Thematic Article

Curricular and Extracurricular Learning among Students with Resilience Potential. Social Inequalities in Higher Education

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Abstract

Does resilience potential in higher education mature into success or does it remain merely a promise of success due to rising social inequality? We studied curricular and extracurricular learning of students with outstanding academic achievement who entered higher education despite their disadvantage of social background (= students with resilience potential). A student survey database compiled in the research project "Higher Education for Social Cohesion – Cooperative Research and Development in a Cross-border Area" (HERD) (HURO/0901/253/2.2.2.) in 2012 was analyzed. Students of three Eastern Hungarian higher education institutions were surveyed (N = 1205). Students with resilience potential were identified in the intersection of two groups of variables: social background and input academic achievement. We have conducted a cluster analysis, which has resulted in the identification of students with resilience potential and other researched groups: drifters (low social background and low input academic achievement), beneficiaries (high social background and high academic achievement) and indifferent prodigals (high social background and low academic achievement). To sum up our results, the students with resilience potential only use higher education to fulfill curricular requirements, and hit a ceiling, compared to the beneficiaries, when it comes to the student year mining, meaningful extracurricular activities. Thus social inequalities crawl through these invisible channels into higher education and beyond.

Keywords: resilience, learning, higher education, social inequalities

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Introduction

The longstanding initial question of international educational research has been: what is the role of schools and where do they operate regarding decreasing social disadvantage (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman et al., 1966; Treiman, 1970)? This question continues to come up again and again, following changes affecting society and the school institutional system. The answers are a plethora, dependent upon the examined social, institutional, and personal dimensions (Downey & Condron, 2016).

We have attempted to enrich the research of the topic through analyzing such persons who have started down the road to defeat social disadvantage, via the outstanding fulfillment of the requirements of the school system. In our study, we will examine how, during student years, the resilient (that is, successful despite hardship) school career develops, among disadvantaged students (students with resilience potential) who have with exceptional academic achievement reached higher education.

Via the Hungarian higher education system, that is regarded as open even on the international stage, this study gains insight into a system where, from a structural standpoint, many opportunities await. As a result, the

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existing/produced social inequalities, in principle, depend far less upon the current structural constraints, meaning that their "less visible" nature can emerge more pronounced. Aside from this, the study gives insight into Hungary's higher educational transformation, where in the Central- and Eastern-European academic context, due to Hungary's peculiar political and economic embeddedness and heritage, expansion got a late start. Despite other global processes, following 1989, the previous disadvantage served as an excellent basis for building out international connections, making room for infocommunicational tools, the internationalizing of higher education, and transforming the job world. Thus they arrived with far fewer delays (Dabney-Fekete, 2020; Marinov, 2018; Orosz & Perna, 2016). In this particular situation, the social determination of study in higher education may be of interest.

Higher education and social inequalities

In international literature, an argument surrounds the relationship between higher education and social inequalities. On one side, they argue that today the discourse on social inequalities within higher education is losing its validity. One of the reasons seen for this is that the widely available education has the potential to provide a broader, less selective immersion base in terms of social inclusion. According to another argument, higher education's inequalities may appear smaller in light of inequalities at lower levels. Furthermore, due to reaching these heights of education, as a result of selection, the effect of social disadvantages is dulled (e.g., Treiman, 1970; Beck, 1983).

In contrast, the other side views higher education as a field where inequalities are significant, where they are able to break free and thrive. The Maximum Maintained Inequality (MMI) and Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) hypotheses claim that educational expansion is not enough to reduce educational inequality. This may be due to, among others, the nature of expansion where those from more advantaged social strata are in a better position to take advantage of expansion, and where social inequalities are the dominant shapers of differentiation and diversification of higher education (e.g., Altbach, 2010; Boliver, 2011; Lucas, 2001; Róbert, 2000). We could even say that inequalities have crept up higher into tertiary education (Boudon, 1974).

Based on theories from international literature, our research examines higher education in Hungary. We provide insight into the everyday life of student years, and with this we deepen and further discuss the following question at the national level: What is happening with social inequalities within the walls of higher education?.

Resilience. Study involvement and social background

According to the broad definition of resilience, it is "the capacity of a system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, function, or development of the system" (Masten, 2019, p. 101). In the OECD PISA test, those are considered resilient who, based on their social background, are in an unfavorable position yet have received a high point score on the test (Agasisti et al., 2018). Earlier life path studies considered a person resilient if and when he could successfully complete his school career despite the fact that based on social features we could not make it probable (Ceglédi, 2012). The main characters of the present study have received the name "students with resilience potential", those who despite their social disadvantages have stepped into higher education, boasting excellent academic achievement. The signal that something or someone is promising in the higher educational context is a valid distinction, meaning that successful entrance is a promise, not a guarantee, that, also during student years, we will be able to speak of resilient life paths.

Study involvement refers to that psychological and physical energy and time that a student invests in study-related activities (Pusztai, 2015, based on Astin and Kuh). Bourdieu speaks of the tendency to invest in schools being influenced by the extent to which the reproduction or improvement of a person's class position and social validation depends on the institutionalized cultural capital, i.e. the degree (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In our research, we consider as elements of study involvement the time spent and strategy employed in studying and visiting classes, as well as the attitudes in connection with these.

Based on prior research (Ceglédi, 2012), we can assume that the main social divide appearing in higher education should be sought out where the positive relationship tied to study involvement can be distinguished from all that the student years can offer apart from this. The curricular requirements' obedient and mechanical execution (maximized class visitation and time spent studying, which means mainly lonely, ineffective study), based on our assumption, is something that the students likely to succeed through overcoming socially disadvantages brought from their families. All the way up to higher education this was a successful compensatory

strategy, but the real stakes of the student years lie in the extracurricular activities that determine whether students can succeed in building competitive career potential after university.

Hypothesis

We surmised that students with resilience potential are lagging behind in regards to activities outside the mandatory curriculum (e.g., research group membership, language exam) compared to fellow entrants (to the beneficiaries) who have similar input academic achievement but more advantageous social backgrounds. The hypothesis is based on the literature which describe that social inequalities are the dominant shapers of differentiation and diversification of higher education (e.g., Altbach, 2010; Boliver, 2011; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Boudon, 1974; Lucas, 2001; Róbert, 2000).

Materials and Methods

In our study, we have analyzed a student survey database compiled in the research project "Higher Education for Social Cohesion – Cooperative Research and Development in a Cross- border Area" (HURO/0901/253/2.2.2.). Surveys were conducted on paper between March and June 2012. Students of 3 Eastern Hungarian institutions were surveyed (N = 1205). Our research's target group was formed by full-time, state-funded and tuition-paying students in their first and final years. The sample is representative looking at the classes and the departments.

Students with resilience potential and other researched groups: To identify students with the potential of resilience and other researched groups, we picked out the social background indicators which, based on the special literature, would best highlight the school career's borderline[3]. Furthermore, we chose the input academic achievement indicators that stood closest to the manifest academic goals.[4]

Study involvement index: In the interest of making study involvement's complexity visible, we created a study involvement index from the elemental indicators: attitude toward and frequency of class visitation, time spent studying, attitude in regarding good grades.[5]

Students with resilience potential and other researched groups

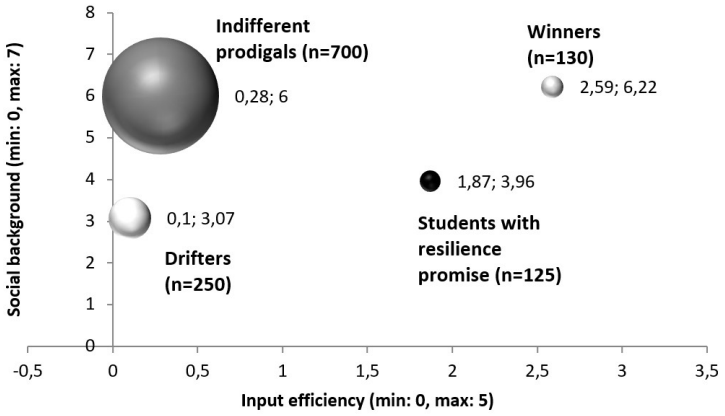
As the first step of group formation, we conducted complex indicators both the social background and input academic achievement. During the identification of students with resilience potential, we listed the risk dimensions founded upon the individual combination theory of Beck's (1983) extreme individualization of risks. With this, all at once, we sought indicators of the non-traditional group diversification present in higher education, and of the multi-dimensional, individualized disadvantage concept (Pusztai, 2015; Cotton et al., 2017; Bowl & Bathmaker, 2016; Gauntlett, 2016). After imputation, dichotomization, indexforming and standardization, we carried out a cluster analysis, resulting in being able to identify four types (Figure 1.).

[3] Education of father and mother, inactive father and mother, economic-social level of development of the micro-region of place of residence, settlement type of place of residence, subjective financial state

[4] Received some sort of award or scholarship during secondary school years for semester or year's end study performance, for competition scores, art or sport achievement; was, in the year of graduation, entitled to extra application points due to sport achievements or academic competition placement (e.g. – the highest ranking national academic competition)

[5] The followed got a value of 1 in the index: he who spends one or more hours studying daily completely agrees with the fact that he would do everything in the interest of class visitation, and he who attends at least 80% of classes fully agrees with the fact that he would like to get ever bettering study results. We viewed those who got 1 or 2 index points as having below average study involvement, and those who received 3 or 4 index points as having above average.

Figure 1. Students with resilience potential and other researched groups (cluster centers[6]).



(Source: HERD 2012 [N=1205])

1) 125 people ended up among the students with resilience potential, who based on their social background belonged to those in the worst situation, while based on their input academic achievement they belonged to those in the best situation. On average, they arrived to higher education with three socially disadvantages. 2) The drifters (n = 250) are in the worst possible social background, and based on their academic achievement as well, are at the end of the line. Regarding their success, they drift with the constraints of their social background. We can also say that they may be those who, due to expansion, were able to drift into higher education. 3) Only 130 students were found to have good academic achievement based on favorable social background. We can call them beneficiaries. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) identified them as victors, who start from a more advantageous social footing. Their path of life in higher education acts as a mirror for the students with resilience potential. After all, the differences between the two most effective groups could be the evidence of the effect of social background. 4) The largest group is the indifferent prodigals who have good social backgrounds (and have at most one disadvantage), but who cannot show even one of the input academic achievement indicators. They may be the ones who participate in higher education to maintain their social positioning or to avoid sinking, and because of the diploma's consumption value and its role in prestige.

Study involvement's social divides among students with resilience potential

Based on the comparison of the four groups, we can see that in the above average study involvement indicator cells, the students with resilience potential are overrepresented, while the indifferent prodigals are underrepresented (Table 1). Thus, with the higher education curricular content, they identify in a bigger proportion than the beneficiaries.

Table 1. The study involvement index among students with resilience potential and other researched groups (column percentage)[7]

	indifferent prodigals	drifters	students with resilience potential	beneficiaries	total	P
below average involvement	73.1	70.1	56.6	71	70.5	0.003
above average involvement	26.9	29.9	43.4	29	29.5	

(Source: HERD 2012 [N=1205])

[6] Actual centers: recounted after standardization, to the original index based on scatter and mean. Success axis: The larger the value, the more successful the indicator. Social background axis: The smaller the value, the greater the social disadvantage. Means: Entrance success: 0.66. Social background: 5.2.

[7] Once underlined data means that fewer elements were put into the cell than would be expected from a random layout (Adjusted Standardized Residual ≤-1.96). Twice underlined data means that more elements ended up in the cell than would be expected from a random layout (Adjusted Standardized Residual ≤-1.96) (Agresti, 2002).

In what is to follow, beyond the mandatory curriculum, we examined the activities pointing to the intellectual exploitation of student years. Here it is clear that the beneficiaries are at the front of the pack (Table 2). For instance, almost every third student from this group has his own research topic, yet in other academic activities as well, they well surpass the average (conference presentation or poster, research group membership, filling the post responsible for the class year). In these same areas, students with resilience potential hit the ceiling around average, thus they are no competition for the beneficiaries, and, in the case of possessing one's own research topic, they are not even a match for the indifferent prodigals.

Table 2. Academic success among students with resilience potential and other researched groups (column percentage)

	indifferent prodigals	drifters	students with resilience potential	beneficiaries	total	P
I gave a lecture or made a poster at a conference	6.6	3.7	5	12.8	6.5	0.008
I have a professional CV in a foreign language	18.3	8.6	17.9	31	17.6	0.000
I have my own research topic	24.4	20.7	17.9	31.5	27.3	0.047
I currently fill or have filled a class year or group managerial post	8.1	6.5	10.5	15.1	8.7	0.033
Research group, academic association membership: - member	5	6.8	7.4	13.8	6.6	0.012
- not a member, but would like to be	35.1	33.1	40.2	36.6	35.4	
- not a member, and would not like to be	59.9	60.2	52.5	49.6	58.1	
Changed language exams[8]: - never had a language exam	34.4	61.5	40.4	24.8	39.6	0.000
- maintained their language exam level	48.8	25.2	45.9	56.4	44.4	
- raised their language exam level	16.8	13.2	13.8	18.8	16	

(Source: HERD 2012 [N=1205])

Summary

To sum up our results, they call attention to the fact that the resilience potential at entry remains but an unrealized promise, because students with this potential only use higher education to fulfill curricular requirements, and afterward hit a ceiling, compared to the beneficiaries, when it comes to the student year mining, meaningful extracurricular activities. Thus social inequalities crawl through these invisible channels into higher education and beyond. Social inequalities move in an upward direction (Boudon, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Róbert, 2000).

The limitation of the research is the regional database, so the generalisability of our results to wider geographical units is limited. Nevertheless, exploring the properties of students with resilience potential may provide lessons not only for the region under study, but also for higher education institutions with students from similar social backgrounds.

Our results can serve as a lesson for education policy and for the actors in higher education institutions (decision-makers, teachers and any other staff who come into contact with students). From their side, it is important to monitor continuously students with social disadvantages and to provide them with the necessary financial, human and material support. A concrete proposal is to set up a so-called talent ambulance, which would operate on a continuity basis, adapted to the life paths and life events of secondary school pupils, students and recent graduates, rather than on an episodic basis, broken down into application cycles. Our research also has an important message for students themselves, namely that they should not limit their activities in their student years to rigorous compliance with curricular requirements, but should consciously build on the fact that the higher education years offer a unique opportunity to build professionally relevant relationships, to exploit academic opportunities and to acquire the skills needed to become intellectuals.

[8] The indicator based on the current and entrance language exams.

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