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Time travel by means of research

Examination of Amrita Orientation Alumni Affaires within the framework of Wislocki Henrik Student College

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Introduction

At the University of Pécs (PTE, Pécsi Tudományegyetem), the Wislocki Henrik Student College (WHSZ, Wislocki Henrik Szakkollégium) has been administering a complex supporting system between 2013 and 2015, from financial resources of a tender promoting the academic and professional progress of students of mainly Gypsy/Roma origin, studying at the faculties of PTE. One of the main goals of the student college's program is to involve the students in activities, which contribute to the development of the competences needed in the academic world. This was, among others, also the aim of that complex research in which the students of the college, each fulfilling different tasks, examined the period of the Amrita Orientation Alumni Affaires Association (Amrita OBK, Amrita Orientációs Baráti Kör Egyesület), founded in 1994, before the turn of the millennium. The examined community was chosen because its former students – similarly to the students of the student college performing the research – as socially underprivileged, in its majority Gypsy students were striving to compensate for their social disadvantages by acquiring a higher qualification. The research group examined the influence of the – supposedly accepting – Amrita society from various aspects by exploring the life path of the former students. The research also presented an opportunity for the students of the student college to meet adults who were, as students twenty years ago, also members of a similar community of the WHSZ, which had an impact on their life. The working method of both Amrita and the Student College is based on self-help peer community and provides complex and diverse services to promote individual progress.

"This is a unique initiative, where the students participating in the research and their helpers examined a community with scientific methods that is similar to theirs and can serve as a real example or showcase to them. The research equipped the participating students with methods to examine social processes, community systems and personal life paths at an academic level and at the same time it gave them examples for their own, personal life which, if understood and valued, can become influential." (Varga, 2015)

In my essay, I would like to present this complex analysis, called “Amrita research” by the research group. The process of the research is important because it served as a “pedagogical tool” in the development of the students of the student college who were involved in the research in an ever growing number. Consequently, the research can also be considered an “action research” as during the 10 months of conducting the study, the appearance of the examined organization and persons, their relations and the researchers’ interests and needs shaped the whole research program. Besides, I will briefly discuss the results of the research until now, anticipating and raising interest for the upcoming edition, which will include descriptions of various parts of the research in a unified volume.¹

The Conditions of the Research

The research examined the early years, the organizational operation and the effect on mobility of the first community of an after-school program in Hungary, the Amrita Orientation Alumni Affairs Association. The research group set as an aim to explore the operation of Alumni Affairs by consulting the founding members, analyzing the available documentation and examining the effectiveness of the organization through analyzing the life path of the former students. Supposedly, the two decades since the foundation of the Association is a long enough time to receive relevant and valid data when examining the effectiveness of the organization. Even in our days, several complex educational programs are beginning in Hungary, which partly focus on supporting the underprivileged children and adolescents. The extra-curricular projects – for example after-school programs – usually give support for a short period of time (1-2 years) to the applying organizations or institutions which, as a consequence of the short and often interrupted functioning, do not have indicators of project effectiveness on the long run (Fejes, 2014; Németh, 2013). The study of the Student College fills this gap by analyzing the efficiency of Amrita as an accepting community, which can prove the necessity of the extra-curricular, non-governmental initiatives. Moreover, the organization’s practice that is in the focus of this research can serve as a good example to organizers and participants of the complex equal opportunity programs, such as after-school programs or Roma student colleges.

The sample of examination included the former participants and organizers of Amrita Association. The research group could not collect representative data, and consequently the qualitative examination’s goal is not generalizability, but rather a profound understanding of individual cases.

The starting assumption of the research group was that the operation and activity of Amrita Association, as a non-governmental organization, did not only provide a temporary support but also created the possibility to found a community in which the intergroup relationships of the members lasted over twenty years. In other words, the sup-

1 The research group firstly presented the academic results of the examination at a spring conference, “Horizons and Dialogues International Series of Conferences PTE” in the framework of a symposium. The results are summarized in the essay collection “Amrita at the turn of the millennium” published by Wlislöcki Henrik College, which describes, among others, the operation of the examined organization from various aspects.

port and services of Amrita not only offered immediate help to its former members but also played major role in their later life.

The research group explored the examined field from many different aspects and with various research methods, in order to have a nuanced understanding of the topic. Analysis of the documents served to describe and display the events of the past; in particular, the realization of the direct and indirect goals could be inferred from the publications of the association (newspapers, other publications) and photos. With the help of in-depth, life-story interviews, the implicit thinking and attitude of the interviewees could be researched, focusing on Amrita as a support organization that influences successful school performance, and "Amrita identity" (N=10). Moreover, during the research, a semi-structured questionnaire was filled out, containing questions which did not require explanation and showed quantifiable data (N=35). The questionnaire touched on the data regarding the participants' mobility (social, geographical), opinion about the services of the examined organization, and connections within the community. The surveying (including in-depth interviews and the filling out most of the questionnaires) took place at the "Amrita Nostalgia Reunion" in January 2015. The questionnaire was prepared and filled out with the help of eight students of the Wlislöcki Henrik Student College.

The Process of the Research

The surveying was preceded by four month of active preparations consisting of several different phases. As the research progressed, the number of the research group members was continuously increasing, which consisted of leading professors, colleagues, students and PhD students of the Wlislöcki Henrik Student College. As the first step, the research group set the main focuses of the examination and prepared the 10-month schedule of the research apt for the methodology. At the same time, the researchers began to seek out those who were Amrita-members before the turn of the millennium – former students, volunteers and colleagues – and invited them to the "Amrita Nostalgia Reunion" in January. Nearly 100 addresses were found in the documentation, which were complemented with new contact information. The Facebook group called "Amrita OBK before the millennium" largely contributed to this process as more and more people joined this group due to the 'snowball' effect (N=100). Meanwhile, three students of the student college began to explore, digitalize and order thematically the documents (written documents and photos) in connection with the examined organization.

At the next phase, the members of the constantly growing research group took a share in the preparation of the surveying. At that point, a professor and former Amrita-student joined the examination, and he began a methodological training of the students of the student college participating in the questionnaire surveying in order to execute the research. Simultaneously, a group was formed including PhD students, which was responsible for preparing the in-depth interviews. Members of this group together decided on the steps and drafted the questions of surveying, while paying attention to the individual aspects of examinations. The researchers worked in micro groups (of 2-3 people) exploring the examined area from different aspects, with periodical coordination of results and progress. Surveying took place after research preparations, towards the end of

January 2015, in Pécs, during the two-day “Amrita Nostalgia Reunion,” which was the shared event for the former leaders, colleagues and students of the organization as well as the college researchers. During the weekend, all college students got involved in research as they prepared together for the reception of the Amrita-members by processing the previously collected information and displaying it as an exhibition. The arriving guests were greeted with this exhibition, which simultaneously helped them to revive their memories. The “content” of the interactive poster exhibition – which presented the functioning, everyday life and members of Amrita OBK Association – made by the student college students could be completed during the meeting by the Amrita-guests as well. It enabled the research group to collect the new information written on posters in addition to the filled out questionnaires and in-depth interviews during the weekend spent together. On the second day of the event, a roundtable discussion was organized where ten former Amrita-members shared personal stories in connection with the community of the examined organization and their personal lives, the content of which was used as a focus-group interview by the research group. Besides, this was the moment of the research when the community of the student college could closely and personally experience the stories of the previous generation.

During the next phase, small groups of researchers assessed and analyzed the research data based on different aspects, cooperating with each other while working independently. The consultations helped with tracking the progress of the groups and focusing on the goals of the research. The multifaceted approach of the topic is indicative of the complexity of the research, which can be shown by enumerating the fields examined by the micro groups:

- The history and complex scope of activities of Amrita OBK Association was examined by a PhD student with the help of analyzing documents and conducting interviews with organizers.
- The research group considered important to elaborate on the socio-geographical aspect of Amrita-students’ lives. This was prepared by five students of the student college with the help of various databases. Among other topics, they explored the school career of the former students.
- The effect of Amrita OBK Association as a support organization was examined by three PhD students while analyzing the life-story and focus-group interviews.
- Analysis of the questionnaire was done by a professor (former Amrita student) and eight students of the student college, focusing on features of mobility and attitude.
- The pedagogical exploration of a project-based reading camp organized by the Association was fulfilled by a PhD student and two students of the student college (BA and MA education major student).
- Qualitative analysis of the student newspaper “*Csodalámpa*” [Magic Lamp] was done by a PhD student and a student of the student college. The analysis showed the multifunctional role (career orientation, contact maintenance) of this publication.
- Iconographic analysis of the thousands of photos of Amrita OBK Association’s community programs were prepared by the social coordinator of the student college and two students of the college.

Some Research Results

In the following section, I am going to present the results of three sub-studies of the above mentioned research in a nutshell. During research, as the first step the relevant literature and available written documents in connection with the topic were examined. Based on these, it can be claimed that in Hungary, the first complex extra-curricular supporting communities started after the fall of communism and were initiated by NGOs, responding to local needs. There are researches who draw attention to the tendency that adolescents of Gypsy/Roma origin, especially those from small villages, who get into secondary institutions drop out of school in a high proportion during the first year of their education (Forray, 2003; Liskó, 2002). The Amrita OBK Association began its work at Pécs in the early '90s in order to reduce the dropout rate. Among the fundamental goals of the organization was to create a supporting environment by means of which the students, together with their peers, would be able to obtain a higher qualification. Amrita-students studied in the secondary or higher educational institutions near Pécs, or were preparing for secondary or high schools from the primary schools in small towns of southwestern Hungary (Dél-Dunántúl). Those students who were already in Pécs spent a significant part of their time out of school, at the inclusive and family-like spaces of the organization, while those who were still preparing to come could meet their older peers on the weekends or during summer camps. Amrita Orientation Alumni Affairs considered the formation of a "self-help"² peer community important, which highly contributed to diminishing the dropout rate and to nurturing talent (Varga, 1999). In the everyday life of the Association, developing a sense of belonging to a new and contemporary community, as well as forming a sense of community played an important role beside shaping the talent, knowledge and identity of individuals, all of which in turn strengthened the social relationship (web of relations) of the students. Adolescents studying away from their family thus belonged to a protective and motivating community where they could make friends with their peers who had similar experiences, substituting the family milieu. The organizers of the Association strove to create a family atmosphere and to fulfill the individual needs of the students. Amrita students had the opportunity to participate in weekly organized programs (student clubs, cultural programs, language lessons, career orientation sessions) besides studying, which further strengthened the community. The Association started a school newspaper, called "Csodalámpa," which was edited by the students and was published bi-monthly in an ever-growing number. Besides career orientation purposes, this newspaper also served as an important tool to keep in contact with the seventh- and eighth-grader students living in the villages (Derdák, Keczer and Varga, 1995).

The activity of Amrita OBK exceeded the limits of a student association. The organizers of Alumni Affaires started Galilei Foundation, which coordinated the work of

- 2 Both international and Hungarian specialized literature about 'self-help' groups played an important role in the formation of the professional concept of Alumni Affaires. These writings defined self-help groups as communities facing the same problems, offering mutual help and taking responsibility (Gerevich, 1983). The members of self-help groups can experience help and support of those who struggle with the same problems so the community provides an opportunity to leave the individual life scenes and roles; moreover, sharing the problems with the community strengthens the feeling of belonging (Rácz, 2008).



Géza Buzás

Romológia BA, WHSZ tag, PTE BTK

Let's not forget the fact that this is a Roma student college. What I would make compulsory is Roma language learning. It can strengthen the identity if someone learns their language. I think everyone would like that. Roma culture is also important. There are a lot of programs in connection with Roma culture in Pest, like exhibitions, conferences, etc., and I visit these through my own resources. It would be good to go together.

various professionals (language programs and Gypsy national programs in numerous schools and kindergartens), selected talented students and published research, professional documents and books (Varga, 1999). Besides, Amrita was one of the founders and organizers of Collegium Martineum, a Gypsy high school dormitory in Mánfa, which lasted for 13 years.

During the examined period between 1993 and 2000, Amrita Association worked on the complex support and empowerment of more than a hundred underprivileged adolescents with the financial help of Soros Foundations. The first results of Amrita research showed that the inclusive approach of the community of the Association together with the practical tools used were able to create real prospects for the underprivileged adolescents.

The questionnaires and in-depth interviews provided empirical data for the research. One micro-group of the research team analyzed the interviews focusing on the role of Amrita Association as a support organization (with the help of Atlas.ti software). Data analysis revealed the kinds of disadvantages that were mentioned most often in the interviews with regard to the life of the interviewees (emotional, financial, pragmatic), and the kinds of support they have received to successfully overcome the mentioned disadvantages and failures. The most substantial disadvantages that emerged from the interviews were emotional disadvantages (deriving from the socio-economic status related to family background), followed by financial disadvantages. Similarly, regarding support, emotional help was the most important, in which the role of the support organization was outstanding. The analysis of the aggregated codes showed that the support organization, as the agent influencing the life path of its members, had the most significant role according to the narratives of the interviewees. The support organization – based on the results – responded and reflected effectively to the individual needs of the interviewees, intervened and encouraged them exactly where it was necessary (Csigi–SerdültTrendl, 2015).

The questionnaire complemented well the results of the in-depth interviews. By analyzing the questionnaires, features of respondents' mobility, and their connection to and opinion of Amrita community was revealed. More than 60% of the respondents have obtained a higher education degree and 30% grammar school or vocational school qualification; so in the case of the majority of the respondents, the goal of the organization to promote education of the students was achieved (Boros, 2015).

The work of the Alumni Affaires was highly influenced by the formation of the self-help community. That is why the research group was eager to know, based on the questionnaire, how strong were the bonds and friendships made in the Association. 77% of the respondents made a closer friendship within the analyzed community and 71% is still in contact with another Amrita-member, which – from a perspective of two decades – clearly shows the power of Alumni Affaires to create a community. The importance of community was also highlighted by the replies to the question regarding aspects where the examined organization provided the most support for the respondents. Most respondents considered camping opportunities the most significant form of support, which was an important occasion to build a community. It is also interesting that following camping, the majority of respondents chose different aspects of emotional support, which correlates with the results of the in-depth interviews (categories: “they believed in me”; “they listened to me”; “it was a circle of friends in my life”) (Boros, 2015).

The results of empirical analysis show so far that Amrita Association contributed significantly to the life of many underprivileged people of Gypsy/Roma origin. A significant proportion of former Amrita-students have obtained a good profession or a post-secondary school qualification, they work in various scopes of activities or fields, and they have been effectively integrated into society achieving success both in professional and in private life.

Outlook

In the 21st century, thanks to the European Union’s financial resources for tenders, more and more extracurricular programs support the socially underprivileged adolescents in Hungary. Such initiatives are the extra-curricular communities and after-school programs, which concentrate on the multiply disadvantaged and/or Gypsy/Roma students studying in public education; the Roma student colleges working in the frameworks of post-secondary education can be regarded as a continuation of this initiative. The connection between the above mentioned organizations can appear in various forms, and it strengthens the relationship of the two fields. Student colleges are not only important for the students who attend the after-school programs, but it also provides an opportunity for the current student-members to benefit from peer counseling. The communities of after-school programs provide an opportunity to college students to act as model-mediators or “translator” (*transzlétor*),³ in which role the college students are able to provide a trustworthy model or give advice to the younger students.

In sum, this is why it is so important that the after-school programs and student colleges today adopt an attitude which promotes the social acceptance and retains the supporting methods to promote real social mobility. The analysis and impact assessment of the organizational operation of Amrita OBK Association contributed to the presentation of another successful inclusive practice, which can serve as a good example to the various educational initiatives.

3 People who belong to a minority community but are able to “translate” between the different cultures as they have been successfully integrated to the majority culture—trans. note.

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