

## DROPPING OUT OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING – HUNGARIAN EXPERIENCES

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**Abstract:** *Despite the improving level of education in Hungary, the proportion of people with low school qualification who are permanently excluded from the labour market is still significant. For them – even under current labour market circumstances – the supply of jobs is very limited, hence, their employment rate is decreasing, while their unemployment and inactivity are rising. The study focuses on the issue of secondary school dropout in international and Hungarian, theoretical and empirical contexts. The importance of the subject is due to the fact that early school leaving is a complex phenomenon that affects a range of areas outside the educational and training system, therefore the management of the problem is a priority. Using the methodology of questionnaire surveys and semi-structured conversations, the study aimed at the exploration of the school life of people who dropped out of vocational training, the conditions of dropping out and the applied compensatory measures. The sole solution for the people concerned is public employment and the various types of aid that further increase their marginalization. Results of the study pointed out the impact of family background, the positive experience of school reintegration, and the role of career choice based on misinformation or compulsion. Conclusions of the study provide an adequate framework for the development of an action plan that may serve as a basis for future prevention, intervention and compensation developments. The conclusion of the research is that due to the strong family ties of the dropped out people it would have been rational for the school to focus on preventive measures in the form of closer contact with parents. Increasing the role of homeroom teachers might also be a key factor in preventing early school leaving. The results point to the conclusion that the presence of career guidance sessions is not sufficiently emphasized in educational institutions. As a suggestion, it could be argued that higher level teaching of learning techniques and the elimination of skill deficits could be a key element of education not only in the field of adult education but already in ninth grade, trying to prevent dropping out before it is realized.*

**Keywords:** *drop out; Hungary; labour market; return to education; vocational training.*

**JEL Classification:** *I26; J29.*

### 1. Theoretical background: risk factors

Summing up publications by overseas authors, Freeman and Simonsen (2015) classified the risk factors of early school leaving into two categories: social status

factors (qualification level and employment of parents, gender, age, social disadvantage, native language, mobility, family structure, etc.) and alterable risk factors (failures in learning, retention, attendance and absence, misbehaviour, early aggression).

From among the risk factors of early school leaving, others also emphasize the impact of family. Hickman, Greenwood and Miller (1995), Knesting (2008), Terry (2008), Kroon et al. (2016), Stratton et al. (2017) and Dommers et al. (2017) found that completion of vocational training is strongly influenced by family-specific impacts.

According to Hungarian experts (Liskó, 2004, 2005, 2008; Kertesi and Kézdi 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013; Szanyi-F, 2013; Hegedűs and Podráczky J, 2013), one of the properties influencing the schooling prospects of children is the residence of families: above average amount of high school students live in big cities, while the majority of students of vocational institutions live in small towns and villages. The second characteristic is the existence/nonexistence of an intact family (the lower the level of training children are participating, the more likely their parents are divorced or one of the parents has deceased). Further links have been pointed out by other research (Budavári-Takács and Szalma, 2009, Czech-Papp, 2010, Czech-Papp and Hajós, 2014) concerning later dropout, the earnings of parents, income status of families, age of the child by the time the parents lose their job and ethnic composition of families.

Relating to alterable risk factors, research findings of Lee and Breen (2007) and Suh, Suh and Houston (2007) have shown that not only poor school achievements lead to high school dropping out – 43% of underachieving students involved in the study have successfully completed high school. Students who were absent multiple times and had a pessimistic look towards the future were exposed to the greatest danger. In the scope of her research involving Dutch students, Elffers (2013) found differences in terms of the so-called behavioural engagement in the case of groups of students threatened and not threatened by dropping out. Definition of the concept can be described by active engagement in school activities, such as regular attendance of the classes, timely arrival, attention towards the teacher, and execution of the work assigned to them. Insurmountable challenges were reported by involved students in the scope of the research of Frederick and Goddard (2010), and Van Caudenberg and his associates (2017).

The starting point for Kigon and Boekaerts (2005) was that the high dropout rates in secondary vocational training can also be explained by the fact that the students concerned do not really identify with their school (they do not really fit in). In the course of the study, self-regulation ability of students, their internal motivations and the willingness to meet external expectations were analysed. As a result, the first three key factors were identified as the judgment from teachers and fellow students, the usefulness of school subjects and the degree of alienation from the school.

High school failures are closely related to the serious shortcomings of basic skills acquired in primary school, so the success of high school depends considerably on primary school (Livingston, 1959) and on the preceding years (kindergarten years). The findings of Hungarian researchers are in line with international results (Kertesi

and Kézdi, 2010, 2011, 2013). One of the main causes of dropout is the failure to pass, retention, weak mid-semester achievements. Absences show a significant correlation with the occurrence of primary school failures (Fehérvári, 2008; 2012; Mártonfi, 2008). Almost 40% of all young people in vocational schools have failed to pass in primary school at the end of at least one of the years (Mártonfi, 2004). Also the ones who had to repeat some of their primary school years due to failure to pass, usually enrolled in a vocational school due to compulsory schooling but there is a 70% chance that they do not reach the final examination to become a skilled worker (Mártonfi, 2014). Dropout from vocational training occurs mainly in the first and second grades before the actual professional training begins.

According to the findings of Bodacz-Nagy (2011), 38% of those who were compelled to choose a professional training failed at the end of the year, while only 22% of those who desired to learn the selected profession. Initially, the majority of those who dropped out did not want to study a profession, they intended to acquire a secondary school graduation (Fehérvári, 2012), or they originally did not intend to study that particular profession but for some reason they were forced to (Czech-Papp, 2006; Bodacz-Nagy, 2011; Domokos, 2000). Compelled choices lead to dropping out at a significantly higher rate than choices based on own interests or intentions.

As for the further fate of secondary school dropouts (Liskó, 2003; Fehérvári, 2008; Köpeczi-Bócz, 2013; Cockx and Picchio, 2013; Fehérvári, 2015; Iannelli, Duta, 2018), it is expectable that: one-quarter of them succeed to stay in another school; one-third find some work (mainly occasional ones, illegally employed, paid in cash); 40% of them will be unemployed, but they will have intention for further education.

## 2. Material and method

The aim of the research is to determine how to reduce dropping out from vocational schools.

Consequently, the study focuses on family circumstances, school career and current job market status of vocational education dropout students

The abductive nature of the research does not require the establishment of hypotheses, but the exact formulation of research questions is of paramount importance. The research questions of present study are related to the family, career choice and school conditions characterizing dropout students; how the involved students were affected by the period following the dropout, and how the returning opportunity of learning influenced them. Such abductive research is particularly well suited to topics where only limited knowledge is available and the researcher is able to rely on the mental models of those involved.

## 3. Results of the questionnaire survey

The questionnaire part of the empirical research work was based on a paper-and-pencil survey of 103 individuals who dropped out of vocational training; the questionnaire mostly contained closed questions and 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire survey was aimed at exploring the socio-demographic characteristics,

school life, dropout circumstances of dropped out individuals as well as the taken compensatory measures. The survey was conducted in four counties of Hungary with average economic (labour market) indexes in the spring of 2017. Data was processed by means of descriptive statistics and crosstab methodology.

### 3.1. Demographic data

The surveyed sample is not representative ( $n = 100$ ), considering that it is based on a group of individuals, which is relatively difficult to reach. Gender distribution is almost equal: 47% of the respondents are male and 53% are women. The participants are young people, the average age is 27 years, one-third (33%) is under the age of 25 years, the youngest respondent is 16 years old, the oldest is 52. As for their place of residence, smaller settlements are typical: 51% live in villages, 46% in small towns, while 3% on remote farms.

Three-quarter of the respondents (75%) dropped out of vocational schools (ISCED 2/3 C) – currently known as vocational secondary schools – one-quarter (25%) of vocational secondary schools (ISCED 3 A) – currently referred to as specialised secondary schools. More than one-third (39%) dropped out of first grade of the secondary school, nearly half of them (45%) from second grade and 16% from the third grade. 21% of the respondents continued their studies after dropping out (13% learned a profession, 8% passed the final examination).

School qualification of parents is low; almost half of the parents (58% of mothers, 46% of fathers) attended primary school only. There is no fundamental difference between the school qualification of mothers and fathers. In the case of the majority of respondents (56%), the parents live together; the number of those who were raised in a one-parent family is slightly less (44%).

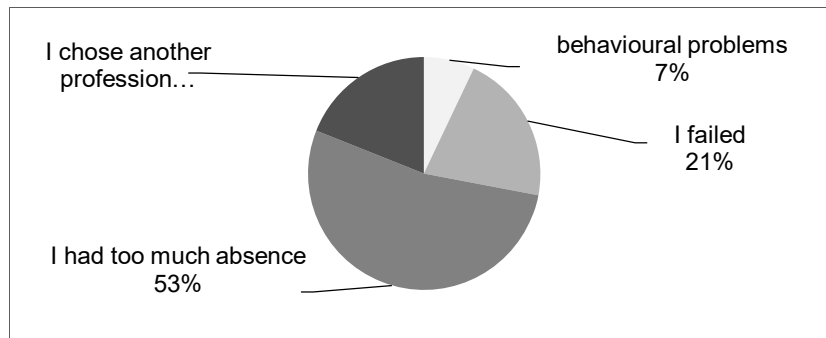
More than half of the respondents (52%) are unemployed.

Early school leavers included in the examined sample are young people living in small settlements who are characterized by parents with low school qualification and unemployment status. The education level of the involved respondents is usually higher than that of their parents.

### 3.2. Circumstances of dropping out

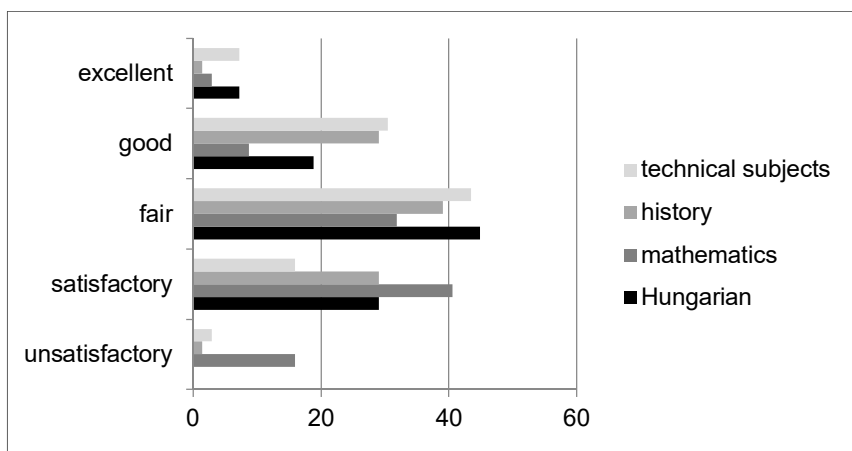
Most of the individuals surveyed in the scope of the study (53%) left school due to an excessive amount of absences (14% of them left due to pregnancy), one-fifth (21%) left because of failure, 19% left to pursue other professions (three-quarter of them have successfully finished that), and 7% were dismissed for behavioural problems (Figure 1). Of those who dropped out of secondary school because of failing classes, only 2% have previously failed in primary school.

The surveyed respondents – based on their replies – were not bad students. By their own admission, their average grades were the weakest in mathematics: 2.43, followed by literature: 3.01, followed by history: 3.02 (Hungarian education system uses a classification of grades ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 means failure and 5 is the best grade). All of the respondents received the highest grades in the case of their professional subjects with an average of 3.23.



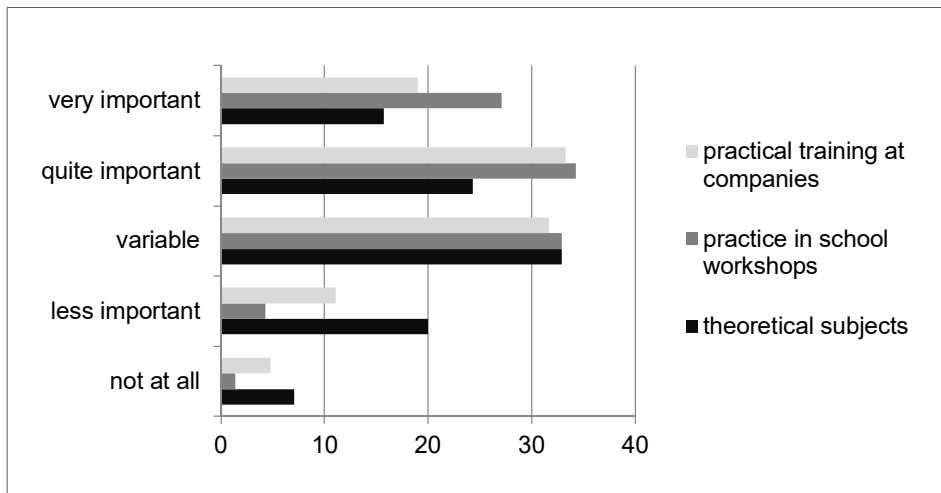
**Figure 1.** Distribution of the reasons of dropping out  
*Source:* own examination

Concerning the observations, there is no fundamental difference between theoretical and practical subjects (Figure 2).



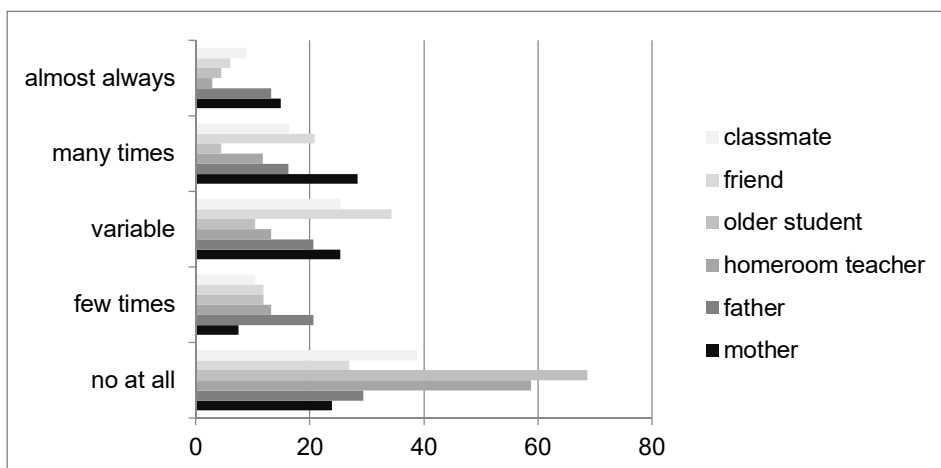
**Figure 2.** Distribution of the grades of respondents  
*Source:* own examination

However, the replies concerning the importance of learning theoretical and practical subjects showed a greater difference (Figure 3). Dropped out individuals clearly considered practical training more important than theoretical education. The significance of activities in the school educational workshop was 3.83; practical training at companies was rated at 3.50, while theoretical education received a score of 3.23. Some inconsistency is detectable between the average of received grades of respondents in the case of professional subjects (3.23) and the mean score (3.53) assessing the importance of practical training.



**Figure 3.** Distribution of the opinions of respondents concerning the importance of theoretical and practical subjects  
*Source:* own examination

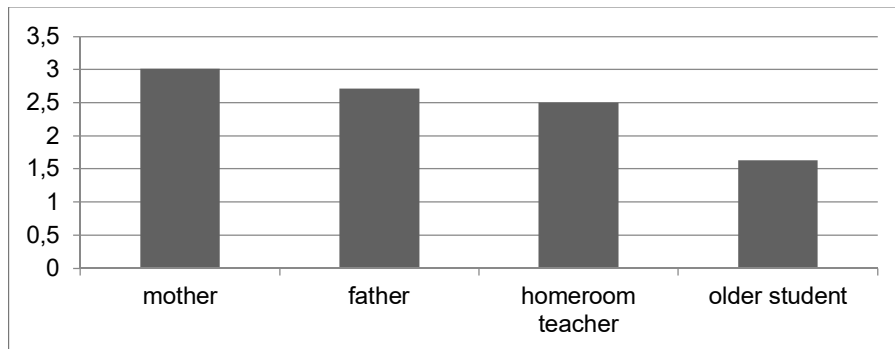
The mean value of educational help received in secondary school is much lower than it was in the case of primary school (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Help received by respondents for their education in secondary school (%)  
*Source:* own examination

Students received the most help from their mothers in this case as well (3.01), followed by the role of the father (2.71) and then the homeroom teacher (2.5). Respondents assessed the received help from older/senior students only with a mean score of 1.63. The largest decline in terms of mean value was found in the

case of the homeroom teacher: while in primary school this value was 3.32 (equivalent to the father), it was only 2.5 in secondary school (Figure 5),



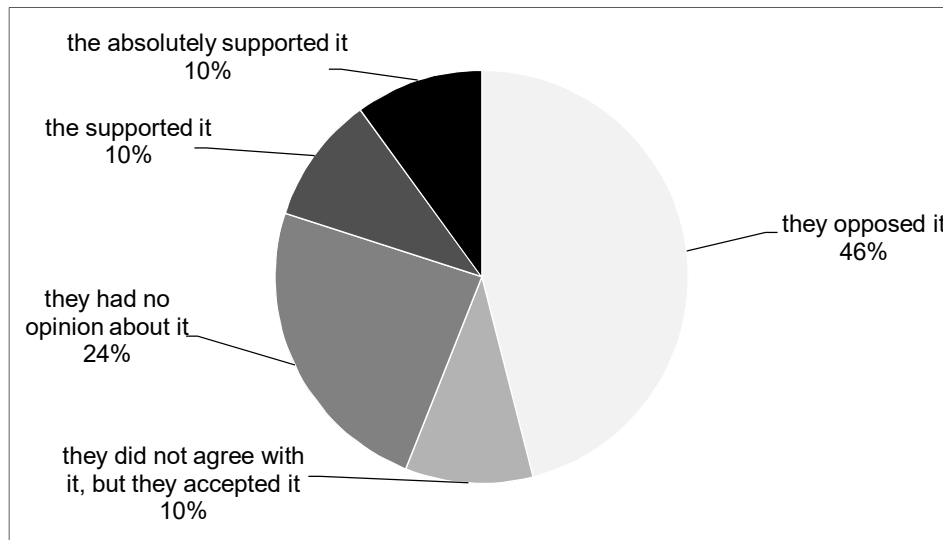
**Figure 5.** Assessment of the amount of help received by respondents during secondary school

*Source:* own examination

Thus, the amount of received support for learning in secondary school is considerably lower and decreases the most in the case of the homeroom teacher. One-quarter of respondents (27%) did not ask for any sort of contribution from their homeroom teacher. One-third (35%) of the respondents did not ask for any help from anyone, while 24% considered their demand for support medium-level.

As for the discussion of non-education related problems, the score of mothers is the highest: 2.9, followed by the role of the father with 2.65, then followed by the role of friends (not schoolmates) with 2.6. The influence of the father and the group of students at the same age are almost the same. Considerably less help was used by the participants of the sample for their non-school related problems. The role of the homeroom teacher in solving non-school problems was very low (1.84). 57% of the respondents did not ask any private help from their homeroom teachers.

**Focusing on the family background, in the case of more than half of the respondents (56%) their families did not agree with or explicitly opposed early school leaving. One-fourth of the sample (24%) experienced indifferent attitude, while one-fifth (20%) of the respondents received supportive reactions (Figure 6).**



**Figure 6.** Distribution of the attitude of family members towards early school leaving  
*Source:* own examination

Dropped out individuals clearly consider practical training more important than theoretical education, however this is not reflected in their grades and achievements. The extent of learning support in secondary school is significantly lower than in primary school and the largest decline is observed in the case of the homeroom teacher. Nearly half of the respondents (40%) do not discuss their personal problems with anyone. Almost half of the respondents had someone else in their families who dropped out of school as well. The majority of the parents of those who had dropouts in their families did not agree with early school leaving (91%).

#### 4. Conclusions

Life-path of young people involved in the study can be a starting point for training reforms. Findings at the end of the analysis - due to the low sample size - are mostly thought experiments, but we hope that we might also contribute to the scientific and everyday discussion on early school leaving.

Findings relevant to complex research are the following:

Due to the strong family ties of the dropped out people (significant learning and other problem-solving assistance from the mother; most of them intend to establish a family in the future), it would have been rational for the school to focus on preventive measures in the form of closer contact with parents. Family influence can help prevent early school leaving.

Increasing the role of homeroom teachers might also be a key factor in preventing early school leaving, because their frequent presence and the covered topics of their lessons might draw attention to the context of training and labour market, that learning is necessary for student to be able to be employed later.



The results point to the conclusion that the presence of career guidance sessions is not sufficiently emphasized in educational institutions. These sessions are often led by homeroom teachers due to funding reasons or in the absence of a qualified professional. It is therefore proposed to increase the presence of career guidance within the education system. Respondents are not aware of their employment opportunities either; the lack of knowledge concerning the labour market is common. Currently, career counsellors or employment advisors work in all major settlements, schools, child welfare services, employment offices; their help is available for students. Intensive inter-sectoral cooperation is also of importance.

Excessive number of subjects taught in ninth and tenth grade not directly relating to the given profession was mentioned in the questionnaires and in the course of the conversations as one of the reasons of dropping out of school. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to apply a practice-oriented "learning by doing" type of education in vocational schools. Students should develop a sense of usefulness towards learning. As a suggestion, it could be argued that higher level teaching of learning techniques and the elimination of skill deficits could be a key element of education not only in the field of adult education but already in ninth grade, trying to prevent dropping out before it is realized. During their training, students need to be able to resolve their frustrations and inhibitions caused by their existing or earlier school conflicts. Re-thinking and changing educational methods might helpful for that.

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