

Education policy and educational inequality in Hungary

An overview of the past decades

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Changing life opportunities under illiberal rule: drivers of social structural change in Hungary

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Outline

1. General characteristics of the Hungarian education system and its functions
2. Overview of the main policy directions in education between the 1980s and 2010
3. How has the illiberal turn of 2010 affected the education system, educational inequalities and social mobility?
4. A possible interpretive framework

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The Hungarian education system

- highly selective and unequal in international comparison
 - early tracking
 - extreme selectivity, homogenous classes and schools
 - geographically unequal distribution of resources >
- typically, children with higher SES receive the best services
- actively reproducing social inequality

Pre-regime change (1980s)

- early years of the socialist regime
 - turn towards a more comprehensive schooling system
 - higher CSL age
 - opening routes for lower status groups
- from the 1970s: schools attempting to serve economic interests

- 1985: 'pedagogical regime change' – the first policy on school choice, teachers' autonomy, methodological liberalization, new tracks

Democratization and diversification (1990s)

- methodological liberalization
 - reopening and opening of church schools (1990)
 - shift in maintenance: local municipalities instead of the state (1993)
- > extremely selective school system, increasing social polarization
- higher status families: access to the best services
 - vulnerable groups: increasing ethnic and social segregation, sealed tracks and schools

Moderate equalization (2000s)

- 2000: the first wave of PISA – the first measure of inequality and inequity in international comparison, a trend that has been present ever since

	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2015	2018
Hungary	26	27	21	26	32	22	19
OECD	20	17	14	14	21	13	12

Percentage of variation in performance explained by the PISA index of ESCS

Source: Lőrincz–Antal–Fekete 2022: 212

- 2003–2006 (2009): articulated intention to increase equality in education, several new policies aiming for desegregation and a shift in pedagogical methodology

Lack of real structural change (2000s)

- only incentives, financial resources missing
 - resistance against the 'paradigm-shift' among municipalities, teachers, parents
 - no real political will to engage in conflict with professional and social interest groups
-
- > policy did not turn into practice
 - > the selective system remained

Education after the illiberal turn (post-2010)

- Structural turn
- Ideological turn

The concept of in/equality has disappeared from education policy documents.

The education system has been underfunded; educational performance in terms of attainment and achievement has generally deteriorated.

Structural turn

The centralization of public education (ISCED 1–3) (2012)

- nationalization of municipal schools for the sake of "equal opportunities"
- the real objectives and justification were never made clear
- nationalization of schools and more centralized curriculum and methodology > decreasing autonomy

The expansion of the church school system

- after 2010 steep rise in the number of church schools and pupils attending them
- greatest increase in poorer regions and settlements – in the case of primary and lower secondary schools, these are mostly attended by local elites (escape route)

The expansion of the church school system

Institution	1992/1993		1999/2000		2010/2011		2018/2019	
	Private	Church	Private	Church	Private	Church	Private	Church
ISCED 0	0.2	0.4	1.9	1.4	2.7	3.7	3.8	7.7
ISCED 1-2	0.2	1.0	0.9	4.3	1.9	6.7	2.8	14.9
VET	1.0	0.1	4.5	2.0	19.6	3.1	3.2*	7.3*
ISCED 3	0.6	2.5	4.3	4.3	9.1	9.0	5.2	16.7

The percentage of pupils attending church-funded and private schools, 1992–2019
 Source: Lőrincz–Antal–Fekete 2022: 214

* Data from 2016/2017

Ideological turn

What is the underlying assumption that explains the policy shift?

- The Program of National Cooperation (2010): "a new political, economic, and social system built on new rules in every area of life" > overarching transformation
 - ideological basis: "post-communist neoconservatism" (Szikra 2020) = socially and economically conservative values (nation, religion, gender roles, authority)
 - turn away from the earlier 'modernist', 'Westernist' paradigm
- > nationalization (centralization), standardization of the curriculum, curtailing autonomy

The impact on vulnerable groups

Low SES

- 'work-based society', deserving and undeserving citizens
- 'responsibilization' of the marginalized (Papp Z.–Neumann 2021), denial of structural reasons behind inequality
- vocabulary of policy documents shifted from inclusion to 'catching up' (Ferge 2017)

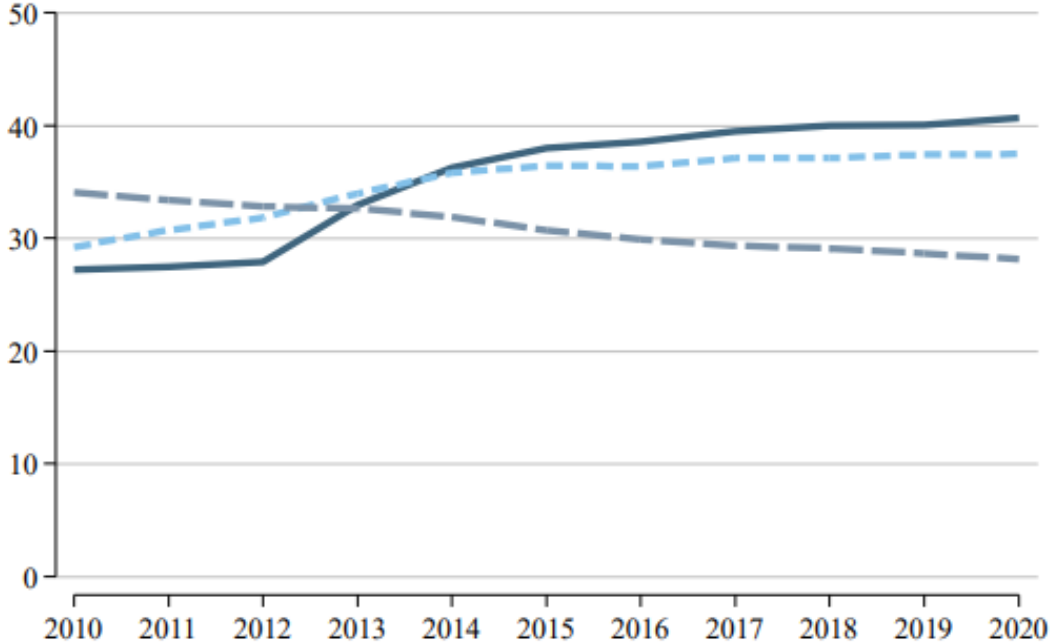
Roma

- strong criticism against earlier attempts of desegregation and integration
- normativization of anti-Roma sentiments, blaming earlier welfare policy for prejudices
- Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy goals in large part not achieved (mandatory kindergarten from 3 years of age, but ESL actually increased)

The impact on vulnerable groups

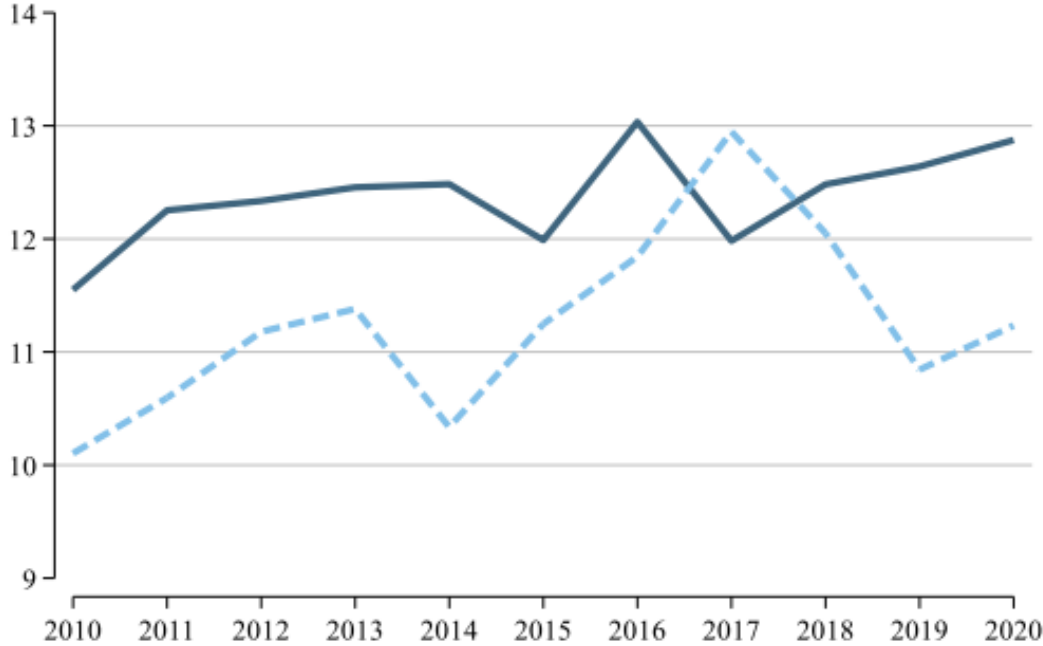
The Index of Segregation 2010–2020

Source: Hajdu et al. 2022: 196



Percentage of early school leavers by gender 2010–2020

Source: Hajdu et al. 2022: 313



— disadvantaged students - - - SEN students
- - - multiply disadvantaged students

— male - - - female

Education: a channel of social im/mobility?

Exceptionally unequal system for decades –

- argued to have the precise role of reproducing social inequality, rather than tackling it.

Since 2010, general decline –

- lower achievement (e.g., PISA results), lower attainment (e.g., ESL levels), severe underfunding.

Education as a channel of social mobility has become increasingly dysfunctional for multiple reasons, which serve to enhance the political and social vision of the System of National Cooperation (Scheiring 2019).

A possible interpretive framework: Hirschman's Exit – Voice – Loyalty model (1970, 1978)

- reactions to discontent with organizations and states: leaving, protesting, accepting

“Customers who care *most* about the quality of the product and who, therefore, are those who would be the most active, reliable, and creative agents of voice are for that very reason also those who are apparently likely to exit first in case of deterioration.”

(1970: 47)

- the option of 'voting with one's feet' is unequally distributed in modern societies, in connection with inequality of financial, social, cultural capital as well as ethnic/racial discrimination

Loyalty in education

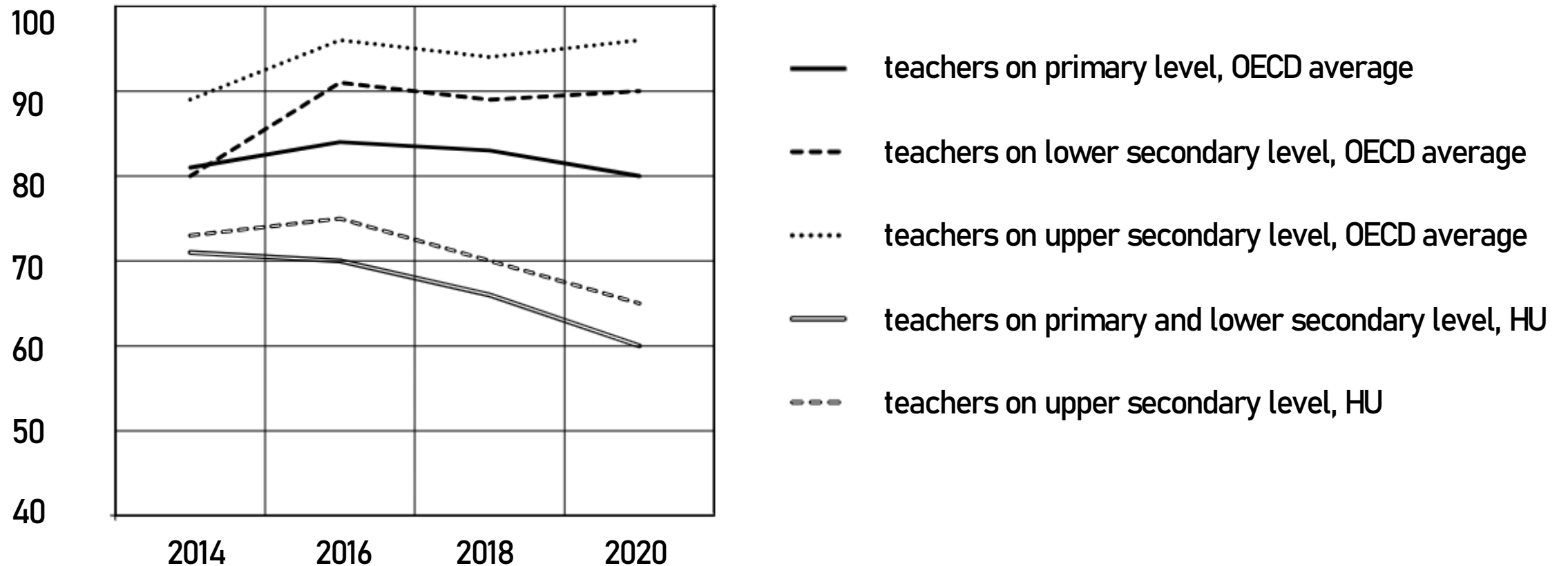
Loyalty in the case of 'public goods' (e.g., education) – their quality affects everyone

- exit may be postponed by quality-conscious parents for the sake of general good, because further deterioration potentially caused by their exit is too costly for society
 - the benefit of loyalist behaviour: supposedly preventing further damage
 - even if the case of exit due to an intolerable level of 'public evil', the "consumer" does not stop caring about the public good
- > fighting from without, rather than changing from within

Processes of Exit, Voice, and Loyalty in the Hungarian education system since the early 1990s

1. Marketisation: the quality of education provided in schools serving different social groups, respectively, began to divert according to parental needs (e.g., alternative pedagogies) + parental choice of schools introduced
2. Increasing quality of services offered by the state for free, but only those already owning capital could access them (e.g., 6- and 8-year high schools)
3. Political attempts to reverse inequality (early 2000s), following a period of uncontrolled diversification > provoking an 'inverse-Hirschman scenario' among teachers and parents
4. Rearrangement of the market (since the illiberal turn): deterioration of the 'public good' of education > gradually turning it into a 'public evil' (see for instance teachers' wages)

Wages of teachers* in comparison with full-time employees with an ISCED 5–8 level degree (%), OECD & Hungary, 2014–2020



* teaching on primary, lower secondary and upper secondary level

Source: Polónyi 2023: 10, based on Education at a Glance 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022

Reactions to the rearrangement of the market

	Parents	Teachers
Exit	wide-spread, thanks to the old and new escape routes (e.g., private kindergartens, church schools)	wide-spread, leading to major shortage (especially in poorer regions and schools)
Voice	weak especially in the most deprived areas, stronger among higher status students	strong repercussions against attempts of strike and civil disobedience, leading to further exit
Loyalty	a wide range of parents do not have access to alternative options (social, cultural, financial capital)	several possible explanations: e.g., sense of responsibility, lack of mobility options

International trends: when given the opportunity, more quality-conscious parents opt out of public education or go for market-based extracurricular services etc.; shortage of teachers etc.

Question: Where is this process leading? How (if) is quality going to be improved?



**Thank you
for your
attention!**

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