



## Experience and Observations on the Choice of Career among Disadvantaged Students in North-Hungary

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Received: 24.02.2016; Accepted: 16.05.2016

**Abstract:** *It appears – and this is apparent from school documentation – that every school considers its duty to support career orientation. At the same time, it is obvious that guiding the process of making career choices exists only on the level of references. As we did not question teachers, we have only tiny fragments what is done for the sake of career choices. Such is like: letting students visit an open day; as the part of the head-teacher’s class they help students complete the admission form to high-schools; based on academic records they make the proper type of high schools, there was an elementary school that brought its students to trade gatherings in Budapest, where both on film and on the spot students were introduced to the master-strokes (on the other hand students did not remember these, even though they were present).*

**Keywords:** career, choice of career, disadvantaged students, social discrimination, extreme poverty

### *Theoretical background*

During the choice of a career orientation the initial starting point has been that underprivileged children live in such a social environment – such as gypsy yards of villages in Borsod county or slums – where the culture of poverty has already evolved. A concept that was introduced by Lewis (2000) could be interpreted as a type of subculture that he represented in *The Children of Sanchez* (Lewis, 1968) where most of its attributes are described. From among these, future without perspective and the hopelessness will be our concern. Later what will become more important is that how disadvantage itself emerges on the soil of subculture and unique processes.

Future without perspective and hopelessness were important characteristics of sociographic work written by Lazarsfeld and his

colleagues (Lazarsfeld, Jahoda & Ziesel, 1999) in 1930 of the labourer's quarter that was turning into a slum;

With choosing a career, underprivileged children get into a contradictory position, as they need to make a decision that will fundamentally determine their future and their future economic prospects for decades on the soil of a subculture whose most characteristic feature is that there is no future and its members live only for today (see Borbély-Pecze, 2012).

We would like to emphasize another vital feature of Lazarsfeld's and his colleagues' research, which is the fact that after with the loss of jobs in the slum of Marienthal consumption of cultural goods drastically decreased. As an example, a relapse in the book loan was mentioned, though, with becoming unemployed they could have had much more time for reading. Above all, in Hungary after the transition many cultural institutions (community centres and libraries) closed their doors in areas where poverty and slum-culture became dominant. Therefore, underprivileged children came from an environment to school, where the accessibility to cultural goods and their consumption is – the least to say – is very limited.

A career choice could be interpreted according to Coleman's concept (1994) as the concept of social asset in the reproduction of the human asset. Based on the social asset as it has been defined by Coleman, in the career choice all groups can be relevant, beside parents, brothers and sisters in the family, peer groups, including groups in schools, especially the class.

Within this it is also important to allocate time to examine the position of gypsy/Romany students, whose cultural and social inheritance is even more unique (Hajdú, Kertesi and Kézdi, 2014).

In perspective examining teachers' role could also become important. Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén is a quite poor county in the North-East, where parents entrust their children with choosing a career. For that very reason in this part of the country the influence of all other groups – primarily peers and the peer groups could increase.

Another issue is to scrutinize whether the underprivileged children go to classes where their classmates' parents economic background (tangible capital), as well as their educational attainment (human asset) differs from theirs, or in this respect the class is homogeneous. Also, there is an information channel as a social asset (Coleman, 1998).

Last, but not least, could the drop-out from high school be understood as the measurement of the uneven distribution of social and human assets and in the light of this, how reasonable is the career choice of the disadvantaged students?

### *Career orientation researches in Hungary*

In the former decades of socialism, helping in the career choices – according to the needs of the socialist society and therefore it received a great emphasis – was a crucial part in the head-teacher's work. It was not only that that they spent time with questions of further education in the head-teacher's class. As head-teachers produced "portraits" (quasi recommendations) about every single student, their role in selecting the

right type of school (and profession) became very important. (The elementary head-teacher of the author of this study recommended a horticultural vocational school and his high-school head-teacher recommended a bookbinder vocational school and can express his gratitude to his teacher parents that his life could have become different). Career choices during the Socialism were tailored to the appropriation of planned economy.

After the transition the role of the head-teacher was overshadowed along with community building and movement-related work. It happened partially because with the Socialist industry becoming obsolete, whole profession groups turned out to be superfluous. From the end of 1990-s researches have started to consider the perspectives of economic-enterprise developments. These characteristically, attempt to put the interest of multinational companies into the forefront and show through this what kind of professionals would be needed.

In the 1990-es there have been less and less handholds, while many very impressive new professions could be learnt at the plethora of institutions of parallel vocational training schools; from the one hand, the municipal-state-governed traditional vocational, apprentice schools, and on the other hand, new institutions – customarily as andragogic institutions – maintained by private individuals and economic associations (or, in the hope of more advantageous taxation, operating as a foundation or other social organisation). The third type of the institutions that promote learning a trade is the one providing a corporate-type of training. This period is characterised by the fact that they not only address teenagers but they also try to address adults, while elementary school students are looking for grammar schools that provide greater general purpose in an increasing number. This phenomenon could be attributed to the fact that before 2010 there was no economic trend that would have defined a clear goal for eight-graders in their career choices.

From this period, a PhD dissertation by Judit Lannert within the frame of the PhD programme is a serious work that under the title of Career Choice Aspirations (Lannert, 2004), she examines and analyses the pursuits in the career choices of twelve and thirteen-year-olds in three micro-regions. This investigation – as it is become apparent from the acknowledgment – was prepared with Anna Imre and György Mártonffy (the theme supervisor is Ildikó Szabó) in those days' the Reserch Center of the National Public Educational Institute (as an institutional background), data acquisition took place in 1997 and 1999. In the research, parents of thirteen-year-olds and high-school students were asked through exhaustive questionnaires.

It would also be interesting to mention Irén Sipeki's approach (2005) to the history of career choice guidance activity that is corresponding to the author's profession is based more on psychology than on any other discipline.

Among others, *Tibor Bors Borbély-Pecze, Katalin Gyöngyösi and Ágnes Juhász* (2013) provided summary of career orientation guidance before 1990 and changes after the transition.

In the last few years Institute for Economic and Enterprise Research (this organisation was founded by the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Trade in March 1999) pursued wide-ranging career orientation and

career choice researches. These rely on national questionnaires. For us, researches carried out 2014 and 2015 with elementary school students are relevant. (Általános..., 2014, 2015).

The basis of measurement for these researches, the question row of 2013, was provided by the Chamber of Commerce and Trade in Bács-Kiskun county. Questioning took place with seventh graders. Questions aimed to be representative and the relevance of results were supported by weighing 9336 questionnaires in 2014 and 9088 in 2015. István Tóth was in charge, as well as the supervisor of these researches, who also supervised the analysis of the findings in 2014 by Ágnes Makó, Anna Bárdits and Zsuzsanna Nyíró, while the next year analysis of 2015 was written by Gergely Türei and Anna Bárdits.

Another engaging study is related to *Tamás Németh* (2015), which was published in the *Military Science Review*, but its methodology, choice of samples, measuring tool could be interpreted from a wider perspective rather than considering career models from the somewhat narrowed military career. The emphasis is laid in the career choices in the adulthood, just as with earlier Klára Szilágyi (2000), who is an acknowledged publicist and expert of labour and career building related guidance.

*Nóra Hegyi-Halmos* (2015) examines the school advisory network of career orientation, but so far has only published her approach to the key questions, research concepts and hypotheses.

*Vanda Kovács* (2014) and her associates with the support of Tempus Public Foundation prepared a guide on how to complete Europass documents through many examples. This project aims at developing students' career models and their competences in order to enable them to meet challenges successfully in the employment market.

During the spring of 2015 based on TÁMOP there was an opportunity to carry out researches. We were curious to find out that how children of poor families in the county of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén make their decisions; with what kind of hopes and future perspective, where to pursue studies and what profession to choose. In our research – contrary to previous studies – we did not ask students who are just about to make career decisions, but (if we can put it that way) those “in the way”; eight-graders students who turned 14, who by the data acquisition between 5 May 2015 and 4 June, knew where they have received admission. There was a technical reason for insisting on questioning those who have turned to 14 years, because in this case parental approval and presence is not obligatory, on the other hand, we could not question students who were born during summer. The interview technique or qualitative social data method was selected, because we would have intended to understand the life chances of explicitly disadvantaged children and according to poverty-researches we prepared for comprehension difficulties, scare vocabulary and backward language skills with poor expressions.

## *Methods, tools*

While we were preparing the interviews, we planned teacher interviews as well, but later we abandoned the idea to focus more on the students. Instead of teacher interviews we made a compromise to collect references

that could be found in educational programmes (in some cases in another documents). As these were available in a limited number and all in all, these only merely mentioned this task, therefore these could hardly be used for a document analysis as a kind of analytical references.

With every student group, we tried to prepare a so-called mind map about the career choices. This method is known for students and its earlier usage contain only few related elements or relations. The representations are so fragmented and confined to listings, that the “mind map” expression is not entirely justified. If we consider this as if “this is the way these children are” with their social circumstances, then through these representations we gain a truthful image about them. (However, from the professionalism with which this method was adapted it deducts somewhat that students were only willing to start working after a long session of nudging and they were eager to stop working with crayons and markers.) All in all, we have received empirical evidence in the form of 17 wrapping papers. (Later the analyses of these will be published.)

The most valuable part of the research has been the recordings of query with the use of half-structured focus groups. In the presence of 149 students 17 recordings were made. (The latter expression refers to the fact that two students were unable to speak up or even to utter a single word. Teachers probably selected students with these difficulties only to show us that this selection of students reflects truthfully the student population and every single day they are obliged to work with all.)

### *Circumstances of the research*

In selecting the locations of empirical data acquisitions, it was a great help to have the cooperation of schools that are participating in the tender that is in progress. We tried to get into schools whose catchment area includes significant segregated communities. This is how we managed to get to Hejőkeresztúr, Ónod, Alsózsolca, Taktaharkány, Lak, Megyaszó, Pácin, Bükkaranyos, and among the most significant towns, Ózd, Szikszó, Sátoraljaújhely and we also visited four elementary schools in Miskolc.

On the course of our empirical research we faced some difficulties. We visited all educational institutions together in pairs. Before actually visiting schools, during the preparation we asked all schools to allow us to speak with 4-12 students who have turned 14 years old (so that parents’ presence is not obligatory, while we are making our enquiries). We confirmed on every single spot that we do not need assistance from teachers.

It was expected that schools’ inner life is quite closed and there will many forms of refusal (on the directors’ side). Though we informed schools in advance when we were coming and institutions had been aware of that and had undertaken this option in a contract, despite all these, many a times when we arrived schools seemed to have forgotten all... In one of the cases, the deputy director administered us to another tender, not the one that is in progress. In sum, in three cases we had to be very firm and within these three, on one occasion even this was not enough: there we could only thank the assistant who works on the project who helped us to get in and speak with the students we had in mind.

Another typical problem was – and we were not as prepared as to the chances of being refused and ignored – is that schools thrived to impress us as much as they could. One of the means of that was that they did not let us speak with students we would have needed for the study, the most disadvantaged. It occurred that during the interview it turned out that there is a class for children with disadvantage, but not the student we were talking with. In another school, we could speak to underdog, but it turned out that they are the richest among the very poor and in the member schools there are those we would have needed. In the third case, students seemed to have been so undeveloped and their responds appeared to be so inadequate that we started to think that instead of eight-graders we were presented pre-selected seventh-graders. In the next school, we had to repeat our visit to make interviews with Roma students, because non-Roma students were “pre-selected” for us (therefore it could not reflect the characteristic student compound as it is of the given school). Next there was a school, when the librarian-teacher was not inclined to leave the children and tried to speak “instead” of children, how much is done for the sake of them in making career choices.

Frequently, the school director tried to control what happens in our presence. It could be a sign of lack of general trust, as there might be some other factors, irrespective of this. In many cases, they requested to see what students created, in these cases, we showed them. We tried to eliminate any suspicion of ethical misconduct, we praised full-heartedly both students (and the school).

It was not disturbing, only surprising that at our reception students were told that we have come to hold a “lecture” (instead we made them work and after, we asked and were curious about their opinion). It appears that “university” and “career choice” is associated with the enrolment campaign even as early as in the elementary school.

Questioning took place in class and in two cases in the school library. It was astonishing how scuffed and impoverished classes are of the disadvantaged children and they know it and complain about it themselves. It is especially plaques of sums given by the EU and from these anyone could read and find that in the last ten, twelve years more, than hundred valuable developments were realized.

In one of the cases the mind map was rather drawn than written. This is not correct methodologically, however, we gained surplus information in a way that we could not receive in any other. At the same time, it is not clear whether in the given case students have drawn their anxiety (human- and organ trafficking), or their reality (or they are might be the “beneficiaries” of the phenomenon).

### *Poverty and career*

During our work the question arose whether we have reached out for the poorest, the most disadvantaged children? The public education system – according to the legislation in force while this study was being processed – handles these students within the frame of Bridge-I and Bridge-II and try to push them toward finishing at least the elementary school that could provide basic literacy. Bridge-programmes bridge the chasm that is given

by the numbers of unfinished years. In Hungarian public education, there are students who drop out even in their first years and there are some who only drop out while they seven- or eight-graders.

At the end of eight grades, in our sample there were more boys than girls. There might be numerous explanations. It is possible that even in poor or the circumstances of extreme poverty remains an expectation for boys to have finished schools or to have a trade by which they could earn their living. It is also possible that in their sphere starting the school is delayed to a later age (they are enrolled to the first class of the elementary school), and grade retention due to failing, therefore when they become eight-graders they are 15-16 years old. It is also an option that the reason why we met with less girls is that at the time they did not turn 14. On the course of interviews, we encountered with the scenario that the girls that were sent by schools, did not come (class, school library) In line with other poverty-culture studies, sometimes (not in all living quarters, or schools) it was observable how girls started to withdraw even among the 14-year-olds, boys tended to express craggier and determined views as girls (Ózd, Sátoraljaújhely, Pácin).

At the same time, it was not characteristic – at least not at peer level – that whether there were students that dropped out of school because they have given birth. Even the contrary, in groups, where this question is relevant (first interview in Hejőkeresztúr), children explicitly refused the idea of establishing a family early. In other settlements, it sometimes occurred that girls mentioned the option of becoming pregnant early as the reason for dropping out for school. Establishing a family early in vain, if in their environment, it happens that they undertake bringing up a child (Pácin).

It is also observable that there are grades and strata of poverty. We could not reach out for the lowest strata – these could probably be reached through family care centres, but their involvement in a research that aims at career orientation is irrelevant; in the lack of elementary school education they will hardly have any bases to make any “choice”.

## *Results*

In 15 schools we met 149 students, 17 empirical data acquisition took place but two students were not willing to talk at all. While we were preparing the mind map not everyone took part in the work. It might be interesting that those who did not participate were all girls except on one occasion. The fact that girls who looked intellectually sound had withdrawn from actively engaging into work poses the question what is the role of girls in the given subculture or micro-environment and may be, we caught the process of following a norm in action.

It was peculiar that when we had on two occasions groups without Romas (though there could have been a chance to set the circle of questioner that could reflect more the given school sociocultural compound), on both occasions they made reviling complaints about Roma students, while in Roma groups never has anyone complained about racist despise or generally about Hungarians.

Students' career choices were included in the first chart. This chart only includes professions where they gained admission. On one occasion a girl student – based on what she said – is not going to learn the trade she gained admission to. During the interviews, it has turned out that the three options students had, led them pick totally different directions (in other cases for the same profession but different schools were targeted with enrolments application forms). In the school of Selyemrét, many students submitted enrolments application forms to the same grammar school, but different division – in their cases it looks like as if they were trying to apply for five or six different places.

In interpreting the results a difficulty arose because students in many cases were unable to tell precisely that to which school did they submit their application. Many a times class-mates helped them out with whispering the answer. It appears, especially after listening to the recordings that in some of the schools, students tried to tell us what they thought we would want to hear; perhaps they are not even planning to continue studying, still they named a profession and school. There was a school (Sátoraljaújhely), where the noise was so great that responses to questions regarding to profession or school, especially in the case of the girls, remain incomprehensible and with hindsight is untraceable whether these girls have picked any profession at all.

Based on the interviews and the chart it becomes evident that among the questioners in overwhelming number opted for orientation towards trade and those, the proportion of those who have chosen grammar school is evanescent (only 8 students). Even those who gained admission to grammar schools selected specialisation, which means that behind that decision there could be a truthful orientation and intention to develop one's career in future. Almost everyone continues to study in a school, specialisation or profession that corresponds to his or her interest and abilities. The primary point of view is that what will serve them in earning their bread and butter and their ability to fulfil the expectations of the employment market.

In explaining the data, those impressions could also be important that we observed our visits to schools and our empirical researches. In many cases, we observed that class mates picked the same high school or the same profession. There were four students who will become programmers they came from the same class. Only from three schools did student choose to become bakers, but from one school four students selected this as their future trade. Language specialisation of grammar schools was chosen mainly by students of Selyemrét. There was a class from which three students decided to become a nurse (health care).



Table 1. Career choices among the eight-graders

<i>Trades where they gained admission</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
<i>nurse (healthcare)</i>	1	7
carpenter	2	0
car mechanic	2	0
vamp-maker	1	0
<i>confectioner</i>	1	6
<i>shop assistant (catering)</i>	2	6
architect	4	0
forestry	1	0
hairdresser	0	1
mechanicien	1	0
<i>grammar school (general)</i>	2	6
<i>grammar school with specialisation</i>	2	3
<i>grammar school with languages</i>	8	2
graphic designer	1	1
<i>welder</i>	16	0
butcher	1	0
IT	2	1
industrial mechanical	1	0
commercial	0	3
cosmetics (beautification)	0	1
brick-layer	1	0
economist	1	3
building and civil engineering	1	0
high mechanical	1	0
agricultural engineer	1	0
pedagogical assistant	0	1
<i>baker</i>	3	3
financial	0	1
<i>waiter</i>	5	1
postman	0	1
programmer	4	0
<i>law enforcement</i>	5	4
X-ray assistant	0	2
cook	2	1
house painter	1	0
welfare worker	0	2
manager assistant	1	2
electrician	2	0
did not gain admission anywhere	0	4
remain obscure	1	5
incomprehensible	1	4
<i>In total</i>	78	71

Between the trades the welder was on the top of the popularity list. However, it needs to be added to the complete view that many students opted for something else in the first place but at the end, they gained admission to this apprentice school. (We encountered a student whose school results were not good enough to become a welder and with his academic achievements could only continue as an electrician trainee.) It seems to be the case that behind the popularity of the welder trade is that

children come from a background where working with “iron” is frequently seen, therefore they have relatively many experiences in what it would be like to do this job, or helping adults in their work. Students recounted experiences that made them believe that their earning potential would be good abroad.

Working in the law enforcement profession is a relatively frequent choice. However, it is intriguing the family background behind that choice. We usually assumed that those who opt for this career choice, they have a relatively wholesome family background. These children knew that they will only have chances to get into this profession if they study in an organised frame and lead a decent life and have the support of their parents and family members.

Students of impoverished background usually chose trades that offer fast and safe job opportunities and earnings. There was an interesting transition between students of Alsózsolt (there were a worse compound in groups, but it only turned out during the interview): according to their clothes they appeared to be quite well-off and their high-school choices represents a kind of transition between poor students’ career choices and the quasi middle-class children’s orientation. They usually selected a high school with a high-school diploma, but they did not have enough confidence and vision for the future to cherish dreams about higher (university) education. (Maybe even at an early age they had the experience that affluence could be temporary.)

In the Elementary School of Selymret it seemed to us as if we had met with „middle-class” children (though there also was a class for disadvantaged children, but it has only come to lime light only during the interviews), but while we were listening to the interviews it turned out that they are more characterised by “respectable destitution” or the lower middle class children who tried to get hold of greater opportunities. With them it was obvious that they would go for a school that offers a high-school diploma with the perspective of pursuing academic studies, but even among them the need was recognizable to obtain a trade (not that fast) in the form of choosing specialized high-schools. Many of the students from this school could not gain admission to the selected high-schools (usually grammar schools, and in two cases because their central exam results were not good enough), but presumably their family background and their parents’ attention and care that will help them to get into a high-school institution that will be close to their original interest.

We tried to clarify that what factors played a part in making a career choices for them. In the questionnaires provided by the chamber of commerce, and in that form the online information acquisition is on the top. Accordingly, students selected that one as the primary source of information. But it is not what we experienced. Only few students mentioned Internet as a point of reference but rather in the context of finding the address of school they picked or when they planned their way to it (timetable, schedule). No one has ever mentioned among the student that they used the *National Career Orientation* site (*Nemzeti Pályaorientációs Portál*, <http://eletpalya.munka.hu/>) that could be immensely useful to find the most suitable high-school or finding the first profession.

We believe that further researches would be necessitated to examine whether it is an inherent part of the “poverty culture” that verbal orientation proved to be decisive in this strata. It is worth considering that most of these children are planning to start work as soon as possible and their career orientations is greatly influenced by personal experiences and employment difficulties (unemployment and failures) of their adult family members, older acquaintances. Only very few can afford to delay making career choices to pursue their studies in grammar schools that provide general education. Students who gain admission to grammar schools do it with a greater perspective in mind and chooses a specialisation that suits that goal. According to our experiences those who cherish an ambition to get into higher-education, they are frequently choose a vocational school (for instance, polytechnic and the like).

While choosing a high-school it was conspicuous that almost all students mentioned only the abbreviated name of the high-school. In some of the cases it was quite exhaustive to find out what does “collective” concept for school could mean. While processing data, after repeated listening we realised that trades were named that are not even within options in the website of a selected high-school.

It was intriguing that four girls did not gain admission to anywhere – during the interview we had the impression that all four must have arrive from the greatest depravity. With some of the boys and girls, whose answer was not intelligible, it was either because they spoke too softly and this could hardly be identified after the recording or there was such an intense background noise that the only person that could not be heard is the one who was meant to speak and provide data. Girls’ position was well characterised by the fact that by the time their turn came (most of the time boys spoke up first), boys were not curious to hear what they were about to say and disturbed them in speaking, jeered at them and did not leave them to tell what we needed to know. Last there was a case when after a hard struggle, we managed to get information about her preferences regarding a career, the only information that could not be retained is that where did she gain admission.

### *Evaluation of results, summary and suggestions*

There was a degree of uncertainty that characterised students, the thought of pursuing studies seemed to be obscure and the result of by chance, the superficial knowledge about the selected trade, the lack of plan B in case the plan A does not work all-all envisage that these children will have extraordinary difficulties in bridging discomfort while changing schools. Where there is a lack of parental care, where parents and family members just leave things as they are – and this is the case with most interviewees, they were left alone to make decision – as they will probably pay the consequences of their decision without support.

At the end of the interviews many questions sprang up. What is the rate of drop-out in the selected schools? How fat chance do they have to finish the school and complete their training they chose? What will happen if as early as in September or October it turns out that their choice does not suit them and not interesting at all? – It would be good, if their interviewees

fate could be traceable. It would be beneficial if we could observe that where and at what points would intervention and help be needed. To put hypothetically, for students with impoverished background would be better off with having ten-twelve grades in school and personal mentoring that could help them to survive the consequences of bad or mistaken decisions that would not let them drop out from the school system without completed education or partially completed education.

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