

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Decision mechanisms underlying school choice. *High school students of Seklerland in a cross-sectoral approach*

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Thesis objective, theme delimitation

School choice is a research field of educational sociology with a long tradition. (cf. Maaz et al. 2006). Above all, the analyses of the social selection mechanisms associated with it have become more intensively focused on by social scientists. In the educational science research, countless subfields analyse the decision situations, especially the ones that are placed on the selection points of the education system offering cross-sectional branches. Among them, thematising the school choice of the student and/or parent that determines the life of the individual further on is of paramount importance.

Based on the international literature (Becker 2000; 2010; Harazd 2007; Kristen 2005; Mayer – Koinzer 2014; Suter 2013 stb.), school choice is declared as a means of school quality control (social public interest) on the one hand, and of achieving individual freedom (family—individual interest) on the other, the latter being realised through the (self-) determination of "the best education for my child". Nevertheless, according to the critical overtones of the above specified international literature and the empirical research, neither the social public interest, nor the family-individual interest means of school choice has succeeded in reducing social inequality and social segregation. Moreover, it deepens and enhances those tendencies, despite the fact that the role of a school as a social institution in a democratic society should be realised in the equalisation of social inequalities. We start the educational sociology section of our thesis with briefly showing the present topic, where the intertwined yet different conceptual apparatus of educational equity, equal opportunities and the meritocratic principle in school choice is meant to be analysed from a critical approach.

In our thesis, we seek the answer to the substantive question, along which criteria do students decide on one or another type of school? Which are the determinant arguments that serve as criteria in the decision-making process? The multi-faceted issue formulates a multi-stage research objective. To what extent do the student's previous achievements influence the choice of the given school type? Is the achievement-based choice the only conclusive one, to which the international literature dedicates so much attention in the light of the examination of the rational decision's theory (cf. limited rationality)? Or does the principle of free decision (also) apply, which makes the free (and equity-based?) school choice possible among the various alternatives? In the school choice of the school users (students as well as parents), do the norm, value and religiousness represented by denominational schools play a role? Can we talk about sector-specific decision motivations? What constitutes the *differentia specifica* of the decision mechanisms of secular and denominational school choosers?

The optics, questions and methodology of research dealing with minority and denominational education are increasingly refined, and the results of the research help the decision makers in education policy in formulating more and more accurate statements. In spite of all these, no empirical research has been done in the Sekler region concentrating the largest Hungarian and at the same time denominational high school student base (especially in Harghita and Covasna counties), opposed to the Partium region, where both Pusztai (2004b; 2009) and Frigy (2014) carried out research triggering significant scientific interest in denominational education. Therefore, our research is both necessary and gap-filling, which we intend to analyse within the ethnically neutral, particular conceptual framework of the counties with predominantly Hungarian inhabitants.

Based on the above, we believe that the analysis of the minority education on the one hand and that of the denominational education on the other are both essential and interesting fields of the Hungarian minority education research in Romania from several points of view. According to Pusztai (2015), the two most exciting current research issues of the denominational education research are the *education law and education policy* on the one hand, the *education effectiveness and efficiency* on the other. The problem of the former field to be investigated is constituted by the access of the school users belonging to national, ethnical and religious communities to culture-identical education, the assurance of the sector-neutral attitude of the government towards non-state operated institutions (Glenn – De Groof 2012). The macro-level analysis of the factors influencing school choice of our thesis draws upon the present issue, focusing precisely on the above-mentioned field, education law and education policy. The objective of the latter research field is to reveal the difference in the achievement of the institutes and the students of the education authority sectors. A separate chapter of the empirical section of our dissertation deals with the enrolment (input) achievement of the students from the perspective of school choice. As it is a cross-sectional research, we are not able to compare it to output achievements, hence we can only measure the achievement following enrolment; and we do this along the analysis of the two – objective and subjective – types of the dimensions of efficiency. This way, our thesis intends to place the analysis of the students' school choice in the cross-section of the education law and education policy approach, as well as the education efficacy and efficiency, doing it in regard to the discourse of the rational decisions theory as well as the theories of value change.

The theoretical structure of our thesis is constructed around three pillars whose plinth (footing) is constituted by the three models (economic/quasi-market, political philosophy and educational sociology) based on three groups of arguments of free school choice (competition, freedom and equity arguments). Its body is made up by the discussion of the two theories

underlying decision modelling (economic/quasi-market model: theory of rational decisions; educational sociology model: the theory of value change), then, by chapters, the discussion of the three factors (macro, mezo and micro factors) influencing school choice.

The micro-level factors are analysed in the empirical section of our thesis, which we carry out along the five parts of the chapter (capital). 1) To answer the *who* question, we examine the students' family (socio-demographic) background. 2) The *why* question analyses the determining criteria of the students' school choice along the parts discussing decision criteria, decision process (procedural rationality) and decision assessment (substantive rationality). 3) Answering the *how* ("from where") question was indicated by the results obtained throughout the process of decision making: on the one hand, along the analysis of decision making by consensus/dissensus with parents; on the other hand, that of the intensive/mild impact of peer groups. The results of the decision criteria provided for the examination of two further questions. On the one hand, 4) the *what can explain* question provided for the discussion of the value-based decision along the analysis of its value-rational dimension; on the other hand, 5) the *what results* question examines the students' school performance indicators. The named factors are examined separately on the one hand, their effect on each other as well as the extent and the strength of their relationship on the other hand in the final (6) part of the empirical section of our thesis, carried out along the path model analysis.

The issue raised with respect to the analysis of school choice models was whether the free school choice promotes the equality of chances or it further increases the already existing inequality. Is the economic/quasi-market model – which, according to the classical liberal education economy concept is the possible solution to reduce inequality – able to achieve educational equity? We reach the conclusion that, though there is inflexion among the concepts of free school choice, the very debate unfolding in relation to it leaves much room to differences in opinion. Therefore, our thesis regards school choice not merely the case of rational actions (cf. RCT and SEU theories: Erikson – Jonsson 1996; Breen – Goldthorpe 1997; Esser 1999; Becker 2000 etc.), but it also includes its value-based dimension in its analysis (Klages 1984; 1992; 2001a; 2001b; Klages – Gensicke 2006 etc.), considering that it is the other essential strand of the multi-element matrix, which might assure the methodologically grounded and wider-spectrum analysis. Thus, our thesis differs from earlier research since it wants to place the discourse in the cross-section of the joint examination of the two dimensions. In this analysis we try to outline the actual conceptual framework of school choice by comparing different theoretical approaches.

Besides revealing the students' school choice mechanisms, it was also necessary to include various *efficiency-concepts*, since during our previous research (Tódor 2018b) we found that the input achievement of the student is closely related to school choice and school choice is closely linked to the student's family background characteristics. No less important is the theoretical standpoint that places the limited rationality in the centre of the analysis. Therefore, we consider it worthwhile to analyse the joint correlation of the coefficients of all these, where, besides the indicators of the objective (quantitative) efficiency we can nuance the picture by including the indicators of the subjective (qualitative) efficiency. Here in effect we built on the reflections of the elements of the two great theories discussed above with respect to student efficiency, since by measuring the subjective (qualitative) efficiency we analysed the students' system of values, the elements of norm, value and attitude acquired throughout school life, whereas the cognitive abilities were analysed following the objective efficiency measurement.

An outline of the methods applied

The target group of our research is constituted by 9th and 11th grade students of denominational and non-denominational schools of Seklerland fitted to them (ISCED 3). The reason for which the survey was carried out on these two years is that they represent the entrants of the lower and upper secondary school. In Romania, students start their high school education following the 8th grade, whose lower secondary level is constituted by the obligatory section (9-10 grades), while the upper secondary level by the non-compulsory section (11-12 grades). The survey of the ninth-grade students related to their aspirations was made in the previous year (during the 8th grade); at the same time, the mechanism of their decision is still vivid in their memory, which enables us to measure the entrants' motivations, requirements and expectations alike.

We carried out our research in Seklerland, since this region includes the counties where the majority of the inhabitants are Hungarians, and it constitutes a territorial and social entity distinct from both the Partium and the diaspora regions. In this region, school choice is made in an ethnically neutral environment. We applied a multi-stage cluster sampling.

At the first stage, all the denominational schools operating under the auspices of Hungarian historic churches in the three counties of Seklerland (Harghita, Covasna and Mureş) were included in the sampling, and we fitted non-denominational schools to them. The selection of the non-denominational schools and their adaption to the denominational ones were carried out in such a way that the indicators should be similar for the settlement type of

the residence and for the social situation of their student society (cf. Pusztai 2009). Besides the previous field experience, the official national “ranking” based on the school input and output learning outcomes and achievements provided a good basis for this. Thus, 14 schools were selected: seven (fully) denominational (2 Roman-Catholic, 4 Reformed and a Unitarian) and seven non-denominational schools.

At the second stage of the sampling, the selection of the students was carried out within the schools. We made full questionnaire survey among the 9th and 11th grade students. Out of the population of 2,157 there were 1,927 respondents, thus we managed to reach 89,33% of the target group. The survey took place between 16 April 2018 – 23 May 2018 in the form of paper questionnaires. Our SIC-CSC 2018 data base was recorded and processed with the help of the SPSS 22.0 statistical program package. The 46, both closed and open questions of the questionnaire can be grouped into seven main categories.

The first question block contains the questions referring to the characteristics of the school, whereas the second one contains the ones related to the demographic characteristics of the students, where we asked them about their sex, place of residence, family structure etc, which serve as explanatory variables in the course of our quantitative analysis. The questions examining the social status of the student’s family of the third block refer to the students’ origin, economic, cultural and social milieu. The fourth, central question block examines the students’ school choice motives (obtaining information; naming decision criteria, reasons; expectations and their fulfilment etc.). Following these, the questionnaire contains question blocks referring to further “hidden resources” such as peer relationships, systems of value and religiousness. The seventh question block of our questionnaire aligns questions that measure the students’ input and current school objective (quantitative) and subjective (qualitative) efficiency in order to obtain an answer to the *how efficiently* question.

Based on the theses formulated in the theoretical section of our thesis, we set up six hypotheses: the socio-economic status hypothesis, the decision hypothesis (decision criterion – and decision process hypotheses), the decision consensus (parent – child) hypothesis, the following-the-orientation-of-peer-group (classmates, friends) hypothesis, the value-hypothesis (value orientation and educational value hypotheses) as well as the efficiency-hypothesis (previous and current school achievement hypotheses). The presumed correlation among the six hypotheses is illustrated in a sole theoretical model. Analysing the literature, we found that the students’ school choice mechanisms do not only have effects separately, parallelly, but their impact on the decision also implies a correlation among them.

In the theoretical model we set up we assume that the students’ school choice decision is most intensively affected by the students’ family background (socio-economic status). The

family background does not only directly affect the other four explanatory variables, but it also has an indirect impact on them. We assume that the educational perceptions, the systems of values represented by the student's variable, besides its direct impact on the decision, also influences the school efficiency of the student as well as the consensual decision made together with the parent in an indirect way. Furthermore, we assume that besides the direct impact of the peer groups on the school choice, the student's (previous and current) school performance is also affected in an indirect way. The constructed theoretical model is meant to serve as a starting point in the analysis of the empirical section of our thesis as well as in testing our hypotheses. The logics of the construction of the theoretical model is carried out in the final section of our thesis, with the help of the path model analysis (a series of successive regression models).

A thesis-like enumeration of the results

The need for the cross-sectoral research came to the fore in the middle of the 20th century, due to economic (investment-return rate) and education policy reasons. The chapters of our thesis dealing with the economic/quasi-market model as well as the rational decision theory underlying it fit in this argumentation field. The theories examining the differences between the particular sectors re-interpreted the results belonging to the great data bases in several cases at the end of the century, and they fitted them in a new theoretical framework in each case. Therefore, we considered it essential to embed the framework of our research in the theoretical context of the value-based (value-rational) decision as well.

The practical relevance of our research is realised in the prediction of the extent of the competition related to the choice of (denominational and non-denominational) school, that is, in the motivation of the students' conscious planning of their learning path. A novelty of our thesis is that it attempts to interpret the school choice of the students of Seklerland's public educational (denominational and non-denominational) institutions in an action theory approach, in particular from the theory of rational decision, and within that, the model of the subjective expected utility, its previous moral philosophical and contemporary German interpretations, going beyond the prevailing approach of the Hungarian literature discourse built on the exclusive effect of the constraints rooting in the social structure. The principal merit of our thesis is (perhaps) the application of the value choice model going beyond the stratification paradigm of school choice as interpretation framework; as well as providing the first comprehensive cross-sectoral comparison from Seklerland.

Both the theoretical and empirical models suggest that there is no general school choice mechanism based on a purely objective-rational or value-rational, a consensus- or achievement-oriented decision model, but a chain of constellations of intertwined, interacting factors. However, in the course of the cross-sectoral comparison we were able to read the effects of clearly distinguishable, interpretable models and factors, which were specific in nature among the school choosers, as it were, providing the *differentia specifica* of the school users.

Our *first hypothesis* tested the thesis related to the socio-economic status of the students, where we assumed that students choosing the denominational sector possess higher family background index. We based this assumption on our previous pilot research on the one hand (Tódor 2017a; 2018b; 2018c) as well as the results of the empirical research done in the region that are relevant from the point of view of our topic (cf. Vita 2017). On the other hand, it is based on the theoretical statement (cf. Pusztai – Bacskai 2015) according to which it is context-dependent, thus it has to be examined within the contextual reality of a given country and region. In Romania, in the classical state high school sector functioning similarly to the continental system, there is a strong selection mechanism, where the goal is high achievement. Hence, the denominational sector encompasses the student basis coming from the social milieu who cannot succeed in the non-denominational sector because of their characteristics resulting from their lower school achievement.

In the light of the data we found that the students choosing the non-denominational sector have an advantage over their peers from denominational schools, from economic (subjective and objective indicators), cultural (education, occupational status, reading, book possession etc.), social as well as territorial points of view. So, in a cross-sectoral breakdown, every indicator showed significant difference. Here our hypothesis, according to which the type of the chosen, in our case, denominational or non-denominational school can be differentiated based on the students' family background, *was confirmed*. It is also proved by the binary logistic regression analysis and the results at the end of the chapter.

In *the first sub-hypothesis of our second hypothesis* we expected the high educational standard, the good, qualified teachers and the school's subject offer to represent priority among the students of the non-denominational sector, and this *was justified as well*. Meanwhile, with the students choosing denominational schools, we expected a higher presence of motives such as a good community, the atmosphere of the school, its traditions, spirit and religious education. Based on the student clusters formed from the variables, the differences in school choice motives became clearly outlined both in their comparison to cross-sectoral and family background indicators. We found that the elite- and institution-

oriented students are the students choosing the non-denominational sector in a significantly higher proportion, while the students following the peer group orientation as well as the value- and community-oriented students are the ones choosing the denominational sector in a significantly higher proportion. In the light of the results so far, the children of the families with a higher social status choose the school with higher (non-denominational) educational indicator, and from among the motives of their choice, the quality indicators play the key role. In addition, they also have a higher (objective) success in school as well.

In the *second sub-hypothesis of our second hypothesis* we assumed that the students with higher socio-economic background follow the formal information source, while the student group with a lower status follow the informal way of acquiring information in the course of their school choice/decision process. According to our data, the students rely primarily on informal information; while its main source is predominantly friends and acquaintances for denominational students, it is the family and relatives for the non-denominational ones. However, the comparison of the student clusters created from the decision criteria to the variables of the decision process *confirmed our assumption*, since the elite- and institution-oriented student clusters follow the formal way of information acquiring in a significantly higher proportion, while the other two clusters acquire information along informal enquiry in a significantly higher proportion. Based on facts (our data), the decision forms of the students with a higher social status follow the informal path (the advice of friends, acquaintances, presence of siblings) in a significantly higher proportion, while the students with a lower status get informed from the website of the school. Consequently, our hypothesis *was not confirmed*.

In our *third hypothesis* we assumed that school choice is the result of a consensus-oriented family (parent – student) decision. In the light of our results, almost two thirds of the students (64.2%) make a decision on their own, while almost one third of them (28.9%) makes a decision based on a mutual agreement. It is uncertain to us what conclusion to draw from the independently made decision. Does it mean that the parents leave decision making to their children and fully agree with and accept it? Or that the child makes the decision individually, against the wish and aspirations of the parent? In the light of the data, it is certain that 28.9% of the students make their decision based on a mutual agreement. In the course of the interviews preceding the quantitative research I found that *the decision is not dissensus-oriented*. The majority of the students' decisions was either independently made – left to the child by the parent and accepted – or it was based on a mutual agreement, where both the parent's and the student's aspirations were taken into account.

Since we did not manage to support/refute our hypothesis unambiguously, we tried to answer it through the analysis of further questions. In the following, we compared the students' decision criteria to the parents' viewpoints (perceived by the students), and we found that the first three most important criteria coincide in both cases. We created clusters from the parents' decision criteria as well, and we found (the significant difference) that also in their case, the arguments of the elite-oriented (parental) group choose the non-denominational sector, while the decision factors of the community-oriented (parental) group nurturing family tradition choose the denominational sector. The motives of decision based on a mutual consensus can be read from the data series.

In *our fourth hypothesis*, based on the school choice criteria we assumed that the peer effect is more powerful in the case of the student cluster following the orientation of the peer group than among the elite- and institution-oriented students. According to our results, "roughly half" of the students' friends chose the school of the same type as theirs. It is certain that the main reason is not the school choice preference of the friends, but the fact that in the case of almost half of the students it is, cannot be ignored. Our assumption was not confirmed, since we only found significant difference in the school choice criteria in the case of the elite-oriented student group, where the peer group effect was the least important. It enhances the theory of the asymmetric effect written by Coleman (2010), according to which the lower status students react to the effect of the (peer) network in a more sensitive way than the ones with a high status. It is certain (significant) that the school choice of the peers plays a less important role as a factor to the elite-oriented cluster involving the largest student base. Besides this, although the peer group effect appears in a proportion over average, it does not show significant difference with the other clusters. Based on all these, our assumption *was only partly confirmed*, thus we can only draw with certainty the conclusion that the effects of other factors are more powerful on the students' school choice than the peer group.

In the *first sub-hypothesis of our fifth hypothesis* we assumed that the students with traditional/community and religious value orientations choose the denominational sector, while the students with postmodern value orientation choose the non-denominational sector for themselves. Our results show that the students choosing the denominational schools embrace the religious and traditional/community value system in a significantly higher proportion, while the non-denominational students tend towards the value orientation of self-realisation / self-expression and the new-material self-realisation. With this, we *supported* our hypothesis. In what follows, we examined the clusters of the student value types formed during the factor analysis, and here we expected the same distinctions. We found that the cluster called active realists personifies the value synthesis in the Klagesian sense, since in

their case, the post-material value system co-exist with the religious and traditional/community values. The students choosing a denominational school represent the co-existence of values in a significantly higher proportion. The second data series also *supports our hypothesis*.

In the *second sub-hypothesis of our fifth hypothesis*, where we compared the value type clusters to the students' socio-economic background variables, we assumed that the students' value orientation is greatly influenced by the socio-economic environment of the family of origin. We found that the students with higher socio-economic indicators belong to the hedonistic-materialistic and/or postmaterialist value group, while the students with lower indicators belong to the group of the active realists. With this, we *confirmed* our hypothesis based on Klages according to which the students from the lower social layer are more likely to represent the traditional/community value system.

The *first sub-hypothesis of our sixth hypothesis* referred to the student's input achievement indicators, where we assumed that the students with higher previous school achievement are more likely to choose the school with a higher prestige (achievement-oriented). According to our results, our hypothesis *was confirmed*, since the non-denominational students have a significantly higher input achievement in either a school-level or a cross-sectoral comparison. We also examined the factors whose influence are felt and found that the student's input school achievement is influenced by the parents' education as well as the number of books in the possession of the family. Our results are in line with the results of the measurements and the effects of the explanatory variables found in the national and international literature.

According to the *second sub-hypothesis of our sixth hypothesis*, the higher input achievement indicators increasingly diffuse the already existing differences in achievement during the high school years. In our research, we measured two types of indicators of success in school: objective and subjective types. In the light of our results, there is a significant difference between the student groups belonging to the two sectors according to the objective (quantitative) type high school success indicators. The students of the non-denominational sector who had a higher input school success, have a higher quantitative success indicator as well. As regards the subjective type indicators of success in school, the denominational students have a significantly higher index value. Thereby our above discussed hypothesis was only *partly confirmed*.

In summary: Through cross-sectoral comparison we found that the students choosing the *non-denominational sector* are the children of highly qualified parents with higher socio-cultural background and come from a more advantageous region from an educational

ecological point of view. At the same time, the indicators of the named family background strongly correlate with the student's input and current (objective) school achievement. As a consequence of these indicators, the non-denominational sector is chosen by the elite- and institution-oriented student group, to whom the primacy of the educational standard and outstanding achievement indicators as well as the prestige of the institution, its local perception is decisive, factors which fulfil their expectations from the institution. In relation to the procedural rationality, it considers the information obtained through formal channels more important and follows it. Along the self-realisation/self-expression as well as the prevalence of the new-material self- realisation value systems, they belong to the group of the postmaterialist value type with the depreciation of the religious and traditional/community value systems. The students' value systems correlate with the parents' child-rearing values, thus, the students belonging to this sector were socialised along the autonomous value dimension, where the classically intellectual educational values are also reflected.

The *denominational sector* is chosen by the students who are the children of parents lower qualified than the average of the sample, indicators which are reflected in the socio-economic indicators of the family as well. Denominational schools are predominantly chosen by students from the country. They arrive with lower input school achievement, which bears witness to widely different results depending on the positioning of the school. At the same time, they have a higher subjective type success indicator, since both attending the school and acquiring good marks are more important to them. According to the clusters created from the motives, the value- and community-oriented student group as well as the one following the orientation of the peer group can be found in a significantly higher proportion in denominational schools. The information spreading through informal channels constitutes the main source for them. Their expectations from the school based on which they decided to choose the institution were also fulfilled, reference may be made here to such criteria as the good school and class community, the school atmosphere as well as its spirit.

The dominance of the traditional/community and religious value preferences are derivable from the school choice criteria, not depreciating the self-realisation/self-expression value system, thus the students choosing denominational schools belong to the active realist value type cluster, with whom the co-existence of values is realised. With the child-rearing values, the dimension of conforming values appears, to whom the community where they live and which they belong to is important, and on whom the community can also rely. The conform child-rearing (perceived) value system used in the Mertonian sense positively correlates with the religious and community/traditional student value dimension.

We can state that the students who choose the denominational sector are the ones who come from micro communities representing a religious, traditional value system, where learning and educating children in a denominational school count as values (“prestige”). Obviously, the (high) success in school is also important to them; however, it is not exclusive but co-existent with such criteria and values as religiousness, community, tradition. Therefore, the “added value” of the denominational schools can be observed in integration, where all social layers can feel addressed, both the ones seeking “quality” and the ones searching for a “helping” for catching up. Examining denominational schools, we can detect that in these institutions the religious value system is not exclusionary, but these schools realise inclusion, personal attention along the values. Denominational schools in Seklerland, just like in other regions of the country and abroad, fulfil a complementary rather than a competitive role within the given educational system. They are legitimate and do have a role, especially in the educational system of the European Union sharing and based on the principle of equity (“the first virtue”). Indeed, *“justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is to systems of thought”* (Rawls [1971] 1997: 21).



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (5)

1. **Tódor, I.:** A felekezeti és a nem felekezeti középiskolát választó tanulók jellemzőinek vizsgálata Hargita megyében.
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