oppression.¹⁰⁷ When I asked my interviewees whether they agree with the importance of critical thinking in the classroom, the answers were unambiguous and strong yeses. All of them without exception expressed their opinion on how critical thinking is the most important skill students can learn at high school, and how indisputable its future benefits are. As Principal H noted, critical thinking is an indispensable skill. *“The way their text interpretation strategies develop in school, the way they engage in a cultured debate, a dispute, fundamentally influences how they will read the press, fiction, receive daily news, and so on as adults.”*

¹⁰⁵Antonio Gramsci (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, International Publishers, New York

¹⁰⁶ Luke and Gore, p. 27.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

When I put up my question, I added a little explanation to it that I also mean looking at subject materials critically and from different perspectives. Consequently - and very interestingly, resulting from this addition of mine, also nearly all of the principals highlighted a concern about critical thinking, that is the arbitrary use of it and misunderstanding it with pure criticism and disparagement. One of the interviewees, Principal D summarizes the general view well:

“As you said earlier, questioning the knowledge in the textbook, I would prefer to put it as a joint exchange with the teacher and a possible discussion, which are very important and prominent roles of pedagogical methods. But the student must also realize that arguing is only possible if there is adequate knowledge behind it and we try to educate them to acquire that in the first place.”

Ira Shor identifies practices of critical education, such as encouraging participation, cooperative learning, codeveloping the class curriculum with students, and covering what is left out of the official textbooks and from the curriculum.¹⁰⁸ By exercising them, teachers offer a critical rethinking of the existing ways of socialization. He calls this process *desocialization* and makes the important argument that it is not just questioning existing knowledge, but also recognizes how the curriculum is a political process of inclusion and exclusion, and it presupposes that the knowledge excluded is left out of students’ personal development.¹⁰⁹ This concept gives a useful insight to understand how the daily practices of resistance shared by the interviewed principals lead to certain levels of desocialization. The classroom and school activities the principals shared allow students to engage in personal knowledge inquiries and also support collective work, thinking together. As the examples in the following paragraphs will show, these institutions support students in looking at the other side of the coin and asking questions, while this is not included in the education program put forward by the government. This way, they can socialize their students differently, hence desocialize them from how the curriculum would do.

The patterns identified by Shor are resembled in those exercises of critical education that the principals shared with me. While the respective schools share their excellence, their values, and accordingly, their teaching methods are quite different. However, there are some overlapping initiatives and those are institutionalized permanent structures, such as the Student Parliament

¹⁰⁸ Shor, pp. 117-118.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 119.

and the Student Union. The democratic political forum allows students to have a say in decision-making procedures with a certain power level attached to it. This is of key importance to a progressive educational scenario. Another example, although not as widely practiced, is the annual teacher evaluation survey where students are given a chance to channel in their thoughts on teachers and education as well. Principal C highlighted how students arrive at these elite institutions with a certain sociocultural background, one where the critical mindset is already present because of the parents. This attitude is not only inherited but required to follow by the parents themselves. This greater level of democratic participation and co-democratic governance with parents, teachers, and students are practices supporting a culture of resistance, which influences the socialization happening within the schools.¹¹⁰

Besides what is initiated on the institutional level, something that is indispensable for critical education to happen is the very presence of critical and creative educators in the school. Those teachers who offer problem-posing, democratic dialogue in the classroom, they challenge socialization into the myths, values, and relations of the dominant culture.¹¹¹ However, introducing critical education practices in the classrooms is made harder by the tightness of the curriculum. The elite institutions, as previously discussed, leave a bigger space of freedom for teachers in practice and also encourage the nurturing of critical thinking, as I discovered from the interviews. What seems trivial, but it is not in the frame of the new curriculum, is boosting and supporting students to ask questions. As such, Principal A endorses questions: *“I also tend to tell my students to ask at any time, and I will answer it. And so do most of my colleagues, we value critical thinking in any field, even if it is related to the curriculum.”* Some subjects give more options for critical thoughts, such as literature and history, where the different perspectives of a historic event or a poem can be contrasted, as Principal B put it. Principal E shared their practice on debates, an exercise that they use, and one that can be done in various classes. Students have to take sides prior to the debate and gather arguments for the discussion in class. *“I teach biology, we are used to things like that, there’s a topic, vaccinations or artificial insemination, or something like that and we settle disputes. (...) [A]rgument collection precedes the conversation, so they learn that it is not just talking into the air.”*

As I wrote earlier, a fascinating finding of my conversations with the principals was how these elite institutions have greater autonomy than other schools. They owe this to their excellence

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

¹¹¹ Shor (1992).

and to the results their students achieve, like university acceptance, grades, and competition scores. Their students are the best *products*, not just because of their knowledge, but also as they can think in more complex, creative, and critical ways. This makes them exceptional, not only during their school years but also afterward when they become fully functioning citizens. One of the interviewees, Principal C raised some concerns stemming from this: *“Many times, I think our students will feel like in a “vacuum” after graduation because they have a different set of tools than the others do. It is difficult for them to relate to the Hungarian reality (...). There is no critical thinking outside of school, their skills are difficult to apply, hence many go to the West or if they stay, they rise as civilians, attend vocational colleges, etc. They will be successful with the creativity, thinking, and active spiritual skills they have acquired at this school.”*

As the examples show, there are ways to channel in critical pedagogy to the very strict and tight national curriculum and education system. What it is really about, is the empowerment of the student, the knowing subject, to become someone who can decide what to believe, can form arguments, and hence, be an autonomous thinker despite the circumstances. It is also about empowering teachers to exercise such critical practices, and to show them how valuable and fruitful their work can be, even if it means diverging from the path paved by politics. These elite institutions use their greater amount of autonomy to produce more autonomous students with a critical ability, creative problem solving and a sense to understand complex questions. They do this so they can *produce* our society’s future leaders, great thinkers, and successful individuals, as the principals summarized their mission statements. What might appear controversial is that they can achieve this by resisting the Government’s centralized and politicized education system, finding those seams where critical pedagogy can be inserted into their daily practice.

Conclusion

Education is something that we all experience. As Principal H put it: *“Everyone, who constitutes the future of Hungary is in school right now or will be in school, thus takes part in public education”*. For a different length of time and through different means maybe, but we all take part in this form of knowledge transfer. We know what it means to be a student, and maybe some also know what it means to teach. Education is a complex social structure, filled with hierarchy, autonomy, and power positions that are in a dynamic relationship in the education system.

The Hungarian education system went through important changes in the past decade. Educational institutions became a new battleground of power politics and identity politics. The Government acknowledged the importance of education and the school curriculum in developing the next generations’ identity. The centralization of the education system and the nationalization of all educational institutions give power to them so they can make the necessary adjustments to serve their purposes. As such, all textbooks are now published through a central publisher, the national curriculum, designed by a government institution, controls what is taught in the classrooms, hence also limiting the freedom of teachers for including alternative materials. While the Hungarian education system needs reforms and modernization, these policy changes serve a different purpose, that of controlling the knowledge formation of students.

The thesis aimed at answering the question of *how the contemporary Hungarian secondary education system affects the subject formation of young people as future citizens, particularly in the light of the current education reforms of the Orbán Government?* Secondly, *how do principals of high schools that have traditionally enjoyed greater degrees of freedom in defining their curricula negotiate current reforms?* To do so, it analyzed the recent education policy changes and with the help of critical education theory, it revealed the relationship between power and knowledge in the Hungarian education system. With the help of the interviewed high school principals, the institutional and personal level effects of the legislation were shown as well. The daily practices confirm how the school becomes a space for the development of a specific identity through politicizing the formation of the knowing subject. The Government aims to form a knowing subject that is nationalist and prioritizes the values and virtues that the current political discourse does. Students who are trained according to these measures will

become citizens who hold on to these values, make their decisions accordingly, and very likely give them on to their children.

My thesis also aimed at uncovering those spaces left to resist this development by looking at the daily negotiation of these policies and how they are implemented on the local school level. The interviews with high school principals of high-ranking, acknowledged institutions reveal the effects of politics and how those appear in their schools. I categorized these influences into three levels where power appears plus one, where it is challenged. The changes of authority and who is in the decision-making position can be observed on the institutional level. While it is typical of an authoritarian regime to drive all power to their hands, there is a struggle to resist against this on the principals' level. They aim to keep some levels of autonomy, which they are allowed to do so for their excellency. This is one of the key findings of the research, for this gives ground to them to practice critical pedagogy as an act of resistance and develop an alternative subject formation. These elite institutions strive to raise autonomous thinkers and they can do so by allowing more freedom to their teachers in interpreting and implementing the national curriculum.

If we untangle the controversy that lays here, we can see how these findings can have a broader societal implication. The students graduating from the elite institutions are raised through their education to become autonomous thinkers with the help of critical pedagogy. If this is the key to get the best out of the next generation, then the good practices shared by the elite high schools could be implemented on a larger scale to achieve a similar, if not the same result in other educational institutions as well. On the other hand, understanding the motives and the results of the current Hungarian education policy can be eye-opening not only to parents or educators but to a larger audience as well.

This present study gives an account of how knowledge relates to power and that of identity formation through a contemporary country-specific example. It uncovers the complex effects that governmental politics has on the education system, revealing not only the negative outcomes but also the hidden potentials to resist such influence. While the consequences are hard to be measured yet, the discussion and the framework of critical education theory could be adapted or further teased to disentangle power relations in education and identity formation.

Lastly, this thesis also aims to help the readers to take an account of their knowledge, think about how they were formed through their most formative years, and what their education made them capable of. The research enables one to think analytically about education and how that forms the individual, not only through knowledge transfer but also through experiences that affect the identity. This gives a good ground to contrast with the contemporary system, how it will impact those currently in education to see what kind of future citizens they will probably become. It also gives opportunities to expand this analytical overview to a larger scale inquiry, move further than the elite institutions and see through the lived experiences of the less privileged institutions how they experience power and autonomy in the current education system.

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