

A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Education Systems in Bulgaria and Hungary

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Abstract: The paper presents an analysis of the structure and functions of modern education systems in Bulgaria and Hungary. The analysis focuses on Geert Hofstede's cultural orientations to explain the similarities and differences between both countries. Main research methods are literature review and observation. Results show that educational systems present the main set of cultural values in Bulgaria and Hungary, where the main difference lies in the masculinity/femininity dimension. There is also an acute need of general cross-cultural training for both students and teachers because of the increasing number of foreigners settling in the countries. These results could be used for cross-cultural education practices and research in education studies. The paper presents a key topic in the development of education systems in the Danube region.

Keywords: education policies; intercultural communication; cross-cultural education; cultural values

JEL Classification: I21; I25; I28

1. Introduction

Bulgaria and Hungary have shared similar historical backgrounds in the last century – both were part of the Eastern bloc where the main cultural values were imposed by the communist party. Shared values were focused on hierarchical decision-making, collectivism, concentration of power to one person (the leader of the Communist party), lack of individual freedoms, cult of personality. These values were internalized in the communist society through the education systems in both countries. The repercussions are still there, 30 years after the fall of the communist regime. Certain practices and norms have remained the same even though legislative changes have been made. There are considerable difficulties in teachers' adaptation to the new environment in education, although the new generation of teachers is bringing new knowledge and competences. Developments in pedagogical preparation are also rather slow but steady with the hope of improvement in the future. The paper discusses the structure of education systems in both countries based on Hofstede's cultural orientations and makes an attempt at concluding main similarities and differences between them.

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2. Intercultural Communication and the Structure of an Education System

Intercultural (cross-cultural) communication includes communication between people from different cultures. It focuses on the interpersonal interaction of people who represent both cultures. The unit of analysis in intercultural communication is typically the so called interpersonal dyad – two people from two different cultural groups who interact at a given moment. Intercultural (cross-cultural) communication in education includes practices such as learning about foreign cultures and learning among representatives from foreign cultures. Intercultural learning occurs in many contexts – school, workplace, everyday interactions.

There's an increasing need for developing intercultural skills today for several reasons:

- The need to see the world through the eyes of the others;
- The need to add the knowledge of others to our personal repertoire;
- The development of a common mind-set as a result of the intercommunication among diverse people;
- Because of the following factors: technological development, globalization of the economy, widespread population migrations, development of multiculturalism in business and education.

In the context of studying educational systems' structure with intercultural tools we can acquire the following benefits:

- Understanding the behavioral models and educational norms we witness in depth when studying abroad.
- Learning about the main values of the host culture presented in the local language.
- Adapting faster to the social and educational norms in the given country.

Education systems in Europe share the following main characteristics according to the Eurydice Network's classification:

1. Key Features of the Education System – Funding and Teaching
2. Stages of the Education System – 1. Early Childhood Education and Care, 2. School Education, 3. Higher Education and 4. Adult Education
3. Structure of the National Education System

3. Overview of Bulgarian Education System's Structure

Education system in Bulgaria consists of the following key elements - pre-school and school education system, state education standards, funding and teaching requirements.

Pre-school and school education units are legal entities such as kindergartens, schools, personal development support centres, and specialized service units. Education is provided according to state educational standards.

The levels of necessary general and vocational competencies are determined by the state education standards with the following state-regulated tools and professions: general educational content in all subjects, textbooks and school aids, teachers' licensing and qualification, 6-grade assessment system, inspecting institutions for teachers' progress and qualification and many others.

The state pre-school education standard is defined by covering all the required topics in pre-school education in the respective age groups.

The state general and profiling education standard requires completing a full set of the learning outcomes expected for each general education subject at the end of each stage of the respective degree of education.

It is important to emphasize that Bulgarian education is of secular content and norms both in state-owned and municipal schools. There are no education fees required. All Bulgarian citizens have the right to education and may enhance continuously their education and qualification. No restrictions or privileges are allowed based in race, nationality, gender, ethnic or social origin, religion or social status. Children and students with special educational needs and/or chronic diseases are taught on integrated basis in kindergartens and in schools.

Funding in Bulgarian education system is provided by the local municipal budgets (about 90% of schools) with the so-called "financial decentralization system" and "delegated budgets". "The financial decentralization transfers rights and obligations that are related to the constitution and execution of a budget (delegated budgets). Schools have more operational rights in relation to budget constitution and expenditures, and execute their own impended policies."

In order to become a "teacher" or "educator" the professional needs a completed higher education and an education qualification degree of a "Master", a "Bachelor" or a "Specialist" in pedagogy and a second field of choice in accordance with the Classifier of higher education.

Selection procedures for teachers are decentralized. Schools are responsible for an "open recruitment" procedure for all applicants. This approach allows teachers to choose education institutions according to their filed of interest, competence and opportunity.

Payment for teachers is differentiated according to a system of hierarchical differentiation in three levels: Junior teacher, Teacher and Senior teacher.

“As for higher education The Higher Education Act, the Law on Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Science and Research Degrees and Ranks Law set the conditions and requirements for the academic staff as well as the decision making bodies at national, regional and local level, covering the various academic career stages: from entry to the profession to retirement, thus covering issues like recruitment, academic staff professional status, payment and enticement, working hours and obligations, mobility, retirement etc.”

The average academic staff monthly salary amounts to about 1 750 leva, varying for the different higher schools and depending on the budget of the respective higher school and its Regulations.

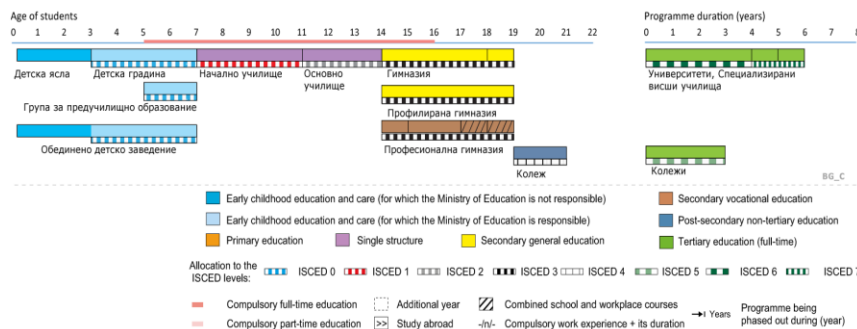


Figure 1. Stages of the education system in Bulgaria

The figure above represents all stages of the education process starting from early childhood education and care (between the ages of 0 – 7), school education (ages 7 to 18), higher education (18 and above). Early childhood education and care is managed by both local authorities and the Ministry of Science and Education, whereas school and higher education are under the financial supervision of the Ministry of Science and Education. Bulgaria joined the Bologna declaration in 1999 as it was one of the first countries to sign it with the perspective of implementing the standards for the European Higher Education Area. Higher education institutions are autonomous entities unlike schools in terms of determining educational content. Both schools and universities are governed at the state and institutional level, where universities retain a certain autonomy in forming monthly income with an average salary of 1750 leva.

The main characteristics of Bulgarian education system include hierarchical and centralized governance that is state controlled.

4. Overview of Hungary's Educational System

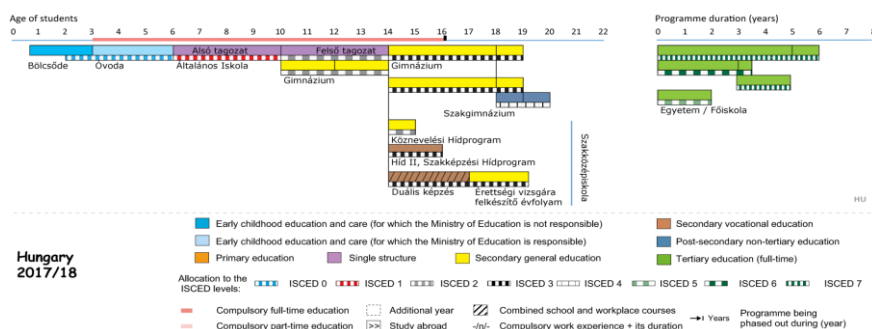


Figure 2. Education system in Hungary - structure

According to Hungarian constitution all Hungarian citizens have the freedom of conscience and religion, the freedom of expression, freedom of scientific research and teaching, the right of national minorities to preserve their cultural identity and to learn in their mother tongue. It also declares that all Hungarian citizens have the right to education, and the state guarantees this right to all of its citizens by providing free and compulsory basic education, free and generally available upper-secondary education, and higher education available to every person according to his or her abilities.

Deeper centralization of governance, maintenance and financing in education started in 2010 with the Act on Public Education (Act CXC of 2011), the Act on Higher Education (Act CCIV of 2011) and the Act on Vocational Training (Act CLXXXVII of 2011).

Hungarian education consists of the following stages:

1. Pre-school education – nursery and kindergarten (ages 0-6), governed and financed by the government.
2. Primary and lower secondary education (ages 6-14) – governed municipally and financed by the state budget.
3. General and vocational schools (ages 14-19) – governed institutionally and financed by the government.
4. Higher education (ages 19 and above) – governed institutionally and financed by the government.

The main characteristics of Hungarian education system include hierarchical and centralized governance that is state controlled as well as main values proposed in the constitution of the country.

5. Educational Structure according to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Typical for both countries is hierarchical governance and structure. There is a high degree of formality of educational values in Hungary. Decentralization in Bulgaria is more prevalent. We suggest that power distance is larger in Hungary than in Bulgaria. Both systems share a degree of institutional collectivism presented in stronger collective identity. Decision-making in Hungary is characterized by masculinity because of the competitive element in budget formation. Changes in budget delegation in Bulgaria also present a degree of masculinity.

6. Conclusions

Educational structure and organization in Bulgaria and Hungary share similarities in their hierarchical collectivistic function – cultures of larger power distance and varying collectivism. We can argue that cultural values prevent or stimulate certain reforms in education, especially when they contradict the new values during the reform. Education is a conservative system that requires slow changes that are adapted to the local needs. Characteristics of financing and governance should be considered when introducing new policies to the system.

7. References

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