



**Szociológia Doktori
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PH.D. THESIS SUMMARY

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Short term career aspirations of vocational school students

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I. The background and overview of the research

I/1. The focus of the dissertation

This dissertation focuses on the short term career aspirations of vocational school students. The main question of my research was investigating which factors influence decision making in vocational students. The explanatory models include three dependent variables, as possible short term tracks, which are: labor market entry, the acquisition of a baccalaureate and uncertain career plans. The explanatory variables can be categorized into three groups, I analyzed the influence of the family background, the effects of the school experiences and the impacts of subjective labor market expectations of the students. This dissertation shows the process which creates systematic differences within the career aspiration of the students. According to my hypotheses, the sets of factors mentioned above, influence the daily experience of the students and they contribute to the building of different visions about their future career.

I/2. Relevance of the topic

The scientific relevance of my research is based on the institutionalized reproduction of inequalities within this special type of school where educational statistics indicates homogeneous population. Vocation schools offer places for students who had the weakest performance in primary school, and whose institutional failures correlate with disadvantaged family background. The economic relevance of this dissertation comes from the fact that a significant part of the graduated vocational students do not appear on the labor market after finishing the vocational school, that is to say they do not practice their profession. I believe that a sociological perspective on decision making can unfold several significant elements of this question.

The regime change brought considerable change to the content, the structure and prestige of the vocational education. The job seekers with vocational certificates faced serious difficulties on the labor market, this was caused by the change of the economic system and the deterioration of the industry. These structural changes effected not only the already active population but had an influence on the whole vocational education system as well. During socialism the factories offered not only work places but they were also responsible for apprenticeship places, which were closed after the collapse of the system. The expectation towards different professions has also had transformations with the new industrial structure and the applicants with vocational certificate were not able to follow and fulfill the new demands. [Kézdi et al., 2008, Mártonfi, 2003]

Parallel to the economic process the ongoing educational expansion created places for those students who would have been “the elite” in vocational education in the previous system. Plans by the policymakers, the needs of the economy and the aspirations of families towards higher education met in the educational expansion. In the 80’s approximately forty percent of the school population entered vocational programs, the same ratio was 25 at the beginning of 2000 when the decrease of the proportion had stopped. [Oktatás-statisztikai évkönyv, 20012/13:22.]. Nowadays within a school population the less advantaged students enter the vocational programs, they have the lowest competency scores, and the lowest socio-economic status. This negative selection and the low prestige do not make vocational schools appealing for middle class families even if their children would be interested in certain professions. [Lannert, 2004; Mártonfi, 2003; Kertesi-Varga, 2005] The institutions define themselves as suppliers of the labor market, the task of realignment do not appear in their curriculum even if it would be justified by the strong correlation of bad school performance and the disadvantaged background of the students.

The mismatch of low quality labor force and fast changing, demanding economy created an anomaly in the labor market. In some professions, surpluses and shortages exist simultaneously, Fazekas and Hajdu [2011] call them „critical professions.” In this case shortage is not the right expression since there are enough qualified professionals but they do not show up as labor supply. The question is raised, which individual factors influence the decision on labor market entry.

After finishing a vocational program one possible alternative is the acquisition of a baccalaureate in the short run. Theoretically it is a possible opportunity for vocational students to enter the labor market first and postponing the acquisition to a later time, but according to educational statistics most of the students who left the educational system do not reenter it later. International comparison shows that the payoff of a higher degree is one of the highest in Hungary. The activity rate and the salary increase that come with higher qualification, which means an acquisition of a baccalaureate is a logical decision. It remains a question whether the macro level correlation appears at the micro level as well, or whether other factors have stronger influences on individual decisions. For example, family background has a strong impact on educational attainments, which also can have an effect on individual decisions. [Lannert, 2004]

The third dependent variable was the uncertain notion of the future. Compared to the clear career tracks this can be described as a “left over” category but based on the literature (Ball et. al, 1999) doubts by young people can represent a certain deprivation such as the need to be separated from other options.

II. Data

The applied data was recorded by the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development, the project was called “The education of the 21st century – development and coordination” (project code: TÁMOP-3.1.1-08/1-2008-0002, subproject code: 6.1.1 and 7.1.6). I present a map of aspirations based on expert interviews with school directors. The conclusions of the interviews created a frame for the quantitative analysis. I used the interviews and the questionnaires for secondary analyses.

II/1. Qualitative data – interviews with school directors

The recruitment of interviewees was based on a previous questionnaire which targeted school directors and included a question about the willingness to participate in later interview. The discussions were dealing with three topics. I focused on one of them, on the special professions which are very popular or very unpopular in the vocational schools, since the latter appear in the labor market as “critical professions.” The research included more than 100 interviews and this sample represented the regional diversity of the country. The interviews helped to draw a horizontal picture about the process of career choices and they showed the heterogeneous feature of the vocational school population. The discussions also drew attention to the influential external factors. Unfortunately the frame of quantitative analyses limited the inclusion of institutional barriers, which were described by interviewees but they showed individual reactions towards them which helped to understand the situation in decision making.

II/2. Quantitative data – questionnaires with vocational students

The applied questionnaires were recorded in 2010 with vocational students in their last school year. The sample represented the vocational structure of the educational system in Hungary based on educational statistics between 2007 and 2009. I used the representative data to

describe and to model the process of decision making on career choices. The data collection took place in classrooms and the students filled out the questionnaires by themselves. The sample included 1359 respondents from 70 vocational schools. The sample distortion was corrected by edge weighting, based

on 1) the type of the school 2) the specialization and 3) the place of living.

II/3. Variables and methods

For operationalizing the career choices I used three dependent variables, a) the labor market entry b) acquisition of baccalaureate and c) the uncertain vision about their career. The first part of the thesis describes the independent variables, their distribution in the sample and their correlations with the dependent variables. The same set of factors was used to present the decision making. The first group contains the variables which characterized the family background of the respondents. The second set includes the factors which show the school experiences of the students. Finally, I analyzed the subjective expectations of the students towards the labor market. In concluding the results of the descriptive statistics and for testing the hypotheses of the dissertation, multivariate models were used based on logistic and multinomial regression.

III. Conclusions of the thesis

III/1. Family background

Hypotheses

H1/a. Better financial background makes it possible for the students to postpone their entry to the labor market, by contrast the less privileged has to choose this option.

H1/b. In the families where the highest level of education of the parents is vocational education I expect stronger aspirations towards entering the labor market immediately after graduation.

H1/c. I expect stronger aspirations towards further education from students, who have parents with baccalaureates.

H1/d. Stable and secure family background reduces the chance of uncertain visions about their future career.

Results

Based on the regression models, the hypothesis H1/a. was partly fulfilled. The students from the highest quarter of financial backgrounds showed less probability to enter labor market in the short run compared to their peers. The educational backgrounds of the parents was an influential variable as well. The students who have parents with at least a bachelor degree, showed also less willingness to enter the labor market immediately after finishing the vocational school. Hypothesis H1/b. did not seem to fulfill the expectations since the vocational background of the parents did not influence the career choices of the students. The regression model supported the hypothesis H1/c., those students, whose parents have a baccalaureate also showed stronger aspiration towards further education. Hypothesis H1/d. was not fulfilled. The only variable which had significant effect on uncertain visions was bad

financial background of the family.

III/2. School experiences

Hypotheses

H2/a. The school choice which was suiting the expectations of the primary school students and the successful vocational specialization raises the probability of entering the labor market.

I also expect higher willingness to enter the labor market from the students who based their specialization on personal interest or on the positive labor market perspectives of their vocation.

H2/b. Failed school choices and unsuccessful specialization in the vocational school

demotivate the students to practice their profession. I assume, institutionally forced schooling and discontent towards specialization decreases the probability of entering the labor market.

H2/c. The early success in primary school seems to have a long effect on educational career, so I expect stronger aspiration towards acquisition of a baccalaureate from students who had better marks in primary school.

H2/d. Based on expert interviews, the acquisition of a baccalaureate is an alternative solution instead of labor market entry. I expect that discontentment towards a specialization increases the probability of acquisition of baccalaureate.

H2/e. Good academic performance in vocational school reduces the costs of an acquisition of a baccalaureate, so most probably, the students with better performance show more willingness to acquire a baccalaureate.

H2/f. Lack of success in a vocational school, forced schooling or failed specialization raise the probability of uncertain notions about the future career.

H2/g. Professional support from teachers can diminish the effect of disadvantaged family background, so I assume that students who get personal attention from their teachers show less uncertainty.

Results

The regression models indicated that the H2/a. hypothesis was fulfilled and the early motivation had an effect on the future career plans. The students who have chosen their secondary school according to their interest or based on positive labor market expectations showed stronger aspiration towards entering the labor market immediately after finishing their vocational program. By contrast the students who were disappointed about their previous choices were less keen on taking this option. (H2/b.) The primary school performance did not show significant effect on the present career plans of the students (H2/c.) but a good performance in vocational school had an influence on the aspiration towards acquisition of a baccalaureate (H2/e.) It was also proved by the model that forced schooling and a failed specialization filled their role as “negative motivations” by moving students toward baccalaureate.(H2/d.)

The models included a few factors which can diminish the existence of uncertain visions about the future, having attentive teachers in the school was one of them. (H2/g.) Hypothesis H2/f. was only partly proved. It did not seem to be a valid statement that the lack of success in school would raise the probability of uncertain notions but it was visible that good performance and positive identification with previous choices decreased the ratio of uncertainty.

III/3. Expectations toward labor market

Hypotheses

H3/a. Positive labor market expectation can motivate students to enter the labor market right after finishing the vocational program. According to my hypothesis the relatively high standard of living provided by the chosen profession and stable employment are the variables which raise the probability of entering the labor market.

H3/b. Most probably the student who like their profession also would like to begin their career as soon as possible. I assume that a positive professional identity increases the probability of an early entry.

H3/c. Labor market statistics shows that applicants with a baccalaureate have better chances to earn more compared to their peers having only a vocational school certificate, even if they have the same profession. I expect that a higher salary expectation also raises the probability of acquiring the baccalaureate.

H3/d. Most probably the lack of positive expectations towards labor market creates uncertain visions about the future.

Results

Hypothesis H3/a. was only partly fulfilled. The students who hoped to find a job easily after finishing school showed stronger aspirations towards entering the labor market. The standard of living provided by the chosen profession had a different effect than expected. Very positive opinions did not influence the dependent variable but the very low expectancy did on a negative way. According to the model a positive professional identity did not have a significant effect on the labor market entry. (H3/b.) Based on the regressions, the higher level of salary expectations did not motivate students to go for baccalaureate. (H3/c.) The lack of positive expectations did not influence uncertain notions but the very positive opinion about prospects of the chosen vocation did decrease the probability uncertain vision. (H3/d.)

III/4. The interrelations of aspirations

After examining the effect of the independent variables separately on the dependent variable I also built up a model to test interrelations between them. According to the regression the choice between labor market entry and acquisition of baccalaureate is influenced by the financial background of the family, by the school performance, by satisfaction towards the program, by the labor market expectations and by the field of profession. The students with the most disadvantaged financial backgrounds cannot afford to postpone the labor market entry for an acquisition of baccalaureate and in this group the uncertain visions were also the most frequent. Early specialization, positive expectation towards finding a job and bad financial background were the variables which had the strongest effect on choosing the labor market instead of anything else. By contrast, the students who had bad opinions about vocational programs, who showed good performances in school and who studied on the field of economy or services showed the highest willingness to go on with their studies instead of entering the labor market.

III/5. Conclusion

As a result of my research I cannot conclude that vocational schools could offer a prosperous future for their students. Besides the positive (subjective) expectations towards labor market, the most influential variables on labor market entry were factors which showed constraints and failures (bad financial background and bad school performance) instead of real positive motivation. There was only one “real” motivating variable which had an effect on labor market entry which was vocational specialization. The students who had the chance to study what he/she was interested in showed higher willingness to apply for a job after the vocational program. This result has a meaningful message for policymakers. Namely, it is worth respecting the choices of the students about vocational education and maybe even more

importantly to help (or build up) the career guidance in the schools which can support these choices.

In my thesis I did not plan to comment on the question of how can a baccalaureate contribute to a successful vocational career but based on statistics the students who have the necessary sources to acquire a baccalaureate have also the aspiration to do so. The students with uncertain vision about their career give cause for more concern. This group of students had the most disadvantaged background and they were missing all the necessary resources to change their labor market situation. In addition to the high number of dropouts they are also giving a good reason for vocational programs to strengthen their function of realignment.

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