

The collapse of the two-pole world system led to radical changes concerning political-economic and social matters in the post-communist countries, including Hungary. The changes had an impact on all fields of life, thus the whole system of education as well, affecting its structure, organization, control and the regulation of contents. The realization of all these was determined by the changes in the priorities of education policy.

At the beginning of the procedure the transformation of the system of public education was in focus, in connection with the emergence of the values of freedom and autonomy. During this phase the decentralization process, which had already started before the change of regime, accelerated, and primary and secondary schools were given the opportunity to change structure, from the traditional 8+4 grades to the structures of 6+6 or 4+8 grades. At the same time, the elaboration of a new “core curriculum” was started, which considered as determinative the points of view of the reformed, decentralized educational system. By the end of the procedure a two-level, norm-oriented high-school graduation system was elaborated, which enabled the comparative measurement of students’ achievements.

During the last ten years, which can be considered as the second phase of the procedure, education policy has been focusing on three fields: vocational education, adult education and higher education. In these fields the decision-makers had to face differing problems: on one hand the fast-changing needs of labor-market, on the other hand the dilemma of how to preserve the quality of education under the circumstances of the extensive broadening of higher education. In my presentation I would like to talk about the changes in public education, considering mainly the modifications in the system of the regulation of contents. The lead of my talk will be the chronology of elaboration and transformation of the state regulatory document, the National Core Curriculum.

1st phase: 1989-1998

The history and characteristics of the evolution of the Hungarian civil democracy can be depicted in an expressive way through the changes of the legal system. What led basically to the existence of the democratic footing-system developed through discussions and compromises were the structural crisis of the former Soviet Union and the economic bankruptcy situation in Hungary. It was elaborated mainly by a new political elite in power, among the members of which could be found both the reformers of the former party in power and the politicians of the new parties as well, who were recruited mainly from among the intellectuals.

As a result of the discussions of the so-called National Round-Table the public law system of the third Hungarian Republic came into being, still, specific issues were not outlined. And despite the fact that all regime-changing parties considered education as a national matter, altogether seven pages were dedicated to the situation of public education in the program of the freely elected Hungarian government, swearing an oath on May 23, 1990. This document outlines the need to radically transform the former, ideologically strongly influenced educational system, concentrating on two essential elements: decentralization and the structural transformation of the system, which also meant the change in the function of some types of institutions. In the background of the reform intentions one could find the leading government party’s nostalgic political conceptions which, as a matter of fact, were based on formerly initiated changes.

Namely, the 1985 law on public education, by declaring the possibility of decentralization, autonomy and alternativeness, created the circumstances for the professional autonomy of schools, breaking with the content- and procedure-led system that had been – until then- centrally directed and ideologically determined by the party-state. And although the emergence en masse of these possibilities were limited for several years to come by many other measures, this law was the starting point for all changes till the inauguration of the new law on public education, that is till 1993. This was the law modified by the last party-state parliament in March 1990 in a way that it enabled individuals and organizations to found pedagogical institutions and gave the permission to schools to determine their own pedagogical goals.

The orientation of the changes in contents was defined both by broadening the maintainer's rights and ensuring the institutional autonomy. Such a device was needed that ensured the conditions of a unified regulation and could tolerate the teachers' professional freedom at the same time. Due to the transformation of the secondary school system the 8 grade elementary school, that used to operate exclusively in the past, lost - both after the 4th and the 6th grade - some of its pupils who could continue their studies in high schools of either 4, 6, or 8 grades, which, after the change of regime, appeared with differing maintainers and solely independent programs. And although at the beginning there had been two different trends within the professional circles concerning the transformation of the contents regulation – one with a state examination-system, and a “mixed” one, that is a system regulating both with a school-leaving exam and a core curriculum-type entrance exam, - in the end the core-curriculum conception, supported by the majority of the professional circles, prevailed, and was accepted by the regime-changing parties as well.

Since the 1989 Ministry decision on the starting of the curriculum-works till the 1995 decree on the publishing of the National Core Curriculum, 6 versions of the core curriculum were elaborated. During this period three governments had their turn: a reform-communist one, one with Christian-national feelings and a social-liberal one. The government changes meant not only political changes in the country's life, but bore significant differences in the scale of values as well, which had a strong impact on the development of the functioning of each sub-system.

The different conceptions of the “core curriculum” taking shape in the cross-fire of social debates were discussed by the representatives of the whole professional community: teachers, principals, educational researchers, educational politicians, Ministry officials, corporate systems. The work of the curriculum makers - educational researchers and university experts who were all committed devotees of the modernization of education - was basically determined by professional points of view. The debates on the curriculum were carried on following the same points of view and each of the curriculum versions took shape according to this. Still, a non-committal professional conception proved to be unacceptable for the government committed to Christian-national feelings, thus the debate shifted from professional issues to the field of political values, and the educational government was interfering through administrative ways more and more. The sharp contrast between the experts making the curriculum and the Ministry administration following ideological points of view was only dissolved when there was a change in the person of the Minister. The new leaders of the staff committed themselves to the publication of the National Core Curriculum, thus a compromise was elaborated.

The concept and functions of the core curriculum were redefined, and instead of a two-level contents regulation, in accordance with the professional circles, the introduction of a three-level one was decided. According to this on the first level the National Core Curriculum would have been composed of basic principles and requirements, on the second level of frame curriculums elaborated for the different types of schools. The third level was the local

curriculum of the schools. The definition outlined in the original conceptions - according to which the central curriculum should contain the common basic requirements of compulsory schooling, which the schools would have adapted to their local circumstances - was modified to basic principles and requirements, the two-level contents regulation was modified to a three-level one. However, before either the basic principles or the requirements could have taken effect, a change of government was effectuated and the new liberal Minister defined a new direction to the development of the National Core Curriculum (NCC). The person he nominated as the State Secretary of the sector was an independent expert of the curricular works and one of the directors of the process. By his person the staff was led by the professional circle, and the political values merged with the professional ones.

The professional arguments on modernization were close to the liberal principles on education policies. As for the finalization of the NCC the concurrence proved to be favorable. However, by the time this finalization took place the stress of the debates moved from the issues of regulation to the problems of the whole educational modernization evoked by the NCC. In spite of all these the works on the finalization of the NCC went on with full speed, accompanied by a series of discussions all over the country between December 1994 and spring 1995. The NCC6 was finally accepted by the government on October 5 1995, then, consecutively, the parliament modified the law on public education, adjusting it to the new system of contents regulation.

The National Core Curriculum coming into effect “was meant to be a regulatory document above all school types”¹ that defined the common and minimal cultural contents (approx. 50% of the knowledge) by sorting them into civilization-fields, and complementing them with a series of cross-curricular elements standing above all of the civilization-fields and imbibing each of them. The horizontal organizing principle was complemented with a series of vertical points of view, namely, based on the English model, the knowledge fields were divided into two big sections (grades 1-6; grades 7-10) and four smaller ones (end of terms at grades 4, 6, 8, 10), by filling in this way the whole scale of compulsory schooling. Contrary to traditions, neither subjects nor numbers of lessons related to the subjects figured in the curriculum, what was defined was only the timeframe that could be dedicated to the teaching of the civilization-fields, fixing the minimum and maximum percentage for each section. The central curriculum did not dispose of the time when each of the cultural elements had to be taught either, however, the requirements referred not only to knowledge, but to abilities as well.

Schools considered and used the NCC as a common fund that enabled them to adapt to local surroundings in a flexible way (social status, parents' expectations, pedagogical possibilities). Thus the elaboration of the contents of school curriculums was carried out on two levels, taking into consideration the central and the local requirements as well. Schools were given two years to introduce the NCC, they had to promulgate their local curriculum on September 1st 1998 in ascending order, firstly in grades 1 and 7.

Although institutions were given a wide range of support for the implementation (curricular database, trainings, electronic information system, information offices, publications) the debate around the NCC did not come to a standstill. The poles of the debates were on one hand the difficulties of the practical realization and on the other hand the value differences.

Practical difficulties

1. The message that the newly elaborated vertical structure of the curriculum carried was the complete structural transformation of the Hungarian public education.

¹ Zoltán Báthory: Maratoni reform (Marathon Reform), Önkonet 2001, par.157.

2. The introduction of the modernization contents of the NCC could only be fitted within the frames of the science-based subject-system with great difficulties.
3. As the curriculum only applied to the compulsory schooling period (16 years of age) the questions related to contents regulation of the two years directly preceding graduation (16-18 years of age) remained open.
4. The requirements of the new examination system, namely the documents that were meant to regulate the contents from the side of the outcome, were only completed in the year of the compulsory introduction of the NCC, thus the teachers could not get any guidelines concerning the functions of grades 11-12, which – as an empty space – made the preparatory works uncertain.
5. The structure 6+4 meant that the traditional syllabus had to be restructured, which turned out to be an unsolvable task in the case of the subjects taught cyclically and chronologically: e.g. because of the fact that the cycle was broken at the end of the elementary school.
6. Teachers had neither the theoretical nor the practical knowledge to elaborate a curriculum and they did not feel like it was their task.
7. As they had neither knowledge nor experience in the field of planning schools did not know how to use the 50% timeframe that remained free, and they did not know either how to broaden freely the 50% knowledge that was strongly bound to the core curriculum.

Value and value differences

1. The transformation of the horizontal and vertical structure of the curriculum became a primordial question from the point of view of the elementary school teachers' living conditions.
2. The introduction of the new cultural elements that figured in the curriculum concerned the teachers as a matter of their living, rather than a professional issue, in the same way as did the fact that the numbers of lessons were given in percentage for intervals.
3. The social-liberal government, by the help of the curriculum, made an attempt to solve two old "pedagogical and educational-political – or maybe even social-political – deficiencies: elementary education was raised from eight years to ten and primary education from four to six."² There was a not at all hidden intention of democratization lying beyond this, namely that all 14-16 year old pupils should be involved in general civilization, thus ensuring the expansion of secondary and higher education. But psychological-pedagogical arguments also emerge in the intention of raising primary education to 6 grades. This intention of ensuring permeability among schools and social equalizing found opposition in the secondary school corporate systems defending the interests of the middle class.
4. To provoke democratization to be realized through schooling (social mobility) by means of changes in school structures meant that selection based on merit was rather preferred to selection based on social origin, which offended not only the interests of high schools, but of the whole middle class as well.
5. The insecurity of the last two years of secondary education queried the traditionally strong prestige and functions of the 4 grade secondary schools.

² Zoltán Báthory: Maratoni reform (Marathon Reform), Önkonet 2001, par.157.

2nd phase: 1998-2002

Although - according to the data of a contemporary representative survey – schools had elaborated their local pedagogical programs till the inauguration date, insecurity concerning the inauguration of the NCC did not diminish, the debates did not calm down. The then leading opposition party, sensing the situation, initiated the postponing of the inauguration of the NCC, referring to the lack of qualification of the curriculums and of the teachers' competence. This goal also figured in their electoral program.

When on government, the new national-conservative trend started the revision of the NCC, this time not on ideological, but on a very actual political pragmatic basis. The law on public education modified again in 1999 kept the validity of the NCC, however, it tried to solve the permeability among schools by means of the frame curriculums based on the civilization-fields listed in the NCC, reviving the conception of the NCC5, which defined the three-level regulating system. According to the law frame curriculums were elaborated for all types of schools, including the schools that differed from the structure 8+4.

The frame curriculums regulated (education) not till the 10th, but till the end of the 12th grade, eliminating this way the empty space in the grades 11-12. School structure was divided into two sections: grades 1-8 were the elementary section, the aim of which was to found general civilization, and depending on school types, grades from 9 to 12 or 13 were the secondary section. That meant a turn back to the structure preceding the change of regime, although the law disposed of the possibilities to deviate from the frame curriculum, introducing the institution of the frame curricular accreditation and thus maintaining the right to teacher's freedom, achieved not so long ago. "The frame curriculum contains the defined compulsory and common pedagogical-educational requirements, the number of lessons necessary to fulfill the syllabus or the requirements, the rules of deviation from the curriculum, and the disposed time frame to be used in a compulsory or free way to fulfill the requirements, as well as the rules of using them."³

The frame curriculum works were carried out in three types of boards: the subject boards planning for 12 grades, the so called horizontal-school-type boards examining in 4-year cross-sections how the subject contents and the requirements fit, and the deviation boards regulating the possibilities to deviate from the frame curriculum. The ready frame curriculums consisted of two parts: on one hand of the general system of goals and tasks related to a certain type and level of schooling, of the system of subjects, the yearly number of lessons to be related to the subject for each grade, and on the other hand, of the precise frame curriculums for the subjects containing development-requirements, minimum subject contents and requirements defining the conditions of the progress. The modernizational contents of the NCC (dance, drama, media- and movie-culture, social- and human-studies) did not get an autonomous full-year time-frame, but were placed into so-called 1-2 term units (modul) to be organized freely and the schools could dispose of them independently. On the other hand new compulsory subjects appeared: Ethics and Headmaster's class in all types of schools, and Philosophy in secondary schools.

Schools had to adjust their local curriculum to the frame curriculum by September 2001. There were no social debates about the changes, but according to the feedback of questionnaires sent out to institutions and corporate systems teachers welcomed the changes, as they remedied some of the problems erased by the NCC and through the rearrangement the insecurity of living conditions was dissolved.

³ Gábor Halász and Judit Lannert (eds.): Jelentés a magyar közoktatásról (Report on the Hungarian Public Education) 2000, Országos Közoktatási Intézet Budapest, 2000, par.180.

3rd phase: 2002-2010

The introduction of the frame curriculums overwrote the regulatory force of the NCC without de facto revoking its effectiveness. Thus, after the parliamentary elections, the re-elected social-liberal government only had to abolish the compulsory nature of the frame curriculums to be able to come back to and continue their own 4-year-old education policy. Following this, the liberal Minister ordered the supervision of the NCC, in first place in order to eliminate the errors that had made its introduction problematic.

But the corrections were carried out in an altered environment. 2003 was the year Hungary entered the European Union. In the life of the European Union this period was the beginning of the era when educational issues, - that had been previously left to the member states, - were revalued on community level. The education policy called Lisbon Process reformulated former perceptions on education in terms of the “life-long learning”. This change of paradigm was focusing on the question of human disposing capacity, and fundamentally changed the dimensions of national education policies. While vigorously focusing on competitiveness from the point of view it affected labor market, attention was paid to global processes, which had a significant impact on regulatory, curricular and evaluation systems. Hungary could join the process by having – at the same time – at its disposal significant EU subventions from the so-called cohesion funds to carry out the developments.

The conceptional issues of the changes were formulated in different programs: in the 1st National Development Plan, in the strategy of the development of life-long learning, in the medium-term strategy of the Ministry of Education on the development of public education, in the New Hungary Development Plan. What effected from all this the issue of contents regulation can be described by the above mentioned conception of change of paradigm.

The new government did not modify the three-level system of contents regulation, but significantly modified the role of each level during the supervision of the NCC. The strategic function of the NCC was reinforced, thus it became the primordial document for the conceptional-theoretical principles of education. It remained at the same time the fundamental document of the uniformity of education, a regulatory device above school types, defining the main civilization-fields to be transferred, the contents periods of public education (grades 1-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-12) and development tasks prevailing in each contents period.

In the spirit of the preparation to “life-long learning” and the policy of equal opportunities stress was unambiguously put on development that was defined, on the basis of the EU conception, by so-called key-competences. In these terms, the cross-curricular contents were reinforced and the inner logic-system of the ten preserved civilization- fields radically altered. The “detailed requirements” and the repetitive knowledge were left out, and the development tasks were not defined in relation to the civilizational contents. Instead of two educational periods, the “new” NCC interprets the tasks in schooling periods that better fit the evolutionary-psychological characteristics; these tasks are defined in each competence-field by a series of tasks built upon each other according to the logic of development. It is much easier to build on this system the requirements of the two-level high-school graduation system that can be considered as the other cardinal point of the development of public education.

On the second level of contents regulation can be found the frame-curriculum to be used freely and the so-called program-kits. Their function is to broadcast in schools the task-system of the NCC in a usable way, with detailed explanations. The decree that defines the conditions of the frame-curricular qualification was enacted in 2004, and was completed later on with the criteria of the qualification of the program-kits. Neither of them is a compulsory document, but a system of recommendations that offer alternatives to institutional utilization with their goals, their subject- and development methods, topics and requirements. The

program-kits also contain an assortment of means: detailed pedagogical conception, course books, teaching units (modul), devices for demonstration and evaluation. For the development and implementation of all these the government spent significant EU subventions.

The third level is obviously the level of the pedagogical programs of schools, which also includes the detailed curriculum. Schools were given the possibility to transform this till September 1st 2004, the date when they had to introduce the 2003 NCC on the first grade, in ascending system. It was their own competence to decide what aids they used to fulfill this task. What mattered was that the accomplished local curriculums should correspond to the conception of education based on competence. Still, it is a fact that at this time only the 2000 frame curriculum could be found in the "curriculum-database" of the Ministry, the introduction of the paradigm-changing regulation was not accompanied by wide social debate, in comparison to the initial period, only a few hundred institutions and corporate systems were asked to express their opinion.

It is in this section that the contents regulation became a mixed-system, according to the original notions of the 90-ies. On one hand from 2001 the so-called measurements of competence have been carried out, on the other hand in 2005 the two-level high-school graduation system was introduced. Both of them have a strong retrospective effect on the work of elementary and high schools as well. The conception of these standardized measuring devices was elaborated with the objective to provide both the institutions and education-policy with data that can examine in an exact way the competence of fulfillment of public education and provide the students leaving the system with real licenses that enable them to enter higher education respectively.

As for the present situation: the NCC 2003 was modified again in 2007. But this time it did not mean a conceptual change, it merely meant an adjustment to the European reference-frame. This way education based on competence became even more accentuated, the introductory part containing general development principles and values was enlarged, and the highlighted developmental tasks were modified as well.

In order to facilitate implementation and make it more efficient significant developments were undertaken to give practical support to education based on competence. Program-kits were elaborated for 5 highlighted fields, to all school types and grades, a great number of frame curriculums were accredited. As, according to a 2005 representative survey, two-thirds of the schools based their work on the frame curriculums published in 2000, the educational government called the institutions for tender in two cycles, in order to implement the education based on competence.

Teachers' trainings and their overwork were financed in hundreds of schools from tender funds, as well as the provisioning of devices facilitating the use of the program-kits. As for their efficiency, the answer will be given by researches to come.

If we want to sum up the events of curricular changes, we can state unambiguously that this issue has come up as a priority in the policy of distinct governments. That is, everyone treated it as a national matter. This fact would presume in itself some kind of compliance - understanding. But what we see is that the development, introduction and modifications of the National Core Curriculum was taking shape not only, and not basically either in the course of professional coordination standing above politics, but 1. as the predomination of inner values of political parties, or else, 2. as a constraint of outer, in first place economic interests. The cyclic and continuous changes led to moments when three different (even contradictory) regulations could be in effect simultaneously, prevailing even within the walls of one single institution. The phenomenon referred to by the expert as a roller coaster, but evaluated as reform-chaos by the profession has not ended yet. The Christian-national government elected in May promises to supervise the NCC.

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After the collapse of the two- pole world system a radical political-economic change occurred in the new democracies including Hungary. The change extended to the whole education system as well with a shifting in education policy priorities. In the beginning the strategy focus was on public education. Referring to the value of freedom and their autonomy the general and secondary schools changed their formal 8+4 school structure to the 4+ 8 or 6+ 6 freely. Along with that a new national core curriculum was elaborated emphasizing a kind of decentralization. At the end of this first period the new two-level and norm-oriented examination system created the possibility of comparing the students' achievements.

In the last decade education policy has been focusing on the three other areas, namely adult education, vocational education and higher education. In these areas the decision makers should face different problems like the changing needs of labour market as well as how to preserve the quality of education in the circumstances of extended higher education.

In the paper the changes of the first period will be presented in more details, especially the Hungarian Core Curriculum.