

Video: "Hétszínvirág" School

The "Flower of Seven Colours" in the town of Marcali

By: Lajos Miksa

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Making strings of beads, attending artisans' workshops, participating in football teams, drama classes, playing folk games, learning computer science, brainpower games, modelling, therapeutic gymnastics, and playing with puppets are the activities that children in grades 1 to 4 can choose from. Those in grades 5 to 8 have a larger choice including cookery, graphics, enamelling, learning about the Highway code, attending the club sessions called "around the world in a year", physiotherapy, chess, origami, classes on good manners, language games, mathematics games, ceramics, making jewellery, weaving, making strings of beads, dance, felt-making, hygiene classes, ethnology, gardening, situational games, hiking, Beash choir, learning Beash folk tales, Beash language classes, Gypsy dancing, Gypsy music, puppet making, religious education, crocheting, knitting, sewing, spinning, basketball, football, table tennis, basket weaving, "Do It Yourself", afternoon study room, library, journalism, computer science. That was what they had last year.

And this year – fulfilling the children's wishes – some new items appeared in the list of afternoon activities. "We would like more bicycles," they wrote. And so they have more. "We would like to have piano lessons." And so they do, and even have guitar lessons into the bargain.

Most of this can be read about in last year's newsletter of *Hétszínvirág (Flower of Seven Colours) Elementary School* in Marcali and the rest can be found out while talking to Lajos Orosz, the headmaster, during our visit to the school. The building is in the street that leads to the railway station. Once it belonged to a bourgeois family, and nowadays it is the home of a singular institution. From the outside, it looks rather battered, but inside the building we find the school, which, as stated in its pedagogical creed, is a *children-centred* school, with a programme of *personality development*. *Children-centred* means that it is the pupils' choices that shape the list of the activities on offer and as far as *personality development* is concerned, there exists *The Box*, the pedagogical programme of the school.

- We started our experiment of development seven years ago. It concluded in the compilation of our pedagogical programme last year. The aim was to create a "system of boxes", which consists of class logbooks, students' report books and a computerised database on students' progress. This is a hidden form of *quality assurance*. As for the contents, our aim is to educate successful and happy people, i.e. people who have good communication and problem solving skills and have reached a fair level of socialisation. Our system is able to pinpoint problems and search possible solutions. The logbook contains information on the progress of each student. We spend the first month of the school year talking to the children, building their sense of security, and helping them adapt to school life. We outline overall and individual tasks based on our

observations and the system provides us with assistance. Our teachers have accumulated a vast amount of intellectual wealth and experience, which we have gathered and filed systematically. It is available on the World Wide Web, too, - states the headmaster.

- What is the teachers' role in this process? At which stage do their personalities come into the picture?

- In my opinion, teachers' role is providing *assistance*. We make a diagnosis and offer our assistance in the course of the therapy. It is up to the teacher what use they make of it. Because, in a children-centred school, *children* are free to decide which activities they wish to participate in. We assume that it is the children who can best decide what they need. Children teach each other. Generally speaking, only a small part of the knowledge derives from what teachers teach.

All the colleagues teaching here in the morning also take part in the afternoon activities. Thus, for example, we have a colleague, who was here in the morning today, and tomorrow she is coming to the school at ten a.m. and she will stay here until the end of the day. And there are the pedagogical assistants, who provide programs. We have two assistants. Some of the teachers organize activities three times a week in the afternoons, some others once a week, depending on how the team agreed. But we have no teachers specializing in particular jobs. Everybody takes part in everything.

- What are the results of this period of seven years?

- I consider it a great success that children *like coming to school*. Absenteeism has gradually diminished. We have created an atmosphere that makes it possible for the pupils to live their own lives happily. 83% of our pupils are Gypsy children and our institution is supposed to be a remedial school. 98% of the Gypsy students would like to continue their studies and I think this is enough to say. On the other hand, it is a fact that most of our pupils who go on to secondary schools drop out.

- Why is that?

- Firstly, parents cannot afford to buy them the schoolbooks or pay for their travelling and food. They prove unable to keep up. Secondly, the pupils *cannot tolerate the conflicts*. We provide them with personality development programmes, while secondary schools, even the special ones established to support underprivileged youths called short-term vocational schools, function in a different way: teachers enter the classroom, present the teaching material, leave and eventually give pupils marks.

This is what 8th grade pupil János Bogdán said last year. Good teachers "are kind and helpful, teach children a lot of things and take good care of them. They show children how to deal with problems and set an example. They take part in sports and games. They are not strict. They are kind to us. If they have problems concerning the class, they tell us about it. I don't like nervous teachers. Good teachers like us and we like them. If we tell them to come and play football with us, they are ready to. I like teachers

even if they hit me because I know that I deserve it. Good teachers spend time talking to children. They don't come late to the classes. They arrive on time. They are not strict and do not smoke. Bad teachers give oral tests every day, good teachers rarely do. Good teachers are understanding, take their jobs seriously and care about the children. They do not only teach but also concentrate on children's problems. If a teacher is like that, the children will take them seriously and will get to like them."

János Bogdán was a pupil of exceptional abilities. He passed the advanced level language examination of Beash. He was the only Gypsy member of the National Pupils' Parliament, personally corresponding with ministry officials. He was the Student Mayor of the school, where they even have this particular title. *He dropped out from vocational school during the first term of the first year.*

János Bogdán's case is typical of the dilemma that alternative public educational institutions, claiming to be children-centred and to provide personality development often face. Catching up with the socialisation process, the delay of which is due to their socially disadvantageous situation, takes time, patience, personalised caring and a larger than average amount of love.

The pedagogical programme of the institution is built on this. But it turns out that eight, ten or even twelve years may prove insufficient for the rehabilitation. Headmaster Lajos Orosz has tried nearly everything. He has organised an association of twelve village primary schools with the objective of spreading on the goals of his institution. By applying to endowment funding, he obtained different grants for his pupils so that their financially disadvantageous situation did not hamper the continuation of their studies. He is considering setting up an educational institution to provide a place and one more chance for catching up for students who drop out from vocational schools.

Let the society decide how they wish to deal with socially marginal groups, he says in an impassioned way. Our children have no chance whatsoever for catching up. They live in constant frustration. Let us decide then if we wish to build prisons or schools. The selection in society and within its educational system is based on a single point of reference: the acquisition of a certain amount of knowledge. The layers of society who are in financially advantageous position set the criteria of the selection and they make every possible effort to maintain their advantages. Even linguistically speaking, there is a special atmosphere that is created according to this. I do not say that everybody should have schools like ours, but they should let us live even if running our school costs more than the average. We cover the extra costs by applying for institutional grants.



It is obvious that the children at different stages of socialisation of different depths need an infinitely flexible educational system. But such a system has proved impossible to set up anywhere in the world, either abroad or in Hungary. At the same time, it is a fact that even children-centred schools need to let go of the children's hands at one stage. Wouldn't it then be more sensible to spend at least the last one or two years preparing them for life outside the schools or at least for the new type of school they are about to attend? This could include organising visits to their future schools, explain the different sets of rules that these schools apply, and tell them that they will have to adapt to them. Wouldn't it be possible to find teachers who are ready to take these children craving for security by the hand at those schools?

It is very difficult. I cannot get the teachers there to start thinking in a new way. Still it is true and it has been like a weight upon me for a long time: we must take this is direction.

And there is a sign for this, the examination in fundamental knowledge, which is not compulsory but children have the option to take it. As former deputy head mistress *Zsuzsanna Lőrinc* (currently writing her second thesis), a member of the team working on the project says, the school also takes care of pupils who do not want to or are unable to continue their studies. She lists a number of activities that are supposed to teach children practicalities such as basket weaving, different kinds of craftsmanship, or the household basics. Children put their artwork on sale and the earnings are given to the student's council. The wages of the cleaners that are substituted by the pupils also are given to the students' council.

- What is the daily routine of the pupils? Mrs. Éva Matykó Nagy, the current deputy head mistress relates.

- Pupils come here from within a circle of 20 kilometres in diameter. The first students arrive at seven, when one or more adults are already in the school. The classes last from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Then children plan what activities they would like to participate in in the afternoon. They clean their teeth and wash their hands before lunch. The canteen is about a mile away from here. They need to walk there alone, in pairs or in small groups. We have nothing to complain about, the only problem I can think of is that they tend to come back late. They clean their teeth and wash their hands again. The afternoon activities finish at 3.45. p.m. Then they have a snack and after that they give a thorough cleaning to the classrooms. The first bus leaves here at four o'clock and the last one at 5:10 p.m. Our pupils spend most of their days here. The buses take them home in thirteen different settlements. To what kinds of homes? To "sites" in many cases, where there aren't even proper houses to live in. Their poor lodging is only covered with plastic sheets. Our teachers often visit them. And we have already got to the stage where even parents start to be interested in their children's schooling. There is a slight ray of hope that comes from our school.
