Ability to attract and retain secondary school students

An overview of pedagogical conditions in secondary school dormitories of the Central Transdanubian region[1]

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Abstract

This paper aims to present the results of empirical pedagogical researches conducted in secondary school dormitories of the Central Transdanubian region. The researches of the last 12 years undoubtedly reveal the crisis situation of educational institutions and illustrate professional details. Their methodological background is characterized by inventiveness and soundness; we can find mixed, quantitative and qualitative methods among them. The output results predict comprehensive professional changes: the complete rewriting of the national educational basic programmes of secondary school dormitories, teacher training programs focused on special dormitory subfields, and the restart of professional cooperation and networking as soon as possible. The pedagogical changes are based on professional paradigm shifts, a drastic decrease in the number of secondary school students and significant individual-teacher performance gaps.

Keywords: secondary school dormitories; empirical researches; crisis; professional changes

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Introduction

Nowadays, I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that a teacher's work in a Hungarian secondary school dormitory is a plethora of pedagogical challenges and novel educational problems. However, researches on this special field of pedagogy are incomplete, after 2010 only a few self-motivated researchers have conducted empirical studies. This left alone segment does not have a national teacher training program and professional journal since 2011. The national association for the protection of interests of secondary school dormitories has effectively finished

1 Central Transdanubia is a statistical (EU-NUTS 2) region of Hungary, including counties of Fejér, Veszprém and Komárom-Esztergom.

its activities in 2013. The most important national educational basic programme has not been revised, even though the consensus of professional changes should be introduced as soon as possible (Pribék, 2020, Papp, 2022).

The disintegration of Hungarian families, the growing financial problems, and the negative effects of parents' workload have had a significant impact on the educational activities of secondary school dormitories. Despite the infrastructural backwardness of these institutions and their peripheral professional location in Hungary, there is a growing social demand for this educational area again (Benedek, 1997, Pribék, 2017). Actually, it wasn't always like this: according to the data of the Central Statistical Office (CSO), the number of students decreased by about 40-45 % between 2004 and 2014, with the exception of the capital. At the same time, the number of full-time teachers decreased by a third. In 2015, the decrease in the number of students stopped, stagnation began, and then after the Covid period, it started to rise slightly.

In scientific terms, we hardly have any empirical pedagogical research in this special field of education. Only one area, the Central Transdanubian region can be singled out as a flagship of intensive pedagogical-empirical research in Hungary. In our first English language paper, we briefly present the results of the regional research of the past 12 years and underline the key phenomena, main areas, where pedagogical changes are necessary at the levels of work organization and cooperation, as well as teacher expertise and activities.

Overcoming professional half-truths of the past and exploring real pedagogical problems between 2012 and 2014

The first pedagogical research in the region was carried out in 2012 (Pribék, 2012). The local pedagogical research focused on the examination of teaching staff and the cooperative practice of members, based on Sveiby's scientific concept (Sveiby, 2001), basically following Creswell and Plano's (Creswell and Plano, 2011) mixed methods (QUANT→qual) methodology. The results of the research reveal and identify serious professional problems in the examined secondary school dormitory. The set of problems consists of professionally changeable components: its roots typically refer to outdated professional thinking, pedagogical routines, management failures, learned helplessness, furthermore the lack of organizational cooperation and its intensity and frequency problems. There are as follows:
- unclear personal vision of the future as a teacher,
- aversion risk and lack of open dialogue,
- short-term performance pressure,
- maintaining the status quo at any cost,
- denying pedagogical problems,
- disproportionately high teacher helplessness at the expense of professionalism,
- uncertain organizational strategy without consensus,

- rigid, segmented organizational hierarchy, centralized decision-making,
- attitude that hampers organizational learning,
- regular transfer of professional responsibility,
- treating people as tools,
- middle manager who needs to be developed (attitude, communication, etc.).

The researcher concludes as a final result: the set of problems leads to a permanent decrease in organizational performance, and consequently disadvantageously affects the institutions' ability to attract and retain secondary school students (Pribék, 2012). This research presents a set of professional disadvantages that clearly stop attributing professional problems to external (underfunding of secondary school dormitories, lack of professional training, networking, etc.) half-truths factors. They provide an adequate basis for further research in secondary school dormitories.

Another pedagogical research (Pribék, 2014) worked in a completely different approach, using a newly developed (2013-2014) pedagogical questionnaire (Benedek & Pribék, 2014). The meticulously tested, valid and reliable questionnaire is suitable for identifying organizational problems from the perspective of dormitory leaders in the region. The empirical quantitative research has a dual structure that focused on:

it pays significant attention to the signs of the professional crisis, unconsciously experienced by teachers (N=86) in the region, as well as interprets and compares the revealed signs in the background context of relevant international-scientific literature; furthermore

it points to the need for profound organizational changes through organizational competence bottlenecks, as well as individual competency bottlenecks.

After data processing and analysis with SPSS software, we achieved the following result: the crisis of the secondary school dormitories can be linked to concrete paradigm shift constraints. The majority of teachers take care of their pedagogical activities in isolation, without a pedagogical background base and dialogues, environmental changes are interpreted as an existential and professional threats, cooperation at the organizational level is difficult.

In connection with the research, the professional crisis phenomenon was confirmed using Juran's method, and the causes were presented as follows:

	Phenomena in the secondary school dormitories:	Professional change, steps:	Final results:
Phenomena in the secondary school dormitories:	Professional crisis situation, decrease in the number of students, which threatens to close or merge the institutions.	Compulsory dormitory implementation of development programs.	There is no professional vision in the institutions.
Cause 1:	The ability to adapt is constantly decreasing in secondary school dormitories.	Obsolete dorm routines.	We do everything the same and the same way („daily grind").
Cause 2:	Parental and student needs are constantly changing.	Minor modifications in the national pedagogical program.	Essential constancy, partnership needs increasing dissatisfaction.
Root causes:	Dormitories do not have a professional survival kit, they do not see a way out, they are vulnerable and helpless.	"We deny the crisis situation" or „We have to trust that from something it will be better"	The lack of organizational vision and pedagogical identity crisis.

In addition, it was emphasized that the teachers participating in the research have an increased need for:
- pedagogical concentration and the satisfaction of parent-student needs in secondary school dormitories,
- coordination of professional work, cooperation in work groups.

It has been revealed that in the background of the unfavourable changes in educational activities the individual, internal constraints and urges of teachers can be highlighted, which are characterized by (partially existential) uncertainty and constant haste. The outdated educational environment also has a negative and increasingly strong effect on the well-being of teachers in the institutions. The power distances between the members within the dormitory organizations are large, there is little or hardly any new professional impulse and real pedagogical challenge. In the meantime, the state maintainers of secondary school dormitories do not consider it their task to supervise, guarantee, and constantly improve the high quality of pedagogical work.

Thanks to the research, our overview of the crisis situation of the secondary school dormitories was further broadened: former professional half-truths (a crisis situation that can only be traced back to external causes, teacher satisfaction, well-being, excellent teacher work groups and their cooperation in secondary school dormitories, etc.) have been clearly refuted.

The systematization of the development needs (identified competence deficits) for different paradigm shift constraints (in brackets) is as follows:

- For teachers, the learning from others is typical, but at the same time there is little professional independence and individual initiative (paradigm shift: from organizational learning to the learning organization);
- Teachers cannot react to unexpected, rapid educational situations (paradigm shift: a new era of knowledge and professional preparation);
- Highly hierarchical structured organizations with large professional distances (paradigm shifts: organizational, cultural and management paradigm);
- Frequent information gaps, gossips and speculation in the organization (paradigm shifts: management paradigm, organizational paradigm);
- Leadership ability to vision and envisioning the future (paradigm shift: management paradigm);
- The problem of professional performance evaluation (paradigm shift: management paradigm);
- The working day of teachers consists exclusively of repetitive, routine tasks (paradigm shifts: organizational, cultural and management paradigms);
- Professional developments and their specific tasks representing disproportionate teacher workloads (paradigm shifts: organizational, cultural and management paradigms);
- The management only deals with serious institutional problems (for example: significantly decreasing number of secondary school students in a short period of time i.e. within a few academic years) when they have become drastic (paradigm shifts: a new era of knowledge and professional preparation, management paradigm).

The significant literature background for the research was systematically explored and processed by main topics in the framework of which we also looked for possible professional solutions to the organizational and individual problems. For example, we explored in details the topics of organizational reengineering, total quality management, cultural paradigm shift, organizational paradigm shift, leadership paradigm shift (Tenner and DeToro, 1996, Dobák, 1999, Szintay, 2000, Drucker, 2005, Dinya, 2008, Mintzberg, 2010), potential positive breakthroughs in organizational performance (Hammer and Champy, 2000, Thornhill and Amit, 2003, Shiba and Walden, 2006), etc.

Focusing on the basic problem between 2015 and 2020: the real needs of parents and students are distanced from the service provided by secondary school dormitories

Starting from 2015, the regional pedagogical research in the secondary school dormitories turned more and more in the direction of exploring teacher roles. The key point and most important element of research was the examination of the relationships between teacher roles and the unsatisfied parents' and students' needs. The scientific papers and presentations on the topic (Pribék, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2020) were based on a two-year (2015-2016) regional-empirical research. Its research logic has a threefold structure:
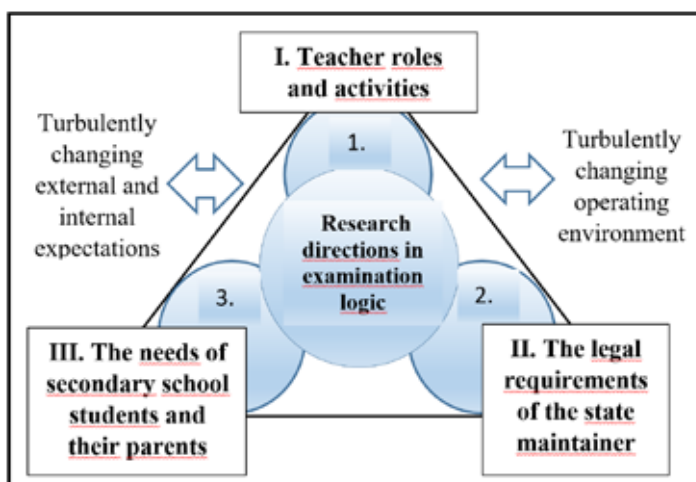
Presentation of defining research questions:

1. What does the current pedagogical practice show? What's next?

2-3. What is expected from the teacher and the secondary school dormitories?

The first partial results were presented the following year (Pribék, 2017a), which concentrated specifically on the secondary school students and their relationships in dormitories (III. topic), using tested, reliable and valid student questionnaire (applied SPSS data analysis by principal component analysis, factor analysis, ranking, N=110), and student metaphors (N=111) about the dormitories (applied metaphor analysis: Vámos, 2002 and Fábián, 2007). The sequential interpretive research (Creswell and Plano, 2011) based on Sántha's scientific methodological theory (Sántha, 2009, 2015), precisely following Creswell and Plano's (Creswell and Plano, 2011) mixed methods (quant→QUAL) methodology.

In the case of parents, we had the option of a separated quantitative examination (tested, valid and reliable questionnaire, applied SPSS data analysis by principal component analysis, factor analysis, ranking, N=76).

The research intends to achieve several novelties primarily in relation to the students' well-being. First of all it depends mainly on:
- the intensity and frequency of teacher-student relationships,
- seeking (finding) reliable support and shelter outside the family,
- the need to replace the family,
- the need to belong to the community,
- fostering relationship building through dormitory programs and communities.
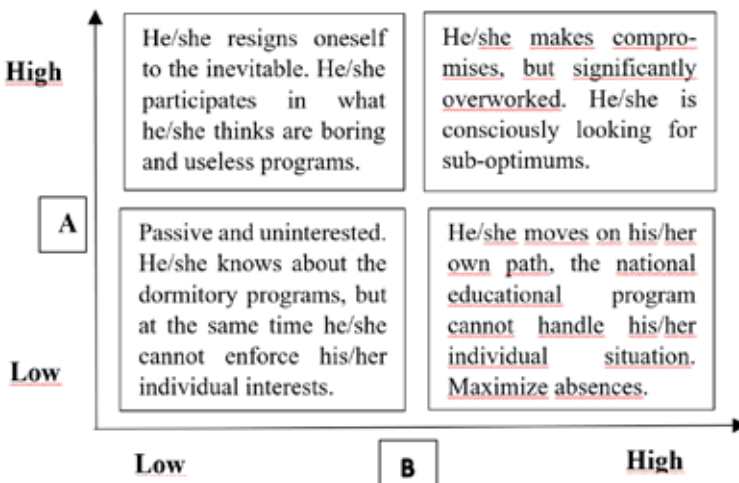
However, students' well-being is disadvantageously affected by the overall image of the secondary school dormitories. They perceive outdated infrastructural and pedagogical conditions: the secondary school students and their parents have difficulty adapting to these circumstances, conditions (more and more difficult, and this is a key factor in their thinking). The opinions of the former secondary school students about the dormitories are decisive in the move-in of new students. From the point of view of the future of dormitories, it is necessary to pay considerable attention to this set of disadvantages.

In the next paper presenting the partial results (Pribék, 2017b) we undertook to explore and examine the requirements of the dormitory maintainers (II. topic), using qualitative text analysis, text-building method (Kuckartz, 2014, Pribék, 2017d, 2018) with manual coding. We dealt with the following main questions during the processing of the basic national-educational program in dormitories:

Can we define the ideal secondary school student in dormitories based on the basic national-educational program? In how many basic types can the ideal student be selected? What does actual pedagogical practice show regarding the realization of this?

A total of four secondary school student basic types can be defined, which can be represented in a two-dimensional representation. Distinguishing possibilities are:
- the level of individual adaptation to the requirements of the national educational basic program in secondary school dormitories **(A)** and
- the level of enforcement of parents' and students' needs in practice **(B)**.

High | He/she resigns oneself to the inevitable. He/she participates in what he/she thinks are boring and useless programs. | He/she makes compromises, but significantly overworked. He/she is consciously looking for sub-optimums.

A

Low | Passive and uninterested. He/she knows about the dormitory programs, but at the same time he/she cannot enforce his/her individual interests. | He/she moves on his/her own path, the national educational program cannot handle his/her individual situation. Maximize absences.

Low | B | High

This two-dimensional representation (Wenzler-Cremer, 2005, quoted by Kuckartz, 2014) was adapted to the dormitory segment (Pribék, 2017b) in a special research framework. Based on the national educational program of secondary school dormitories, in the mirror of legal requirements of the state maintainer, "an average secondary school student" can be compared to an automatic robot:

- he/she constantly lives, acts and learns under the pressure of time and requirements,
- he/she doesn't have enough spare time to rest, do sports and individual privacy (note: quite unlike some international solutions for example: Little, 2015, Nash, 2016).

Considering that teachers are also very much under the pressure of time and (institutional and legal) requirements, first of all it is necessary to handle these two problems (teachers' and students' time pressure) in parallel in the future. Other important output results and conclusions are as follows:

- it is necessary to increase the degree of pedagogical freedom (in time),
- the dormitory program elements can only be made attractive if they are not forced,
- it is imperative to modernize the dormitory buildings and renovate the living and learning environments,
- the central vision of an ideal secondary school student must be eliminated and pedagogical support for individual strengths must be increased,
- the prescribed has moved away from each other professional content and reality (Pribék, 2017b).

In our next paper presenting the partial results (Pribék, 2017c) we focused on actual pedagogical practice, teacher roles and activities (I. topic), using qualitative semi-structured, individual-teacher (N=16) interviews (Seidman, 2006, Sántha, 2015). The text corpus of 480 typed pages was processed and analyzed with thematic qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) by manual coding. The main questions of the research were:

What characterizes the set of professional roles of teachers in dormitory practice? Can we group the revealed teacher roles?

The dominant and fulfilled dormitory teacher roles (positive) can be seen in the next table:

Identified, dominant and fulfilled dormitory teacher roles (positive) in practice:	Number of specific interview contents (N=16):	Proportion of change, suggestions for the future (N=16):	Conclusions briefly:
Learning facilitator	16	+0-4=12	Need less from this
Surrogate parent	12	+14-0=2	Need more from this

Confide, confiden-tial man	9	+15-0=1	Need more from this
Tutor	10	+1-0=15	Appropriate
Activities coordi-nator	7	+0-6=10	Need less from this

Some more important data:
- a total of 36 identified dormitory teacher roles,
- weak mid-range of dormitory teacher roles,
- a wide range of dormitory teacher roles identified in low numbers, in strange tasks. There are: plumber, security guard, parking attendant, electrician, doorman, secretary, mover, etc.

The dataset of the two-year research (2015-2016) is summarized in our PhD dissertation, using additional methodological approaches, in an integrated analysis space interpreted in a logical triangle (Pribék, 2020).
    The most important output conclusions are:
    a. The main negative factors supporting the early moving-out of secondary school students from the examined dormitories:
- students and their parents are fed up with the practice of secondary school dormitories: too strict dormitory rules, regulations, limitations, the "prison-like" nature of the institutions (measuring tools: student metaphors and their parents' questionnaire);
- the weightlessness of dormitory student governments in practice, ignoring student opinions (student questionnaire, student metaphors);
- unfavourable proportion of teaching roles, fulfilled and unfulfilled teacher roles and activities (teacher interviews, student metaphors, student questionnaire);
- teachers cannot satisfy the new needs of dormitory students (teacher interviews, student metaphors, student questionnaire);
- standard of dormitory catering - quantity and quality problems (teacher interviews, student metaphors, student questionnaire);
- the national-educational basic program is characterized by a low number of cross-relations and sub-categories. Its undefined and often insufficiently explained content regulation, lack of a complete methodological chapter (qualitative text analysis).

    b. General problems that fundamentally hinder the practice of the teaching profession and the effectiveness of secondary school dormitory education:
- the underfunding of secondary school dormitories (teacher interviews),
- extremely outdated living, learning and working environments in dormitories,
- local problems of need-based organizational resource distribution,
- lack of a client-centred maintenance approach.

c. The main factors that have a positive effect on students moving in:
- more and more unfavourable family problems at home (students),
- the individual need of preparing students for adult life,
- dormitory student wants to be a member of a well-functioning dormitory community,
- adolescents who are sometimes under motivated, difficult to adapt, non-dependent, do not or hardly take initiative, and are unable or difficult to organize their school day.

In a recent empirical mini-research (Papp, 2022), the focus is on the working week, work schedule, and tasks inside and outside the dormitory of teachers of the Central Transdanubian region. We examine the actual fields of teacher activities, using semi-structured teacher interviews (N=3), then thematic qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014, Pribék, 2017a, 2020). We suppose that some of the revealed problems can be reversed or at least mitigated.

Our professional information thanks to the mini-research:
- it is necessary to create new professional standards and involve other pedagogical disciplines in the development of secondary school dormitory education in order to develop,
- in connection with the teachers activities, there is a significant student need for individual care and individual education in dormitories (the main directions are: personal life problems-privacy, school life, further human relations maintained with parents, friends, etc.),
- the teachers' ideas and activities are always realized, the disadvantage is that, unfortunately, usually not in the required time (there is time pressure).

Conclusions

The professional crisis of secondary school dormitories of the Central Transdanubian region is an extremely complex problem area, and the possibilities for development must be interpreted also as a complex manner. The crisis situation is not unique, it jeopardizes the future of this educational segment in all Hungary. This overview clearly outlines the possible areas for improvement.

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