

Theses of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

**From vocational secondary schools  
to higher education: investigation of  
further education decision and  
dropout risk factors**

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### **Aim of the dissertation, defining the topic**

International and domestic educational research specialists have been concerned with the factors behind the decision to continue education and drop out for decades. The decision to further study at a higher education institution can be made after obtaining a secondary school diploma in Hungary. In our Hungarian education system, it is possible to obtain a graduation exam in two types of secondary schools; the academic secondary school and the vocational secondary school. Despite the different functions of these two types of secondary school institutions (Lannert, 1998), what is the same between them is obtaining a secondary school graduation to continue their further studies in higher education institutions (colleges or universities). The segregation is common for students in both types of secondary schools (Kertesi and Kézdi, 2009; Kiss, 2016; Radó, 2018), which can decide students to keep their further studies (Hajdu et al, 2022) or to drop out their schools (Fehérvári, 2008). In our doctoral dissertation, we deal with the examination of the vocational secondary school. The purpose of our research is to examine the further education decision and dropout risk factors of

students in vocational secondary school, who are about to graduate, and those who attend technical classes after graduation - that is, in the 12th and 13th grades.

In educational sociology, there are two dominant views on school systems. The sociology of education, two dominant views have emerged on the role of the school. One is based on Bourdieu's (1978) theory of reproduction of social inequalities, according to which the school system does not have an equalizing function, but instead reproduces social differences from generation to generation. On the other view, school is a kind of mobility channel that can provide a chance to move up the social ladder (Sorokin, 1964). The education system works well if it is able to reduce the influence of the family background (Róbert, 2002). In our research, we examine whether the effect of Bourdieu's theory of reproduction or the theory of the school as a mobility channel prevails in the case of students studying in vocational secondary school.

The decision to further education and the freedom to decide also depend on the family background (Markus and Schwartz, 2010), however, according to Fuller and

Macfadyen (2012), other factors must also be taken into account. According to domestic and international literature, both learning motivation (Józsa et al., 2020; Ryan and Deci, 2017; Wigfield et al., 2015) and executive function (Diamond, 2013; Józsa and Józsa, 2018; Thibault and Potvin, 2018) play an important role in students' school achievement. Studies conducted in recent years have shown the strong predictive role of both factors in school success (Diamond, 2014; Gilmore et al., 2017; Zelazo et al., 2016). Therefore, our thesis aims to jointly investigate the role of these factors of learning motivation and executive functions and family background in the decision to continue higher education and dropout as an interdisciplinary approach.

Many statistics and literature have been published about high school graduates and young people applying for the admission procedure, which tried to outline the characteristics of the population (see Garai and Kiss, 2014; Kiss, 2008; Szemerszki, 2014), their motivations for further education (Lannert, 2004; Veroszta, 2016), recruitment (Polónyi, 2012) and career (Ercsei, 2015; Tomasz, 2012). According to some international

researches, vocational education and training (VET) learners made a significant contribution to the expansion of higher education (Katartzi and Hayward, 2019; Shields and Masardo 2015), however, we also found some literature suggesting that vocational education reduces the ability to enter higher education (Arum and Shavit, 1995). Furthermore, the dropout rate of those coming from VET is significantly higher than that of their peers who are already preparing for higher education in academic secondary school (Hayward and Hoelscher, 2011; Katartzi and Hayward, 2019). As mentioned above, previous research has examined the decision to continue education and dropout from several perspectives. In addition to the sociological factors of education, we include psychological factors (e.g. self-handicapping and executive function) in our study, which have not been examined in this context either in the international or domestic literature. Our thesis also fills a gap to compare the two exit points (12th grade and 13th grade) of the vocational training system (which is also called vocational secondary school system since 2016) regarding students' further education decision and dropout.

## **Research methods**

Our research is centered in schools of the vocational training located in Baja, Debrecen, Kecskemét, Pécs and Zalaegerszeg and a Catholic ÁMK. Furthermore, with the help of the Reformed Pedagogical Institute, we visited institutions dealing with Reformed VET to participate in the implementation of the research. Data collection took place between autumn 2018 and spring 2021. Accordingly, the students enrolled in vocational secondary school diploma participating in the study took part in vocational secondary school training introduced on September 1, 2016. Since at the time of the measurement, the examined type of institution was called a vocational secondary school (not technical school) and the subjects of the study were vocational secondary students. Therefore, we use the name vocational secondary school in our thesis in addition to the vocational training that gives the high school graduation.

In order to investigate the goals set in the dissertation and to answer the research questions, we prepared a self-developed questionnaire. Our large-scale

data collection was preceded by a test measurement, the purpose of which was to check the reliability of the compiled questionnaire. As a result of the pilot test conducted with 105 students from vocational secondary schools, we found out that our measuring instrument has adequate reliability, is suitable for measuring the areas we are examining and for the preliminary exploration of dropout risk factors.

During the compilation of the questionnaire, we took into account the results of the published literature and relevant research, as well as the experiences of the pilot study. Based on this, our measuring device contains three large parts. In the first part, we asked sociodemographic questions about the school, place of residence, place of residence during the school year, age, gender, and questions about family background were also included here. In the second part of the questionnaire, there is a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire containing 27 statements about the decision to further education and the affective factor of further education. In addition, this part of the questionnaire also deals with dropout risk factors. In the third part, we asked about the students' cognitive ability

using the ADEXI (Adult Executive Functioning Inventory; Holst and Thorell, 2018) executive function scale on the one hand, and the semester marks of the main subjects on the other hand. Furthermore, we asked about sociological factors in education, such as failure during studies, repeating a year and going to shadow education and their reasons.

Contrary to our original plan - paper-based filling - due to the pandemic, we could only implement an online inquiry. We chose a convenience sampling technique for data collection (Gliner et al., 2017). A total of 2036 participants filled out the questionnaire. After data cleaning, 1998 people remained in our sample (vocational secondary school = 1182; vocational technical classes after graduation = 668; academic secondary school = 146). The sub-sample of 12th grade vocational secondary school students is representative in terms of parents' education.

An exploratory factor analysis was performed to examine the validity of the questionnaire scales. The reliabilities of the subscales were verified with reliability indicators. Parametric (e.g., two-samples t-test, one- and two-way analysis of variance, correlations, linear and

logistic regression) and non-parametric (e.g., cross-tabulation analysis, Mann-Whitney test, Kruskal-Wallis test) tests were used to explore the results and verify the hypotheses.

## **Results**

*In our first hypothesis, we assumed that there are significant differences in the sociological and psychological factors of 12th- and 13th-grade students studying in vocational secondary school, as the influence of parents and peers decreases with age, and as does the motivation to learn.*

The parents of 12th grade vocational secondary school students have a higher educational level, but the percentage of parents' employment does not differ from one another. In terms of permanent residence, there is no difference between the two grades, yet there are significantly more entering students in the 13th grade. We found no significant differences between the two grades in the number of siblings, the family structure and the financial index.

The harmony of people outside the school (parents) and inside the school (teachers) who are closest to the students can stimulate and encourage students to continue their further studies. Like the way parents did not "give up" on the future of their children entering the 13th grade, the teachers also tried to help them continue their further studies. Even if students cannot continue to their higher education, teachers still keep helping them through the last door that opens to adult life. That is why, it is important, that they talk to them not only about learning, but also about things in life. In terms of friendships, we found significant differences between the two grades. While 12th-year vocational secondary school students have close friendships one another within their class, 13th-year students are different due to the different life paths after graduation.

12th-year vocational secondary school students have stronger motives for further education and weaker self-handicapping than 13th-year students. More than a half of 13th graders surveyed do not plan to continue their education. Within the cognitive factors, neither executive function nor academic results differed between the two

years of vocational secondary school. Despite this, 12th graders significantly spent more time studying and paid much more attention to private lessons than 13th graders.

Based on this, we can say that our first hypothesis was only partially confirmed, since there are components in both the sociological and psychological factors in which the two grades show differences, as well as components in which there is no difference between them.

*In our second hypothesis, we assumed that, based on the family background, we found significant differences in the sociological and psychological factors of education. To investigate this, we used cluster analysis.*

During the cluster analysis, three clearly distinct groups were created within the vocational training sample. We gave them the names (1) urban well-to-do degree, (2) village low-status and (3) metropolitan low-status. The results were summarized by grade and cluster.

The parents of the students who belong to the 12th urban well-to-do degree cluster have a high level of education, their financial situation is good, and the majority of the students live or attend the school's settlement. These students have a strong motivation to

continue their education and a weak self-handicapping, and more than a half of the students plan to continue their studies in higher education. Their academic results are better than the low-status group in the village. Almost a half of the cluster participates in shadow education, and the primary reason for which is preparation for further education. They have many friends within the school and reported a strong relationship with their parents. It is probably from this group of students that the largest proportion of those who will continue their studies in higher education will come out. Behind this lies the social status of the parents, since the only way to preserve it and avoid downward mobility is through further education.

The majority of the low-status students in the 12th grade are first-year students or college students, and the majority of them live with grandparents or relatives. The parents have a low level of education, they are raising more children, and their financial situation is worse than the average. Based on Róbert's social pear (Bánóczy et al., 2015), this cluster is closest to the social stratum of workers and defectors. The students have poor grades, low motivation to further study and strong self-handicapping.

Few people participate in shadow education. The students who prefer to work after graduation will probably come out of this cluster. For these students, obtaining a high school graduate is a means of upward mobility, and a technical qualification can provide them with even better employment opportunities.

The characteristic of the 12th metropolitan low-status group is that they live in the settlement where they study. The parents have a low level of education, and are mainly skilled workers who raise 1-2 children in difficult financial conditions. The single-parent family structure has the highest proportion here. The motivation of the students to continue their studies, their self-handicapping and their grades do not differ significantly from the urban affluent graduate group, but fewer of them participate in the shadow educations. Differences in social background are reflected in participation in shadow education (cf. Szemerszki, 2020). In this cluster, the urban environment has a strong influence (cf. Ferge, 1972), which increases the possibility of continuing education and staying in the 13th grade. Based on the examined characteristics of Róbert's social model (Bánóczy et al., 2015), the majority

of the cluster having a high school diploma come from the urban families. In the 13th grade, the clusters were separated based on family background, but we did not find any differences between them in the vast majority of the examined variables. Actually, we see a homogeneous 13th grade, which can be easily understood from the differences in the 12th grade clusters. After all, we have seen which cluster group is the one from which the students go on to higher education, and which is the one from which they prefer to go to work instead of studying.

Our second hypothesis was only partially confirmed, because we found no differences in executive function either based on family background or between grades.

*In our third hypothesis, we assumed that the family background has a strong influence on the decision to further education, since further education in higher education is a means of upward mobility on the one hand, and social status preservation for those with favorable family backgrounds on the other. Furthermore, affective and cognitive factors are closely related to the decision to further education.*

The decision to further education was examined by year and by cluster created on the basis of family background within the years.

The examination of the grades and clusters also shows that the affective factors of students from vocational schools most strongly determine the decision in favor of continuing higher education. While motivation to further education multiplies it, self-handicapping reduces the likelihood of further education. Although the dimensions of the executive function did not show any differences between the grades, in the study of the decision to further study, the weaker functioning of the working memory reduces the probability of further study in the case of the 12th and 13th graders as well.

In our work, the marked presence of affective factors in the decision to further education highlights that the chances of further education in higher education can be increased by strengthening motivations for further education in the vocational secondary school. Furthermore, it draws attention to the strong influence of the negative self-image related to learning before and after graduation. However, the question arises as to whether

self-handicapping factors strengthen during the secondary school years for students studying in vocational secondary school, or whether the choice of vocational training after primary school is already a manifestation of this. To answer this question, it is necessary to extend the investigation to elementary school.

*In our fourth hypothesis, we claim that we can identify the risk factor for dropping out, which is the lack of a language exam, employment during higher education studies, preference for cost-reimbursed training and poor academic results, repeating a year, and the excess of failure.*

At the time of data collection, the requirement for obtaining a university diploma is to pass an intermediate level language exam (according to the law prescribed in Hungary). More than 80% of students in vocational secondary education do not have a language exam. Students who do not have a language exam have weaker motives for further education and worse academic results than those who have already obtained the language exam. Therefore, the lack of a language test is considered a dropout risk factor.

In our study, employment during higher education studies is not a clear dropout risk factor. In the 12th grade, students with a lower financial index want to work during their studies due to the lack of parental support. However, the employment factor is not significant for 13th graders according to their financial background. In this grade, the children whose mothers with a high level of education are likely to work in order to gain professional experience, which seems to confirm the positive side of employment.

The financial background of the family significantly determines the financing form for the student who wishes to apply for. In our study, those with a better financial background primarily want to apply for cost-reimbursed training. A comparison of the academic result with the application for the financing form showed that 13th graders with not very good academic achievement want to secure their place in higher education by accepting the reimbursement of expenses (cf. Szemerszki, 2014).

For students who intend to continue their education, we consider it as a dropout risk factor if they have failed or repeated a year during their school career, as well as if they have a lower academic result.

There are students who participate in shadow education to avoid failure, but still want to continue their studies in higher education. These students have weaker motives for further education, working memory and academic achievement, and their self-handicapping is stronger than that of their peers who attend special classes due to further education and language exams. Therefore, we also identified this as a dropout risk factor.

Our research shows that it is possible to identify risk factors which are already during the high school years and can predict the danger of dropping out of higher education. However, our results also draw attention to the fact that this assessment is not clear in all cases (e.g., employment).

Overall, it can be concluded that there are significant differences in the family background of students in vocational secondary school, which has an impact on vertical mobility. The probability of further education in higher education can be increased by strengthening the motivation for further education and reducing self-restraint, which affective factors are closely related to academic achievement and many dropout risk factors. Both motivation for further education and self-restraint are

strongly present in students studying vocational secondary school, regardless of family background.

So far, more attention has been paid to students in vocational secondary school, as educational researchers have mainly dealt with students in short-term vocational training at risk of early school leaving. In recent years, we have witnessed the continuous transformation of the vocational training system. The government's strong educational policy is to increase the number of students in vocational education and, in addition, the number of graduates. On the one hand, the results of our study can be useful for the educational policy dealing with vocational training since we have revealed the factors that play a role in the further education decisions of this population. On the other hand, we examined not only secondary school graduates, but also the 13th graders, which represent another exit point in vocational secondary school. Furthermore, we have also identified dropout risk factors that can be an obstacle to obtaining a higher education diploma.

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Registry number: DEENK/434/2022.PL  
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Gabriella Józsa  
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Human Sciences  
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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (10)

- Józsa, G.:** Az egyházi és állami iskolában tanuló szakközépiskolások továbbtanulási szándékát befolyásoló tényezők.  
*Magyar Ref. Nev.* 3 (3), 5-22, 2021. ISSN: 1585-7565.
- Józsa, G.:** Szakközépiskolából a felsőoktatásba: lemorzsolódási veszélyek vizsgálata egy pilotmérés alapján.  
*Iskolakultúra.* 31 (7-8), 88-103, 2021. ISSN: 1215-5233.
- Józsa, G.:** Végzős szakközépiskolás tanulók továbbtanulási szándéka: egy próbamérés eredményei.  
*Neveléstudomány.* 9 (4), 138-153, 2021. E-ISSN: 2063-9546.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21549/INTNY.35.2021.4.8>
- Józsa, G., Józsa, K.:** A gyermekkori (CHEXI) és a felnőttkori (ADEXI) végrehajtott funkció kérdőívek magyar nyelvre történő adaptációja.  
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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17670/MPed.2020.1.47>
- Józsa, G.:** Lemorzsolódási kockázat és jelentkezés a felsőoktatásba.  
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9. **Józsa, G., Józsa, K.:** Végrehajtott funkció: elméleti megközelítések és vizsgálati módszerek.

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13. **Józsa, G.:** A felsőoktatási továbbtanulást befolyásoló tényezők.

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14. **Józsa, G.:** Szakközépiskolások továbbtanulási döntését befolyásoló tényezők.

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18. **Józsa, K., Józsa, G.:** A CHEXI és az ADEXI végrehajtott funkció kérdőívek magyar adaptációja.  
In: Prevenció, intervenció és kompetenciák - Korszerű neveléstudományi módszerekkel a korai iskolaelhagyás ellen : Absztraktkötet, Magyar Nevelés- és Oktatáskutatók Egyesülete, Budapest, 138, 2019. ISBN: 9786155657078
19. **Józsa, G., Kocsis, Z.:** A munkavállalás szerepe a lemorzsolódásban.  
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20. **Józsa, G.:** Reziliens szakgimnazisták felvételi mintázatai.  
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21. **Váradi, J., Józsa, G.:** A zeneoktatás jellemzői az online térben: A kutatás előzménye, mintája és módszere.  
In: Az online tér megjelenése a zeneművészeti oktatásban és a hangverseny-látogatásban.  
Szerk.: Váradi Judit, Magyar Művészeti Akadémia Művészetelméleti és Módszertani Kutatóintézet, Budapest, 11-22, 2022. ISBN: 9786156192943
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23. Váradi, J., **Józsa, G.**: A tanórán kívüli művészeti tevékenység hatása a művészeti rendezvények iránti attitűdre.  
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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31074/gyntf.2021.3.28.43>
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25. Józsa, K., Barrett, K. C., **Józsa, G.**, Morgan, G. A.: FOCUS teszt: új, számítógép-alapú vizsgálati eszköz 3-8 éves gyermekek számára.  
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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21030/anyp.2017.1.2>
27. **Józsa, G.**, Józsa, K.: A szövegértés, az olvasási motiváció és a stratégiahasználat összefüggése.  
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28. Józsa, K., Barrett, K. C., **Józsa, G.**, Kis, N., Morgan, G. A.: Development and Initial Evaluation of an Individualized Moderately Challenging Computer-tablet Mastery Motivation Measure for 378 year-olds.  
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29. Józsa, K., Amukune, S., **Józsa, G.**, Barrett, K. C.: Design, development and application of focus app for assessment of school readiness.  
In: NTED2022: 16th annual International Technology, Education and Development Conference. Sharing the Passion for Learning. Ed.: L. Gómez Chova, A. López Martínez, I. Candel Torres, IATED Academy, Valencia, Spain, 4903-4910, 2022. ISBN: 9788409377589

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30. Váradi, J., **Józsa, G.**, Szűcs, T., Láda, J.: Az online tér megjelenése a művészeti oktatásban.  
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31. Janurik, M., Szabó, N., **Józsa, G.**, Józsa, K.: A zenei észlelés, a zenei reprodukció és a végrehajtó funkció összefüggése óvodáskorban.  
In: Család a nevelés és az oktatás fókuszában : absztraktkötet : XX. Országos Neveléstudományi Konferencia Debrecen, 2020. november 5-7. Szerk.: Engler Ágnes, Rébay Magdolna, Tóth Dorina Anna, MTA Pedagógiai Tudományos Bizottság; Debreceni Egyetem BTK Nevelés- és Művelődéstudományi Intézet; Kopp Mária Intézet a Népesedésért és a Családokért, Debrecen, 212, 2020. ISBN: 9789634902584
32. Józsa, K., Barrett, K. C., Kis, N., **Józsa, G.**, Morgan, G. A.: Kismackó: Az elsajátítási motiváció és a végrehajtó funkció új, számítógépes mérési eljárása.  
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33. Amukune, S., Józsa, K., Szenczi, B., **Józsa, G.**: Comparison of the mastery motivation of hungarian school children with mild intellectual disability with that of those developing typically.  
In: XVIII. Pedagógiai Értékelési Konferencia 18th Conference on Educational Assessment . Program és összefoglalók = program and abstracts. Szerk.: Fejes József Balázs, Pásztor-Kovács Anita, Szegedi Tudományegyetem, Neveléstudományi Doktori Iskola, Szeged, 34, 2022. ISBN: 9789633068625

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