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**SMALL SCHOOLS, LOCAL SOCIETIES, EDUCATION POLICY.
SMALL SCHOOLS IN BARANYA COUNTY**

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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Introduction – Indication of the Research Topic

In recent years, the discourse on small schools has come to the foreground again mainly because of the changes in school structures. This is not without precedent, especially in education-sociological studies in Hungary as in connection with the process of districting the problems of small schools have produced a significant literature in the second half of the twentieth century (cf. FORRAY, 1976, 1988, 1992; ANDOR, 1986; KOZMA, 1987, 1992; KELEMEN, 1993). Around the millennium and in recent years authoritative studies discuss the advantages and disadvantages of small schools (cf. FORRAY, 1998; FORRAY, 2009; IMRE, 1997; IMRE, 2003; KISTELEPÜLÉSEK..., 2006; JANKÓ, 2011; GYÖRGYI, 2012), and lately several analyzes have focused on small schools or small local schools, as well as the effectiveness-efficiency-equity ratio system (cf. LANNERT, 2004; HERMANN, 2005; KISTELEPÜLÉSEK..., 2006; VÁRADI, 2008; LANNERT – NÉMETH – SINKA, 2008). When reviewing the international literature of the present and recent past (including: FICKERMANN-WEISHAUP-ZEDLER, 1998; WESTON, 2000) we could see that both the term ‘small school’ and the existence and organizations of small schools raises various questions in other countries as well.

In Baranya county – which is the site of our research – the number of small schools are significant: at the beginning of the research in the 2009/2010 academic year, according to statistical data primary school provision was available in 89 settlements of Baranya county, that is 30% of all the settlements; and in 58 places – 65% of the settlements providing primary school provisions – we found (member)institutions of less than 150 people. Our question’s stake is not just a scientific problem analysis, respectively, development of possible responses, but also a description of series of changes directly concerning and influencing the everyday life of a social circle (area, settlements, institutions and people who live there) and also showing the results that can be put into the local social practice (action plans, declaration of intent, educational programs, etc.). The vulnerability of this institutional circle does not simply mean closing down schools, but a complete (social) structural change in regions where elementary education is significantly built on small schools – like in Baranya.

According to our experience, social embeddedness of small schools is poorly explored, so we think it’s essential to perform further studies that enforce both sociological and pedagogical positions. It is particularly important to look at the schools and the actors in a complex way thus perform complex analyses manifesting in methodological diversity.

In the social correlation system of small schools results of the studies prior to our research bring a new thematic node into the field of research: the complex problem of disadvantageous position (cf. FORRAY, 1992; KISTELEPÜLÉSEK..., 2006; IMRE, 2012). In addition, since minority education¹ is strongly present in the schools with low number of students in Baranya, examining related issues, in particular the Roma minority education, is also inescapable. It also provides an opportunity to reveal the various anomalies and find opportunities in the field of minority education as well as formulate relevant education policy proposals.

Reflection on actualities is also important because the education policy environment is constantly changing. Our research, although this study is not limited to institutional circuits operating with the lower grades, is made actual by the new education policy intention in the area of legislation manifested in the following manner: public education act of 2011 (Act CXC 2011 on National Public Education), in case it is requested by the parents of eight children it will be possible to establish a new lower primary school; also this act supports – on a legislative level – the operation of the already existing institutions with a low number of students.

The Questions and the Objectives of the Research

The questions of our research dealing with small schools, especially schools with low number of students in Baranya county are as follows:

- How can you define the terminology of small schools?
- Whether small schools in Baranya can be typologised, and if so, in what way?
- How life of primary schools with small number of students has been forming, with special attention to the small schools in Baranya, and what tendencies in education policy and what institutional and maintenance strategies can be observed?
- What kind of relations are there between small schools and minority education when focusing on Baranya county's institutions?
- What features can be explored in the relation system of small schools and disadvantageous positions?

Among the questions raised we are looking for an answer to the question that is referring to the circumstances of keeping or rather closing down the institutions

¹ as national minority education

and also the strategies of the maintainers and the settlements. This also shows the possibilities of the local societies and those social spaces in which local societies of each settlement appear.

Based on the above, the main objective of the research can be grasped as follows: *small schools, local societies, examination of the relation system of education policy directions*, focusing particularly on Baranya county's public school system, schools with a low number of students. This study attempts the followings:

- typological examination of small schools in Baranya county;
- analysis of tendencies concerning small schools (too) and thus the effects of legislative changes;
- analysis and description of the changes taking place since 2006 concerning schools with low number of students – less than 150 students – in Baranya county;
- exploration of the systems in the context of disadvantaged position and schools with low number of students;
- studying the relation system between minority education and small schools.
- Among the thematic lines we assign a prominent role to our attempt of *mapping the maintainer/settlement/institutional strategies (closing down schools – preserving – reopening) primarily with case-studies, in the relation system of schools-settlements-maintainers; also exploring the related causes, motivations and results, and the complex relation between the school and the local society.*

The research also aims to address the dilemmas of the *terms* in use and their scope, their development history and current value, scientific and non-scientific (colloquial, technical, legal, education policy and other public) use. To do this, first we carried out an examination of selected writings from Hungarian and international literature, moreover we built in a micro-research element during which we studied the small school terminus with a questionnaire.

The research thus contains all parts of *detecting – description – explanation* as a possible research objective (BABBIE, 2001: 106-108).

Methods

During the research both quantitative and qualitative methods were used with the increased presence of qualitative methods: analysis of settlement and education statistics, questionnaire survey, document analysis, field research (interviews and observation) all provide base for the study. In the case studies we rely on observations, interviews, documents and statistical analysis to look for answers to the questions of ‘How did it happen?’ and ‘Why?’ (cf. GOLNHOFER, 2001: 19; YIN, 2004, 2009).

During the analysis of *settlement and education statistics* we put the emphasis on the examination of annual (2009/2010 and 2012/2013 school year) school statistics, that helps the typological approach of small schools; as well as we examined Austrian and Italian education statistics data matched with international examples. Since the existence of schools is closely intertwined with the settlements they are located in, the inclusion of settlement statistical data in the study can highlight the geographic-demographic specificity of the institutions.

The *analysis of the various documents* also brings us closer to the understanding of the world of small schools. During our research, ‘we consider a document every material made recently or these days that is not made for the pedagogical research, but their analysis is instructive to the pedagogic research’ (NÁDASI, 1996: 317). Among the documents we paid special attention to the analysis of the county public education development plans of 2013 concerning the (re)opening of (small)schools. We assumed that these documents reflect the relevant section of the Public Education Act passed in 2011, as well as statutes of certain institutions, educational programs, and relevant regional and settlement papers have contributed to the expansion of our knowledge about small schools.

Our micro-research conducted in Spring, 2014 among the directors of Baranya small schools with less than 150 students is a *questionnaire survey*, which (1) reveals a definition of the actors of small schools referring to themselves, that is the definition creating strategy, (2) reveals a small school’s evaluation elements reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages which are attributed to small schools by the literary canon. The micro research asking directors of all the schools concerned in the study – it meant 68 schools in Baranya county according to preliminary data – cannot be considered representative (56% of the

respondents, that is 38 directors filled out the questionnaire), however, it provides a number of information that are tinging the image of small schools. When processing the electronically completed questionnaire² data mainly the answers given to the open questions were analyzed in this study, and the results take us closer to the term of small school. Advantages and disadvantages of small schools or the opinions about undivided education also formed part of the analysis as well as the directors' ideas about the opening of small schools.

Nevertheless, the subject of this paper is the analysis of the *narratives* of actors completing the questionnaire being responsible for the institutions, as well as actors in the case studies, and through this the interpretation of phenomena in question.

The dissertation's fundamental organizing element is the presence of case studies. The case study is an exploration and interpretation that attempts to show both the typical and the unique side of small schools. It reveals the strategies the institutions and their maintainers use; it explores the macro and micro social environment of schools, the actual participants of the school's space and the diverse systems of relations which emerge during the examination of the objects of the case studies. During the research, we carried out Hungarian and foreign school analysis with different time intervals.

The thesis includes the following case studies – that are organized along the settlement and maintainer strategies significantly determining the life of small schools.

1. Case study on closing down a small settlement's school

The case study is about a school closing where we would also like to explore what alternative ways are used in a peripheral sub-region to have 'local education', and how it's social usefulness may manifest from the point of view of disadvantaged students. The school of the settlement chosen for the analysis closed its doors 1 September, 2008 without a successor. The first survey was subsequently done in 2010 and the field work took place in the summer of 2014.

² The questionnaire was made with the help of LimeSurvey program. (<http://www.limesurvey.org/en/>). The background-surface was provided by the Dél-Alföldi Regionális Társadalomtudományi Kutatási Egyesület (<http://www.dartke.hu/>).

2. Case study on closing down a suburban school

The case study is trying to explore the circumstances, the process and the effects of closing down a (small) school – the observed school closed in 2007 – located in a disadvantaged part of the city. The development history of the school is significantly determined by a diverse social process with the main consequence of the growing number of Gypsy, Roma students and the associated conceptual, strategic, curriculum, methodological, etc. answers. The ongoing multi-phase research puts the school closure's actors, motivations and implications in the focus. The research began in 2003, and was continued in the school year of 2007 and 2013-2014.

3. Case study on establishing a new school

The study focuses on a (re)birth of a small school in 2011. The study concentrates on the local society, its actors and institutional net of the region, the specific relations of the actors, and the start-up motivations. Our research site is a disadvantageous settlement; its combination (multigraded) lower grade school was closed down in 1976, as a result of districting. The first observation started in 2011 and the field work was continued in 2012.

In addition to these three case studies, which are in the last unit of the thesis (chapter V) chapter III also contains a brief description of extended analysis about the given schools in harmony with each thematic unit. Among the latter there is a case study of a small school in Baranya that became maintained by the church and an Austrian school re-opened in 2009.

Since the study is basically built on case studies, we deal with the methodology of case-study and its theoretical questions (GOLNHOFER, 2001; FLYVBJERG, 2006). We look at the case study (at the same time the research strategy – cf. GOLNHOFER, 2001 – and the actual text) as the actual form of scientific recognition, of which function is not limited to being a textual unit serving uniqueness and strengthening or even counterpointing some kind of process or a general conclusion with the main role of illustration. The case studies, according to our intention, are not just examples but also interpretive descriptions of events, scenarios offering numerous opportunities. In addition, the case studies can also be seen as the meeting points of the thematic lines discussed in the study. We believe discussing various thematic units contributes to possible multilateral interpretations of the following case studies in the paper.

In several chapters – especially in case studies – Roma, Gypsy students appear regularly. The issue that brings the discourse on Romology into cases where Roma, Gypsy questions are discussed, appears not only in the discourse of Education. This is the reason behind the emphasis of the study not operating on an ethnic horizon, yet mobilizes knowledge elements attributed to Romology discourse (see: BECK, 2013a; 2013b) as well as other philosophy and social sciences fitting to its subject. The deeper understanding of the world of small schools inevitably concerns the Gypsy, Roma communities and their members due to the schools' special social context, but it happens without general allegations being formed about the Gypsies, Romas based on the experiences gained here.

Structure of the Dissertation

The *Introduction* is dealing with the research topic indication, defining the research questions and goals and detailing the research methods. In the second chapter (*Using the concept of small schools*) we discuss the concept of small schools and look at the followings: (1) the use of the term and its dilemmas, (2) advantages and disadvantages of small schools, in this context, the issue of effectiveness-efficiency-equity, (3) the combination (multigraded) schools – relying on the one hand on the Hungarian and international literature, on the other hand on the results of the aforementioned questionnaire micro research. The intention was to give a summary of the interpretation of terms, especially because we had hardly seen this kind of ambition either in Hungarian or international literature.

The third chapter (*The typological and historical approach of small schools*) is trying to approach small schools from a typological and historic aspect, with special regard to small schools in Baranya. Following a summary of key socio-economic characteristics of the county we deal with the history of small schools in Baranya county after 1945 with particular emphasis on the exploration of settlement-maintainer-institutional strategies of the last decade. It might contribute to the interpretation of the changes taking place in Hungary concerning small schools that we write about the situation of European small schools and tendencies of educational policy in Europe. The fourth chapter (*Small schools in the context of disadvantaged position and minority education*) – discusses the relation system of small schools, disadvantaged position and the minority education focusing on Baranya. In chapter five (*Case studies*) the aforementioned three case studies can be found, their framework for

interpretation is provided by the previously discussed issues. The last chapter of our study is a summary of the results (*Summary*).

Results of the Research

During our research we wanted to know how the *term* small school can be defined. We found that concept-explanations of small schools are highly flexible in the Hungarian literature: the number of the inhabitants and the students is not clearly defined. The definition, due to the first part of the term, is typically based on *cardinality*: the population of the settlement, the number of students in the school, and the number of forms and classes are the base for a clearer definition. In recent years schools with low number of students got into the focus again especially due to the modifications done to the Act LXXIX, 1993 on Public Education and then the new Public Education Act of 2011 (Act CXC, 2011 on National Public Education). In connection with this the *peripheral and uncertain* position – and variable approaches to this – is a common feature of the institutions listed here. Apparently the schools with low number of students are in constant insecurity, their effectiveness is questioned repeatedly, and they are in need of continuous external emergency responses. They have to respond to the changes in the social environment in a sensitive and quick way in order to survive. The ‘small’ indicator can also be referring to the settlement in which the school operates. Consequently, the small school can also be defined as a *small settlement* institution. During our research, however, we found that there are many schools with low number of students in major *cities*, mainly in peripheral regions.

The cardinality-based definition is a fundamental characteristic in the foreign literature too. However, many countries describe their small schools along the combination (multigraded) student groups as we have seen it in the case of Hungarian researchers. Due to the flexible use of terminology when talking about small schools we emphasize that it is particularly important to treat the term critically and *define it when putting it into use*.

Our research conducted among small schools in Baranya county covers the institutions with less than 150 students. The validity of the use of seemingly arbitrary limits on the number of students is shown: in other national and international studies, by the regulatory environment, our field experience as well as the results of the questionnaire micro research done among the school directors.

The study among directors of small schools wished to explore *the definition of the actors of the small schools referring to themselves and the strategies of self-definition*. We found that the self-interpretation is developed mainly along the perceived positive qualities. So the question of ‘what is a small school like’ was not really answered, as opposed to the question of ‘how they see their (small)school or how they make it seen’. On the other hand, the directors were listing the characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of small schools that are attributes to small schools by the literature as well.

One aim of the research was to examine whether the small schools in Baranya *can be typologised* and if so, in what way. It was done primarily by relying on educational and settlement statistical data analysis.

During the research primary education was available only in a third of the settlements of the county, and in two thirds of these settlements we could find a school with less than 150 students. It showed that the public education’s structural pillars of this county are prominently the small schools. These settlements usually have 500 to 1000 inhabitants; this is the size that can have the potential to be the centre of the surrounding small villages.

During the analysis of the education statistic data the following specific items are building the Baranya small schools’ typology:

The main feature of the schools involved in the research is the high proportion of students with (multiply) disadvantaged position, this is significantly higher than the national average and the other schools in Baranya (in 2009/2010 56.54% of the students were in disadvantageous position and 25.74% of them were multiply disadvantaged in the examined institutions). Analysis of the settlement statistical data shows that it goes together with the regional disadvantage which is a significant characteristic of the small settlements and the small schools in their surroundings in the county. We formulated a further question of what features can be explored in the relation system of small schools and disadvantaged position. The data call our attention to the danger of marginalization and segregation and point out the important issue of equity. At the same time, based on the results of the case studies we can state that segregation is a multifold ‘social game’ to which the school can not provide a solution in itself.

Another main specialty of the schools with low number of students in Baranya is the significant role of minority education. The very strong presence of ethnic minorities also affects the schools programs in Baranya county, while the introduction of minority education and its application become important part of the school rescue strategies. In the county the proportion of minority

education participants are significantly higher than the national average, and in schools with less than 150 students this number is even higher (in analysed schools 75% of the students take part in minority education in 2012). In recent years, we observed that the difference between the rates continued to rise.

In connection with Baranya small schools we asked what kind of relationship is there between small schools and minority education. Historical relations explored during the research confirmed one of the basic ideas of the research, that is small schools are fundamentally affected by the regulations and their changes concerning minority education, especially Roma minority education. The research shows that minority education has got important role in the life of small schools. It is a kind of strategic element that is at the mercy of the ever-changing social environment and educational directives. During the research it became apparent that education policy creates an uneven situation in the minority education system. Thus, it is important that the problems identified (e.g.: problems of teaching Roma ethnography and culture, lack of Gypsy minority language teacher training) should be associated with education policy intentions.

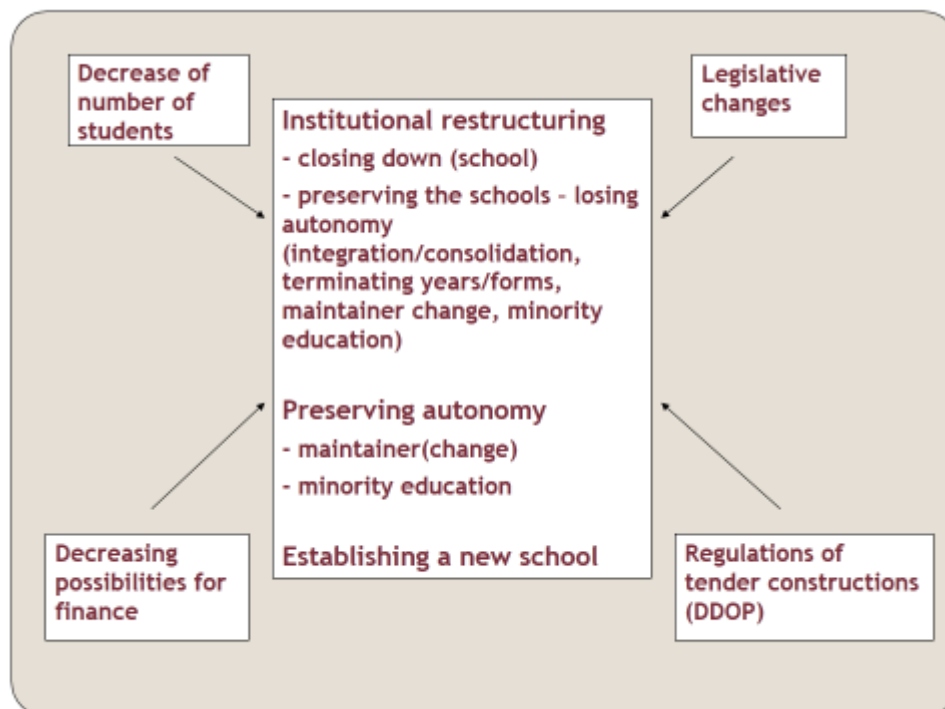
Looking at the distribution of *multigraded (combination)* education we found that the Baranya data is similar to the national index, so in that respect we did not find key specifics among the schools in Baranya. However, the high number of schools in question points out the need for our special attention to the multigraded study groups' continuous presence. For this reason, and also because of the results of the case studies, we considered it important to articulate the transformation of the research into higher education practice. Teacher training should include the methodology of teaching in multigraded study groups, methodological publications should be available and expert consultation should be provided for teachers.

In our research we most wanted to emphasis the exploration of the way how life of schools with small number of students, more specifically the Baranya small schools has developed in the last decade. Moreover, what kind of ***maintenance and institutional strategies, and educational policy tendencies*** can be observed on that basis. When examining the impact of education policy-regulatory changes applicable (also) to small schools we concentrated on the national tendencies with the interpretation of the concept of districting and re-districting, we described the changes concerning Baranya schools along these lines.

Focusing on the last decade our experiences showed that the educational measures of 're-districting' changed the institution network significantly: institutional closures, integration and consolidation of primary schools, what's

more maintainer's changing greatly affected Baranya small schools. Among the primary reasons of institutional restructuring taking place in the last decade, besides the demographic changes, the followings had a role as well: the 2006 change on Public Education Act, defining the minimum size of a class, changes of ways of financing, and as a Southern Transdanubian specificity, the conditions and other requirements of the of regional infrastructure tender of 2007. At the same time, minority education was given a bigger role and it provided a chance for the schools to survive. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Changes and their reasons (since 2006) concerning schools with low number of students in Baranya



At the same time the number of independent schools significantly dropped and in case of those that continued to be independent we met the strategies analysed in the study (church maintenance or mostly minority education).

Hungarian and international examples showed that the settlements, the local communities try to preserve their schools; and the local elite is able to mobilize resources and find new ways of *preserving the school* against the rationalization of the network of institutions. However, the question arises in connection with the centralization that took place in Hungary in the past few years that what role local politics play in the shaping of the life of schools, and what new balance can be established between the local and central politics (cf. FORRAY – KOZMA, 2013). In the course of the international outlook we could see

that in other countries the discourse in small schools picks up again and again, similarly to the Hungarian which derives partly from educational and professional questions partly sustainability issues. The international study also points out that we can look at small schools as a new space of networking providing innovative ways in the methodology too.

In connection with the *closing down* of the schools case studies highlight the fact that not necessarily the *closing* itself means a problem. Our experience is that the situation created by the termination of the school cannot be interpreted as an opportunity by the actors of the education scene; they have no effect on the settlement or region's education development or restructuring.

During the research we examined the possibility of *rehabilitation* of small schools. We found that in the education policy efforts related to small schools re-opening (which also can be interpreted as a new 're-districting') legal preparation was not built on previous investigation; the analysis of the county development plans also show a lack of preparation for establishing schools. As it was indicated by low willingness to participate in the 2011 tender for school opening. Relying on Andor's study (ANDOR, 1986) which is discussing the chances of schools reintroduction in the 1980s, and also relying on our present research experience the following aspects' significance is emphasized during (re)opening schools. Should be taken into account: demographic trends; the parents' will; the material and personal conditions; interest for and against the school opening; the aspects of equity and equal opportunities.

So the case studies on school opening pointed out, just like the example of an Austrian school opening described by us, that if a local political will is formulated in a small settlement, which coincides with the community will in the moment of founding, it has the power to establish a school.

Based on the issues described in the thesis one question arises, what is more relevant and more useful: keeping the institutions – even with institutional restructuring – or closing down them. We can state according to our research and the relevant literature that for the *local communities*, in most cases, *it is beneficial* to preserve, retain or reopen their last institution. At the same time, the current education policy objective, which may also result in school closures through the aspects of effectiveness-efficiency-equity may also apply. In other words, insisting on small schools *at all costs* does not necessarily serve the local communities and the students' interests. It is, however, absolutely certain, that any change leaves a trail on the local community, affects the formal and informal networks, that is why the people concerned can not be left out from the process of consideration and decision making. This is perhaps the key for the

community, the local society to go through the least possible trauma during a school closure or gain the most from a school opening. According to Katalin Forray R. – and we agree with her on the basis of our case studies – clinging to the small school ‘contains a great deal of irrational element, which could not and can not be coped with by ‘aufklärer’ thinking. (...) To create new workplaces, build new roads, improve the state of local infrastructure, etc. is not only more difficult but often impossible as well. They can be replaced by the school and not the demagoguery of local leaders but many rural communities’ deeply felt desire’ (FORRAY, 2009: 245-254).

Possible directions of further research

The research results can raise **further questions** as well as indicate **new research directions**, not only for small schools:

- Schools maintained by local governments were turned into state-run schools in 2013. We can ask then in what way this significant education policy change affected the situation of small schools, their everyday operations; furthermore how the relationship between the school and the settlement is affected by it.
- Our Baranya example about a re-opening of a school as well as the analysis of the county education development plans pointed out that the foundation of new schools raises a number of problems. Based on this we think it is important to follow the life of new schools having been established since 2011. This research can show whether there are ‘success criteria’ for opening new schools and if so, what these are. It can also show how school re-opening affects the life of a settlement, the local society.
- We showed a Hungarian and foreign example of school rescue strategy: the Church became of the new maintainer. Extending the research to several institutions we can formulate a question of what consequences it had for the school actors and the wider environment.
- The statistical data series pointed out that in recent years the percentage of students participating in Roma minority education has increased significantly, along with this we shed light on the problems rising in the fields of minority education. It can be a subject to further study to explore what conditions exist in the institutions and what support they would need

to fully complete the plans set in minority education directives. Along the outcomes relevant education policy recommendations can be made.³

- Education in combination (multigraded) study groups concerns a relatively low proportion of students but quite a lot of institutions; we think it would be necessary to explore in what way the methodology of teaching multigraded study groups appears in teacher training and what additional forms of support may help increase the effectiveness of education.

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³ At the time of the completion of this thesis a research started with similar directions at the University of Pécs, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Romany Studies and Sociology of Education with the leadership of Anna Orsós.

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