

**RÉKA KISSNÉ ZSÁMBOKI<sup>1</sup>****Experience Worlds of Becoming a Freinet-pedagogue in Hungarian Kindergartens at the Beginning of the 1990ies<sup>2</sup>**

*Beginning from the middle of the 1980ies a continuous improvement strategy has evolved in the Hungarian education, along which the changes focusing onto the democratic reorganisation of the education system could start. During this period in 1989 a research group was established in the Kindergartner Training Institute of Sopron, which has intended to realize the kindergarten adaptation of the reform pedagogy owing to the name of the French folk teacher, Célestin Freinet. As the result of the innovation thereof from September 1989 an alternative kindergarten program in the spirit of Freinet was realized at first in the country, with permission by the ministry. Owing to this initiative always more kindergartner at several points of the country has undertaken to adopt Freinet-pedagogy and to renew kindergarten education. In my study I would like to demonstrate the “experience worlds”, which were outlined from the statements of pedagogues. During my investigations I have explored the reasons and motivations hiding behind the demand and method of change and the adventures experienced during the adaptation of Freinet-pedagogy by using the method of qualitative content analysis.*

**1. Experience worlds and process of exploration**

The effervescent mood and colourful palette of the kindergartner on-goings and the alternative pedagogical movement of the period 1985-96 are well demonstrated by the essays and final works coming into in the course of data collection, everything of which was prepared in the former Kindergartner College of Sopron between 1991 and 1996. The topic thereof was a professional and personal “experience” about the realization of the local individual kindergarten adaptation of Freinet-pedagogy. Pursuant to above the writings processed are originally texts complying with the expectations of a scientific work, which were not prepared with narrative purpose, however these are so rich in professional and personal experience elements and stories, that the texts contained can be used as narratives.

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The purpose of my method applied during qualitative content analysis was to find relevant “markers” for my research pre-assumptions in the text composition patterns of the essays as text corpora. These from research aspect significant experiences, motives appearing as personal adventure have become important pivots of content analysis. I succeeded in finding such “markers”, through which from the narratives appearing on the level of individual – after the analysis – an experience universe describing the patterns of meeting Freinet-pedagogy and the adaptation, appearing also in the collective consciousness has shown up.

As purpose of this investigation – instead of confirmation or rejection of different hypotheses – the exploration of experience worlds can be considered, due to which the analysis results can be interpreted differently as significance of a statistical examination. What can be then considered as result in this part of the investigation? On the one hand the texts, which constitute new narrations having common experience content in a “compressed” format. The individual sentences separate already on the level of individual from the persons, these were told and through their extra meaning these become a component of the pattern of the collective experience universe. The result of this approach is that the experience patterns identifiable on the level of individual agglomerate as collective experience dimensions (Ehmann, 2003). On the other hand the texts come to being can serve additional to the exploration of the role and effect of the Freinet-initiative in Sopron as analysis of the subjective experience of becoming a Freinet-pedagogue and simultaneously these can tone, supplement and enrich macro-level education historical researches.

During the analysis of the writing materials of essays and final works – quasi without exception – a kind of identical logic structure could be discovered, which has promoted the analyzing exploration to a great extent. In the introduction of every essay the motivation of the topic selection, the personal involvement and the outline of professional motivation were contained. In the subsequent chapters the pedagogy of Célestin Freinet was briefly represented, then the author has stated the specific research area selected. After these theoretic chapters the own professional experiences and adventures were detailed, then the comparison and synthesis thereof with the French reform pedagogical trend, emphasizing the realization of individual and unique, specific kindergarten adaptation. Finally the statements discovered and the summary of conclusions could be read, which have also contained several manifestations of personal character.

After repeated reading the huge amount of text had to be reduced – for processability, interpretation and analysis. From the available techniques indexation could be applied in this research process (Golnhofer, 2001). During the continuous interpretation of data I have

provided the texts read with coding and notices, by means of which later I have created the corpora, which have contained the narrations having common experience content in “compressed” format. As result of the process demonstrated previously the experience universes were outlined, which have served as analysis of becoming a Freinet-pedagogue experienced in a subjective manner as collective experience.

## **2. Experience world of the first meeting**

Almost everyone has motivated the topic selection of the essays by calling up the adventure of the first meeting with Freinet-pedagogy. The essay writers have met the unknown world of optional, multi-coloured kindergarten programs after the loosening of the uniform and mandatory schedule system of didactic character lasting since long decades. Based on the narratives it can be stated that the evolvement of alternativity and pedagogical pluralismus was received with great pleasure, because one has longed for professional-methodological freedom since several years. However additional to the innovative intention one had to face a difficult task due to the lack of preparedness to change of aspect, the always developing offer of the “fungus” increasing kindergarten lifestyle organizations. The kindergarten pedagogues have often leant to their own sentiments. They have decided not on scientific, but emotional basis, which lifestyle organization to choose. *“I have quasi hunted for writings about new methods. The more I have read the more doubts I had. How shall I know, which one is correct?”* (Prókai, 1993, p. 1). Conscious choice could have been hardly expected from kindergarten pedagogues, because they did not have theoretical and practical skills, in the possession of which they could be able to decide. Recognition resulting from their previous professional experiences and sympathy were important elements of their decisions: *“We have heard of Freinet from a colleague attending the college in Sopron. She had the opinion that we do something similar to what she has learnt there”* (Némethné, 1994, p. 5). According to the statements Freinet-pedagogy – after knowing it – was basically chosen by emotional engagement, based on intuitions and inspiration in grain. The selected quotes illustrate this: *“When I read the description about the Freinet-program in Sopron, I have felt that it’s mine. This is what I long for since years. These are my thoughts, my feelings!”* (Vanyáné, 1994, p. 1).

The engagement for new, the decision, the practical realization of change of aspect was combined daily in several cases with doubts and concerns. Some have reported in their writings that the first deep impression was followed by fear and uncertainty resulting from the duplicity

of the freedom of choice and the professional responsibility for the decision respectively. The kindergarten content norms of the investigated period and the previous time (ONP of 1971 and its further developed version of 1989) have formulated the character and spirituality of pedagogical work in a centrally prescribed manner, rather along kindergarten- and performance-oriented requirements. On the contrary the evolving alternatives – without content guidelines on central level – have emphasized the pluralisation of education targets and values, children orientation and experiences based on development, building on individual specifics. An uncertainty resulting from this duplicity has occurred also in the narratives of kindergarten pedagogues: “...when I got to know Freinet-pedagogy, I have felt at a glance, that I have found the right one! But I also had a kind of uncertain feeling. Is it enough for the child to learn the adjacent world as it has learnt to walk and talk?” (Horváth, 1994, p. 2).

The participants of the further trainings and courses in Sopron have had different professional preparedness and past and different pedagogical experience, due to which they have had ramified ideas and expectations against alternative pedagogical trends. So from the different kindergarten programs they have chosen the most willingly, which has complied with the criteria required by them the most. In the event of Freinet-pedagogy these are the characteristics, which are sympathetic “at first glance” – according to the witness of the reports – which were children orientation, the freedom of personality evolvment and naturalness.

As summary it can be stated that the innovative pedagogical atmosphere of the 1980ies and the appearance of alternative kindergarten lifestyle organizations have significantly impressed kindergarten pedagogues. The intensity and process of change of aspect developing along the acquaintance with new pedagogical ideas were determined by specifics resulting from the different personality features, the individual professional expectations and pedagogical aspects and the possibilities and circumstances of practical application. The confrontation with pedagogical alternatives and pluralism was combined in many people with the immediate feeling of identification in a defined direction; others were provoked to scepticism or further acquaintance. Reception had to be experienced individually by everyone.

### *2.1. Reasons for and motives of change*

In the motivation of the topic selection of essays and final works prepared by kindergarten pedagogues – additional to the experience of the first confrontation - there are in several cases critics against kindergarten education typical for the period investigated and the previous years, the dissatisfaction with daily pedagogical work as motive for change. The essay writers have

considered the main reasons of the problems first of all in methodological regulation, mandatory activities and performance-oriented learning realized with artificial didactics: *“I was bound by rules, the schedule defined to the minute, the “subject” system broken down to days and the performance-oriented didactic procedures”* (Koncz, 1996, p. 33).

Most of the critics were exercised against the system of mandatory activities, where the organized unit of “play-work-learn” was realized in a centrally prescribed schedule and thematic order – often in a closed group room instead of the direct environment around the children. *“I have started an excited research; I have tried to get to know a pedagogy in every possible way, where the child is in the centre and not the activity”* (Szűcs, 1993, p. 1). The uniform legal and content regulation has not considered the individual and age characteristics of children and the different development stages thereof. There was not only the “curriculum” prescribed, but also the expected performance. For this reason the change was motivated by the prohibition against the compulsion of central regulation valid both for children and pedagogues in most of the cases: *“At the mandatory activities we have given everything in the hand of the children and explained them what to do. We have deprived them of exploring the world around them. I also have suffered from this compulsion”* (Sümeg, 1996, p. 1) The narratives cited above illustrate and sign the characteristics and problems of kindergarten education, which were laid on the pedagogues by obligation, uniformity and the pursuit of performance. They have felt that this atmosphere has affected the children as compulsion as well, from which often – despite the most careful pedagogical planning and organization – rejection and resistance have resulted.

The motivations of the change requested in kindergarten education have also had another aspect, which has implicated the demand for nature- and life-close active experiencing as new motive: *“There is not such an artificial environment, which would offer so multi-coloured possibilities for collecting experiences as nature”* (Szűcs, 1993, p. 2). The kindergarten pedagogues have formulated their former childhood memories in most of the essays, in which they have also emphasized the importance of connection to nature: *“I have been living in a small village in Zala since my birth: the vineyard, the small forest, the grazing-land, the plough-lands have become part of my life. I keep a life without above environment as unimaginable”* (Szűcs, 1993, p.1). Freinet-pedagogy was born from similar inspiration, it is known from the biography of the French folk teacher how much his childhood meant for him, which he has spent in a direct relationship with nature. The nature-loving essay writers with village past or present have considered nature with reference to Célestin Freinet as clear source of experience collection, which – in their opinion – can mean the richness of learning realizing for children

through life. This reasonable, harmonic environment created by nature has turned out to be experienced more simply and more easily to learn both for kindergarten pedagogues and for children than the world of artificial activities in the group room.

In the experience world summarizing the motives of and reasons for change two main motives were outlined – according to the witness of essays – in the process of pedagogical-methodological path-finding. One of them is the demand for turning away from the previous practice of kindergarten education, which has meant the fact and basic reason for change. In this process centrally prescribed obligations, performance-orientation and the non-observance of age specifics of children have appeared as elementary reason for the intention of renewal and as inducement appearing to be almost irreversible. The terms “*depressing, I started to revolt, I suffered, I was frightened*” clearly illustrate and sign the problems of kindergarten education. Another motive outlining from the experience world – in harmony with personal childhood adventures the nature- and life-closeness discovered in Freinet-pedagogy – has marked the direction and quality of change.

### **3. Experience world of acquaintance**

After the first confrontation with the variety of alternative pedagogies the kindergarten pedagogues have felt and known that they have to break with the previous practice, in a manner, that the child shall be put into the centre of education and the education targets shall be adjusted thereto. To the first steps of realization and the “conversion” afterwards the adventures and experiences seen during the acquaintance with programs and methods have contributed the most. Based on the reports of the essay writing pedagogues it can be stated that during the study of different kindergarten lifestyle organizations engagement has become deeper for those, which have on the one hand correspond with personal pedagogical ideas, on the other hand possibilities and professional support were available for the theoretical and practical acquaintance thereof and thirdly they seemed to be applicable in the daily kindergarten life. According to the witness of statements the success and the motivation force of the Freinet further educations in Sopron were created by its cooperative, interactive character, the spirituality of Freinet and the harmony between the theoretical grounding and the practical realization, during which – in several cases – already at the location the engagement and decision were outlined in the participants: “*I have got to know the spirituality of Freinet during the intensive course in Sopron and at the meetings in Budapest. These assemblies have run in a different mood than the traditional further educations. Learning from each other,*

*experiencing, discussing the problems, acting creatively. It has outlined in me: I want to be a kindergartner working in the spirit of Freinet!*” (Vanyáné, 1994, p. 2).

The first important argument from the facts affecting the choice of pedagogues was children-orientation, which was contained in each essay: *“This pedagogy was close to me, because the child is in its centre, the natural curiosity of children is the origination and it can collect its experiences through “seeking experience”, actively”* (Kovács, 1993, p. 3). Everyone among the essay writers has recognized and felt that this aspect has many, further valuable pedagogical outcomes: *“[...] the children are free, more creative and act with great enthusiasm. It provides every possibility to evolve the whole personality of the child, so they can assay their strength and realize themselves”* (Sümeg, 1996, p. 26). Directed by natural curiosity in the colourful, experience-full whirl of activities one of the most important figures of the pedagogical process, the child could be more enthusiastic and creative, its personality could evolve. The realization of above assumed and resulted the freedom of the kindergarten pedagogue and the kindergarten life as well.

In the process of acquaintance and engrossment another important argument has stood up for the pedagogy of Freinet: the variegation of children activity forms. The principle „training for life through activity” has proven to be such natural for kindergarten pedagogues already at the first hearing, because they could realize the targets and tasks of kindergarten education in accordance with the age characteristics of the children in the most basic and natural way instead of the previously required performance-orientation and carefully organized activities, they could collectively experience daily joys and problems: *“We were on the loaf in the whole autumn. We have discovered the surroundings. We rolled down the hills, swung on trees, pulled fruits on “no-man’s-land”. We prepared compote from the fruits pulled. That was the most beautiful year of my career”* (Szűcs, 1993, p. 1).

According to the witness of the writings in the documents the kindergarten pedagogues, who have tried out what they have learnt during the training in their everyday life, have quasi had immediate sense of achievement. Additional to children and adventure orientation the inspiring natural and social environment has contributed to joyful kindergarten life to a great extent.

During the acquaintance with Freinet-pedagogy, in the course of engagement the method of adaptation – concerning persons, local characteristics and possibilities – had to be recognized. On this area it was the biggest challenge for kindergarten pedagogues that the content and legal rules of kindergarten education in the investigated period have not shown new

ways, alternatives for those, who wished to deviate from central regulations towards local experiments. Due to these reasons the Freinet further educations spreading in Sopron – and in several points of the country -, the publications turned up and the alternative kindergarten lifestyle organizations appearing to be “good practice” have become of dominant importance. *“I have studied the publications published in Hungarian, I have contacted Freinet Foundation. I have visited the group of the practicing kindergarten of the Kindergarten Pedagogue College in Sopron working in Freinet spirit. I have felt always stronger that I have made the right decision, when I chose this way”* (Zabos, 1994, p. 2). In the course of acquaintance the interested have appeared in almost every forum of information and experience collection, they have started to travel around the country, looked for and studied publications. The “work” has run in a creative manner, discussing the arising questions and problems as the kindergarten life in Freinet-spirituality itself.

#### **4. Experience world of „conversion”**

In approximately three fourth of the investigated essays references and occasionally detailed narrations can be found about the fact, what kind of changes the kindergarten pedagogues working in the spirituality of Freinet-pedagogy have detected in connection with themselves, the children, the personal and material conditions of kindergartens and how have they changed daily life. All of them have reported that their human and professional conversion has not happened overnight, but lots of situations experienced, own personal and professional experiences and the related reflections have played a role in the process: *“It has formulated in me that I want to be a kindergarten pedagogue of Freinet-spirituality. I felt that it does not work overnight. [...] in the meantime I have constantly changed, renewed”* (Vanyáné, 1994, pp. 2-3).

Kindergarten pedagogues have written about the changes occurred in their personality at first: *“Freinet-program requires new personality features from kindergarten pedagogues. For this pedagogy decisive, open kindergarten pedagogues with responsibility and creativity are necessary”* (Makra – Kuruncsai – Kószó, 1992, p. 12). The changes of personality were characterized mostly by the feeling of freedom, emotional filling, open-mindedness, creativity and empathy, the ability for renewal and a certain dissimilarity and responsibility.

As result of the analysis of changes experienced in connection with kindergartner children it can be stated that the kindergarten life of Freinet-spirit, the atmosphere of freedom and love has released similar reactions from children to a great extent as from kindergarten pedagogues.



On the account of this a personal love connection could develop, which has become the basis and essential condition of the child-pedagogue relationship: *“In order that everyone feels good, love and acceptance were required without conditions. We have accepted the children as they were. They had self-confidence and they have accepted also others. A love connection was established. There were less conflicts, the kindergarten life has become enriched”* (Sárosi, 1993, p. 45). The children activities replacing the previous obligatory activities, based on free decisions and directed by interest has not required external motivation called up by the pedagogue with didactic artificiality anymore, because the childlike curiosity and being creatively eager to do have become inducement of kindergarten life: *“The children have almost bolted down the different activities offered. They wanted to try out everything, everyone wanted to participate in everything. One could feel on the activity and great interest of the children, how the possibility of free choice has released the”* (Palotai, 1992, pp. 7-8).

The conscious modification of material environment can be also considered as important factor of the renewal in kindergarten life. The inspiring environment around the children is essential condition of creative atmosphere and variable activities, which also plays an important role in the realization of the principles and techniques of Freinet-pedagogy. Kindergarten pedagogues have felt the necessity of change also on this area and tried to create the required material conditions. By comprehensive reordering of the group rooms, in the snugs and “workshop corners” established, providing variable tools – not seen until then in kindergartens – the children have received free space for playing, activities and creating: *“I have reordered the group room already in the first year. We had a real kitchen corner, where there are real dishes and kitchen aids. On the shelves compotes, spices and tea-sorts are lined up. [...] There was place for a rib-stall and a rope hanging down from the ceiling. For the conversation round and fairytales we form a circle from sitting cushions”* (Vanyáné, 1994, pp. 4-5).

In the experience world of the conversion outlining from the reports the kindergarten pedagogues, the children, the character and the atmosphere of the whole kindergarten life has changed following the changes of the kindergarten environment – due to this. Instead of the performance uniformly requested from everyone, learning methods inappropriate for the age characteristics of kindergartner children and more impersonal communities covering individuals kindergarten weekdays were characterized by individual treatment, acceptance and emotion-richness (e.g. love, acceptance, adherence, joy of collective experience). The conversion had creative power according to some: *“We have recreated the kindergarten life.. [...] We have felt better in kindergarten”* (Szűcs, 1993, p. 26).

From the narratives disclosed the character of change can be summarized, the basis of which was created by a child-orientated kindergarten education aiming for free evolvement of personality. In this process the cooperation of child and pedagogue was principally based on love and acceptance realized through empathy and tolerance and in the professional renewal reflective consciousness, authenticity and self-identity owing to the methodological freedom were outlined in the writings. The conversion process was characterized by the majority of kindergarten pedagogues with the motive “I have become somebody else”, however for some it meant “finding himself”, “revival of the previous me” and “finding home” in professionalism instead of complete conversion.

### **5. Evaluation and acceptance of „diversity”**

In the experience world analyzed during my investigations and highlighted in the previous sub-chapter renewal and diversity have appeared as sharp motives. In consequence in most of the cases the feeling of a kind of professional self-identity has occurred in kindergarten pedagogues, from which later the appearance of the intention of separation, self-definition and the motive of “diversity” have occurred. The interpretation of “diversity” and the evaluation thereof was present in the narratives in several comparisons. There were some, who have used this term as duplicate of finding their professional self-identity: *“Internal convincement and emotional adherence are unconditionally required for the realization of the spirituality of Freinet. It completely satisfies my internal needs and diversity”* (Némethné, 1994, p. 33). Among the essay writers other have compared the pedagogy of Freinet formulating general issues, considering “traditionalism” characterizing their previous kindergarten practice: *“In Sopron and in Budapest I had the chance to see the wonderful atmosphere and harmony existing in groups of Freinet-spirit. Diversity between traditional kindergarten life and the one called Freinet-spirituality was very much observable”* (Koncz, 1996, p. 35).

Individualism and diversity building on local specifics – considering the writings – are present in the realization of Freinet-pedagogy as values. In consequence the acceptance of diversity existing in the society, in the kindergarten and between children and the modern aspect of its evaluation were also revealed in the narratives. Accepting approach based on personal treatment and age and individual specifics is characterized for the evaluation and acceptance of diversity for kindergarten pedagogues: *“Kindergarten is not open only for healthy children. In my group there was already handicapped, twin-language child and child with autism. [...] In the spirit of Freinet an environment and atmosphere shall be established, where individual*

*tempo and flexibility help a lot in the solution of problems arising from diversities” (Sümeg, 1993, p. 31).*

## **6. Experience of coherence and movement**

After meeting Freinet-pedagogy the further questions and problems arising in the common days of kindergarten life during the “daily” practice of Freinet-pedagogy, the feeling of separation and the sharing of joy and success feeling have called connections and relations to being, which have played a key role in the evolvement of domestic adaptation and its spread of movement character. The experience world of coherence and movement can be disclosed along the motives “community-friendship-fellow-sufferer”, the primary stages of which were the relationships between local kindergarten education communities and colleagues: *“While many other Freinet-pedagogues fight against the non-understanding by their managers and colleagues, our kindergarten has started a common finding-scanning path several years ago. In our internal demonstrations it feels good to receive confirmation from each other within the colleague community and to see how others sustain from the spirit of Freinet” (Molnár, 1993, p. 3).* At the beginning other have tried to renew kindergarten life alone, however later they have felt the necessity to belong to a community, where initial attempts were confirmed by learning from each other and professional enrichment: *“I have lot of tasks to solve, in order to be the leader of a kindergarten group of Freinet-spirit. However I am sure I do not have to pass this road alone, because I succeeded to get to know several colleagues, the objectives of whom correspond with mine” (Zabos, 1994, p. 35).* Additional to contact between pedagogues working according to similar principles the essay writers have considered the activity of the research group in Sopron as connecting power provider, which arose from the theoretical and practical trainings and meetings respectively. According to the statements the instructors and practice-guiding kindergarten pedagogues have accommodatingly communicated their experiences to the interested and shared the success of others with pleasure and given faith and confirmation in case of doubts and problems: *“The method and techniques of Freinet are not institutionally taught, but his followers share their experiences and one can receive Freinet-pedagogical skills in this manner. For this reason the role of the movement is important, because it allows meetings and exchange of experiences” (Koncz, 1996, p. 26).*

During the further analysis it has outlined from the essays that the building and always spreading relationships – owing to the regularity and frequency of meetings – were organized

into a movement building from below, the necessity of which was considered by the kindergarten pedagogues in the strengthening of relationships, professional development and the creation of the possibility of self-training: *“Freinet-pedagogues are not trained anywhere in the world, so self-development and self-training are important. Freinet-meetings, further educations, exchange of experiences and literatures allow this”* (Kasper, 1994, p. 18). The organizational framework of the movement was the meetings mentioned also in the quote above, which were additional to community events of friendly character also professional continuative educations. The principle of learning from each other has shown up, there was the opportunity to exchange experiences, which have confirmed or re-considered individual attempts with a kind of “self-selection” character. So the communities called by the French reform pedagogical trend into being have formed in professional continuative educations, Freinet-meetings, then these have embodied in the domestic Freinet-movement organized with time. Pedagogue (self) training realized within the frames of the movement – similar to international continuative educations and meetings developed from French roots – has played (and plays also today) an essential role in the vitalization of the pedagogy, where instead of the road of official graduation the knowledge of the pedagogical concept, the engagement for principles, the application embodied in Freinet-techniques and the demand for continuous self-training and weighing shall mean the guarantee in professionalism.

## **7. Conclusion**

During my investigations it has outlined from the essays of kindergarten pedagogues that additional to certain uniform attempts in the intentions wishing to renew kindergarten education the renewal breaking up with the pedagogical practice of the previous years and the diversity from others, which has become value by self-definition, were expressed as strongly appearing demand. It was demonstrated in the narratives that the pedagogues have mainly believed to discover in Freinet-pedagogy among the evolving kindergarten lifestyle organizations, that it builds onto multi-coloured pedagogue personality, during the realization it almost implies and requires differentiation and multi-colouredness – manifesting itself naturally in the atmosphere of freedom. From the statements it has outlined that the introduction of every new education concept and method – even with careful preparation – shall be successful in the event, if it is emotionally approachable for the pedagogue, if he finds what he can own, if it can be adapted both for himself and for the pedagogical environment, namely it assumes and ensures innovation based on professional autonomy.

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