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**PREVENTION OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING WITHOUT  
QUALIFICATION,  
CHARACTERISTICS OF CAREER GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS  
WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

Theses for doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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## **Introduction**

This doctoral dissertation focuses on the prevention of early school leaving without qualification, primarily through the exploration of the characteristics of career guidance for students with special educational needs (SEN) and on the analysis of the related challenges of the transition between primary and secondary school, based on a county-level sample.

The rapid transformation of the 21st-century labor market, the technological changes, and the economic processes significantly influence young people's career and school choice decisions. Employment roles are becoming increasingly complex, professions are changing rapidly, while new competencies are becoming more and more important and indispensable expectations (OECD, 2024). These processes pose particular challenges for young people who are required to make decisions as early as their primary school years about their further studies and secondary school choices that shape their future careers.

The significance of career guidance in this context is increasing. Career guidance should address choosing the right secondary school or profession, but it should also prepare students for lifelong learning, developing realistic self-awareness, and forming a future vision (Budavári-Takács, 2012; Kenderfi, 2011). The career guidance process is particularly critical in transitional life stages – such as choosing a secondary school upon graduating from primary school – when poorly founded decisions can increase the risk of early school leaving (Imre et al., 2018; Paksi et al., 2020).

Early school leaving without qualification is one of the most serious problems of European societies and educational policy. The EU's target for 2020 was to reduce the proportion of school leavers without qualifications to below 10% (European Commission, 2024). Although improvements have been made in many countries, the phenomenon remains present, especially among the disadvantaged and the students with special educational needs (SEN) (Paksi et al., 2020). According to EU data, the rate of early school leaving among SEN students is 22.2%, while among non-SEN students it is roughly half of that (European Commission, 2024).

Hungarian research also highlights that the process of dropout often begins already in the lower grades of primary school, and it is closely linked to frustration, negative learning experiences, and inappropriate career decisions (Harmatine et al., 2014; Suhajda & Kovács, 2021). The problem is exacerbated by the fact that schools often do not pay sufficient attention to identifying students' strengths, or to applying differentiated, adaptive pedagogical methods (Nahalka & Zempléni, 2014; Nahalka, 2022).

Recognizing the link between career guidance and early school leaving is particularly important in the case of students with special educational needs. The choice of secondary institution increasingly impacts their education, quality of life, and labor market opportunities. The SEN status often goes hand in hand with difficulties in integrating into the school community, isolation, and loss of learning motivation, all of which contribute to dropout (Kenderfi, 2019; Wilson et al., 2020).

The review of the literature shows that career guidance activities can effectively reduce the likelihood of early school leaving, especially when they build on students' self-awareness, interests, and abilities (Szilágyi, 2007; Pogátsnik, 2018; Tajtiné, 2021). Personalized support, system-oriented approaches, and the involvement of families contribute to successful career choices (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Welch, 1987). The OECD (2024) Career Readiness project highlighted that students who participate early and regularly in career guidance programs have more stable career plans and better labor market opportunities.

In the Hungarian public education system, career guidance tasks have been given a prominent role in the National Core Curriculum (NAT) from 1995 to 2020, yet in practice, career guidance activities often boil down to campaign-like events where students remain passive recipients (Tajtiné, 2021; Suhajda et al., 2022). The complexity of the secondary school admission system and the information overload further complicate the decisions of students and their parents, especially for students with SEN, whose choices are restricted by expert reports and institutional requirements (Aáry-Tamás & Szirmai, 2022).

## **Research Aim**

The aim of this research was to identify the information-gathering and decision-making characteristics and challenges of 8th-grade primary school students and their parents, with a special focus on students with special educational needs (SEN), in the transition between primary and secondary schools. Fragmented school enrollment and career information availability may lead to poorly founded secondary school choices, which in turn may become one of the causes of early school leaving without qualification.

The aim of the research was to reveal which factors and informational deficiencies most influence the secondary school choices of students – particularly those with SEN – and their parents. Based on the theoretical background, it was assumed that access to appropriate and processable information could reduce the proportion of forced choices and misunderstandings.

## Main Objectives

1. To explore the research problem: to present domestic and international trends in early school leaving, with a special focus on SEN students.
2. To examine the theoretical background: to analyze career guidance theories and models (e.g., system-oriented, human ecological approaches) and their relevance in supporting SEN students.
3. To identify correlations: to explore the relationships between SEN status, career guidance, and early school leaving.
4. To define preventive opportunities: to investigate how career guidance can reduce the risk of dropout and which good practices can help SEN students progress successfully.
5. To formulate practical implications: to provide recommendations for pedagogical practice, career guidance programs, and education policy.

## Research Method

The study was conducted in Heves County in the 2021/22 school year among 8th-grade primary school students and their parents. The total population was 2,682, of whom 212 students (7.96%) were diagnosed by an expert (KSH, 2022).

1,127 parents consented to participation in the research (42%), and a total of 824 student questionnaires and 688 parent questionnaires were processed. Based on coding, the two types of questionnaires could be matched in 253 cases, thus creating the “family subsample.” Separate subsamples were formed according to SEN and non-SEN status, which made the comparative analysis possible.

Due to the complexity of the research, four sub-studies were distinguished:

1. Mapping of inclusive secondary schools with operating licenses in Heves County.
2. Examination of students’ secondary school choices and influencing factors.
3. Examination of parents of children with and without SEN regarding their children’s further education plans.
4. Examination of parents’ involvement in career guidance processes.

Two main methods were used in the study:

- Document analysis: the founding charters and professional documents of 32 secondary schools in Heves County, as well as the Pedagogical Service’s institutional register were analyzed, supplemented by public databases and school websites.

- Survey: questionnaires for students and parents were designed, focusing on plans for school choice, desired qualifications, visions for the future, attitudes toward dormitory accommodations, most important abilities, and motivations for school choice.

Data collection took place in January 2022, right before the central written entrance exam, during the one-month period preceding the application deadline, when presumably every family already had a concrete idea about further education. Questionnaires were completed in both paper and online form, with the involvement of teachers and designated contact persons.

### **Analytical Methods**

Quantitative methods were used in data processing. In addition to basic distribution indicators, difference and correlation analyses were performed. For nominal variables, Chi-square tests were applied; for ordinal variables, Spearman's rank correlation was used. The analyses were also carried out broken down by subsamples (SEN / non-SEN status), thus ensuring comparability.

### **Ethical Considerations and Reliability**

Anonymity and data protection were key aspects at every stage of the research. Parents gave written consent for their children's participation. Completion of the student questionnaires was voluntary, while the documents used originated from public sources, so no authorization procedure was required. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Eszterházy Károly Catholic University.

The sample size and the creation of separate subsamples ensured that the results were sufficiently well-founded, while the four sub-studies enabled the research problem to be explored from multiple dimensions. Representativeness can only be discussed in terms of the gender ratio among students with SEN status. Therefore, the rest of our research findings can only be applied to the study sample.

## **1. Sub-study – Mapping of Inclusive Secondary Schools in Heves County**

### **Research Question and Hypothesis**

The aim of the first sub-study was to explore what kind of secondary school educational provision is available for students with special educational needs (SEN) in Heves County, and whether this provision offers them more limited opportunities compared to their non-SEN peers.

**Hypothesis (H1):** Students with SEN – based on the SEN categories indicated as acceptable in the founding charters/professional documents of secondary schools – have more limited opportunities due to regional access and available school types than their non-SEN peers.

### Sample and Method

The basis of the research was formed by the founding charters/professional documents of 32 secondary schools in Heves County, as well as the institutional register of the Pedagogical Service. The document analysis focused on the SEN categories officially indicated as acceptable by institutions (e.g., students with motor disabilities, sensory impairments, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, speech disorders, and other psychological developmental disorders).

As a supplementary data source, the student questionnaire was also included: out of 824 students, 197 (23.9%) reported having an expert opinion. This subsample provided direct student perspectives alongside the document analysis.

### Main Findings

1. Limited institutional availability:
  - The 32 secondary schools offered a total of 39 training programs, but the acceptance of SEN categories was highly uneven.
  - The most frequently indicated category was “other psychological developmental disorder” (in 22 institutions), while, for example, students with autism spectrum disorder were accepted in only 7 institutions.
2. Restriction by school type:
  - Grammar schools (gimnázium) indicated acceptance of students with autism spectrum disorder in only one case, while most technical schools and vocational schools declared acceptance.
  - Acceptance of students with speech disorders was almost completely denied in grammar schools (except one institution).
3. Geographical challenges:
  - For several SEN categories, only 1 or 2 institutions in the county provided access.
  - This automatically increases the need for commuting, while 44.2% of students reported that they would definitely not accept dormitory placement.

4. Students' intentions for further education:
  - 95% of students with expert diagnoses indicated their intention to continue education.
  - They most often preferred vocational schools (41.6%), followed by technical schools (21.3%) and grammar schools (19.8%).
5. Decision-making factors:
  - The most important factors: “vocational qualification + secondary school leaving exam” (41.1%), “specific vocational training” (34%).
  - Avoidance motivations (e.g., avoiding entrance exams, buying time) were much less significant.
  - A significant correlation was found between parental education level and students' decision-making criteria: with lower level of parental education, proximity to home, school reputation, and “no-tuition” status weighed more heavily.
6. Informational asymmetry:
  - The main source of information for SEN students was parents/family (160 students), followed by the internet, and teachers.
  - School visits or open house events and career guidance consultations were less frequently used sources, which points to limited access to information.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The results confirmed the hypothesis: students with SEN indeed have significantly fewer options for secondary school choice than their peers. This limitation stems partly from the restrictions recorded in institutional documents, and partly from geographical accessibility.

The research identified four main problem areas that narrow opportunities.:

1. Difficulty in accessing information (lack of transparency on websites, fragmented career information).
2. Incomplete or inaccurate specification of SEN categories in documents.
3. Discrepancy between declared acceptance and actual admission practices, requiring strong parental advocacy.
4. Geographical challenges and difficulties with dormitory placement
5. The findings highlight that, for students with SEN, decisions about further education often involve compromises and forced choices, increasing the risk of dropout.

The results reinforce conclusions found in earlier literature (Liskó, 1996; Lannert, 2005; Csapó et al., 2009; Dunn et al., 2004): socio-economic background, lack of information, and limited accessibility directly appear as selective factors in the transition between primary and secondary school. (Borbély-Pecze et al., 2019; Tudlik, 2020; Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2016).

## 2. Sub-study – Students’ Secondary School Choices and Influencing Factors

### Research Question and Hypothesis

This sub-study aimed to explore eighth-grade students’ the aspirations for secondary school choice: which school types they preferred, which abilities they considered their strengths, and what factors influenced their decisions.

**Hypothesis (H2):** Students’ secondary school choice is determined primarily by the selection among “easily accessible” schools, and less by interest-based choices.

### Sample and Method

A total of 824 students completed the questionnaire (56.3% male, 43.7% female). The vast majority attended general primary schools (96.6%), while a smaller proportion studied in special schools (EGYMI) (3.4%). The questionnaires focused on the direction of secondary school choice, desired qualifications, self-reported strengths, future prospects, and sources of information.

For data processing, descriptive statistical indicators, cross-tabulations, Chi-square tests, Cramer’s V association coefficients, and Spearman’s rank correlations were applied.

### Main Findings

1. Further education aspirations:
  - 91.9% of students intended to continue their studies, and only 0.7% rejected secondary education entirely.
  - 34.5% indicated aspirations for higher education, while 38% were still undecided.
2. Preferred types of secondary schools:
  - Most popular: grammar school (32%), technical school (31%), and vocational school (27%).

- Vocational training schools or specialized secondary schools (szakiskola, szakgimnázium) were rarely chosen (5–5%).
  - In decision-making, “vocational qualification and secondary school leaving exam together” (40%) and “obtaining a specific vocation” (26%) appeared as dominant factors.
3. Decision-making criteria:
- Most important: opportunity to enter higher education (18%), advanced language learning (12%), obtaining both vocational qualification and secondary school certificate.
  - Avoidance motivations (e.g., gaining time, avoiding entrance exams) were marginal (below 2%).
  - Significant correlation was found between chosen school type and decision-making criteria ( $p < 0.001$ , Cramer’s  $V = 0.510$ ).
4. Parental background:
- About 15% of students could not specify their parents’ highest level of education, indicating lack of information.
  - Among fathers, vocational training dominated (31.6%), while among mothers, secondary school + vocational qualification was most common (23.9%).
5. Impact of school type and scholarships:
- 20% of students indicated that the type of management (whether the school is the property of the state, a church, or a foundation) influenced their choice.
  - The cost of foundation schools was a significant factor (44%).
  - Vocational training scholarships influenced 37% of students’ decisions, primarily for financial reasons.
6. Desired qualifications and motivations:
- 36% considered secondary school certificate + vocational qualification realistic, 33% aimed for a diploma, and 20% for a vocational certificate.
  - Motivations: interest-based decision-making was strongest (59%), followed by good salary (19%) and trying out abilities (16%).
7. Dormitory and mobility:
- 37% of students would definitely not move to a dormitory, 38% would only if necessary, while 21% would gladly accept.
  - More than half (52%) planned to attend secondary school in another municipality, though 22% did not intend to move away even in adulthood.

- For international relocation 32% reported intent to work abroad, 28% to move permanently, while 58% rejected studying abroad.
8. Professional interests and strengths:
- Most chosen fields: technical/engineering (30%), working with people (22%), commerce/finance (17%).
  - Strong gender differences ( $p < 0.001$ ; Cramer's  $V = 0.560$ ): females preferred working with people, commerce, and arts, while males chose technical fields and sports.
  - Most frequently reported strengths: physical endurance (28%), creativity (18%), networking/social skills (17%).
9. Sources of information:
- Most frequently mentioned: parents, teachers, school visit/open house, career guidance counseling (240 mentions).
  - More than a quarter of students had already chosen their secondary school without attending an open house.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The hypothesis was partly confirmed: while the “easily accessible” factor played a strong role in school choices, interest-based decisions appeared much more prominently than expected.

The study highlighted the role of information gaps: many students lacked knowledge of their parents’ education, school property ownership types, or the full range of secondary school options. Participation in career orientation programs was widespread but did not always lead to well-informed decisions.

Gender differences (e.g., professional interests, decision-making criteria) and the impact of socio-economic background (e.g., parental education, influence of scholarships) were consistent with tendencies previously reported in the literature (Lannert, 2005; Lyche, 2010; Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2016).

Limitations: potential inaccuracies in self-reported SNI status and distortions caused by lack of information.

Further possibilities: raising students’ awareness of the contents of their expert diagnoses and strengthening self-knowledge components to make career guidance programs more effective.

### 3. Sub-study – Examination of Parents of Children With and Without SEN

#### Research Question and Hypothesis

The aim of this sub-study was to explore how parents relate to their children's abilities, future studies, and social mobility. Special attention was given to the role of SEN status in shaping parental expectations and preferences.

**Hypothesis (H3):** More educated parents prefer school types leading to higher educational attainment for their children, even in the case of children with SEN.

#### Sample and Method

The questionnaire was completed by 688 parents, the vast majority of whom were mothers (92.4%). Responses were collected from 64 schools in 52 municipalities. Among their children, 24.1% (166 students) had SEN status.

The questionnaire, aligned with the student version, investigated desired secondary school types, preferred highest educational attainment, children's strengths, school performance, parental support strategies, involvement in career guidance, and future prospects. For data analysis, descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, Chi-square tests, Cramer's V values, and Spearman's rank correlations were applied. In addition, family questionnaires were created by pairing student and parent responses using index variables.

#### Main Findings

1. Parental aspirations and preferred school types:
  - 32.4% of parents preferred grammar school, 30.2% technical school, and 24% vocational school for their child.
  - Parents of SEN children more frequently chose vocational schools (31.9%) and vocational training schools (11.4%), whereas mothers with higher education degrees mainly preferred grammar schools.
  - The mother's educational level showed a significant correlation with the chosen school type ( $p=0.000$ ; Cramer's  $V=0.458$ ).
2. Desired highest educational attainment:
  - Overall, 83.4% of parents wanted at least a secondary school certificate for their child; 37.6% preferred a university degree, 34.2% secondary school certificate + vocational qualification, and 22.3% considered a vocational certificate sufficient.

- More educated parents significantly expected higher qualifications for their children ( $p=0.000$ ; Cramer's  $V=0.383$ ).
  - The most important motivation was the child's interest (59.9%), followed by abilities and the prospect of higher income.
3. Parental influencing factors:
- 16.1% of parents reported that the type of school property ownership (state, church, foundation) influenced their decision, primarily due to the required monetary contributions to the church or the foundation.
  - For parents of SEN children, 19.3% considered school property ownership particularly important.
  - Vocational training scholarships motivated 20% of parents.
4. Children's strengths (as perceived by parents):
- Most frequently identified: communication skills (21.2%), creativity/idea generation (19.8%), and physical endurance (15.8%).
  - Parents of SEN children emphasized communication (25.3%) and creativity (21.1%) in particular.
5. Parental support in career orientation:
- 77% of parents either fully left the decision to their child or only responded when asked.
  - 30% actively searched for information, but overall involvement in school career orientation programs was low (22%).
6. Work-related values:
- The majority of parents (48%) wanted their children to work in a place where they would be appreciated and they would experience a good atmosphere.
  - Altruism (19.3%) and intellectual challenge (10.8%) were also important.
  - Financial considerations were less emphasized (8.7%).
7. Mobility plans:
- Nearly half of parents (49.3%) did not plan for their child to attend a secondary school in another municipality.
  - 22% supported the idea of their child working abroad, while most parents rejected studying abroad.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The hypothesis was confirmed: more educated parents indeed preferred secondary schools leading to higher educational attainment for their children, even for those with SEN. Parents play a key role in career decision-making, and their aspirations strongly correlated with their own educational background (Lannert, 2005; Tajtiné, 2010).

An “upward one-step mobility” pattern was observed: parents with lower education generally aspired for their children to reach at least one level higher qualification than themselves. The exception was parents with higher education degrees, who often considered a secondary school certificate sufficient for children with SEN (Boudon, 1981; Bourdieu, 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Lyche, 2010).

Parents of SEN children tended to have “more modest” expectations, placing greater emphasis on proximity, financial constraints, and practical considerations, while other parents prioritized quality and opportunities for advancement.

Work-related expectations also highlighted the importance of positive atmosphere and appreciation, suggesting that parents transmit value-based models of the world of work to their children.

## 4.Sub-study – Examination of Parents’ Involvement in Career Guidance Processes

### Research Questions and Hypothesis

The central question of the fourth sub-study was to what extent and in what ways parents are able to participate in school-based career guidance programs, from which sources they obtain information, and how their involvement influences their child’s choice of secondary school.

**Hypothesis (H4):** More educated parents of children with SEN are more actively involved in school career guidance activities than parents with lower levels of education.

### Sample and Method

The analysis was based on 688 parental questionnaires and 253 paired family questionnaires. The majority of the parent respondents were mothers (90.9%). In the family questionnaires, 43.9% of the children were girls and 56.1% boys. Of these, 5.1% attended a special education institution (EGYMI) and 94.9% general elementary school.

For data analysis, descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, Chi-square tests, and Spearman's rank correlations were used, with particular attention to the impact of the mother's educational level.

## Main Findings

### 1. Difficulties perceived by parents:

- Parents of children with SEN reported that their greatest difficulties were the limited school choice options and the fact that secondary schools were not welcoming their children.
- Parents of non-SEN children cited the high percentage of tuition-based schools and their children's uncertainty about future plans as the main problems.

### 2. Parental participation in career guidance programs:

- Parents participated most often in individual career counseling (43%), followed by group counseling (23.7%) and career orientation days (18.6%).
- The most needed yet lacking programs were parental career orientation clubs (23.1%) and group counseling sessions (15.4%).
- 40.4% of parents of SEN children attended parent-teacher conferences on career choice, and 30.1% participated in individual counseling.

### 3. Parental support and information gathering:

- The most common form of support was initiating discussions (131 cases) and gathering information (54 cases).
- The most frequently mentioned sources of information were acquaintances/friends (88 mentions), the internet (66), and teachers (52).
- Children themselves most often indicated family, teachers, and online resources as their main information sources.

### 4. Role of teachers and helpers:

- 69.6% of parents considered teachers supportive, while 13.4% saw them only as administrative helpers.
- 23% of parents stated that homeroom teachers helped them with everything, while 14% reported receiving no help at all.
- The involvement of special education teachers and remedial teachers was limited: nearly half of the parents of SEN children did not turn to them, and those who did, reported mixed experiences.

5. Differences between parents' and children's responses:
  - Significant discrepancies emerged in several areas (e.g., participation in central entrance exams, perceptions of strengths, secondary school choice preferences).
  - Parents tended to prefer technical schools and vocational secondary schools, while children leaned more towards grammar schools and vocational schools.
  - Children more frequently emphasized the importance of scholarships and pocket money opportunities.
6. Work values and mobility plans:
  - Parents primarily valued appreciation and a good workplace atmosphere (52.2%), while children emphasized financial security (30.4%).
  - Children were more open to mobility (moving, working in another town or abroad) than their parents.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The hypothesis was not fully confirmed: although more educated parents tended to participate more actively in certain programs, the overall level of involvement of parents raising children with SEN was not higher. This finding is consistent with earlier studies (Kenderfi, 2019; Borbély-Pecze & Suhajda, 2017; Suhajda, 2022; Tajtiné, 2021).

Parents are key actors in the career guidance process, but their level and form of involvement vary greatly. The results highlight three major problem areas:

1. Information gaps and distortions in parents' and children's responses.
2. Limited access to programs, especially among parents with lower educational attainment.
3. Forced choices and limited options for families with SEN children, which can increase the risk of dropout.

Overall, parental involvement in career guidance processes is a critical factor, but the results point to inequalities and shortcomings in institutional support.

## Conclusions and Methodological Recommendations

### **Incorporating New Scientific Results into the Methodology of Educational Science**

The uniqueness of this research lies in the fact that, unlike previous studies, this one did not analyze student and parent responses separately, but developed a combined family sample. The "family questionnaire," and within it the sub-sample of families raising children with SEN,

made it possible to identify new, evidence-based statistical relationships for which no prior data had been available in the literature.

The originality of this approach lies in its ability to make intra-family discrepancies visible, i.e. the contradictions, and information gaps that directly affect decisions regarding secondary school choice. This proved to be a particularly critical factor for parents raising children with SEN.

The research confirmed that in the career guidance process, it is not sufficient to support only the students: parental involvement and assistance in the flow of information between child and parent are equally essential. This is especially necessary in a system since there is no unified national information system for secondary school enrollment in Hungary, leaving schools and pedagogical service professionals (career counselors, teachers, special educators, remedial teachers) to compensate for this lack.

Based on the new scientific findings, it became clear that desires and realities simultaneously shape students' decisions. Desires inspire, but reality (abilities, financial circumstances, available institutions) sets boundaries for decisions. Parents play a dual role in this: they transmit values and attitudes (towards work and learning), provide encouragement, and offer information, but often struggle with difficulties in processing information themselves.

From the results, three main intervention foci can be identified:

1. Improving the school climate and strengthening communities to increase students' sense of belonging.
2. Providing realistic career information that helps students and their parents make future-oriented decisions.
3. Developing personality and self-awareness, supported by psychological assistance if necessary, using differentiated pedagogical methods and learning strategies.

### **Methodological Recommendations**

Building on the results of the combined family sample, a methodological recommendation package was developed with the primary aim of supporting both parents and students simultaneously.

1. Networking career guidance services: Strengthening cooperation among career counselors, teachers, special educators, parents, and labor market actors.

2. System-based career guidance: Integrating all relevant support environments of the child (family, school, community) into the process, using the human ecological model.
  - o Methods of involving parents: information evenings, parent workshops, online platforms, consultations, supportive parent communities, showcasing best practices.
3. Strengthening constructivist approaches: Actively involving students in their own career guidance process, developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and supporting individual learning pathways.
4. Adaptive career guidance methods: Using personalized tasks, questionnaires, and interactive sessions for processing information, while taking into account students' individual progress.
5. Self-regulated career learning process: Enabling students to direct their own career exploration pathways, supported by reflective practices and motivation-sustaining techniques.

The central message of this methodological framework is that career guidance can only be effective if parents and children are supported simultaneously, and if assistance is provided, it does not simply include accessing information but also support in processing and interpreting it.

## **Outlook and Recommendations for Development in the Field**

International models (ECCP, Check & Connect, MST) demonstrate that supporting children must occur at multiple levels—family, school, and community. By contrast, Hungarian programs (Útravaló, Orientation Year, Dobbantó, Workshop School, AJTP) are often one-dimensional, as they lack the systematic involvement of families and external professionals.

Based on this research, the following development directions can be recommended:

- Professional training for teachers, career counselors, and special education teachers.
- Interdisciplinary cooperation, involving psychologists, social workers, and career counselors.
- The use of digital tools and artificial intelligence in disseminating career information (e.g., VR simulations).
- Active involvement of parents through information sessions, interactive workshops, and consultations.

- Strengthening labor market connections: interactive professional programs, open days, and portfolio building.

The main challenge for the future is the specific educational environment of Generation Alpha: digital natives who enter the labor market with different expectations and skills than the Generation X teachers who educate them. This gap justifies a rethinking of teacher roles and the modernization of career guidance practices.

## **Summary**

Based on the experiences of my two decades of work as a career counselor, in my dissertation I examined career guidance as a tool for preventing early school leaving without qualifications.

The evaluation of the four hypotheses clearly confirmed that students with SEN start their secondary school choice process from multiple disadvantages: the limited range of educational opportunities, limited mobility, information gaps within families, and the mismatch between parental aspirations and students' interests all increase the risk of early school leaving without qualifications.

The novelty of the research was the creation of a combined family sub-sample, which allowed for the direct comparison of parental and student perspectives. This made it possible to uncover contradictions and information gaps that had not been empirically documented in previous studies.

The conclusions of the research provided the basis for methodological recommendations, which suggest that career guidance can only be effective in preventing early school leaving if it simultaneously supports both students and parents, and approaches the process from a systemic perspective.

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