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Mentoring Students of Disadvantaged Background in Hungary – “Let’s Teach for Hungary!” as an Equitable Intervention in the Public School System

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Abstract

The introductory study aims to give an insight into the Hungarian educational system and a mentor program aiming to facilitate development in social mobility in the country. In the Hungarian context of education, the concept of equality and equity is a current phenomenon that influences students of underprivileged families. In Hungary, among students living in the countryside, the intersectionality of disadvantages is observed. Several regions of the country have features of unemployment and low education. Thus, students from underprivileged families face a deficit of capital when entering and proceeding into the educational system. The situation is further complicated for the largest Hungarian minority, the Roma community, who face ethnic biases and misbeliefs, thus creating the cumulation of disadvantages. For students to overcome their difficulties, equitable interventions are needed. International and Hungarian literature stress the importance of developing positive psychological capital for students to become resilient. Peer-mentoring is observed as a tool to help facilitate individual changes. The study focuses on the framework of a Hungarian national peer-mentoring program called "Let's Teach for Hungary!" which aims to help primary school students (aged 11-15) with the help of university students. The theoretical analysis introduces the program and its goals. With the help of previous research conducted on the mentoring program, the study synthesizes the positive outcomes of the intervention. The research highlights the importance of equitable changes in public education and reveals the Hungarian status quo and its alternative solutions. The study creates a basis for continuing research that can open international discussion on best practices on the topic.

Keywords: Hungary, education, disadvantaged background, mentoring, resilience

Introduction

This paper aims to introduce an equitable intervention – a mentor program – in the public school system in Hungary. The study focuses on the “Tanítsunk Magyarorszáért!”/ “Let's Teach for Hungary!” country-wide mentor program. The program was created with an agreement made at the end of 2018; mentor training began in the spring semester of the academic year 2018/2019, and mentoring started in the fall semester of the following academic year. A class

of mentees is the focus of this research, who participated in the program from September 2019 to June 2021 and entered secondary education in the academic year of 2021/2022. Throughout the mentoring process, three analyses were conducted with various focuses: the relevance and novelty of this meta-analysis are that it concludes the results of the previous research carried out in the mentee group. Thus, this paper does not wish to cover all aspects of the national mentor program but gives a detailed insight into its effectiveness and areas to develop in one mentor group. This comprehensive study shows a good practice for intervention in the public school system that helps students of disadvantaged backgrounds to become resilient.

Literature Review

The study aims to give an insight into the Hungarian context and a mentor program created to facilitate development in social mobility in the country. In the Hungarian context of education, equality and equity are a current phenomenon that negatively influences students of underprivileged families.

Students of underprivileged backgrounds have downward aspirations (Bereményi, 2020), which are connected to their lack of several capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). Students participating in the program have deficits in economic, social, symbolic, and cultural capital. They do not have an adequate social network that can help them in procession, and the education path of their family does not support their success. In Hungary, among students living in the countryside, the intersectionality of disadvantages is observed (Híves, 2015), and implicit segregation is a crucial problem. Several regions of the country are featured by unemployment, low education, and poverty; thus, students coming from underprivileged families face a deficit of capitals when entering and proceeding in the educational system. The situation is even more complex for Hungary's largest minority, the Roma community, affected by poverty and undereducation in a much higher proportion than the majority. There are historical reasons behind this phenomenon that explain the situation (Kemény, 2005). Also, comprehensive statistics are to be found about their educational, ethnolinguistic, and financial status (Kemény & Janky, 2005). Bereményi (2020), in his study, collects the most important features of the Roma minority, focusing on educational and early career trajectory. Social mobility is even more difficult for the Roma community, who are facing ethical biases and misbeliefs: exclusion and misjudgments are so determinant that even high achieving and

resilient people find many costs for their upward mobility (Bereményi & Durst, 2021).

Schools included in the program are characterized by the features introduced above: the number of students of disadvantaged backgrounds is high, and Roma students are overrepresented in them. In secondary education, vocational and technical schools (that do not necessarily allow students to take the compulsory school-leaving exam for participating in tertiary education) are disadvantaged, and Roma students are also overrepresented (Liskó, 1997). This pattern continues and even becomes more significant in colleges and universities: the estimated proportion of disadvantaged students in higher education is less than 1% (Proity, 2021), and at the University of Pécs, the estimated number of the cumulation of disadvantaged and Roma students is around 1.5% (Varga et al., 2021: 74). The mentor program aims to intervene in the malfunctions of the educational system, namely that the social inequalities are mostly reproduced in locations that are not given any equitable services (Varga, 2018).

The analyzed mentor program wishes to show educational opportunities for children in focus. The service of mentors can be considered as a disadvantage-compensating, equitable intervention in the education system (Raposa et al., 2019). The above-mentioned deficits in different capitals can be compensated by the work of the mentors if they become role models for the mentees. Thus, building a mentor-mentee relationship is essential: literature on mentoring highlights that both mentors (Lakind, Eddy & Zell, 2014) and mentees (Spencer, 2007) find the connection crucial. Continuity and regularity are two aspects that are to be stressed; if the two factors are not adequate, disappointment and opting-out from the mentor program are to be expected from the side of the mentees (Spencer, 2007). Mentors can become significant others in the life of the mentees and support them in becoming resilient. In their study, Varga, Trendl, and Vitéz (2021) highlight that at least one significant, supporting person is to be found in the lifepath of disadvantaged and/or Roma students who overcome their difficulties. In the analyzed mentor program, the aim of mentors is to become this person; they should open opportunities, support, and guide their mentees.

In the case of a well-functioning mentor-mentee relationship, positive mentoring outcomes can be that students become more confident, and their personalities are developed throughout the process (Schenk et al., 2019). The development of positive psychological capital is essential for students to

become resilient. Mentors, as actors in the process, transmit a positive message to their mentees, according to the guidelines of positive psychology (Bandura, 2008); thus their goal is to support students in anything they are talented or interested in, highlighting their strengths. Being optimistic about the future (Seligman, 1998) has a main role in overcoming difficulties and becoming resilient. If mentees are given opportunities and are encouraged to become more optimistic about their perspectives, they are more likely to make realistic educational and career choices. Acquiring self-confidence and optimism can lead to the presence of positive psychological capital (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004), which has a role in becoming resilient and can compensate for the lack of other capital.

Previous research papers were conducted on the mentor program, the author's institution (University of Pécs), and other participating universities. At the University of Pécs, research papers focused on the process of mentoring from the perspective of mentors, investigating their motivation and personal development (Andl et al., 2020, 2021). The results of the studies highlight that inclusion and inclusive pedagogy are not only beneficial for the participating pupils, but mentors also develop by being involved. Mentors' social responsibility and their process of becoming resilient via participating in the program is also stressed (Godó, Ceglédi, & Dabney-Fekete, 2021).

Besides research focusing on mentors, the participating pupils were also analyzed. A mentor in the program has won a national competition with her study, in which she revealed mentees' perspectives and needs at the time of entering the mentor program (Kocsis, 2021). Longitudinal effects and outcomes of the mentor program as an intervention are yet to come and have not been revealed. However, a first joined mentee group was examined systematically throughout the mentoring period. The author and his colleagues focused on their mentoring practice to learn about the effects of their work: the praxis of the group was analyzed (Boda & Horváth, 2021), then needs analysis took place (Horváth & Boda, 2021). Lastly, outcomes and mentees' perspectives were investigated (Horváth, 2021) to create a comprehensive program overview. The purpose of this study is to highlight the most important information gathered in the two-year mentoring process. After introducing the characteristics of the analyzed program, the results of the three case studies are put through meta-analysis.

The Framework of the “Let’s Teach for Hungary!” Mentor Program

"Let's Teach for Hungary!" mentor program focuses on giving an equitable service to elementary school mentees (aged 11-15) with the help of university students/mentors. The program aims to facilitate adequate intervention and change pupils' previous work- and career aspirations. University students can function as role models: they give representation to children in being successful, and they are meant to show the value of studying. For their work, university students participating in the program are given a financial scholarship and a traveling pass for free commuting in the county.

The program is open to all university students who apply for and participate in mentor training. At the University of Pécs, the training syllabus consists of scientific areas of pedagogy, educational sciences, and communication. Mentor candidates learn about the most important notions of Educational Sociology and Romani Studies: these course elements contain theoretical knowledge and sensitizing practices. In the practical course block, students acquire communicative skills and, via studying emotional intelligence, focus on self-reflectivity. Lastly, mentor candidates are asked to get information about the participating public institutions in the program (mainly with the help of mentors visiting the course block) and compile a mentoring plan. The course ends with assigning a portfolio focusing on the knowledge and practices acquired in the course.

After successfully completing the training, students can apply for the program in the following semester. If the application is accepted, mentors make a contract with the university and choose a school and grade in which they wish to work as a mentor. At a given grade, all elementary school students are involved; thus, the number of mentors varies in the class, and the distribution is around 3-5 mentees per mentor. Mentors are advised to join a grade in which they wish to work until the end of elementary school mentoring to maintain the mentor-mentee relationship. Mentors are given supervision from their university professors, who give support and advice throughout the mentoring process.

Mentoring is carried out both in the school context and in other locations. At school, mentors participate in the mentees' everyday life: they can use the infrastructures of the institution, participate in events at school and help students learn or host mentoring events. Besides, mentors are given financial

compensation devoted to organizing out-of-school programs – the aim of mentoring in the program is to help students cross the invisible line of their villages that they would not be able to cross otherwise. These programs have two functions: on the one hand, mentors organize events in the community that help to build mentor-mentee relationships, and on the other, these events have a significant role in orientation regarding opportunities (the groups visit high schools, factories, workplaces, etc.).

Methodology and Aims of the Research

The study concentrates on a group of mentees and mentors that had been working together for two academic years in the program. Previous results focus on the practice of inclusive education and mentoring in the group. The data included in the article is analyzed via data triangulation. The introductory research carried out in 2020 focuses on input: document analysis of the mentoring process helps understand mentoring aims. The process was analyzed with a questionnaire containing both qualitative and quantitative items, showing mentees' perspectives of the program and mentors' approaches. Lastly, a qualitative, semi-structured interview was completed in the mentee group that reflects both on the process and foreshadows students' future goals and need for mentoring. With the help of meta-analysis, triangulation of the data takes place: a new, comprehensive case study is the result of this paper. The study synthesizes the positive outcomes of the intervention, highlighting the importance of equitable changes in public education.

Results

In the following sections, the results of the meta-analysis are discussed. All three research were carried out in the same mentor-mentee group that worked together for two academic years between the years of 2019-2021. The demographic data of the analyzed mentor-praxis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Data of the Analyzed Praxis

Semester	Number of mentee students	Number of mentors	Number of mentor groups and their distribution
2019/2020/fall semester	20	5	5 groups; 4 mentee/group
2019/2020/spring semester	20	5	5 groups; 4 mentee/group
2020/2021/fall semester	18	5	5 groups; 4 4-mentee groups and 1 2-mentee groups
2020/2021/spring semester	18	4	4 groups; 2 4-mentee groups and 2 5-mentee groups

Source: Horváth & Boda, 2021: 144

Throughout the two years of work, changes in the mentor and mentee population took place. Two students had not finished the academic year of 2019/2020 successfully; thus, they had to repeat 7th grade. At the end of the first semester, a mentor had left the program, and a new university student was included in the group from the second semester. Accordingly, a mentee group had to change their mentor in the spring of 2020. Later this group, after leaving their second mentor at the end of 2020, they were integrated into two mentee groups separately.

A Systematic Review of Previous Results

Table 2 introduces three case studies that were carried out in the mentee group. In the table, information is to be found about the period of the data collection and the most important scientific features of the research.

Table 2

Synthesis of Three Case Studies Carried Out in the Same Praxis

	Analysis of the mentoring practice (Boda & Horváth, 2021a)	Analysis of mentees' needs (Horváth & Boda, 2021)	Analysis of mentoring outcomes (Horváth, 2021)
Period and date of the research	Documents between September 2019-December 2020.	Date of data collection: January 2021.	Date of data collection: June 2021.
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-, and peer-reflection • Document-analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative and qualitative analysis (questionnaire) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative analysis (semi-structured interviews)
Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlighting good practices • Developing mentoring-practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping strengths and areas for development • Getting feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting feedback for the mentoring process • Discovering mentees' fears, future aims, and dreams • Needs for the continuation of High School mentoring
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation of mentoring (own praxis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentees from the authors' praxis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentees from the author's praxis
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 mentees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 mentees
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesis of mentoring practice • Highlighting experience • Sharing information with the mentor-community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insight into mentees' attitudes to mentoring • Highlighting the importance of the mentor-mentee relationship and its attributes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation of the mentoring-process • In-depth information about mentees' perspectives • Detecting resilient and at-risk mentees

Result Summary 1: Analysis of the Mentoring-Practice

The study concerning the mentoring practice (Boda & Horváth, 2021) concludes three main fields of the mentors' work: building relationships with mentees and their families (1), mentoring in the school (2), and organizing out-school activities for mentees (3). The essence of highlighting these categories is that it gives an insight into the characteristics of the program.

Firstly, mentors in the program are encouraged to get in touch with not only their mentees but their mentees' families and those local, significant participants who play a role in the community. This level allows mentors to strengthen their position in the community, and through contacting locals, they can get support outside of school if needed. Another aspect of the program is the location-based, in-school mentoring: based on the mentors' contract with the university, mentoring should be 6 hours/week; thus, students should visit their mentees every week. The in-school mentoring occasions are varied; mentors have the freedom to choose the type of activities that they wish to engage in (for instance, self-developing training, career guidance/orientation, and free-time activities such as doing sports are all acceptable, amongst many others). Choosing the third mentoring field is also optional for mentors. As mentioned before, all participants in the program are given extra financial support for organizing trips and out-of-school activities with mentees. These social programs can differ just as much as in-school activities, yet there is one aspect in common in case of all: these activities can make mentees more engaged with the program and their mentors; besides, they have a crucial role in orientation.

The elaboration on these mentoring fields and categorization of the activities allowed the extension of the case study. To develop effectiveness, an inquiry took place to map mentees' needs.

Result Summary 2: Analysis of Mentee's Needs

The second phase of the case-study present in this paper is a needs analysis for developing the mentoring services (Horváth & Boda, 2021). In this phase, 14 students were involved voluntarily in the examination (N=18; n=14). At the beginning of the questionnaire, mentees were asked to fill out a 5-point attitude scale that contained general statements in connection with the program and mentor-mentee relationship (Table 3).

Table 3

Results on the 5-Point Scale Attitude-Analysis (N=18; n=14) (Horváth & Boda, 2021: 145)

	Statements	Minimum	Maximum	Average
1.	I like that I have a mentor.	4	5	4,93
2.	I am happy when my mentor visits me.	3	5	4,77
3.	I feel better since I have a mentor.	4	5	4,86
4.	I can rely on my mentor if I need help.	3	5	4,79
5.	I like to be a mentee.	4	5	4,79
6.	I have learned a lot from my mentor.	2	5	4,57
7.	Besides my mentor, I get on well with the other mentors.	1	5	4,14
8.	I am satisfied with the program.	3	5	4,79

The data in Table 3 highlights that most of the participating students were satisfied with the program, but areas of development were also present. Generally, students valued that their mentors paid attention to them and enjoyed being in the program. However, there were some exceptions that helped the consideration of several changes in the curriculum of mentoring – for instance, the result to question number 7 was useful feedback that mentees enjoy micro-group activities over classwork. Results of the scales (Table 3) have strengthened the idea that mentees enjoy participating in the program and profit both in their school and personal lives. In this research, the aim was to get detailed data about what mentees highlight from the process of mentoring. To analyze this, the questionnaire applied contained open-ended questions for which students gave short answers. The results were coded based on their contents (Figure 1).

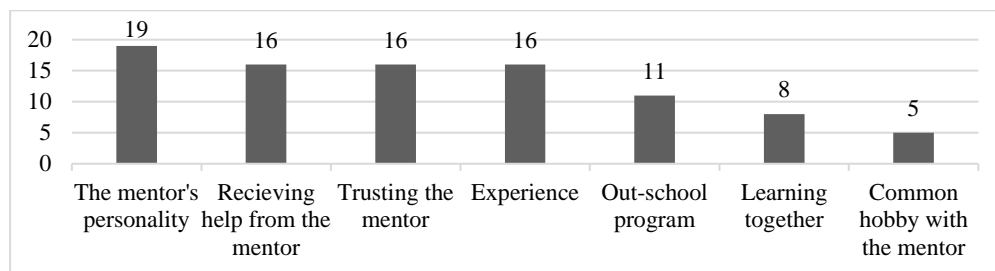


Figure 1. Distribution of coded qualitative elements (N=91) (Horváth & Boda, 2021: 147)

Mentees mentioned their mentor's personality in the highest proportion, containing positive characteristics, and in accordance with this, receiving help and trust were given emphasis: "it's so great that I can rely on someone," and "I trust her [the mentor] a lot, she gives advice even helpful in my private life." As mentioned before, in the program, mentors and their mentees can participate in various social and free-time activities; thus, mentees gave answers in connection with getting experience and attending out-school activities. Learning together and having common hobbies was something that mentees valued a lot.

The significance of this analysis is that it introduces the mentees' perspectives. Measuring mentees' needs is helpful in forming the practices. This phase, if applied in other mentor groups, has a practical result as well, namely that it allows mentees in the program to be active participants in their development.

Result Summary 3: Analysis of Mentoring Outcomes

The main goals of the last research carried out in the mentee group were to uncover the target groups' future perspectives and their needs for continuing the program. The research inquired if there were mentees who had begun to walk on the path of becoming resilient and, contrary to this if there were some who were at-risk and needed mentoring to prevent their drop-out. A semi-structured interview was applied as a research tool from the 18 students of the class, 7 participated in the research. After digitalizing the materials, the data were put through content analysis.

Table 4. contains the distribution of positive, neutral, and negative statements about entering secondary education. It is apparent that mentees have nearly as much optimism as fears in connection with changing school. A reason for this is not only that they are to change their educational settings but also their locations. From their segregated villages, they were enrolled in high schools located in bigger cities. Thus, they had to move away from their home and family. The positive effect of mentoring is to be found in this duality: they were given enough information to prepare for their future and not get a shock (and drop out) when entering their secondary schools.

Table 4

Positive, Neutral, and Negative Feelings About Entering Secondary Education

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Sum of the results (N: 44):	19	7	18

All the 7 students interviewed mentioned their mentor's role in making career decisions. One student devoted a general statement about the help of his mentor; another said that help was not needed in his choosing. In contrast, two students gave details about the helpfulness of the information provided by the mentor, and the last student attributed a complete change in career choice to the effect of his mentor.

Another aim of the study was to reveal if mentees need to continue the mentoring service for successfully proceeding in high school. For inquiries about this, risk factors and factors supporting resilience were collected via content analysis. In the original report of the research, these factors are presented with the indication of the student to whom they refer. This served the aim of giving specific feedback to the mentors of the analyzed mentees, to let them know about the crucial need for continuing the work with their mentees. The aspects are summarized and coded for the meta-analysis to create categories for presenting a comprehensive overview of the data (Table 5).

Table 5

Distribution of Risk-Factors

	Coded categories	Number of mentions (N=19)	The sum of the factors
Risk-factors	Fear from substance use	1	7
	Was not enrolled in the desired school	2	
	Lack of motivation to study	1	
	Environment change	3	
Factors supporting resilience	Supporting family	5	12
	Self-consciousness	3	
	Positive psychological capital	2	
	Relationship with the mentor	2	

To interpret risk-factors, four main coding categories were created. In the interview, in the case of one mentee, the fear of substance use became apparent: "as you know, the place I live in, in Gilvánfa, drug usage is very widespread." Another mentee expressed his lack of motivation to study and explicitly stated that he does not wish to study in high school: "I won't go to high school to study or something like that. When I turn 16 [age limit for compulsory education in Hungary], I'll go to work. [...] In five months, I'll get some experience and decide." Besides these extremes, disappointment for enrollment, "something was wrong with my papers, I signed something late... I was quite sad." and fear of environmental change appeared. Two students were not successful in the acceptance mechanism of the education system and were more than disappointed with this result. Lastly, three students highlighted that they are terrified of living in a city and changing the environment. One source of fear was that they had to leave their family. "I don't feel safe there, in Pécs, especially because I'll be alone. I won't have my mother there..." Sadly, the other was connected to racism: "Someone might beat or stab me, for my complexion or because of who I am."

Factors supporting resilience have appeared in the sample in slightly higher proportions. Five students felt that their family was supportive and helpful. Mentees who appeared self-conscious about their strengths and areas to develop have an advantage, for they seemed to be ambitious about their future: "I'll do everything to earn my place at that school and to get good grades." In the sample, two students have proven that they have positive psychological capital, so much so that with the help of their mentor or any other significant participant in their future, they are likely to become resilient. One respondent in the interview sent the following message to herself: "I hope I'll never give up. Let any obstacle come my way, I hope to always stand up, go forward and never look back." In the sample, two mentees have mentioned their mentors as the most important and most supportive actors in their proceeding – they were the two mentees who had the most significant risk factors (fear of substance usage and explicit indication of the wish to drop out): "If I had no mentor, honestly, I don't know where I would be. I believe I wouldn't have gotten to 8th grade."; "It's good that someone pays attention to you. He [the mentor] always asked if I had homework. And its somehow a good feeling that someone cares about you. Anything I asked, he always helped me." These examples indicate that the mentees value their mentors and will seek their help in the future.

In the interview, a question referred to mentees' opinions about continuing the mentor program while in high school. All seven participants said that they needed mentoring. Some imagined this to take place informally, for instance, by having a coffee with their mentors; others would have preferred formal mentoring, such as supporting their learning in high school.

Conclusion and Limitations

The meta-analysis has revealed the most important results of the three case studies carried out in the mentee group. The results of this summary highlight that on the micro-level of mentoring, mentees and their mentors have connected and established a well-functioning relationship that, if continued, can result in mentees becoming resilient adults. The information presented in this paper strengthens the conclusion that the analyzed mentor program can be efficient. As high school mentoring has not continued formally, it is essential for decision-makers to consider the importance of maintaining and extending the program to other levels of public education. On the one hand, this paper calls attention to the need for mentors to complete – even informal – measurements about their work, their mentees' needs, and future aspirations. These efforts are returned in the form of effectiveness development and conscious planning of the mentoring practice. The main message of this paper is that it calls attention to a social phenomenon and emphasizes the need for action and positive intervention in creating mobile, equitable societies.

Limitations of this paper arise from its nature: it focused on only one mentee group and gave a detailed description of it but could not evaluate the program. Future research might devote much significance to the effectiveness of the program, and its longitudinal influences will need to be measured via macro-statistical data.

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