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Career guidance inequalities
in the context of labour shortage.
The case of Roma young people
in Hungary.



ABOUT THE PROJECT

This paper was prepared in the framework of the project “NGOization of school-to-work transition among Roma youth” (NGOST, <https://cps.ceu.edu/research/ngost>). NGOST is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 Program (Grant Agreement n° 845196), running from September 2019 through August 2021.

NGOST is a comparative research project conducted in three EU countries: Hungary, Slovakia and Spain. The project aims at critically examining policies and programmes that support school-to-work transition (STWT) reaching out to Roma youth. It focuses particularly on the ‘NGOization’ of STWT programmes, that is the delegation of state functions to private entities, as a technique of neoliberal governance of minorities.

This paper enquires into how disadvantaged Hungarian Roma young people take decisions about the main turning points of their educational and early career trajectories. The focus is on to understand how they choose among the available opportunities at decisive points in their life course, who guides them and how, and what role guidance and counselling agents, services and activities play in their school years and in their STWT.

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CAREER GUIDANCE INEQUALITIES
IN THE CONTEXT OF LABOUR SHORTAGE.
THE CASE OF ROMA YOUNG PEOPLE IN HUNGARY.

Abel Beremenyi

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INTRODUCTION

This paper enquires into how disadvantaged Hungarian Roma young people take decisions about the main turning points of their educational and early career trajectories. My aim is to understand how they choose among available opportunities at decisive points of their life course, who guides them and how, and what role guidance and counselling agents, services and activities play in their school years and in their school-to-work transition. Understanding guidance as a life-long process, I focus on turning points such as the choice of elementary and secondary school, post-compulsory training/education, apprenticeship, student work, first labour market experience and early work-to-work transitions. The problem is found at the intersection of two highly relevant debates: the one about early school leaving and youth NEET (Not in Education, Employment and Training) on the one hand, and that of the ethnic gap with respect to post-compulsory education and labour market incorporation of Roma young people, on the other hand.

Research shows that social background and membership of minority communities strongly condition the success of one's educational trajectory, as well as one's transition to the world of work (O'Reilly et al. 2019; Walther 2006; Blustein et al. 2002). Social background intersected by ethnicity has a significant influence on young people's preferences, and perceptions of career development barriers (Cardoso and Marques, 2008 cited in Musset and Kurekova 2018).

Roma people represent Europe's largest ethnic minority (approx. 10-12 million) with higher than average rates of social exclusion, poverty, marginalization, and exposed to discrimination from the mainstream societies (Fundamental Rights Agency 2018). Roma is an umbrella term referring to internally highly heterogeneous ethnic groups with diverse cultural, linguistic and territorial identities and varying rates of social inclusion. In Hungary, the Roma population (CoE estimation: approximately 700,000) is unevenly distributed, highly concentrated in the most impoverished regions, and urban zones, with limited access to quality education and diverse labour market opportunities.

In recent decades, significant efforts have been invested in bridging the educational and employment gap between the non-Roma and Roma population (Rutigliano 2020). However, the width of the gap continues to be alarming (Center for Policy Studies 2019). The Europe Union's strategic goals (ET 2020 framework) to reduce early school leaving (ESL) have been among the main priorities in the educational and training domain. ESL refers to those 18-24 year old young people who have attended lower secondary education, but who did not participate in further education or training. 'ESL represents a concern about the personal, institutional, and social obstacles to unfolding the ideal of lifelong learning in practice' (Oomen and Plant 2014, 5). 'Reducing ESL can help towards the integration of young people into the labour market and contribute to breaking the cycle of deprivation that leads to the social exclusion of too many young people'.¹ In 2013, the EU Thematic Working Group on Early

1 "Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving". European Commission, Education and Training Area. November 2013 p.4

School Leaving identified 12 critical conditions for successful policies to counter ESL. Point 11 refers to guidance and counselling: ‘Strengthen guidance to ensure young people are aware of the different study options and employment prospects available to them. Ensure counselling systems provide young people with both emotional and practical support’.² From this perspective, career guidance and counselling is a process beginning at an early stage of schooling and intensifying before turning points such as school change, track choice or during apprenticeship.

EU countries have developed very diverse career guidance and counselling services in terms of scope (educ. levels, age groups), target groups, methods, institutional embeddedness and with respect to educational, training and employment services. In Hungary, ‘career education and guidance is symbolic’ (Schmitsek 2020) and it has never become a developed area, neither in school, nor in educational or employment support services (Borbély-Pecze and Suhajda 2017). In the past few decades, no systematic policy implementation has been put forward, neither in terms of institutional development, nor in teachers’ training (Borbély-Pecze and Suhajda 2017). PISA (2015) data show, that in the OECD sample, Hungary is among those countries with the lowest proportion of 15-year-old students participating in career guidance activities (Musset and Kurekova 2018, 51). On top of that, as a general trend, disadvantaged or at-risk students with a greater need for career guidance tend to have less access to it (Musset and Kurekova 2018; Mann et al. 2020, 52).

Most studies on this issue are based on statistical data or policy review. Very few empirical enquiries on career guidance have been published, and young people’s views and experiences are particularly missing from the literature. This paper follows the few exceptions, such as those of Schmitsek (2020), Haasler & Barabasch (2015) and Filliettaz (2011).

While there is substantial evidence for the fact that ethnic minorities, especially those in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, face more difficulties in the school-to-work transition (O’Reilly et al. 2019; Walther 2006; Fundamental Rights Agency 2018) there is little empirical research on career guidance for ethnic minorities centring on young people’s experience of this transition.

This paper aims to contribute to bridging this gap, offering Hungarian Roma young people’s view on the choices, support and guidance that helped their school trajectory and school-to-work transition. Concretely, this paper is guided by three research questions:

- How do Hungarian Roma young people in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions make decisions on their career throughout their schooling and school-to-work transition?
- Who/what helps them make well-informed, relevant decisions at the most important turning points of their educational and training trajectory and access to the labour market?
- What roles do guidance and counselling agents, services and activities play in their life-courses?

Guidance, policy and practice in Hungary

The phrase ‘career guidance’ refers to services and activities intended to assist individuals in making educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers (Musset and Kurekova 2018). While in practice guidance is often centred on turning points of one’s educational trajectory and school-

2 Idem p.5

to-work transition, it should be understood as a ‘continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions’ (Council of the EU 2008). Under this umbrella term, there are a wide variety of individual or collective activities with the aim of information-giving, counselling, competence assessment, support and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills. (Council of the EU 2008). Some form of career guidance is present in formal and informal settings (school mentoring, career capacitation, ethnic support groups, inter-ethnic peer support, parental care...), but these actions are not necessarily designed, targeted, coordinated or delivered in a coherent and consistent way by professionals, which would provide the best option. All children and young people will rely on an informal guidance system of trusted family and community members, that is often based on cultural norms and belief systems, which Ogbu calls *a folk theory of how to make it* (Ogbu and Simons 1998). However, Van Esbroeck is highly critical of this support system in a swiftly changing global world. He argues that the ‘informal guidance systems may no longer prove to be adequate’ and do not meet new needs (Van Esbroeck 2008, 34). Following the EU objectives of more and better jobs, ‘new forms of flexibility and security are needed, for individuals and companies’, which is conceptualized under the term ‘flexicurity’ (COM(2007) 359 final). Thus, on an individual level, guidance is crucial in ‘creating smooth transitions, and a more inclusive learning environment, and in establishing outreach services and second or third educational opportunities’ (Oomen and Plant 2014, 6). Under this framework, relevant policies, including education and training systems and transversal guidance services, should support the highest possible adaptability of employees (Borbély-Pecze and Suhajda 2017). Nevertheless, institutional settings do not always ensure these principles. ‘Even professional guidance support is not always fully prepared for this new role and that there is still the pressure of informal guidance systems that do not recommend too much change’ (Van Esbroeck 2008, 34).

In their most recent resolution (Council of the EU 2008), EU member states were invited to give special attention to four key areas in CMS namely: the lifelong acquisition of career management skills (CMS); the facilitation of access by all citizens to guidance services; the ensuring of quality in guidance provision; and the encouragement of coordination and cooperation among the various national, regional and local stakeholders (Sultana 2012).

While all the above points are crucial, for the purpose of our research questions, from a social equity point of view, I put the emphasis on the need to facilitate access by all citizens to these services and provisions throughout their life. As Watts says: ‘career guidance services can raise the aspirations of disadvantaged groups and support them in gaining access to opportunities that might otherwise have been denied to them’ (Watts 2009).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand how Roma young people in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions manage their school-to-work transition, I aim to link three lines of research: school choice and career choice, school to work transition in a flexible labour market, and guidance as an inter-institutional practice.

School choice / Career choice

The choice of institutional setting for the different phases of compulsory and post-compulsory education and training is a highly complex process, embedded in contexts where sociocultural and institutional logics interact. To understand it, one must analyse the interaction of ‘policies, strategies, contexts, resources and values’ (Raveaud and van Zanten 2007). Career choices are influenced from an early age by a range of social and institutional agents, and a series of earlier aspirations and choices with respect to education and training. As Perry and colleagues affirm ‘early gaps in misaligned career and educational goals for disadvantaged students may set them on a trajectory that perpetuates educational and occupational inequalities’ (2016, 1) educational aspirations expressed are inadequate for attaining one’s desired occupation. In order to understand how young people make decisions regarding school-to-work transition, I review relevant contributions, firstly, of school choice literature and secondly, that of career choice.

School choice literature: socioeconomic background & cultural capital

School choice ‘is thoroughly social, it is a process powerfully informed by the complex lives families lead and by their biographies’ (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996, 93). British researchers’ main focus in the ‘90s was how parental ‘choice in education is systematically related to social class differences and the reproduction of class inequalities’ (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996, 89). Ball and colleagues (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995; Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996) explore how middle-class parents take advantage of the expanding school market of open enrolment, and how free choice maintains ‘social distinction and educational differentiation, as related to social class and the class composition of schools’. Based on Bourdieu’s (1979) concept of a ‘cultural code’ required for decoding the system, they classify school chooser parents into three ideal types: privileged/skilled (mostly middle class); semiskilled (different class background) and disconnected choosers (mostly working class). Similarly, Benito and González (2007), drawing on data from Spain, cluster families into three categories: those who can choose it out of conviction, those who are not able to avoid it despite their aspirations and those who accept whatever may be offered by the system. They claim that choice is oriented to and informed by class thinking, aiming for a match between family habitus and school habitus (1996:16).

Raveaud and van Zanten (2007) refer to underlying knowledge of the ‘local normative framework’, or an understanding of the general and local school policies and norms in a particular context, as well as the comprehension of the social composition of that context by means of (perceived) similarities and differences. The main question here is that the ‘resources necessary for making informed choices about schools are not available for many parents’ (André-Bechely 2005, 271).

Beyond differences of social background, Raveaud and van Zanten (2007), and Butler and van Zanten (2007), from an international comparative stance, highlight the schools’ ethnic mix as a factor that is seriously considered by parents when it comes to school choice, ‘based on the link they establish between school results and the number and proportion of pupils from advantaged social backgrounds in the school’ (2007, 1). Similarly, in Spain, Alegre and Benito (2012) comment that the perceived social class and ethnic composition of a school population are the main determinants of school choice. A further intermingled factor is the geographically unequal distribution of schools, i.e. the concentration of low socioeconomic status (SES), ethnic minority families in schools situated close to low SES neighbourhoods and the limited capacity of these families to move. In general terms,

and in variable degrees in different EU countries, ‘where you live will determine the quality of your children’s educational experience’ (Butler and van Zanten 2007).

In the Hungarian urban and rural context, Zolnay (2006; 2016; 2018) sensibly demonstrates the role of high commuting rate in the process of school choice. The process of the expansion of secondary school choice, the increasing presence of church-owned schools under the framework of free selection and school mobility foster further processes of segregation. These changes have ended up suiting elites’ strategies of choosing the school that serves to sustain their privileges. What has been made evident by the abundant international literature is that a wider policy framework of school privatisation and free parental choice foster competition and affect the education of working class students, particularly those of minority backgrounds, in a mainly negative way (Tomlinson 1997).

From our perspective, it is crucial to emphasize that, as André-Bechely (2005) points out, educational institutions play a significant role in producing knowledge that parents use for making school choice decisions. Schools ‘position parents in subordinate roles, in race-, class- and gender-based roles that place parents in a situation in which a decision they make [...] may result in less opportunity for the children of others’ (2005, 271) and by this they become complicit in the reproductive role of school in social inequalities. (Griffith, 1995 quoted by André-Bechely 2005).

Career choice literature

Similarly, the career choice literature offers explanations focusing on socioeconomic background and cultural aspects of social groups (Blustein et al. 2002). The former highlights the structural role of class in people’s lives in terms of access to resources in the transition from school to work (Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996; Rossides, 1990; Sewell & Hauser, 1975 cited by Blustein 2002). Among the latter, Willis’ (1977) seminal work, *Learning to labour*, focuses on young working class males’ adaption to work ‘as a crucial and privileged moment in the continuous regeneration of working class cultural forms’ with respect to working relations (Willis 77:2). For him, class culture includes ‘experiences, relationships, and ensembles of systematic types of relationship which not only set particular ‘choices’ and ‘decisions’ at particular times, but also structure, really and experientially, how these ‘choices’ come about and are defined in the first place.’ (Willis 77: 1). Through the ‘working class counter-school culture working class kids creatively develop, transform and finally reproduce aspects of the larger culture in their own praxis in such a way as to finally direct them to certain kinds of work’ (Willis 77: 2).

Similarly to class-related internalised cultural forms which eventually manifest themselves in career choices, anthropologist Ogbu (1978), in his cultural-ecological model, refers to ethnic minorities’ historical adaptation to structural forces (mistreatment, discrimination, slavery, etc.) through what he calls ‘collective responses’. Collective responses manifest themselves in complex belief systems (‘community forces’) with respect to societal institutions, and they offer alternative ‘folk theories’ of how minority members can ‘make it’ in the face of economic discrimination. When it comes to involuntary or ‘caste-like’ minorities (as opposed to voluntary or immigrant minorities) Ogbu (1989) speaks about ‘cultural boundaries and minority youth orientation toward work preparation’ and highlights the paradox of high educational aspirations but low academic performance, that is explained by an oppositional culture that sustains and reinforces minorities’ identity systems (Ogbu 2008). Although Ogbu’s framework represents ethnic groups as homogeneous entities – overlooking gender, socioeconomic background and other inner-group differences – it lays the ground for more

complex analyses to understand the cultural aspects of less successful, or on the contrary, successful career choices of youth with low socioeconomic and minority status.

Blustein and colleagues (2002) conclude that the school-to-work transition is deeply influenced by social class, alongside a series of variables. Individuals of lower SES expressed lower interest in work as a source of personal satisfaction (*functions of work*), less success in attaining their aspirations (*self-concept crystallization*), less access to quality schooling, guidance and counselling (*external resources*), parental support and disruption (*relational resources*) and lower levels of career exploration and planfulness (*career adaptability*) compared to higher SES peers. In all these variables they find that lower socio-economic status corresponds to weaker outcome indicators.

A recent meta-analysis of career choice literature (Fouad and Byars-Winston 2005) affirms the paradox mentioned by Ogbu, that race/ethnicity differences do not seem to influence the career aspirations (hopes, dreams) of young people. However, minorities tend to perceive lower career opportunities and stronger barriers to career attainment than their mainstream peers. Fouad and Brown (2000) conclude that social class influences individuals through their ‘differential status identity’ which is related to one’s psychological and psychosocial dimensions of race and social class. In a more recent study, Jang and colleagues (2019) explore similar variables through a meta-analysis of career choice literature between 2004 and 2017. Their findings are consistent with earlier meta-analyses. Nevertheless, in the career choice and aspirations component, they find a significant race/ethnicity effect with respect to the African American sub-group. Perry et al (2016) educational aspirations expressed are inadequate for attaining one’s desired occupation explore the paradox of misalignment of career and educational goals from the perspective of ethnic minorities. Research shows that misaligned educational and career goals tend to coincide with a lack of knowledge about the steps necessary to achieve career aspirations, and they often lead to lower income and higher rates of unemployment (Sabates et.al. 2011 cited by Perry et al. 2016:2). As ethnic minorities and socially disadvantaged youth have less probability of accessing the social and cultural capital necessary to systematically plan and implement their higher status academic and labour market career, misalignment contributes to the persistence of social inequalities, and creates barriers to upward social mobility (Perry et al. 2016) educational aspirations expressed are inadequate for attaining one’s desired occupation. Perry et al’s results support previous findings, that low income and ethnic minority youth aspire to upward social mobility through good jobs. Nevertheless, they tend to lack a full understanding of the educational steps to follow. Also, the degree of misalignment of educational and career goals may vary across different types of occupations. In Perry et al’s study, those who aspire to the highest status careers are more thoughtful about what is required than those who aspire to careers such as teaching. Many Latino youth have unrealistic career aspirations (or mobility expectations) as opposed to their lower than average academic plans. From the perspective of the ethnic and socioeconomic background disparities, this and other research suggest ‘a strong need to provide targeted career exploration and college readiness programs in low-income schools that disproportionately serve disadvantaged youth’ (2016, 8) educational aspirations expressed are inadequate for attaining one’s desired occupation.

Guidance in STWT

According to a recent survey (Cedefop 2015), education and career guidance are fundamental in helping motivate disadvantaged youth to stay in school and obtain qualifications (Schmitsek 2020). Career guidance activities enable young people to access information, experiences and capitals that are

unavailable to them at home, in their social environment and elsewhere in school (Holland and Mann 2020). Effective guidance is persistently shown to reduce the risk of later dropout, and improve work-related factors (Holland and Mann 2020). Hughes and colleagues' (2016) meta-analysis confirms that the schools' careers education provision, including employer engagement, positively effects educational, economic and social outcomes. Similarly, Musset & Kurekova (2018) highlight the benefits of career guidance in terms of better progression throughout the education stages, greater motivation and self-management skills, higher job satisfaction and better employment prospects and earnings.

Nevertheless, more focused research also underlines that the quality of guidance is as important as its availability over one's school career (Mann et al. 2020). A coherent guiding plan, coordination among guiding actors, and good preparation of guidance professionals are all crucial factors to achieve its benefits. Furthermore, disadvantaged students tend to have less access to career guidance, while advantaged students are more likely to receive it (Mann et al. 2020). Also, in vocational tracks, where disadvantaged students tend to be overrepresented, attention to guidance is often weaker than in academic tracks (Musset and Kurekova 2018).

Finally, while career guidance plays an important role in reducing social inequalities (Musset and Kurekova 2018) it is necessary to contrast individual responsibility with broader structural factors (Arthur et al. 2013), particularly the way neoliberal ideology shapes career guidance (Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen 2018).

Youth transition, STWT in a rapidly changing labour market

In the light of the school choice and career choice literature, it seems evident that the school-to-work transition is a process beginning at an early age and involves an accumulation of experiences influenced by structural-institutional factors and key agents, both institutional and non-professional.

Educational and career goals are greatly influenced by recent economic recessions and swiftly changing global capitalism that have exacerbated early career insecurity (O'Reilly et al. 2019) that is, the difficulty in planning the transition to the labour market. School-to-work transitions tend to follow a contingent line, linked to interactions between individual decisions, opportunity structures and social pathways (Heinz 2009) including cultural patterns (Walther 2006) Pohl and Walther (2007) refer to the decoupling of education and employment, which implies a prolonged, diversified, unstable, fragmented and uncertain transition. It creates situations of 'somewhere in between' or 'yo-yo transitions' in which young people are present in training or education and unemployment at the same time, in downward work-to-work transition or to inactivity throughout a non-linear process (Leschke 2009). As previously foreseeable transition pathways have become highly unforeseeable, several authors speak about the 'biographization' of youth transitions in which young people must 'invent adulthoods,' reliable collective patterns (Henderson et al. 2007). However, in contrast to 'choice biographies,' those with less formal and informal resources and preparation for decision making disengaged partly or totally from the regular transition system and become stuck in what Walther (Walther 2005; Walther, Stauber, and Pohl 2005) calls 'risk biographies,' biographies that 'drift with the tide,' filled with uninformed, unprepared decisions. Risk biographies, embedded in a highly selective school and VET system with particular techniques for segregation and early tracking, instead of relying on a network of choice biographies, tend to be influenced or even initiated by in-school and extra-curricular interventions targeting 'disadvantaged youth' (Walther, Stauber, and Pohl 2005, 224). These biographies often

contrast with their parents' more straight-line mobility trajectories through labour market integration in traditional manual jobs. In the present social and integration policy context, individual responsibility to find an adequate job is emphasized (Pohl and Walther 2007).

SETTING THE SCENE

Fieldwork for this study was conducted just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 emergency in Baranya county, South-West Hungary, particularly in the county capital and its surroundings. The employment rate in Baranya, 57.7% in 2018, remains below the country average despite a high level of public employment, although Pécs city itself shows more favourable rates. At the same time, the unemployment rate, 6.9% in 2018, is among the lowest in Hungary, with a widening gap from the country's average. The active population engaged in public employment and unemployment tend to be poorly trained, while the job offers target mostly those with vocational and technical training (Baranya Paktum 2020). In the chosen region, outside of the county capital city, more than half of the active population under 25 years of age are registered unemployed through the Public Employment offices (Baranya Paktum 2020). The population migration rate tends to be negative, which widens the gap further with respect to other Hungarian regions. Better educated, younger and employable people leave the region for more affluent territories or for other European countries.

The Roma populations' schooling and labour market situation tend to be significantly worse than that of the majority. Roma is a wide category including families with different socioeconomic conditions, levels of education, labour market positions and ethnic/cultural/linguistic traditions. In Baranya, traditionally, Vlah Roma and Boyash Roma communities have been present (Orsós, 2012). While Boyash communities were mostly employed by state-owned farmers' cooperatives, or producers' cooperatives (TSZ) as well as by mining companies, Vlah Roma were more often engaged in commercial or transport activities. Therefore, during state socialism, the housing policies of Pécs aimed to settle Boyash, rather than Vlah families (Neumann and Zolnay 2008). Since the 1970s and until recently, activity in the coal mines declined and the population of the miners' colonies was substituted by Roma families and a trend of marginalization and ghettoization began.

Like elsewhere in Hungary (Radó 2020), school segregation is a central issue with respect to the Roma children in Pécs and its surroundings. In 2007, 72% of disadvantaged students were concentrated in 6 out of a total of 21 schools, and 79% of Roma children attended these particular schools. This phenomenon is of course, in part but not exclusively, due to a geographical concentration of poverty and disadvantaged conditions in urban areas and villages with no job opportunities. In recent years, school privatization segregation has increased (Zolnay 2016; Ercse and Radó 2019). At the same time, within-school ethnic segregation is also a wide-spread practice (Neumann and Zolnay 2008). Dropping out without graduation from elementary school (6-14 yrs) is a very common phenomenon which – together with several other accumulated factors of educational vulnerability – hinders later access to regulated or alternative education forms. The reduction of the compulsory age of schooling from 18 to 16 in 2011 is considered an unfortunate political decision that lead many young people to abandon the school system, particularly the less engaged and most poorly-prepared ones (Györgyi 2019), among them a disproportionately high rate of Roma youth (Mártonfi 2015).

In Hungary, access to secondary school is linked to a selection process based on elementary school grades or an optional entrance exam. In this highly competitive system, secondary school choice requires previous planning and a guidance process. Demand for low prestige technical schools has been steady over the past two decades, vocational schools have lost their popularity while the baccalaureate³ has proportionally gained students (Fehérvári and Híves 2017). Discouraging messages, skill gaps, last minute choice, limited places or insufficient understanding of the secondary school system often channel vulnerable, and particularly Roma students, into less competitive vocational education and training sectors/courses, in less desired and often segregated schools and training centres (Mihályi 2013) that are supposed to mean the quickest way into labour market. In the stream of 2012-16, the dropping out rate from secondary schools was about 10% of the overall population, and almost 50% among the Roma students (Hajdu, Kertesi, and Kézdi 2014). Hajdu et al. speak about an accumulative ethnic gap of opportunities throughout the elementary school years.

In Hungary, technical and vocational training have experienced a three-decade-long transformation, with considerable investment of EU funds (Györgyi 2019; Mártonfi 2013). The VET development goals of the last 10 years have focused on employability and adequation to labour market needs, rather than inclusion, integration or equity objectives – far from the ET2020 priorities of respecting an ‘inclusive VET’ (Györgyi 2019; Mihályi 2013). In 2013, earlier second chance and reengagement programmes were integrated into Híd programmes (meaning ‘bridge’), but these have not produced the expected results in terms of the volume of reengaged students or their graduation rate (Mártonfi 2015). Scholarships and a mentoring service for the most vulnerable pupils have been available in different forms (Polyacskó 2013), but the quality of implementation has been uneven among the institutions (Mihályi and Kovács 2013). Not everyone in need has access to it due to budget constraints, or to its meritocratic character. The budget for these services has gradually decreased (Bathó 2013). The broadest generalist non-competitive scholarship scheme, called ‘Útravaló’, operates in both elementary and secondary school and is available to students from disadvantaged conditions. In its extended form, it fosters student-teacher mentorship, although its unstable and unreliable performance made it less attractive for schools (Mihályi and Kovács 2013). The most successful programme for disadvantaged students with academic or vocational training aspirations has been the Arany János scheme (Fehérvári and Varga 2020) as well as to examine the correlation between student success (resilience, but its competitive entrance procedure makes it virtually unavailable for most aspirants. Recently, the ‘Szabóky’ labour shortage scholarship scheme made vocational training an economically attractive choice (Juhász 2018).

Career education in the curriculum

A final point that I need to touch upon to set the scene for understanding Roma young people’s school-to-work trajectory is how career education is included in national curriculum. Hughes and colleagues’ (2016) meta-analysis suggests that ‘the way in which teenagers think about their futures in education and employment’ significantly impacts their school and labour market trajectory, particularly in terms of the alignment between career aspirations and educational ambitions. Thus, career education proves

3 In this paper I use the following English terms corresponding to the Hungarian terms: Elementary school = ‘általános iskola’ (1-8); ‘Secondary school’ refers to all post-elementary regular training forms, ‘Baccalaureate’ = ‘gimnázium’ (9-12, or 5-12 or 7-12); ‘vocational school’ = szakközépiskola (from 2016 to 2020 ‘szakgimnázium’); ‘technical school’ = ‘szakmunkásképző’ (from 2016-2020 ‘szakközépiskola’).

important in this respect. Career education is defined by these authors as ‘Careers-focused school- or college-mediated provision designed to improve students’ education, employment and/or social outcomes’ (2016, 1:1). It should ideally include career reflection, career exploration, career action, networking, learning environment, career dialogue and career conversations.

Despite the fact that, since 1995, the National Curriculum has explicitly stated that ‘career guidance can only be effective in a longer process and only if it is based on the coordination of different subjects, areas and extracurricular activities’, (NAT 1995, quoted by Borbély-Pecze 2016), guidance and counselling have never become a subject in teacher training courses (Borbély-Pecze and Suhajda 2017). The National Curriculum contains thematic units such as ‘employment, innovation and entrepreneurial competencies’ within the subject of ‘citizenship’ in elementary school; or ‘life-course planning, adult learning opportunities’ in Baccalaureate; or subjects such as ‘Employment 1 & 2’ in VET. Beyond that, several optional one-off career guidance programmes are available for secondary school students. Recently, short-term guiding projects have been made available through European funding in some schools, such as ‘Új patronus’ (new patron).

METHODS

This paper draws on the Hungarian case study of a wider international comparative research project (NGOST) that focuses on the school-to-work transition among Roma youth. The case-study fieldwork focused on a large city with approx. 140,000 inhabitants, in the South-Transdanubia region. Aside from participation in local organisations working with Roma children and young people, I conducted interviews with 34 Roma young people, and 32 professionals related to vocational and adult training, guidance, mentoring or active labour market policies ALMPs. Roma interviewees were contacted through local professionals and my private network. The snowball technique was also helpful. The criteria of selection were the following: age between 16 and 30; born and/or have lived, studied or worked in the county capital city for more than a year; work experience in any remunerated formal or informal setting.

I conducted 34 semi-structured life-course interviews with young Roma women (18) and men (16), between 20 and 35 years of age. The length of the interviews varies between 73 and 115 minutes. In 9 cases the interviews were recorded in 2 or 3 sessions in which complementary questions were set. 7 interviewees were contacted through Skype/Messenger.

Some interviewees were born in the city (15) others in villages and towns of the region, but they all studied or worked in Pécs for more than one year. 26 of them belong (with at least one parent) to the Roma sub-group called ‘Boyash,’ 8 to the ‘Vlah’ sub-group and one to the ‘Romungro’ sub-group. Drawing on Daniel Oesch’s 5-class schema, I grouped the interviewees by their parents’ highest employment status: I found 17 unskilled workers; 14 skilled workers, 1 small business owner, 1 lower-grade service class worker and 1 higher grade service class worker. Most, but not all, interviewees declared their socio-economic status during their childhood as poor or vulnerable.

Name (sex)	Age	Born	Ethnicity	Parents' empl. status	Highest schooling	Scholarship	Guidance	Current job
Julika (f)	23	city	Boyash	skilled w.	VET	no	no guidance	occas. cleaning
Sanyi (m)	28	town	Vlah	small business	Baccalaur. + Adv. VET	VET: public sch + mentor	VET guidance, mentorship	Roma NGO
Rózsi (f)	29	city	Boyash	skilled w.	VET	VET: one year only	VET: guidance, support	large company: cleaning
Lali (m)	24	village	Boyash	skilled w.	VET	VET: public sch	no guidance	large company: unskilled work

For the purpose of this paper, I selected 4 Roma interviewees, two women and two men, two from the large city, 1 from an adjacent town, 1 from a nearby village. Their parents had experienced considerable social mobility, characteristic of the state-socialist system: they all finished at least compulsory school, and many began or completed vocational studies that gave them access to jobs as skilled workers or to start a family business. While three of them lived in precarious conditions, only one was eligible for school scholarships on a regular basis, while the others only occasionally at the post-compulsory stages. Two of them mention a consistent and influential mentoring service in the VET school, while two mention the complete lack of any. Two of them are currently employed at companies and one at a Roma NGO. The fourth does occasional cleaning jobs with no work contract. While there are no particular success stories in these four life-trajectories, they characterise some patterns of school to work transition among Roma young people.

Guidance emerged as a central theme, and an analytical category from the narrations and preliminary phases of the analysis, which was later explored through further interviews with experts.

Our major interest is the informants' interpretation of the facts. That is, I do not aim to double check informants' accounts, for example, on whether they had individual or collective career guidance sessions in elementary school in order to support their secondary school choice. It might be the case that there actually were several sessions, but our informants do not remember having them, which means that they were irrelevant for them, thus they did not influence their choice in any sense.

EMPIRICAL PART

The following short case studies, focusing on guidance and counselling, are contextualized in the above described school and training system, and labour market conditions. What is crucial here is that all four Roma young people are *potential* beneficiaries of what I can describe as the 'pentagon of guidance'. The five key stakeholders in this domain are the schools, the regional pedagogical service, the public employment service, the chamber of commerce, and private for-profit or non-profit organisations

(NGOs). They can all engage users in guidance experiences with very diverse aims, scope and quality. It is however challenging to foresee who finally receives these services at one point or another of her/his trajectory, and why.

The four case studies exhibit complexity in terms of socio-cultural, economic and geographical context, as well as the informants' own schooling, training and labour market paths. Their most important common denominator is belonging to a stigmatized minority and their subsequent experience of anti-Gypsy racism and discrimination. Nevertheless, I also focus on their perception of upcoming opportunities.

Julika (23)

Julika was born in a segregated neighbourhood of a large South-Transdanubia city into a Boyash Roma family. Her parents' work experience in unskilled jobs does not allow them to provide her with relevant training or work-related guidance. She went to a segregated public elementary school and, despite their poverty, she was never granted any scholarship, nor engaged in guidance programmes. She aspired to become a Kindergarten nurse, but could not find any related VET training nearby. She did not feel supported to find a feasible option matching the available opportunities with her interests and restraints, so half-heartedly, she chose a 4 year vocational training course in Commerce to become a shop-assistant.

Maybe I did wrong, that I didn't go for that [Kindergarten nurse training], yeah. After all, I had no other choice than to go into that Sales and Commerce one.

Julika had thought that the course offered both final A-levels ('érettségi') and a wider range of training. But later she learnt the contrary. She suffered anti-Gypsy racism both in school and during the apprenticeship: 'We felt that... we were marginalised in many situations'. For example, they were offered the less attractive places for apprenticeship, and working there, she was humiliated by racist customers. These experiences dissuaded her from working in her profession anymore. At the same time, she did not receive any scholarship, support or guidance, not even to prepare a CV correctly. She has mixed feelings about school.

Thinking back, I'd like to go back to school, but I won't go back anyway

On finishing the training course, she registered at the Public Employment Service, but she was not offered any training or employment programmes.

I went to the PES to register myself and then well, I said, 'For sure in 1-2 weeks I'll find myself a job'. Well, 3-4 years have passed since then and still nothing from there.

Her repeated experiences of anti-Gypsyism and discrimination both in VET school and in the labour-market has had long-lasting effects on her aspirations:

I was told in a tobacco shop that I was not contracted because I scare the customers away [...] then I was shocked when I realized why he said that – because I was Gypsy. I resigned from this profession. I basically didn't want this profession...

A charity organization supported her with career advice, CV writing, job searching and related training. Thanks to this support and her family network, she took up temporary low-skilled manual jobs in factories, cleaning and tasks unrelated to her training.

I worked a lot. I was in so many factories [...] What I love to do is cleaning. So, for about a year and a half I have been just looking for such jobs.

The destructive effect of discrimination on a vulnerable skilled worker's labour market trajectory can be observed. Eventually, Julika went to live in a tiny village, waiting for any low-paid public employment offer from the local mayor.

She has not been able to count on either guidance and counselling or scholarships and she took her most important decisions about studies and work on her own, lacking knowledge and the soft and hard skills needed to access and interpret the necessary information. While the public services disregarded her vulnerable situation, an NGO guided her in CV writing, job searching and in preparation for job interviews.

Sanyi (28)

Sanyi comes from a large Vlah Roma family from a medium-sized town in South-Transdanubia, with entrepreneur parents. Due to a personal relationship with the school director, unlike the other Roma children, he was enrolled in the non-segregated elementary school of the town. Here, although he received a higher standard of education, he also suffered anti-Gypsyism, which left a deep mark on him. He was not offered any scholarships, or academic or professional guidance.

Despite his demotivation, his parents pushed him to take a VET course in locksmithing in the county capital. He obtained a scholarship ('Útravaló') targeted at disadvantaged Roma and started working with a mentor who provided him with strong emotional, social and academic support. Thanks to the mentor's guidance, Sanyi even modified his professional track to better adjust it to the demands of the labour market. His mentor encouraged him to choose the best apprenticeship place out of several available workshops. He received very positive feedback from his boss and colleagues. He describes his experience in VET school as, 'I'm on the wing'. He considers that if it were not for the mentor, he would have dropped out.

I surely would've dropped out or gone in the wrong direction. I think I would definitely have become a criminal...

On graduating, he went back to the placement workshop, but he suffered racist mobbing from his colleagues and decided to quit and never more to work as an employee.

Accidentally, he fell in love with a university student, the daughter of a Roma activist who leads a large regional Roma NGO. This environment pushed him to take A-levels in a Baccalaureate, and an advanced vocational programme (ISCED 5B) in Social & Youth Work. Besides this, he joined the university's Roma Support College, receiving a scholarship and peer support. Again, he had an excellent mentor on the course, whose presence made his studies a smooth experience.

It was so good. We used to meet up a lot. [...] We talked [...] She helped my career, she really wanted, would like me to graduate after this course. [...] I finished this very successfully. With a five-star accolade, it was a great success.

Afterwards, he made the most of an active labour market programme offered by the PES. His girlfriend's family not only served as emotional support for him, but also to motivate and guide him through the labyrinth of the education and training system, as well as access to the labour market.

The particularity of this case is the accidental availability of social and cultural capital through partner choice, which transforms into different forms of tailor-made career guidance and counselling. His VET school mentor also played a key role in his trajectory: he reactivated Sanyi's motivation, fostered his integration into the peer-group, and guided him in short- and longer-term career-choice issues. It highlights the central role of mentoring and support programmes. However, a VET mentor is not required – and probably not prepared – to have an overview of the wide range of labour market sectors. The case also sheds light on the uneven and interrupted character of the public support services, which may abandon young people at crucial turning points, such as the access to the labour market.

Rózsi (29)

Rózsi grew up in a small Boyash Roma family in a large South-Transdanubia city, in a well-connected, but segregated sector of a working-class neighbourhood. Her parents had already experienced a certain social mobility, they both finished vocational training. She performed very well in school, but she did not receive any scholarship or guidance. Once her tutor told her off with these words: 'if you continue like this, you'll be nothing more than a prostitute with many children'. She repeated 8th grade because of family problems. Finally, she enrolled in a second chance secondary school with sensitive teaching staff and an inclusive pedagogy. She felt motivated to continue studying after finishing a VET course. She received an 'Útravaló' scholarship and she had the chance to change her studies during the first year, which she finished with no clear idea how to find a related job and absolutely no information about support structures or labour market opportunities. She was not supported by any guidance or other public services, and the school just offered her another free VET course. In her own words: 'I was just going with the flow'. At the same time, she took up seasonal jobs, public employment or in factories. She engaged in several short 'useless' training courses offered by the PES and one EU-funded full-time 12-month-long training in industrial cleaning with economic compensation. Thanks to this latter, she found a job in this field, with excellent conditions.

I had no great dreams of becoming a top-model, or a singer, or a hotel manager. I had no specific objectives. But I feel I am successful.

Despite her high academic performance and her teachers' encouragement, Rózsi did not develop high career aspirations, thus adjusting her expectations to those of her close environment.

It's so good for me. [...] If I got into an office for the same money, it wouldn't be better. [...] They're taken to task for everything. If they mistype something, there's a big drama made out of it. No, I don't need it. This is calm for me.

Rózsi's case shows the perverse consequences of not enjoying any ongoing guidance throughout one's academic/VET choice and subsequent school-to-work transition, despite one's excellent intellectual capacity and disposition. With a more sophisticated understanding of intellectual work and more focused career choices she could have developed her talents to the full.

Lali (24)

Lali, born into an ethnically mixed family, lives in a tiny Boyash Roma majority village in South-Transdanubia. His parents have had factory and agricultural jobs throughout their lives, which ensured enough income for the family, but which made Lali ineligible for most scholarships and mentoring programmes. After elementary school, he followed his father's profession, agricultural machinery mechanic, without receiving any meaningful guidance from his teachers. *'I don't know why this particular one,'* recalling his choice. In the rural 3-year-long vocational programme he was granted a *labour shortage scholarship* but with no assigned mentor. Due to a teacher shortage, technical studies students received less attention than their peers from vocational studies (which offers A-levels). So, they were provided with less guidance, less IT training, and they had less competitive apprenticeships than the vocational school students, although the option to shift to the vocational programme with an extra two years of training was available for all.

Yeah, I would've obtained A-levels. I really regret not having stayed there, but I said, 'That's enough for me'. I said so.

The state-financed scholarship programme provided no option to continue for an extra two years of vocational studies and his family could not afford it. On finishing technical school, Lali registered with the PES as a jobseeker, but he was not offered any training or work, nor information on further opportunities.

His transition to the labour market can be described as 'going with the flow' of emerging opportunities in the local agriculture industry, seasonal jobs, public employment, unemployment and a short adventure in Germany thanks to family contacts. He believes that in Hungary being a Roma is clearly detrimental in work and he perceived prejudices and discrimination several times.

Your skin is a bit darker: 'Gypsy!' or some grimaces or whispers or whatever. There are some buggers who even say it to your face: 'there goes the Gypsy, the thievish Gypsy!'

Presently, he works in a factory with Roma friends and relatives in an adjacent city as a semi-skilled worker. His description of a good job is as follows:

It shouldn't be a hard, manual job, rather a lighter job that pays well – it won't happen in these times, now. I should have a good car [...] These things... it's just abroad, in Hungary, certainly not.

Lali's poorly detailed description reflects a limited overview of the world of work, and an ignorance of career management skills. Despite his relatively early exposure to work, he recognised that he never received career education, career information on courses, occupations, learning and career opportunities, progression routes and choices. Rather his strategy was 'to drift with the tide', relying on the limited, but locally-relevant information flow of his network. This strategy proved to be successful in maintaining him occupied in precarious, semi-skilled or low-skilled jobs, but unsuccessful in terms of social mobility.

DISCUSSION

Throughout their life course, children and young people are confronted with decision making and turning points, that may have a great influence on their future life opportunities. I have seen that even if their own decision-making capacity grows, they tend to rely on the consideration of significant people, a category that may include a range of formal and informal agents. Also, I could observe that secondary school choice appears to be the first to which considerable attention is paid by family, school, and other agents. In subsequent choices, the mix of guiding institutions and agents gets more complex.

Below, first I will discuss how disadvantaged Roma young people take career-related decisions, then I turn my attention to institutions, organisations and agents who assist them in decision making. Finally, I look at how guidance is delivered and what role it plays in young people's life courses.

How do Roma young people take career decisions?

Elementary school choice

The literature shows that elementary school choice may have a long-lasting impact on subsequent choices. With respect to elementary school choice the four selected Roma young people's elementary guides are their parents, close family and community members. Three of them went to the closest school, which hosted the children of poor, lower working-class families. Following Ball et al.'s (1996) categories, I describe them as *disconnected choosers*. Here, parents do not necessarily lack school experience or sufficient insight into the functioning of the school system. Rather they achieved a certain social mobility in the late state-socialist economy, which has nothing in common with the present state of neoliberal capitalism. Sanyi's parents are the only ones who chose the elementary school that did not cater to their Roma peers, which is a signal of a *semiskilled choosers'* attitude in terms of attention to ethnic mix and perceived quality. Convinced of the importance of an ethnically integrated school experience, they were able to negotiate with school staff Sanyi's regular conflicts with his peers. On the contrary, Rózsi, due to family conflicts, was compelled to finish compulsory schooling first as a 'private student', and later, in a project-based second-chance school. What is common in their experience is the randomness of the educational career guidance, counselling or other support services. Three of them did not receive any, while Rózsi luckily did, in the second-chance school. Rózsi's guidance was a fortunate coincidence, rather than linked to systemic elements.

Post-elementary school choice

Post-elementary school choice is traditionally considered to be among the most significant of career turning points, in which families and schools track children towards academic or vocational studies. The Hungarian school system is known to be among the most selective (Radó 2020), in which tracking actually begins with the free choice of elementary school (Zolnay 2016), and intensifies in the

distribution of children in secondary schools. The National Curriculum concentrates guiding efforts into the 7th and 8th grade of elementary school under ‘career choice guidance’ or ‘further studying guidance.’ Career choice in Hungary, in normal practice, is still considered a one-off event, to which one-off support is assigned (Borbély-Pecze 2016). While it may help, it does not end up being enough to support adolescents – particularly those with limited parental support – to realistically align their career aspirations and educational ambitions.

Julika, on seeing her aspirations of becoming a Kindergarten nurse frustrated, opted for a residual course already late in the enrolment period. She did not consider it a ‘good choice’, but she was determined to finish secondary school anyhow. Sanyi, after his negative school experiences and the complete lack of professional guidance, decided not to continue studying, aligning his career plans to those of his non-school-oriented peers. His parents’ secondary school experience was decisive. They convinced him to attend the vocational school where his father used to study. Trust, easy access and the teachers’ caring attitude lowered Sanyi’s choice-related stress and ensured him achievable success and satisfactory results, which foreseeably compensated for the poor guidance he received in elementary school. Rózsai’s secondary school choice was determined by the school where she finished her elementary studies. Empathetic teachers helped her through the stress of choosing. Nevertheless, it cannot be said she had a well-prepared, widely informed selection process either. Lali, having very limited career aspirations despite his excellent school record, decided on the technical training that was most easily accessible by public transport. It was only his parents who supported him in this choice.

The trajectories of our selected informants lead us to the following findings. In post-elementary school choice, disadvantaged youth are often driven by logics that take them to less competitive courses and to future low-paid jobs with bad working conditions, which limit their social mobility aspirations. Some of these logics can be identified in their path:

- A preference for geographically closer secondary schools, often despite the unequal distribution of the most desired studies (e.g. a broader scope and better quality offered in city centres)
- The tendency for ‘realistic choice’ of secondary school, that is, choosing the one to which access is ensured for students with low school performance. School professionals may recommend realistic (often meaning VET instead of academic) tracks, which students who teachers consider less prepared, can successfully attain.
- A choice of less competitive professional sectors (e.g. agriculture) and professions (e.g. manual jobs) due to the families’ and youth’s mobility aspirations misaligned with their education-training ambitions.
- Students’ low motivation and aspiration with respect to school/training-related issues.
- Students’ limited overview and understanding of how school and qualifications are linked with labour market goals. Immature career development skills (CDS) and knowledge.
- Choice can be influenced by local ethnic community members driven by ‘folk theories’ (cultural beliefs) about how to achieve success in life. Informal guidance based on these beliefs tend to be poorly linked with the reasoning of the globalized labour market.

Choices beyond compulsory school age

In choices beyond compulsory school age, the range of influential agents widens. In the case of disadvantaged young people, the family's guidance often disappears – although parents' support may remain – and many accidental, informal rather than formal ways of counselling occur through school-, peers- and labour market-related experiences. The outreach of formal guidance structures is very weak and accidental, if not inexistent. PES seems to be particularly inefficient as a recruitment agency, rather it operates as an authority managing available publicly financed training courses, and public work.

The secondary schools where the young people study tend to motivate them towards further studying in other VET courses or to finish A-levels in the same centre. Here, guiding actions do not always take the youth's interests and career management into consideration. It is institutional interests to fill courses, and teachers' good intentions that are often in play.

Apprenticeships, on-the-job practice, or student jobs emerge as crucial to our informants' knowledge about the labour market. Some of them experienced racial discrimination, and most of them recognized the precariousness of their labour market status as unskilled workers. In fact, none of them remained in their first profession. Julika and Lali accessed the booming labour market of unskilled workers in harsh working conditions (temporary contracts, subcontracted, non-registered temporary jobs, public employment, foreign migration...). Rózsi and Sanyi decided to search for further possibilities.

Labour market realities are more pressing at this age, and the return to training/education without scholarships is becoming a less realistic option. Meaningful training is perceived as unequally available in time and territory. Scholarships or public funding is a factor that facilitates further studies, though it is by no means enough in itself to re-engage already disengaged youth. Active labour market policies can also be irrelevant if they do not properly match interests and necessities with available offers. But they may become determinant factors, as Rózsi's and Sanyi's cases illustrate.

Who/what helps their decisions at the important turning points?

Our interviews suggest that, rather than coherent plans, a mix of fortuitous events and circumstances influence school choice. While parents are crucial in elementary school choice, secondary school and post-compulsory educational, vocational and work-related decisions are taken motivated by a wide range of agents, institutions and programmes. In the absence of career education, labour market realities emerge under the pressure of poverty.

Parents', older siblings' and close family members' educational experience is crucial in the decision of elementary school selection. Three informants out of four had at least one parent with a vocational school certificate. All three families aspired to at least a vocational certificate (without A-levels) for their children, which is the lowest educational level in Hungary. All but Sanyi's parents, acting as 'disconnected choosers', accepted the closest elementary school. Only Julika benefited from the after-school activities of a Roma NGO, but she did not take it seriously. However, others in our full sample discovered their talent and eventually made informed choices thanks to local NGOs' daily work.

Post-elementary school choice and the preparation process towards it is officially assigned mainly to school professionals and form teachers. In Rózsi's case the second-chance school offered her another VET course in the same institution, not for its suitability to Rózsi's aspirations, but in order to keep her within the school's supportive environment and to ensure she finished it. Lali and Julika were recommended adjacent VET schools by their form-teachers but without comprehensive career

information, and they accepted them with limited motivation. Sanyi and Lali were encouraged by their parents to study a ‘good profession’, but their guidance did not go any further. Sanyi and Rózsi were granted a public scholarship targeting disadvantaged students (‘Útravaló’), but only Sanyi was the beneficiary of the corresponding mentoring, Rózsi was not. Lali was receiving a public scholarship that did not offer mentoring, although he badly needed it.

At post-compulsory stages, the eventual *acknowledgment* of their poor labour market position is a crucial turning point in their school-to-work transition process. In this, an environment that facilitates resilience appears fundamental. It is at this point, where institutional support (scholarships, mentoring, tutors, even school peers) tends to abandon young people. At this point, personal-professional networks, community support or over-bureaucratized public employment services may take a leading role. Sanyi is an outlier in that his personal network had multiple links to the university: he applied for and received scholarships, professional mentoring and tutoring in a Roma-only student organisation.

Roma-focused and other NGOs are also key stakeholders that tend to offer mentoring, consultation or some elements of academic and career guidance. There are longer-term interventions, mostly for younger children, and shorter-term EU-funded governmental training programmes for jobseekers. In the case study, all but Lali enjoyed some short/mid-term assistance of this kind. The Roma NGO network turns out to be crucial in job-related information provision, as I could see in Sanyi’s case, who was pushed towards an active labour market programme for entrepreneurs, that offered him a unique credit opportunity for an enterprise.

Neither in these case studies, nor in the wider data base could I identify anyone who has received training, consultation or a one-off guidance activity from the Regional Pedagogical Services (Career guidance division), the Chamber of Commerce, or from any private services others than NGOs.

In international practice, career guidance as a process is normally coordinated through a network of educational institutions, labour market services and targeted NGOs and private organisations (Borbély-Pecze and Suhajda 2017). While these stakeholders all deliver some sort of guidance programmes, the young people’s interviews did not suggest any coordination between them.

Understanding guidance in wider terms (Council of the EU 2008) as a continuous process of individual and collective activities, in the research field I have identified 5 main groups of formal stakeholders that occasionally support young people’s career management: educational institutions, the guidance division of regional pedagogical services, public employment services, chambers of commerce and industry, and NGOs and other private organisations. I should nevertheless add parents, family and community members, and peers as key stakeholders, as non-professional, or informal agents, especially when the professionals fail to be available and relevant for the young people.

What roles do Guidance and Counselling services play in their life-courses?

Case studies suggest that while school-related services, particularly in elementary and secondary school, reach every student, access to other professional career-related services is contingent, accidental and they include activities of widely varying quality, content and range.

I have learnt that the delivered career services, even if well-intentioned, cannot be considered as professionally prepared and delivered. Services are rarely based on a long-term process, rather they are concentrated in the months before the turning points; they focus more on capacities and economic sustainability (scholarships, funding) than on competences, interests and a supportive environment;

they emphasize the short-term future instead of a longer-term perspective. As a result, pupils rarely perceive that they have taken informed decisions drawing on well-developed career management skills, a wide overview of the opportunity structures and a carefully designed career path. Rather, they remember ad-hoc decisions driven by the *least bad options*, or only available opportunities, ‘going with the flow.’ Sanyi’s case is the only exception, where his accidental personal involvement with an NGO-leader’s family, and his professional involvement in the NGO’s work provided him with a continuous information flow on available opportunities in a planned manner.

Nevertheless, I could observe that even discontinuous and disconnected guidance delivered by formal or informal agents had a great influence on our interviewees in terms of considering their educational and training options, labour market outcomes, and skills and competences in the short, medium or long term.

Beyond the general affirmation that guidance proves crucial in school-to-work transition, especially for ‘non-dominant groups’ (Arthur et al. 2013), I can also conclude that in the observed trajectories the way it is delivered is a far from holistic approach (Van Esbroeck 2008). In this sense, the main findings about the guidance services are the following:

- Discontinuous: Guidance fails to be carried out as a process, or a life-long activity across life cycles, institutions, organisations and communities, where children and young people develop their career. Continuity of guidance is not ensured by any means.
- Disconnected: the different academic and career guidance agents (formal and informal), services and activities are disconnected from one another. No alliances or comprehensive approach appeared in the trajectories
- Segmented: Academic and career guiding agents, services and activities do not consider all aspects of guidance; they do not tend to link career guidance with psycho-social aspects of counselling in a tailor made, personalised fashion (OECD 2010).
- Non-specialised: Most agents are not adequately prepared and well-trained for career guidance. The four trajectories suggest that teachers’ guidance operated in a very narrow sense with respect to young people’s competences, knowledge and timeframe.
- Biased: Well-intentioned guidance by teachers who often lack objectivity (OECD 2010). They may insist on either an academic or VET track without thoroughly analysing its link with broader labour market inclusion. Within-school promotions to other programmes are often driven by the school’s sustainability objectives rather than strictly considering young people’s best interest.

Certainly, all the above findings have to do with wider, structural and institutional dimensions within a process of growing centralisation that manifests itself in a profound change of ownership structure.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper focused on disadvantaged Hungarian Roma young people’s decision making at the main turning points of their educational and early work trajectory. In particular, I aimed to understand three aspects of it: A) how they choose among available opportunities at decisive moments, B) who guides them and how, and, C) what role guidance and counselling agents, services and activities play along their education and school-to-work transitions. Career guidance is a continuous, life-long process that helps identify individual capacities, competences and interests to make informed educational, training and occupational decisions (Council of the EU 2008).

The issue under scrutiny is found at the intersection of debates on early school leaving (ESL), and on the persisting ethnic gap with respect to education and labour market incorporation between Roma and non-Roma young people. In the European Union’s strategic goals (ET 2020 framework) ESL has been among the top priorities of the educational and training domain, highlighting its personal, institutional and social dimensions (Oomen and Plant 2014, 5). Reducing ESL is a key step that contributes to ‘breaking the cycle of deprivation that leads to the social exclusion of too many young people’.⁴

Research suggests that guidance, or in a narrower sense, career development activities can make a difference in helping improve young people’s understanding, in order to align their career aspirations with their educational ambitions (Hughes et al. 2016; Mann et al. 2020; Fouad and Byars-Winston 2005). In this sense guidance and counselling for the most vulnerable youth, particularly the Roma, is a relevant tool for both reducing early school leaving (ESL) and for counterbalancing structural inequalities responsible for the ethnic gap in education and work.

In several EU countries, guidance and counselling has an explicit ESL prevention role (Cedefop 2015). For example, Schmitsek (2020) mentions that Denmark promotes cross-sectorial cooperation of guidance and it has introduced a BA programme in Guidance in order to ensure uninterrupted, life-long guidance provision for vulnerable young people. At the same time, in Hungary ‘career education and guidance is symbolic’ (Schmitsek 2020) and, as I could observe, contingent. A massive centralisation process since 2010 has further weakened any local leeway in acting, which is a crucial aspect in terms of a fine-tuned, tailor-made action, such as guidance.

The lack of attention paid to guidance in Hungary, is not only alarming because the present Hungarian school system does not fulfil its expected role of redressing socioeconomic and ethnic inequalities – among others – but also because, in the swiftly changing labour market, past generations’ experience is of little help. In this context of career insecurity (O’Reilly et al. 2019) where young people need to reinvent adulthoods (Henderson et al. 2007; Pohl and Walther 2007), lacking effective guidance puts them into the most vulnerable position in the exploitive labour market.

4 “Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support - Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving”. November 2013 p.4

Furthermore, from a social justice perspective, it is necessary to discuss guidance beyond **human capital** in critical terms with respect to its engagement with **structural factors**. While a human capital approach aims at enhancing an individual's fitting strategy, the latter – with an emancipatory view – tends to also target wider systemic change (Hooley and Sultana 2016). Blustein and colleagues (2002) highlight the crucial role that social research plays in informing guidance counsellors about 'how social class influences vocational decisions and outcomes' (2002:312). Similarly, racial and ethnic minority status strongly influences the unequal access to labour market sectors and job types, not only directly through discriminatory actions, but also through perceptions of the opportunities available for them (Fouad and Byars-Winston 2005). Nevertheless, as Irving (2015) shows, social justice thinking is widely missing from career advisers' vocabulary. The problem with this absence is not just that guiding agents do not recognise structural injustice, but also that they may be 'serving the status quo and engaging in oppressive practices' (Irving 2011) offering support to students to adjust to difficult conditions, or focusing on serving market needs (Arthur et al. 2013).

In Hungary, in the present, 'embryonic stage' of guidance and counselling services, it would be unjust to blame formal and informal guiding agents who work with Roma young people – in a fragmented, discontinuous, disconnected and biased manner – for the overall failure to effectively contribute to the reduction of early school leaving, and to narrow the STWT gaps that exist with respect to young people's ethnic and socio-economic background. As I have shown, despite everything, many one-off forms of guiding can still trigger positive change in young people's life. I believe that any future intention to strengthen a cross-sectorial lifelong guidance system must be informed by critical social research, and through a conscious practice of balancing market demand with the goals of social mobility and equity.

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