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# Supporting the academic progress of underprivileged secondary school students: The Arany János Special College Program

*Translated by Boróka Madarász*

## Introduction

I have started the research presented here because I consider the programs supporting the academic success of underprivileged<sup>1</sup> students important. At the beginning of my study, I present chronologically various education policy initiatives that affect the academic advancement of underprivileged students<sup>2</sup> in public education. My original goal was to discover the reasons behind the premature school drop-outs (Imre, 2014; Mártonfi, 2014), as well as to find what motivates students to study. While exploring motivation, I proceed to the programs supporting secondary school students, especially the Arany János Program, which is the subject of my study. In this research, I investigate the extent of further educational plans of the students participating in the program, as well as the background of these decisions. With this research, I would like to prove that it is possible to influence cross-educational mobility of underprivileged students with the help of successful support programs.

## Support Programs

After the regime change, there were state and non-state tenders initiated among the programs supporting underprivileged, mainly Roma/Gypsy young people. The tenders released by Soros Foundation introduced direct programs nation-wide, such as "Lépésről Lépésre" and "Hálófeszítés" Program (Varga, 2012). There were several national initiatives to decrease inequality, for example the Gypsy Educational Development Program (Cigány Oktatásfejlesztési Program) (introduced in 1995), the "Útravaló – Macika" scholarship program, and the Phare Program (supporting the social inclusion

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- 1 The notion of being underprivileged and multiply disadvantaged is used according to the definition of the Child Protection Act. An underprivileged child is part of a family characterized by low income, lack of education, unemployment, or insufficient living conditions. The disadvantage is multiplied if more than one of the enumerated aspects are present (Varga, 2014).
  - 2 Underprivileged people are selected as the target group of the programs, though most of them emphasize the importance of belonging to the Roma/Gypsy minority.

of multiply disadvantaged primarily Roma young people, initiated in 2000) (Forray, 2011). It is worth mentioning the Integrational Pedagogical System (Integrációs Pedagógiai Rendszer, IPR) operating in public education since 2003. The aim of this program is to support students with social disadvantages by developing their key competences in school context. The plans of disadvantage compensation are supported with grants by the System, and thus the formation of an inclusive approach is expected within the institution (Havas and Zolnay, 2010; Arató and Varga, 2012). It is a significantly important program, inclusivity (mutual acceptance) has been incorporated into it, in contrast with segregation and assimilation.

### The Arany János Program<sup>3</sup>

The Arany János Program was established in 1999-2000. The first element of it was the Arany János Talent-Nurturing Program (Arany János Tehetséggondozó Program, AJTP), which started as an experimental initiation for the support of students living in towns with a population of less than 5000 and struggling with municipal disadvantages. Later, the target group of the program was extended: besides municipal disadvantages, students who receive additional family allowance or who have parents with lower educational qualifications were also invited to take part in the program. The second element, the Arany János College Program (Arany János Kollégiumi Program, AJKP) was established in 2004-2005; in 2006, the Arany János College-Vocational School Program (Arany János Kollégiumi – Szakiskolai Program, AJKSZP) was introduced (Tolnai, 2010). The Arany János Program Office (Arany János Programiroda) is responsible for the operation of these programs, which includes the development of programs, organization of professional events, maintenance of contacts between the partners, and operation of the mentor network. The program began with tender financing and since 2002, the per capita support grant was integrated into the system, ensuring the stability of the program.

The most important mission of the Arany János Talent-Nurturing Program is the preparation of its students for higher education. All the activities in the program help students pursue further education: educational-pedagogical work, placement in dormitories, and preparatory year that is aimed at reducing gaps in knowledge. Foreign language education and information technology are in the focus of the first year. The program is rather popular, and it can be found in all the counties of Hungary. The program has been assisting the academic advancement of 3,000 underprivileged secondary school students every year for 15 years now.

One of the objectives of the Arany János College Program is to ensure through pedagogic means a successful studying environment for multiply disadvantaged and underprivileged students in institutions obtaining a certificate of secondary education. A very important part of this work is the preparatory year (similar to AJTP), where students are prepared for secondary school through disadvantage compensation. During the next four years, the complex support of students is realized with the help of course and competence development, cultural programs, and social aid. In addition to these,

<sup>3</sup> [www.ajtp.hu](http://www.ajtp.hu), [www.ajkp.hu](http://www.ajkp.hu), [www.ajkszp.hu](http://www.ajkszp.hu)

students of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade participate in career counseling in order to ensure their academic advancement towards higher education or a vocational training in demand. More than a 1000 students from dormitories and their joint secondary schools in underprivileged areas participate in the program.

There are six locations where Arany János College-Vocational School Program operates. The most important aim of it is to enable multiply disadvantaged students to study in higher numbers in vocational education. Teachers of the program create an inclusive environment for the pupils, and consider the compensation of social and cultural disadvantage exceedingly important. Approximately 600 students of the program are assisted along their educational career until their attainment of the profession.

## Further Education in the AJKP

As a graduate student and mentor of the Wlislöcki Henrik Student College (Wlislöcki Henrik Szakkollégium), in the academic year of 2014/2015, one of my tasks was the recruitment of new students. This project gave me the opportunity to contact all the institutions of the Arany János Program and to visit all of the AJKP dormitories. During these visits, together with some of my peers, I organized a vocational guidance consultation for the students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the AJKPs. After the consultation, the students filled out a questionnaire regarding their plans of further education and about their motivation.

I have hypothesized that at least half of the students in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade intended to continue their studies in one of the institutions of higher education. I have also thought that the educators would be the most motivating factors for students, which meant that the AJKP has played a significant role in the choice of profession. I was also curious whether this shows a homogenous picture of the program, or if there are any differences among the special colleges in terms of the image. I also wanted to examine the amount of stress put on the students by the many additional programs provided by AJKP. It occurred to me that the numerous programs in addition to classes, many times organized during weekends, might put too much pressure on students.

Eleven AJKP institutions participated in my analysis. The questionnaire was filled out by approximately 200 students, which includes 72% of all the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders (Table 1).<sup>4</sup>

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4 I started the research in October 2014 and finished it in April 2015. I keep in contact with the students of the visited institutions on a social network page, as well as through the e-mail system of the Wlislöcki Henrik Special College.

Table 1. The ratio of the AJKP institutions and questionnaires

Institutions	Number of 11th grade students (persons)	Number of 12th grade students (persons)	Number of students filling out the questionnaire (persons)
Bercsényi Miklós Gimnázium és Kollégium [Bercsényi Miklós Grammar School and Dormitory] 5200 <b>Törökszentmiklós</b> , Almásy u. 1	11	16	24
BLSZSZK Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Kollégium [BLSZSZK Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Dormitory] 3100 <b>Salgótarján</b> , Kissomlyó út 2.	0	8	8
Gandhi Gimnázium és Kollégium [Gandhi Grammar School and Dormitory] 7629 <b>Pécs</b> , Komját A. u. 5.	20	9	16
I. Béla Gimnázium, Informatikai Szakközépiskola, Kollégium, Általános Iskola és Óvoda [I. Béla Grammar School, IT Vocational Grammar School, Dormitory, Primary School and Kindergarten] 7100 <b>Szekszárd</b> , Kadarka u. 29.	20	8	16
Karacs Ferenc Gimnázium, Szakközépiskola, Szakiskola és Kollégium [Karacs Ferenc Grammar School, Vocational Grammar School, Vocational School and Dormitory] 4150 <b>Püspökladány</b> , Hősök tere 2.	13	17	19
Móricz Zsigmond Gimnázium, Szakközépiskola és Kollégium [Móricz Zsigmond Grammar School, Vocational Grammar School and Dormitory] 4484 <b>Ibrány</b> , Hősök tere 2.	9	5	10
Nagykanizsai Műszaki Szakképző Iskola és Kollégium [Vocational School of Technicians and Dormitory of Nagykanizsa] 8800 <b>Nagykanizsa</b> , Ady utca 74/a.	11	7	15
Ózdi József Attila Gimnázium, Szakképző Iskola és Kollégium [József Attila Grammar School, Vocational School and Dormitory of Ózd] 3600 Ózd, Bolyki fő út 13	5	1	6
Széchenyi István Mezőgazdasági Szakképző Iskola és Kollégium [Széchenyi István Agricultural Vocational School and Dormitory] 4220 <b>Hajdúböszörmény</b> , Radnóti u. 3	22	20	31
Vásárhelyi Cseresnyés Kollégium [Cseresnyés Dormitory of Vásárhely] 6800 <b>Hódmezővásárhely</b>	22	10	21
Vay Ádám Gimnázium, SZKI, Szakiskola és Kollégium [Vay Ádám Grammar School, Vocational Grammar School, Vocational School and Dormitory] 4561 <b>Baktalórántháza</b> , Naményi út 7	13	7	18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>184</b>

The distribution of male and female respondents was almost equal: 53% were young men and 47% were young women; most of them 18 or 19-year-olds. More 11<sup>th</sup> graders (58%) filled in the questionnaires than 12<sup>th</sup> graders (42%). It was also observable that less graduate students participated in the vocational consultation due to the numerous programs, as explained by the educators.

In the remaining part of the questionnaire, I asked the students whether they would like to pursue further studies. I found it important to compare the answers of the different dormitories. In general, it was interesting to observe the case of Ibrány and Ózd, where all the respondents indicated their willingness to continue their studies. Figure 1 shows the summarized answers regarding the issue of further studies.

*Figure 1. Summarized data of the distribution of the intentions to pursue further studies (N:12)*



A total of 154 (84%) of the 184 students filling out the questionnaires would like to pursue further studies. 30 students would not like to continue their studies after secondary school or at any time later. This ratio proves my hypothesis: at least half of the AJKP students would not stop their studies after passing their matura examination. I find this ratio very promising, and it proves that the program is indeed successful in motivating the students in such big numbers to continue their studies. Certainly, the efficiency of the program is not the subject of this research, since many impact assessments had already proven the positive effects of the Arany János Program (Fehérvári, 2013; Fehérvári, 2015). Rather, this research is concerned with the background of the above-mentioned data. Is it the educators, the numerous programs, or any other factors that motivate students so much?

A further positive aspect is that 139 students (76%) would like to continue their studies right after their graduation year. The significance of this prospect lays in the fact that students have a better chance to acquire higher qualifications this way, than by pursuing further education after some time spent away from school environment.

According to the description of the AJKP, the main objective of the program is to help underprivileged students to pass their matura examination. I hoped to find with this research that students indeed would like to continue their studies after the final exams; I received very promising answers already at the beginning of the questionnaire. Next, I inquired about their plans concerning the level of higher education they would like to pursue. The students were asked to choose among advanced vocational programs, university studies, as well as they could add "other" forms of education. It can be observed, according to the answers, that there are significant differences among the dormitories. In Ibrány, Hódmezővásárhely, Ózd, and Salgótarján the option of «other kinds of education» was not used at all; everyone chose participating in higher educa-



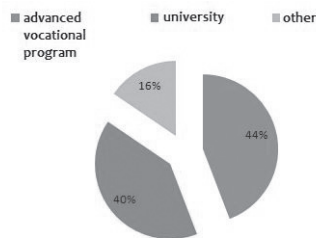
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In my opinion, the student college was good because we have not felt alone in this huge university environment, and because we have become really good friends (even if not everyone, most of us have).

tion (either vocational or university studies). In the institutions, where the third («other») option was used, the students rather preferred to obtain a profession in a vocational school (Figure 2).

*Figure 2. Summarized data about the intention to pursue further studies according to different kinds of institutions (N: 129)*

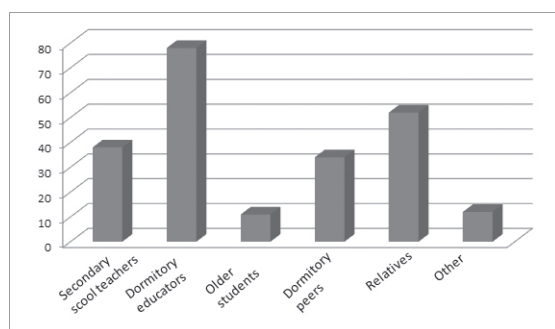


Since the students of AJKP are guided by well-prepared educational professionals, I have hypothesized, that it is these educators, that stimulate them the most. In the next part of the questionnaire, I asked the students to indicate the person or people who motivate them the most to continue their studies after the final exams.

I would like to highlight Ózd again, because this is the institution where the highest number of answers indicated the educators as the most motivating people. In addition to them, peers were another motivational factor; although, it is also very interesting that none of the students in this institution of Ózd has mentioned their family as a source of motivation. This phenomenon points out the importance of educators and peers as supporters of further studies especially in the case of youth coming from the most underprivileged areas. In contrast with Ózd, the students of Nagykanizsa indicated their relatives as the most motivating people, though educators and peers appear in their answers as well. In the case of the other institutions, there were no such extremities concerning this question.

It is well known that educational motivation is greatly influenced by one's family background, the lack of which is attempted to be compensated by the Arany János Program. I find it extremely important that the support of relatives is present in all the institutions, quite independently of the social disadvantages of the student. The questionnaires show that the emotional and mental support of the family has a positive effect on students. However, my hypothesis stating that educators are the most important motivating factors in the AJKP has been found correct. In addition, the role of relatives as source of motivation is very much noticeable as well (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Summarized data about the intention to pursue further studies according to different kinds of institutions (N: 129)



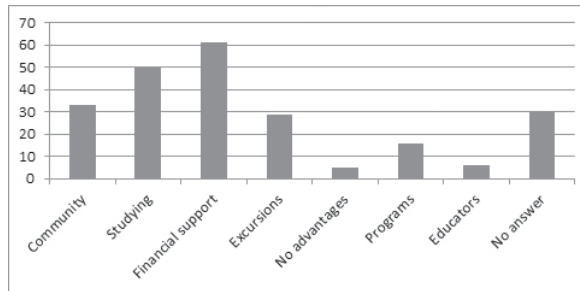
It can also be seen with the help of the data that the support of peers ranks very high in the aggregated results. Older students and dormitory peers are close to being as important sources of motivation as the family or relatives. This means, that even when far away from the family, people (in this case, students) with similar life situations may form an informal community in which mutual support is a strong motivational factor. If this community of peers follows the direction of the program, together with the support of the pedagogical professionals and the intentions of relatives, being a resident of this special college has a truly beneficial effect on the learning motivation of students.

There was another issue I wished to address: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the AJKP recognized by students? I used an open-ended question regarding this topic. I have grouped the answers into eight categories, which were the following: educators, additional opportunities (e.g., obtaining a driver's license), excursions, financial support (educational grant and commuting support), support of study (personal development aid, preparation for the matura examination), and community, as a different form of offering help. There were two more categories: the program "has no advantages," and "no answer." My hypothesis was that students would mark support of study the most significant strength of the AJKP. The answers are described below.

First and foremost, the two institutions that were standing out the most are Nagykanizsa and Ibrány: here most students regarded the support of their studies as the strength of AJKP. The answers of these students affirmed my assumption that education is the most important support factor of the AJKP. In the case of the other institutions, although many wrote learning, yet financial support was still more frequently

mentioned. The reason of this is the disadvantaged situation of these students, and it is quite understandable that many of them refer to the grants, bus tickets, and commuting support as positive features. However, it is very important to mention that nearly 60 students found support of education a very positive aspect (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Advantages of the AJKP summarized



Looking at the data, I find that my hypothesis (concerning the importance of the support of studying) has been verified. Furthermore, it was also confirmed by my own experience: during the career orientational conversation, a significant number of AJKP students had questions in connection with learning. Moreover, the high ratio of students intending to continue their studies in higher education also support this statement. Matching these data with the question about the most motivating people, the strengths of the program have started to be more visible.

## Summary

According to the results of this research, more than half of the students would like to continue their studies in higher education, most of them immediately after graduation year. It can also be established that in spite of minor differences among AJKP special colleges, the overall picture shows a relative agreement of the data among the institutions.

I emphasized the importance of the educators' work as an educational motivating factor of students; it is also worth mentioning that the support of parents has appeared in the answers of most of the pupils. Moreover, not only the educational professionals of the special colleges, but also the teachers in the secondary schools assist their students. As Réthy Endréné suggested, students need to have an adult role model and need to have their work acknowledged in order to form their inner motivation (Réthy, 1988). Although at the beginning of this research I did not expect the community and the peers to be so influential as motivating forces, based on the questionnaires, I found that in addition to the educators, peers are regarded as important motivating factors. I consider this result very important because it also supports my hypothesis about the positive effect of special college programs on the determination of students to study.

During the course of the research, I was also interested in the success and efficiency



of AJKP. Thus, the students were asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The answers have partially confirmed my hypothesis, since the educational advancement of students is helped the most significantly, though they also indicated financial support to be very important. A minority of students found the abundance of programs a drawback of the AJKP, as I had assumed, though the majority either did not answer the question or stated that the program has no inconveniences.

As a result, I have formulated answers to my main questions by the end of this research. According to the opinion of the students, it is apparent that the AJKP achieves its objectives through its practise. The educational professionals and the parents motivate the students together, and the AJKP is supportive mostly concerning education and financial aid. With these practices, the special college program is able to promote the advancement of students during secondary school years and the admission into higher education after the matura exams.

I do not regard this research as fully concluded, and I hope to have the opportunity to continue with a follow-up investigation examining the experiences of the special college educators and students who are successfully pursuing further education.

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