

**The theses of the university dissertation  
(PhD)**

**Student achievement in the light  
of mobility aspirations**

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## **I. The aim of the dissertation and the determination of the topic**

Two of the numerous aims of school education deserve special attention. The first concerns the effectiveness of pupils at school, i.e. their acquisition of the knowledge and competencies expected of them at a given age and for a given type of education. The second objective relates to the school's role in social integration, i.e. to influence the preservation or transformation of the structure of society and the mobility of individuals between different social groups in accordance with expectations and norms. My thesis is concerned with the examination of these two objectives, and the central question is the extent to which schools can contribute to the development of pupils' achievement when there is an individual intention to improve their position in society.

Research on academic achievement has a long history, and at the same time, the range, number and complexity of the aspects included in the study are extremely diverse. Depending on their focus, studies can take a variety of disciplinary approaches, including philosophical, psychological, sociological, pedagogical and economic

research, using either qualitative or quantitative methodological tools. The main question of analysis is usually what factors influence student achievement. One of the major disadvantages of large sample empirical studies is that they can only address the fundamental inequalities inherent in the school structure (known as that schools differ more than students learning in the same school) with methodological biases, i.e. they can only take into account the fundamental characteristic of the sample, its stratification, to a limited extent. The statement on inequality is particularly valid for the Hungarian school system, as confirmed by both Hungarian and international research results (Balázsi et al., 2005; OECD, 2016; Bazsalya & Hörich, 2020). Another problematic aspect of the analyses is that the available databases, which include unsampled data on students, school background and student achievement, do not provide insights into student intentions and motivation, which may be one of the most important explanatory variables for student achievement. Quantitative analyses tend to describe complex models and regression calculations, where the separability of the factors from each other and the examination of the independent and combined, intertwined effects of factors are particularly important. This

becomes particularly important when new explanatory aspects, which have hardly been included in previous research, are introduced into the analysis, for example, in an effectiveness model. In this thesis, I attempt to resolve these problems. My thesis aims to conduct an empirical, complex study of student achievement that, on the one hand, includes mobility aspiration as an explanatory indicator of individual learning intention; and, on the other hand, takes into account the stratification of the sample and treats individual and contextual effects separately.

The theoretical background of the research is provided by the theories of school effectiveness, resilience and sociology of education that examine the role of schools in social structure and mobility. School achievement is a complex concept and significantly depends on the dimension in which it is interpreted. For this reason, there is a wide variety in how achievement research conceptualises and operationalises student achievement. The indicators used can be diverse (output and process indicators, simple and composite indicators). However, this diversity also indicates that only limited knowledge can be detected by selecting one of them

(Széll, 2015a). Based on this, I will analyse the three dimensions of student achievement in more detail. The National Assessment on Basic Competencies measures the current state of students' skills in a given subject in several domains. Among these, I focus on test scores in mathematics, mainly because this is the most important way to capture the impact of family and peer group. The second achievement indicator is school resilience. The basic assumption of achievement research is that the socioeconomic status of the student influences their academic achievement (a favourable background is associated with better achievement, an unfavourable background with poorer achievement), so the question is more about the extent to which background determines achievement (Bánfi, 1999; OECD, 2010; Schleicher, 2019). The phenomenon of resilience captures when this determinant does not prevail, i.e. when a student with an unfavourable socioeconomic background is still able to achieve outstanding results. Resilience as an outcome reflects not only the learner's aspirational nature but also the background's deterministic influence and thus the school system's equity under examination (OECD, 2013; Papp, 2015). The third dimension of effectiveness analysed refers to

the inefficiency or failure of the educational process, i.e. when the learner fails to achieve the declared objective of the education system, at least a secondary education. Early school leaving thus expresses the abandonment of the typical school path and the discontinuation of education during primary or secondary school. This failure is also a double-edged sword: it reflects both the inefficiency of the school system and the student. Taking all methodological constraints into account, I define dropout as an outcome indicator.

The causes affecting student achievement are multifaceted, multilevel, interrelated and usually require a complex approach. Traditional models explaining test scores or academic achievement are usually built around explanations that include pedagogical and assessment parameters; organisational characteristics; teacher influences; school climate; individual student characteristics; and school-family and school-student relationships (e.g. Reynolds et al, 2014; Széll, 2018). Resilience studies place particular emphasis on the school climate, the social psychological mechanisms of assessment and the extent of parental support (e.g. Csüllög et al, 2015; Széll, 2018). In understanding the causes of early

school leaving, understanding the role of student behaviour, deviant behaviour and practical training are becoming more important, and so is the role of the regulatory environment of education in this dimension (e.g. Cedefop, 2016; Mártonfi, 2011). Since there is a high degree of similarity between the effects of the three dimensions of achievement under examination, despite the differences in emphasis, I have tried to organise the influencing factors into a model, which I have called a synthesis model, in order to understand the factors affecting student achievement. Three types of entities can be distinguished in school learning: individual, community and organisational. The individual entity type includes the learner and the teacher; the community entity type includes the family and the peer group; and the organisational entity type includes the classroom and the school. Entities can be captured in at least three dimensions: the characteristics of the entity (the parameters of which are difficult to vary or change, e.g., gender of the student, capital of the family), the attitudinal characteristics associated with them (the parameters are a system of opinions and attitudes about the learning activity), and the actions and behaviours associated with the learning process (the parameters are thus descriptions of specific

modes of action). A fourth dimension, called 'dowry', can be distinguished in the learner and teacher entities: it includes all those parameters relating to past experiences and knowledge, the effects of which strongly influence the three dimensions mentioned above but are still relatively well distinguishable from them.

Entities and their dimensions can be observed from several perspectives. One of these perspectives is locality: in this case, entities can be approached in their own locally bounded socioeconomic embeddedness. Another perspective is the school system, in which entities, and in particular the entity of the school, are given meaning and significance in the light of the properties of other entities. A third perspective places the entities under study at the root of society. It focuses on the factors that articulate the regulatory framework of the learning process and the role of the school in social integrity. The perspectives outlined thus help make sense of the value of entities and their relationships and dimensions. Perspectives can typically be understood in terms of two dimensions known as what is given and what are the processes that characterise them. The dimensions distinguished within



entities are not independent of each other, just as the attributes belonging to the dimensions of each entity are formed in the interactions of each entity.

One of the fundamental questions of sociology is how societies are stratified, what kind of social groups they are made up of, how they are related to each other and what dynamics characterise the movement of individuals within and between groups. Several paradigms attempt to describe the stratification of societies. However, these broad approaches have in common that they all examine the role of some aspect of stratification (e.g. position in the division of labour, power, connections, capital endowment, etc.). However, in none of these approaches is the structure constant, either because of the interests of social groups or because of institutionalised instruments of social cooperation. Such an institutionalised instrument is the school, which can therefore be both a means of transforming the social structure and preserving it (Bourdieu, 1978; DiMaggio, 1998). It can fulfil this role primarily because the norms and knowledge it imparts are generally accepted and valued and thus appear to be an appropriate mediator as an important condition for the

movement of individuals between social groups and for social mobility.

The Hungarian society underwent significant changes during the socialist regime. However, the political and economic regime change and the past decades have not radically transformed the social structure, and at the same time, mobility opportunities have become more limited (Kovách, 2020). The structure of contemporary Hungarian society is characterised by a broad lower stratum, a broader middle stratum and an increasingly narrowing upper stratum, with high chances of social status transmission at the bottom and the top (Balogh et al, 2019). Of course, education does not clearly define an individual's place in this structure, and its importance varies between social groups. While the role of tertiary education as a 'demarcation line' between the elite and the middle class is blurring, the presence of a vocational qualification continues to draw a sharp line between the lower and middle classes. For this reason, the traditional route of schooling will be particularly important for the lower classes, as their success at school will better determine their future prospects without additional capital and resources. However,

school as a social institution does not primarily reflect the norms and expectations of disadvantaged groups, so to succeed in this environment, either a helpful will (on the part of the school or the teacher) or some individual motivation is required. In my thesis, I hypothesise that this individual volition can be empirically detected by observing students' mobility aspirations. Mobility aspirations refer to the educational attainment that a learner wishes to achieve relative to the (highest) educational attainment of one's parents. They can be distinguished as status acquiring, status destroying, and status losing aspirations. Therefore, in my thesis, I sought to answer the question of the relationship between different dimensions of student achievement and mobility aspirations and how this relationship shades the role of other factors affecting achievement.

## **II. Applied methods**

To empirically investigate the impact of mobility aspirations on student achievement, it is not sufficient to look at whether the operationalised variable has a significant impact on achievement due to the complexity of the influencing factors and their interactions, but rather to interpret this in a complex,

multifaceted model. Hypothetically, an empirical model building can be carried out in one of two paths: it can either be based on data from sample-based data collection, or it can be based on secondary analysis of existing databases. In both cases, many limiting factors have to be taken into account; however, to consider attrition as a criterion for effectiveness, I have explored the issue through quantitative secondary analysis.

The necessary data was obtained by merging the National Assessment on Basic Competencies 2011-2019 student and site databases. I added the results of the later surveys to the 2011 sixth-grade student data, which also allowed me to identify students' learning pathways, including dropouts (methodological inspiration was taken from Mariann Szemerszki's (2016) study). This way of constructing the database also allowed to reduce the amount of missing data. In some cases, I also supplemented the n database with data from the HCSO (Hungarian Central Statistical Office). I operationalised the dependent and independent variables of the model on the resulting analytical database and then performed the regression model calculations taking into

account the specificities of the subpopulation under investigation.

The traditional regression approach can only fit the outcome model with bias because it does not address the fundamental property of the sample, its stratification. For this reason, I have used hierarchical linear and hierarchical logistic regression models, which can take into account the contextual effect of the explanatory variables. The calculations were performed using SPSS 26.0 and HLM 8.1. The fit of each model was tested using several statistical parameters. Thus, the dependent variables of the models were the three dimensions of student achievement: the score on the 2011 sixth grade mathematics competency assessment and whether the student under study was resilient or dropped out later. I also looked at the mathematics competency test scores of both the resilient and early school-leaving students. To operationalise resilient pupils, I used a different method to capture the relative performance gains of the pupils: I first delimited a circle of pupils within one standard deviation of the mean (considered as typical pupils) in the joint coordinate system of the standardised family background index and the mathematics

competency test scores, and then delimited further groups of pupils, including the resilient ones, using rotated hyperbolas adjusted to this "circle" (further groups: disadvantaged, beneficiary, underperforming, unclassified pupils). I considered early school-leavers those who had an entry in the 2011 sixth grade competency assessment but no further data were available in the student databases of the subsequent competency assessments (up to 2019).

The explanatory variables of the models were developed on the basis of a synthesis model of student achievement. During model construction, I examined the phenomenon of multicollinearity for all models (although not all of them could be examined in depth). After operationalising mobility aspiration, I incorporated it as an explanatory variable in the developed models. However, in the case of resilience, I examined mobility aspiration as a moderating effect from a causal point of view. As a final step in the analysis, I examined the relationship between mobility aspiration and the mobility trajectory achieved. Due to the fact that the sample only allows for the follow-up of students up to grade 10, my

analytical focus was mostly limited to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **III. Results**

My first research question was the following: is it possible to construct an empirical model of achievement that can address the influences on student achievement at the individual or contextual level? The main limitation of the methodology used to develop the achievement models was that the independent variables that could be included were largely limited to measures of endowment and, to a lesser extent, to measures of process and dowry dimensions, due to the methodology of the competency assessments, and not all entities could be included in the model. Nevertheless, the regression models were robust, and typically the effect of all entities and groups of factors could be detected.

In the model measuring the test scores, the strongest effect sizes were the indicators describing the average cultural capital of the class and school, parents' educational attainment and the student's participation in extracurricular activities. Compared to these variables, weaker but independent effects on mathematics test scores were found concerning the

students with ILBD (Integration, Learning and Behavioural Difficulties) and SEN (special educational need) status, gender, type of school, and whether the student had experienced a severe learning failure (grade repetition) in the past. Among the institutional characteristics, the segregated school has a significant effect in multi-school settlements. Independent, less strong effects were found for the characteristics of other family entities; some locality parameters (e.g. the proportion of Roma population living in the region, Northern Hungary and Northern Great Plain regions); and indicators of the school's student composition (social background, motivation), value-added and selection practices.

The interaction analysis showed that the impact of certain institutional characteristics is only influential in certain circumstances: eight-year grammar schools are mainly beneficial for learning communities with high cultural capital; the impact of school added value on test performance is higher for non-church and non-state schools, and in cases where the school does not face a shortage of teachers. Although the effects of factors describing student and family entity appear



to be stronger explanatory variables, model parameters that also account for the stratified specificity of the sample indicated that differences between schools are better explained than differences between students. The model suggests that significant student characteristics, processes and yields explain the results of the mathematics competency test but that it is more dependent on differences between schools and classes. The result is in line with the findings of other authors (Balázsi et al., 2013; Fehérvári & Széll, 2014; OECD, 2013; Széll, 2015b), but the method used in this thesis helps to capture the phenomenon behind their results in a more nuanced way.

The chance of becoming a resilient learner is largely influenced by the same parameters as good test performance: student characteristics, family environment, prior educational experience, characteristics of the class and the social environment of the school's students, the local attractiveness and perception of the school, and some school characteristics. Four factors, in particular, strongly influence the development of resilience: whether the pupil has a learning disability (SEN and ILBD), whether the pupil attends school-based talent

development programs and the average cultural capital level of the class. However, there are large differences between schools in the odds of resilience, most of which cannot be explained by the explanatory variables included.

In terms of the dropout rates, several aspects can be highlighted: whether the pupil has repeated a year in one of the first six grades, whether there is a family history of learning failure (both of which increase the risk), the educational level of the parents, the average cultural capital level of the pupil's class (the higher the capital, the lower the risk), and whether the pupil receives some kind of school-based talent management (which, if so, reduces the risk).

My second research question was whether the human resource conditions of a school's teachers have an impact on student achievement. I hypothesised that the more favourable these conditions are, the more favourable student achievement is likely to be. In the achievement model constructed for the mathematics competency test, none of the relevant criteria showed an independent substantive effect, with only two factors interacting with the inclusion of data on teachers in the model. In schools where there is a problem with the provision

of human resources for teachers, the usual pedagogical value added is visibly impaired in test scores; and in schools where teachers have to teach in segregated school environments, inadequate human resources further worsen the results. I have examined the odds of belonging to a group for resilient pupils concerning several benchmark groups (below average status and disadvantaged pupils). The latter model, i.e. the model fitted to the more homogeneous status reference group, showed that there are large differences in both disadvantage compensation and talent management between schools with the most disadvantaged pupils. However, the differences in resilience cannot be traced back to the characteristics of the teachers under examination, even when measured in terms of teacher qualities and when measured in terms of the human resources endowment of the school. Thus, the differences between schools cannot be traced back to resource mismatches between teachers in the schools. This also implies that untested pedagogical aspects - e.g. teacher attitudes - may have an effect, but differences in human resource endowment per se do not. A stratified model analysis of the dropout rates showed that differences between schools could only be

explained by differences in the composition of pupils, without any effect on teachers' human resources.

As a research question, I raised whether, on the one hand, the underlying data collection captures individual motivations indicating learning intentions; and, on the other hand, if so, how this relates to subsequent educational pathways. In 2011, 62% of sixth-grade students showed rather status-keeping mobility aspirations, and 37% showed status-seeking mobility aspirations if I consider the attainment of a school leaving certificate as the highest possible level of educational attainment. When including a diploma, the proportion of those with status-keeping aspirations is 38 % and 58 % of those with status-seeking aspirations. Mobility aspirations show a high degree of consistency in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades. On the one hand, this means that mobility aspirations are established and anchored early, before the sixth year of primary school. On the other hand, even according to the more detailed indicator, i.e., the attainment of tertiary education, mobility aspirations are essentially status-seeking, largely based on the principle of one-step mobility. Status-seeking mobility aspirations are

also dominant among both graduates and dropouts (85 and 59%).

In general, it is true that mobility intentions are achieved: 65% of those aiming status-seeking and 87% of those aiming status-keeping achieve their goal. The former data shows that mobility intentions alone do not ensure higher attainment and that the individual will of the learner is not enough. Resilient learners' aspirations for status-seeking are more likely to succeed. In contrast, dropped-out learners are less likely to have an incentive effect and more likely to have a protective effect (i.e. those with status-seeking aspirations are relatively more likely to retain their parents' educational status).

My fourth research question was whether aspirations for status-seeking mobility are linked to and have a meaningful influence on student achievement. Incorporating status-seeking mobility aspiration into the achievement model showed to significantly influence and increase the achievement in the mathematics competency test. The class and the mean of the school family background index, attendance at a school with no other reservation, lack of SEN and ILBD status, and status-seeking mobility aspiration are the most important

explanatory variables in the model. Status-seeking mobility aspiration is also one of the most important influential variables when examining resilience. Also, it impacts the degree of influence of the other explanatory variables in the model. The odds of dropping out are also reduced by status mobility aspiration in contrast to the lack of effect of school-level context variables. In addition, even if they drop out at the secondary level, those with status-seeking mobility aspirations are more likely to complete primary school than those without mobility aspirations. For both resilient and dropped-out students, having status-seeking mobility aspirations is associated with better mathematics test scores. However, the models do not improve significantly compared to the baseline model, i.e. this effect is weak.

Finally, a research question was posed: does the incorporation of mobility aspiration into the model change the impact of other factors on student achievement; does it change the structure of the factors affecting achievement? The answer is yes because incorporating mobility aspiration into the model not only has a greater effect on the chances of developing resilience per se but also changes the effects of the other

factors. This is interesting because the differences also indicate whether institutional (school, teacher) or student (individual, family) effects are more important. For those with status-keeping aspirations, the effect of institutional characteristics is more pronounced. In contrast, for those with status-seeking aspirations, the effect of personal and family experience is more relevant. For the latter group, the class community is also decisive, i.e. if the average cultural capital of classmates is relatively high, the chances of resilience are significantly increased in the case of status-keeping mobility aspirations. Thus, for those students who intend to mobility upward, the effects of differences between schools are replaced by differences in individual (family) learning-socialisation experiences. It follows that the Hungarian school system suffers from an equity deficit. At the same time, the contextual effect of the class is also very important, which shows that the internal selection practices of schools also contribute to this deficit.

Returning to the central question of the thesis, whether schools can contribute to the development of student achievement if the student has a will for social mobility, the

answer is that they can, but only to a small extent. As the results have shown, for all learners, aspirations for status-seeking mobility is a new relevant aspect in the model, and other factors - school, family, school system, etc. - show similar effects as in the case where aspirations for mobility are not included in the model. For pupils who drop out, the effects of school context are weak, and individual aspects, even when combined with status-seeking mobility aspirations, can at most increase the chances of obtaining a primary school certificate. In the case of resilient learners, there is no model of school practices to follow, at least not detectable in macro statistics. The fact that individual and family characteristics tend to be stronger than the institutional context in the case of resilience indicates that the school does not reinforce the aspiration to status-seeking mobility, nor is it relied upon. This, in turn, suggests the possibility of an untapped motivational factor for learners.



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