
ESZTER BERÉNYI*

Social selection step by step: The case of the Early Selective Grammar Schools in Hungary

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* [berenyi.eszter@tatk.elte.hu] (Eötvös Loránd University)

Abstract

The article scrutinises the application process and its consequences in terms of educational inequalities in early selective grammar schools in Hungary. The focus is on the almost one-year-long process of preparation for the entrance exams to these grammar schools. Its main aim is to depict how the gradual nature of getting into secondary education intensifies social selection within the educational sector. The analysis is based upon the findings of a mixed method research, of which the results of the two waves of the survey and the consecutive interviews will be analysed.

The article provides evidence of successful practices during the preparation process to these schools, as well as evidence of self-exclusion mechanisms for socially disadvantaged families. Overall, the results suggest that the most important selection factors are not the written or oral entrance exams themselves, but the decision to enter and remain in the preparation process, as well as the strategic decisions made by the parents during the preparation process.

Keywords: secondary school, school choice, tracking, self-exclusion, entrance exam, educational inequalities

1 Introduction: tracking, school choice and early educational selection

This article presents the findings of the research ‘Entrance to the ESGS: inequality of chances and resilience’ which scrutinises how educational selection takes place in the case of early selective grammar schools (ESGS) in Hungary, and what happens during the process of preparation for the entrance exams to these grammar school tracks. It also wishes to deliver evidence whether this particular type of grammar school track can serve as a mobility channel for students coming from the lower strata of society or, on the contrary, it rather contributes to the educational reproduction of social inequalities.

The approximately school-year-long preparation process for the entrance exams to these schools will be scrutinised as a long step-by-step process, using the analytical logic of Mare (Mare, 1981) who conceptualised the educational structure as hierarchically con-

structured. Mare emphasised that educational attainment is a result of dependent probabilities where entrance into the next step is always the consequence of earlier steps. The subject of Mare's analysis is the (in)equality of chances in the educational system through the different educational levels. In this article this logic will be adapted to the analysis of the almost one-year-long preparation process for the Early Selective Grammar Schools.

After an 8-year-long elementary school education, Hungarian students enter the secondary school system, which consists of very different tracks ranging from the academic 'grammar schools' or Gymnasium to vocational schools. A special type within the academic schools offers early tracks for those who wish to leave elementary school after the 4th or the 6th grades. These Early Selective Grammar School Tracks are the most prestigious tracks within the academic school type, and applicants have to enter into competition and pass an exam if they want to get selected. Most of these schools are state-maintained, but there are also many church schools and, to a lesser extent, private schools that charge tuition fees.

Since these schools exist within the already tracked secondary school system, and one must take an entrance exam for these tracks, the selection process in many ways bears the hallmarks of secondary school tracking. At the same time however, it can in several respects be seen as a school choice phenomenon that appears at the elementary school level. The most important characteristic of this type of choice is that the possibility to apply to these schools crosses the 8-year primary school period, hence participation is optional and the majority of the potential choosers remain, in fact, non-choosers.

2 Theoretical framework: Tracking, school choice and inequalities

Literature on both tracking and school choice deliver a wide range of evidence on how social inequalities are magnified by educational differentiation. I will discuss here the research experiences on school choice and tracking that relate to the phenomena that are also important in the Hungarian case: the effects of early tracking; the advantages of the middle-class families when it comes to choosing a school; and the realisation of avoidance strategies made possible by school choice.

Regarding between-school ability tracking most criticism concerns the age when tracking occurs. Buchmann and Park (Park, 2009), when they analysed the PISA 2003 results of five national educational systems (including Hungary) with highly differentiated tracks in secondary schooling, found that students' social origins were highly predictive of the types of schools they attended.

Hanuschek and Wössman (2006), also from the PISA results, found that early tracking increases inequalities in educational achievement: countries that track their students before the age of 15 show a statistically significant larger inequality. According to Gamoran (2010) most research evidence shows that tracking tends to exacerbate inequality with little or no contribution to overall productivity. Werfhorst (2019) proved how postponing the age of tracking contributed to the reduction of inequalities by parental occupational class in several European societies.

Horn (2013) found that social background and the type of tracks where students are accepted to are interrelated and also that the earlier tracking happens, the more influential the family background is. The effect of the family background manifests itself also in the

fact that among those who have better grades, students from middle- and upper-class families are more likely to apply to academic tracks than their peers from lower social strata (Lannert, 2009).

The most important arguments for the introduction of school choice into public educational systems at the elementary school level were that it creates a quasi-market environment for schools. According to these opinions, the parents are consumers who can choose rationally between schools as different service providers, which in turn encourages schools to raise their 'quality' as they are competing against each other. Beside the pro-marketisation arguments, the most eminent proponents of school choice argue that school choice improves the possibility for upward social mobility from lower social strata (Chubb & Moe, 1988).

Research evidence on its impact, focusing both on the 'quality' and 'efficiency' of schools, as well as on social segregation in education, is far from unanimous (e.g. Hoxby, 2003; Berends, 2015; Burgess et al., 2011; Reay & Ball, 1997), first and foremost because of the very different social and educational contexts where school choice was introduced.

Many arguments against school choice contradict the 'quasi market' argument and emphasise the non-rational (emotional) components of these decisions, while others declare that being rational does not have the same meaning for families of different social backgrounds (Riedel et al., 2010). Therefore, these arguments suggest that systems with school choice will always be biased towards the interests of those social groups who consider schooling, and especially the academic tracks of the educational system, to be of crucial importance.

The literature on school choice identifies a number of factors that contribute to the fact that free school choice further increases the educational advantages of the middle classes.

Burgess and colleagues (Burgess et al., 2019), in their analysis on the administrative data on school choices made by parents in England found that poor families are just as active users of the school choice system as rich families in terms of the number of schools they apply to or the proximity of the chosen schools. However, since more poor families live closer to low performing schools they end up having less real access to high performing ones. Yoon and Lubienski (2017), in the American context, arrive at a similar conclusion: even though low-income families choose for the same reasons as parents from upper strata of the society, they end up choosing schools close to where they live for proximity and comfort – which are also the schools with students coming from similar background to theirs.

Beyond socio-spatial reasons, the social, cultural and economic capital of the family also plays a crucial role in the school choice process.

Research relying on the Bourdieusian concept about cultural reproduction through education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and the conversion of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to educational success, also deliver evidence on how social class of the family and patterns of school choice are interrelated. Knowledge about the educational system is seen as a key factor in the choice process – and not only official, but also informal information. Access to and interpretation of informal information ('grapevine knowledge', Ball & Vincent, 1998) happens through and is facilitated by the parents' social network. The access to and the efficient use of informal knowledge about a school's reputation reflects the amount of parental social, cultural and economic capital (Kosunen, 2014). Middle-class parents can 'navigate' the complex process of choice 'better' (Yoon, 2019); moreover, in contrasted with middle-class families, lower-class families tend to leave the decision to their kids as they are (and not the parents) considered the educational experts in the family (Reay & Ball, 1998).

Activities that can be very useful in a school choice process such as early decision-making or attending open days and information sessions are also more common among upper middle-class parents than among working-class parents (Seghers et al., 2019).

Middle-class families also turn to strategies that include using prep schools and private tutoring in order to facilitate the admission to selective schools (Roda, 2017). Social inequalities are increased not only by what middle-class families can and want to do in order to succeed in the school choice process, but also by what they try to avoid: and it is often a school with an unfavourable social composition, which can even be used by them as a main proxy for their decisions in the French case (Van Zanten, 2013). The ethnically mixed composition of a school can be among the most important reasons of the rejection of a given school (Bagley et al., 2001) in England also.

Even middle-class families who are explicitly committed to mixing and social desegregation, can end up making school choices in a way that will magnify social inequalities. This happens because these families are, at the same time, anxious about their child's schooling. Many among these parents share the general belief that an important guarantee for a good school is the presence of affluent parents. So, after all, the children of these middle-class families are likely to apply, and be admitted to gifted and talented programmes, with students mostly from an advantageous (white and upper-income) social background (Roda & Wells, 2013). Anxiety as a driver for choosing a selective class against the explicitly egalitarian view of the family is present in Finland also, where 'the possibility of ending up in a neighbourhood school with a bad reputation was described as a fate to avoid' (Kosunen, 2014, p. 16). It is worth mentioning that in the same research, it was found that avoidance strategies are less characteristic in the school choice process in the case of localities where parents do not feel a strong hierarchy of reputation between the locally available schools (Kosunen, 2014).

Charter schools in the USA are among the most intensively studied school choice programmes. Charter schools are publicly funded but operate independently from the state and can accept students upon application and not upon their residence. Research evidence of both Dee and Fu (2004) and Ross (2005) show that by the introduction of charter schools, the social composition of the neighbouring traditional public schools – with 'non chooser students' left behind—becomes less favourable.

A reason for that phenomenon could be that although charter schools could, at least theoretically, enhance racial and social integration in schools, in reality, in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, advantaged or relatively advantaged students are always more likely to use the choice option than the other, more disadvantaged students (Bifulco et al., 2009). Yongmei (2012) also found that more advantaged or moderately disadvantaged students tend to opt for charter schools, therefore, severely disadvantaged students – low-income students of colour – become ever more isolated in ineffective urban schools serving high percentages of low-income students of colour. When it is just an option, school choice increases the likelihood of self-exclusion practices (Chen & Pereyra, 2019) also, and therefore, it reinforces the already existing stratification patterns.

The problems in terms of the reproduction of social inequalities by tracking or school choice is more important than ever, since the growing importance of school choice is obvious in both Western and Eastern societies (Musset, 2012). Butler and van Zanten (2007) also found that the practice of school choice is present in a growing number of European countries, but, unlike in the USA, 'across Europe people are not meant to choose, but increasingly do.

The mixture of an official policy of “no choice” with a de facto exercise of an option of choice albeit by a minority of parents is leading to inequalities between school districts. These are at least as great, and arguably greater, than in pro-choice countries such as the UK and the USA, where the constraints of transparency or cash impose limits on the extent to which even the best informed parents can achieve their preferred strategies for their children.’ (Butler & van Zanten, 2007, p. 3). The lack of transparency and under-regulation is always a factor that widens the gap between advantageous and disadvantageous families. Cobb and Glass (2009) suggest to distinguish school choice programs according to the extent they control the social intake of the schools involved. Uncontrolled or unregulated school choice programmes do not monitor the distribution of students in terms of their family background. In their overview about the different choice programs in the USA, Cobb and Glass found that unregulated school choice programmes that heavily rely on families to exercise choice tend to increase stratification of students among schools by family background, whereas controlled programmes can be effective at serving disadvantaged students (Cobb & Glass, 2009).

3 Early selective grammar schools within the Hungarian educational system

In Hungary, after the end of the Second World War general and compulsory eight-year-long elementary schools were established. This homogeneous eight-year-long elementary phase is followed by highly tracked secondary schooling after the 8th grade. Secondary school level offers three, highly different educational tracks, from vocational schools to academic grammar schools.

The comprehensive eight years of primary schooling was also partially undermined by the appearance of the so called early selective grammar schools (ESGS) at the end of the 1980s.

Instead of traditional secondary schools which last four years, these schools offer six- or eight year-long tracks. After having taken the centrally organised written test, elementary school students can apply to the chosen ESGSs – most of which organise oral entry exams too. Successful students can already enter into these tracks after the 4th or 6th grade, whereas the ‘rest’ (around 87–89 per cent of the population) remain in elementary school until the end of the 8th grade.

On average, ESGSs produce the best results in the PISA-like annual National Assessment of Basic Competences, and public opinion sees these institutions as secondary schools that are the best at preparing for good universities. Already, the first thorough research on the topic (Liskó & Fehérvári, 1996), demonstrated that this kind of early academic tracking strengthened social selection. The calculations of Horn (2010) on efficiency strengthen the hypothesis that lowering the age of selection has contributed to inequalities in the Hungarian education system, and pupils from more affluent social backgrounds are more likely to be selected into these schools. Contrasted to the average of 10–12 per cent of student population who attend these tracks, severely disadvantaged students are almost invisible in the six- or eight-year-long tracks: fewer than 1 per cent of them attend such schools (Varga, 2019, p. 191).

And although it is generally true in most countries that pupils with the least educated parents are more likely to select the least prestigious secondary schools, this effect seems to be stronger than average in Hungary and in Germany and Czechia, which are all countries that had installed this kind of early academic tracking (Kogan, et al., 2012).

However, no research has been conducted so far on *how* this very unequal distribution among the different secondary schools comes into being and how exactly do ESGSs skim the best pupils from elementary schools. This article has the ambition to fill this gap. Beside an analysis of what happens during the preparation process and at the exams themselves, the paper sets forth important factors other than the entrance exams that influence the social composition of the ESGSs.

4 Description of the research

During the research, a mixed methodology was used. The quantitative pillar consisted of a panel survey, of targeted sampling. Respondents were parents of 4th and 6th graders who considered at the moment of the first wave of the survey – which took place between October and early December – that their child would apply to an ESGS.

The main topics of the questionnaire included basic attitudes to education, everyday experiences on the quality of education in the elementary school, sources of information used, and the kinds of practice done in order to prepare for the exams. Socio-economic status was measured by questions inquiring about the educational degrees of the parents and the financial situation of the family. During the analysis these variables were used as background variables for measuring the family background of the respondents.

The questionnaire included a GDPR statement and respondents were asked to give their e-mail addresses if they wished to answer the questions of the second questionnaire.

The second wave of the questionnaire was sent to the respondents in April, when most of the students would presumably already know if they got accepted to an ESGS or not. It contained questions inquiring about the last weeks of preparation, the experiences of the exams, preparation for the oral exams; the eventual result of the process; and reasons for opting out of the process at the different stages.

During data collection, all (approximately: 200) of the ESGS schools and a 10% sample of the primary schools that ‘send’ an above average number of their students to such schools were contacted and asked to send the link of the questionnaire to the parents they could reach. The questionnaire was also spread in the social media (Facebook) among potential choosers and in two important electronic media with a wide but different reading public (index.hu and noklapja.hu).

In the school year 2019/2020, the first questionnaire was filled in by 606 respondents. All of them were parents of 4 or 6 graders who stated that they considered to apply to an ESGS. Among them, 292 parents filled the second questionnaire also. The sample thus collected is not representative of the population of ‘parents considering application to an ESGS’ since there is no available knowledge of the magnitude and the social composition of such a population – in fact, we lack public and transparent knowledge on the social composition of those who take the central written exam and also, on those who do apply to at least one of the ESGS after the central written exam.

Table 1 Basic features of the sample

	initial respondents (N = 606)	respondents of both waves (N = 292)
Proportion of 6th graders	57.8%	62.3%
Proportion of 4th graders	42.2%	37.7%
Educational background: lowest	9.5%	7.9%
Educational background: middle	23.0%	22.1%
Educational background: highest	67.5%	70.0%
Financial situation: relatively best	51.0%	55.1%
Financial situation: middle	31.1%	30.1%
Financial situation: relatively worst	17.9%	14.7%
Settlement: Budapest	48.5%	49.7%
Settlement: county capital	19.6%	18.8%
Settlement: town	21.0%	20.2%
Settlement: village	10.6%	11.0%

The other important pillar of the research was a series of interviews conducted with parents. As for scrutinising parental strategies and parental practices, in accordance with the views denying school choice as a simple rational choice at a given moment, I considered school choice to be a long process that starts much before the completion of exams. Therefore, I decided to conduct a panel of semi-structured interviews with parents who were considering an application to an ESGS, starting at the beginning of the given school year, which is two months before the deadline of the application for the central written exam. In the school year 2018/2019, 22 families from schools that usually produce a higher-than average number of applications to ESGSs were contacted. The first interviews were followed by a second, and in half of the cases by a third one. Altogether 22 first, 14 second, and 6 third interviews were made.

In addition, 15 interviews were conducted with teachers who work in early selective grammar schools, eight in such schools in Budapest, one in a county capital, and six in other towns. Eight interviews were conducted also with teachers from elementary schools with an above average proportion of applications to ESGS in order to get an insight into the narratives of the elementary teachers.

5 Results

5.1 Basic data on the ESGS

Grammar schools offering early academic tracking after grades four and six attract around 10–13 per cent of the population: for example, in the academic year 2015/16, more than 9 per cent of 7th grade children attended such schools. The yearly National Assessment of Basic Competences delivers data both on the mathematical and reading competences and also on the socioeconomical background of the students of each school. According to these, the average scores of students attending ESGS tracks are notably higher than their peers' in all the other different school types both in the 8th and the 10th grades. The same is true for the average socioeconomic background of the different schools and tracks.

Beside the average numbers, the social composition of the ESGS schools is quite homogeneous also. The proportion of the highest educational degrees of the mothers of the students in ESGS in the 10th grade is 31 per cent, contrasted with 11 per cent for mothers all 10th grade students. This also suggests that ESGSs skim the best elementary school students from favourable social backgrounds.

5.2 Early selective grammar schools and elementary schools

In the case of the ESGS, the whole application procedure is to be done by the family alone, whereas 'traditional' secondary application procedures contain many more centrally or institutionally assisted elements.

For example, the paperwork for the traditional secondary application process for each pupil is done by the classroom teacher (after consulting with the family about the chosen schools). As for information gathering during the process, elementary schools actively promote open days of the four year-long secondary tracks, and are in contact with at least some of these schools; classroom headteachers usually meet the families of 8th grade children to offer consultations and advice on choosing a secondary school.

The opposite is true in the case of the ESGSs. In most cases, elementary schools do not spread information on the school choice process, there is no consultation, nor is there counselling for pupils and their families about this option. According to the interviews with the parents and with elementary teachers, teachers do not like to interfere with the process. The most common reason emphasised by the teachers is that it is 'none of their business', and it is 'up to the parents' to decide. The resulting situation is that unless the parents are especially proactive, a child can start and finish elementary school without ever hearing about ESGS. With the lack of any sources of information in elementary schools, informal 'grapevine knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) becomes indispensable. The most important source about the ESGS for parents are other parents and the websites of the ESGS themselves, and definitely not the elementary schools.

When the possibility arises in the fourth and sixth grades, less than one fifth of the whole school population consider applying.

The following figure shows the differences among the elementary schools in terms of the proportion of their students who apply to an ESGS.

Table 2 Some characteristics of the elementary schools and the proportions of ESGS applications¹

Applications from elementary school to ESGS (6 and 8 years) in the school year 2016/17	the proportion of Roma pupils in the school (%) (F: 61.737; sign: 0.000 eta2: 0.151)	the proportion of parents with HE degree (%) (F: 82.525; sign: 0.000. eta2: 0.195)	SES average in the 6th grade in the school (F: 97.481; sign: 0.000. eta2: 0.294)	Maths average scores in the 6th grade in the school (F: 44.819; sign: 0.000. eta2: 0.111)
none	30.29	11.00	-0.552	1429
few (less than 5%)	16.43	16.12	-0.232	1461
some (less than 10%)	8.29	22.68	0.178	1502
few to 8-year-long track, many to 6-year-long track	11.18	24.94	0.033	1496
many to 8-year-long track, few to 6-year-long track	14.07	18.81	-0.179	1464
many (10% and more)	4.15	35.10	0.495	1531
average	18.67	18.86	-0.159	1468

Sources: National Assessment of Basic Competences and Secondary School Application Information System; computation of the author

In more than 40 per cent of the elementary schools, there were no applications to either the eight or the six year-long tracks in the year under examination (2016/17), whereas in 15 per cent of the schools the proportion is above 15 per cent.

The differences in the social composition of the 'sending' schools in Table 2 highlight the fact that it is mostly from schools with an advantageous school population that the ESGS can get within the viewing range of families. On the other hand, many students who attend schools with a less advantageous student intake in smaller settlements are practically excluded from the process of application. In fact, it seems that this (and what has happened before in the educational career of the pupil) can be considered as 'step zero' in the school choice process for an ESGS.

5.3 The application process: Selection and self-selection

The survey to be analysed here involved parents who had evidently overcome this 'step zero' and considered applying to an ESGS by the time of the first phase of the survey.

¹ Data were prepared by merging the school-site data of the yearly National Assessment of Basic Competences and the database of the Secondary School Application System.

According to the estimate of the survey respondents, an average of 29 per cent (median = 24 per cent) from the class where their child went were also about to apply to an ESGS. This strengthens the impression that personal networks and everyday experiences with regard to the visibility of the ESGS play an important role in the application process.

The same assumption can be made from the findings of the interviews, which testify that a strong reason for an application is because it is the sort of thing done by one's peers. This sample-tracking is particularly true for how, according to the interviewees, the number of potential applicants grows from week to week during the autumn semester. According to many accounts, the original number of pupils in a class who wish to apply doubles from September to December. Some families learn about the possibility from others, and some, who had decided against applying a year earlier re-consider when they learn of others who are considering applying. Sometimes families (and the children) are afraid that 'everybody will leave', and therefore feel they have to make an effort as well. Many parents talked about how they had not devoted much energy at the beginning, but after seeing the extent of others' preparation, panicked and increased their efforts.

However, according to the results of the survey, not everyone actually got to the point of writing the test among those who had considered it before. 5 per cent of those who responded to both phases of the survey said that their child had not taken the test (due in January) after all. The number of cases is very low, but this kind of 'self-selection' is more frequent among those with the lowest educational background among the survey respondents. If having the ESGS on the mental horizon can be considered as 'step zero' in the process this certainly is step one – and those who self-deselected themselves at this stage still remain more or less invisible in the eyes of the official system of application.

Pupils who complete the written exam arrive at the next step, after which they can decide whether or not to actually apply to one or more ESGSs. Hence there is a further risk for self-exclusion from the process at this point.

A further 7 per cent of those having taken the exam decide here, at this step two, not to apply to any of the schools. This is the first step where we have exact numbers from the yearly statistics of the Educational Office² showing similar (3–10 per cent) proportion drop-out rates at this stage.

Most parents who reported dropping out at this stage said that the reason for that is either that the test had not gone as well as they had anticipated, or some said that the written examination served rather to gain experience for later tests. Be that as it may, at this step, 26 (out of the 292) parents said that they quit the process. Despite the low numbers of cases, it is worth mentioning that the proportion of self-selectors at this step is much higher among respondents from the lowest educational level than among the highest educated parents.

Most – 87 per cent – of those who had previously considered the application to the ESGS during the autumn end up actually applying, thus leading us to step three.

As it turns out, by the end of the process, out of these applicants, 69 per cent got accepted to one of the ESGSs after all. However, because of the self-exclusion practices during the earlier steps, this proportion is only 60 per cent of the total number of original survey

² https://www.oktatas.hu/pub_bin/dload/kozoktatás/beiskolazás/prezentációk/kifir_felveteli_20200603.pptx

respondents. These results call attention to the disparity between the widespread element of the public discourse about the competition being too harsh and the written exams being excessively difficult. Irrespective of the actual difficulty of the exams, the majority of those who participate do in fact get admitted to one of the schools. The major decisive element of getting into an ESGS is in fact whether one overcomes what I have called ‘step zero’ and has the ESGS on the mental horizon.

On the other hand, according to the survey results, a less sharp but constant social selection takes place throughout the months of the application process among those who successfully overcome ‘step zero’.

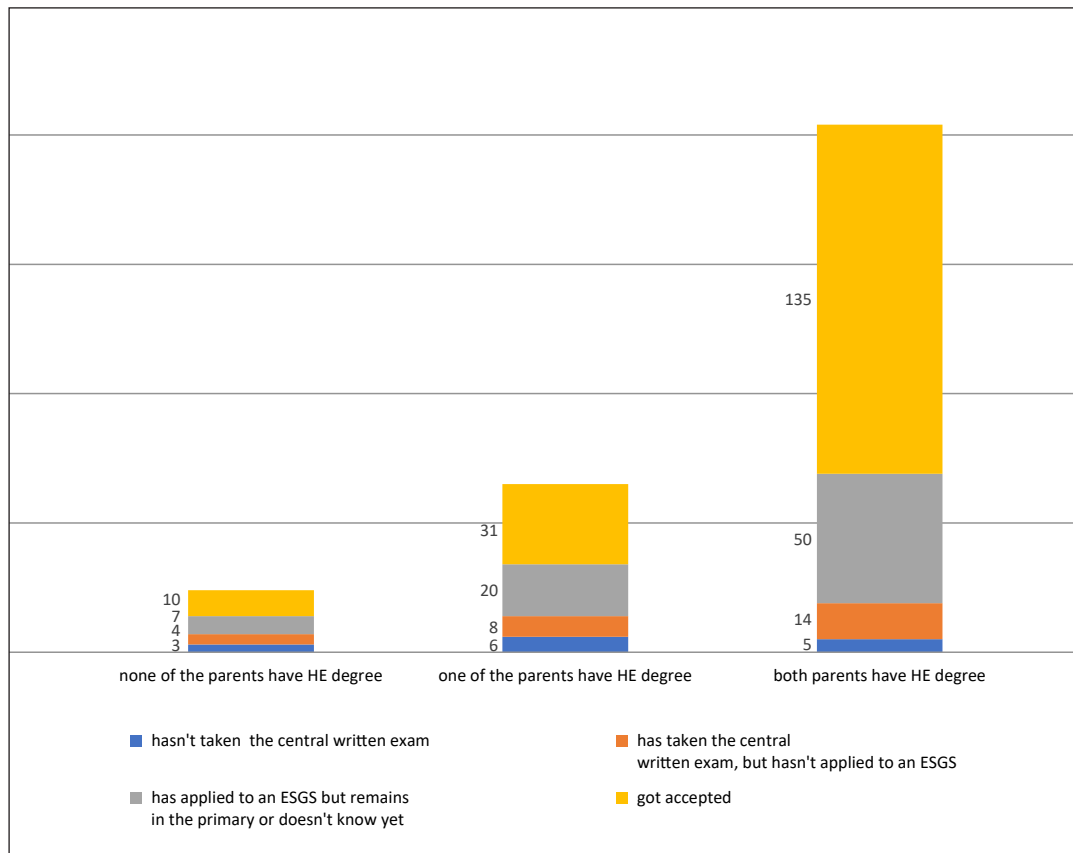


Figure 1 From thinking about the application to getting accepted to the ESGS – Steps of the procedure by educational background (N = survey respondents to both phases of the survey)

Source: survey questionnaire

Figure 1 summarises what happens during the process of preparation for the written exam and the application to the ESGS. Some social selection is present through steps 1 to 3 also and dropout rates are, even if only to a small extent, higher among those coming from less educated backgrounds at each step. The proportion of the highest educated parents among

the original survey respondents was 67 per cent, and 70 per cent among respondents to both waves of the survey. This increased to 77 per cent during the process among those accepted to an ESGS at the end of the process.

This further widens the gap between the least and the most educated parents in terms of their children's chances of becoming an ESGS student.

5.4 Successful practices

Most applicants and their families devote time, energy and money to the procedure throughout the first semester of the school year, but preparation can start even before.

Many of the respondents of the survey had long been preparing consciously for the application to a six- or eight-year-long grammar school.

Table 3 Educational background of the family and the first time of considering ESGS as an option

			acceptance	
			yes	no
at least one parent doesn't have a HE degree	When did the family start thinking about the ESGS as an option?	before last year	54.5%	45,5%
		later	40.0%	60,0%
	average		47.6%	52.4%
both parents have a HE degree	When did the family start thinking about the ESGS as an option?	before last year	77.6%	22,4%
		later	63.4%	36,6%
	average		72.2%	27.8%
average	When did the family start thinking about the ESGS as an option?	before last year	71.3%	28,8%
		later	55.0%	45,0%
	average		64.6%	35.4%

Source: survey questionnaire, own calculations

The figure shows that the higher the educational background is, the earlier the family started thinking about ESGS, the more likely they are to succeed in the end, but future success is more frequent among lower educated families who had also made an early decision about participation.

There is an unambiguous agreement among all actors that taking the entrance exam successfully requires knowledge and skills that are usually not taught in elementary school. This is not only the opinion of the parents, but also of the teachers interviewed. Paraphrasing Pierre Bourdieu's thoughts about how the school reproduces social inequalities, it can be assumed that in order to successfully take the entrance exam to the ESGS, one has to have

knowledge learned somewhere else, but not in the elementary school. However, in the case of the ESGS, bringing cultural capital from home does not seem to be enough. Every actor agrees that weekly practice is necessary in order to succeed. Practice is available mainly through many forms of shadow education, the most common ones being (a) afternoon (or weekend) classes offered by several private preparatory schools that were created to meet this demand; (b) paying classes offered by many of the ESGS; (c) private tutors.

Table 4 Forms of preparation

	no parent with a HE degree	one HE degree	Both with HE degree	all
with a family member	37.5%	35.8%	29.6%	31.8%
family member + prep school	14.3%	19.7%	21.6%	20.5%
family member + private tutor	14.3%	12.4%	13.4%	13.3%
all three kinds	3.6%	9.5%	12.2%	10.8%
none	14.3%	9.5%	9.7%	10.1%
prep school	5.4%	5.8%	6.0%	5.9%
private tutor	8.9%	4.4%	3.5%	4.2%
prep school + private tutor	1.8%	2.9%	3.7%	3.4%

Source: survey questionnaire

According to the survey, 65 per cent of the respondents paid for these services during the months of preparation. The average money paid by them varied between HUF 5,000 and 6,000 per week. This is not much for a middle-class family but can be out of reach for a family of lower social background, or for families who habitually resent paying for an education service – in Hungary, education is often still thought of as a service provided free of charge by the state.

Beside the paid preparatory courses, many parents use their own embodied cultural capital in order to help their children. They actively participate in the preparation themselves: according to the interviewees, the usual routine is that a family devotes one weekend morning for practice: the child does one test as a simulation of the ‘real’ exam, which the parent then marks and goes over with the child. This altogether usually takes at least two and a half hours, and families complain that they have to sacrifice many other important activities for the practice, and sometimes feel, especially if there is a sibling, as if family life revolves too much around the exams due to take place in January.

According to the survey results, both the use of shadow education and that of the tutoring of a family member is very characteristic of the preparation. Only 10 per cent of the survey respondents did not do a weekly practice. The relative majority, almost one-third of the respondents used ‘only’ one of the family members as tutors. However, the majority not

only paid for shadow education services but used two types of preparation. Altogether, 80 per cent of the respondents regularly used a family member *combined* with one of the shadow education forms.

Because of the low case numbers, it is not possible to assert any causal relation about the forms of practice and the successful application. However, those not preparing for the exams at all or only participating in one kind of preparation are underrepresented among those who eventually got accepted, whereas almost everyone among those who used three types of preparation (family; group; private tutor) got accepted.

Parents on average devote about 90 minutes per week to the preparation as tutors. Interestingly, in the case of the families where both parents hold a higher education degree there is no difference between the amount of time devoted by those who did and those who did not get accepted (around 83 minutes in average per week) eventually. However, in the families with a less favourable social background, this factor seems to be important: the average time spent on tutoring by the parent per week is much more (127 minutes) in the case of those who got accepted, than in the case of those who eventually remained in primary school (87 minutes on average). Preparing more with one's child thus seems to be a viable way of coping with the original sociocultural disadvantages here.

Applicants can apply to as many ESGS as they want at 'step 3' of the process. A further quantifiable difference emerges from the survey results also regarding the number of applications: parents with the most favourable educational background are, as if they want to play it safe, likely to apply to more grammar schools than others. And they might be right: among them, those who eventually got accepted, applied to an average of 2.8; and those, who did not get into any of the ESGS, applied to an average of 2.4 schools.

Considering more than one option can be a key to understanding the construction process of 'success' and 'failure' in the application process.

The consecutive interviews with the parents also bear witness that 'success' and 'failure' are far from objective and have no absolute meaning.

Similarly to the findings of many qualitative researches on school choice (for example, Reay & Ball, 1998, p. 433) parents themselves having had a prestigious educational career tend to behave more like an 'educational expert' when it comes to school choice matter, whereas parents with a relatively lower educational background are more likely to 'leave it to the kid'.

In the case of K, an economist herself with a good educational background, urging her daughter to participate in educational competitions already by the first years of primary school, paved the way years before the actual application process for success. Moreover, an important part of her tactics was to manage things in a way that her daughter would drive her attention to the desired school: 'We pushed her that way [...] I directed her smoothly where to go, we liked the Smithsonian School³, so it was there that we wanted her to go for the prep course. It was a way of making her connected to the school.'

She did not only go to the prep-course of the wished grammar school but had a weekly private tutor also. Eventually, she did well on the written exam, and applied to 4 different grammar schools. She was not accepted to the track they had originally wanted the most,

³ All the names of the schools used here are pseudonyms.

but to the other track offered by the same school. Eventually she reached enough points for getting accepted to 2 classes out of the 5 she applied to. However, since she got accepted to at least one, at the end, the family perceived of the result as a clear success and a proof of the talent of their daughter.

Quite a contrast is the case of L. L wanted her son to go to an ESGS because she herself had attended a vocational secondary school and always felt she missed the possibilities a high demanding grammar school could have offered her. However, she and her husband did not want to push their son too much: 'We thought that we have a talented kid, and so, he deserves better than the one he attends [...] I think he knows how much he wants to practice [...] I think, if that is the way he wants it, then I shouldn't ruin it by forcing him.'

The son eventually did not reach enough points on the written exam to get invited to the oral exams of the desired couple of grammar schools. This failure contributes to the ways parents started to see the abilities of their son as less outstanding than they had seen him earlier.

It is just crystallised now... but I am not disappointed. ...but now I see, now I realise that, yes, this is the place for those who are really brainiacs. And well, we were not, L has never been eminent, he has never been sent to any competitions, so we were in the tepid water, one among those who thought that their kid is smart and can get in, but it's not like that.

An advantageous social position, especially in terms of financial situation creates an increased number of options for families to turn possible failures into success, since they can opt for private schools that require a tuition fee. This is the case of S and his family. His mother emphasised that both she and her husband earn enough money to pay the tuition fee if necessary: 'Who else should I spend my money on, if not on my kid. I'd rather not go on holiday. I earn money because I want to be able to provide him with this.'

In such cases, families have a bigger pool of schools to consider than families who do not or cannot pay a tuition fee. S applied to 4 grammar schools, 2 state maintained and 2 private ones. Eventually, the family could convert this diversity into success: he got accepted to one of the six-year-long private grammar schools.

5.5 Reflections on social composition and exit strategies

Are the competing and eventually successful families aware of their privileged status? Some of them are prone to naturalise the privileged social status of their children as 'good skills'. However, several of the applicants' families express their dilemmas concerning the fact that they want 'the best for their children', but their exit from the mediocre standard of general education only reinforces the school segregation process going on in the upper grades of the elementary school.

I think it is very unjust. ...I expect the six-year-long track to be a selected class, I am not naive, this is the reason I want her to go there... But there are no equal chances... and I find this very bad, that we don't give chances to those who come from lower strata... this is bad for everyone, bad for those kids, bad for the country ... (mother of a sixth grader)

[A]nd the worst is that the whole system is so bad that I don't really feel ashamed that I, as a parent, use a strategy that is against what I really think about being public good. (mother of a sixth grader)

Furthermore, beside the clear elitist aspirations, trying to switch to an ESGS is just as many times a flight from the experiences of a bad school. This flight is often clearly a ‘white flight’ – especially in the case of the ESGSs maintained by the church – in the eastern regions of the country. Although ESGSs maintained by the church are not necessarily as prestigious as those ESGS that are maintained by universities, parents usually feel church-maintained ESGSs to be safe havens since these institutions usually exclude Roma pupils with problematic behaviour. Although Hungarian literature usually detects this kind of white flight at the school choice for elementary school (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2013), this research shows that this motivation is still present at the secondary school choice stage. This is illustrated by the case of D, who lives in a small village, in fact a suburban area of a big county capital. The parents both have a higher education BA degree, and they started to think about sending their daughter to an ESGS as early as at the 2nd grade.

There are three eight-year-long grammar schools in the city. There is the ‘Bolyai’ which is the only state-maintained one, and it is too strong. There is another Catholic school, which is located very far. So that leaves the third one, the ‘Szapolyai’, also Catholic. I think it is the weakest of all three eight-year-long ones, but it is not weak! It is a relatively strong school, but the weakest of these three schools. And I want a school that is stronger than the one he attends now but not too strong.

The family opted for the church-run school not because of its religious feature, rather because of its relative, but not at all absolute elite nature. And leaving the problematic students in the primary school behind seems to be an important factor also for her:

When it comes to choosing a school, parents consider church schools as well because, well, here there are many minorities [usually used codename for Roma], and church schools filter them... they let in very few, if at all. And this is a very important factor. I wouldn’t let her into a school where there are five or six such pupils in a class...

This illustrates that under certain circumstances (e.g. in the bigger towns of Eastern-Hungary) the ESGS is a means that is used to protect or reinforce the middle-class status of the family by the exclusion of the problematic (many times implicitly: the Roma) pupils from such schools.

5.6 The lack of disadvantaged applicants perceived by the teachers

Teachers in early selective grammar school tracks are quite aware of the social composition of their school of course, but most of them do not see it as a structural problem. In some cases, being ‘gifted’ is mentioned as a must-have for a student in order to get into the school, and using it as an argument against controlling for the social background of the students.

Well the family is not important here, because we do not enrol students on the basis of their social background. It is obviously not an aspect to be considered. I don’t think you can get into this school without talent. We don’t examine the social background and I think that is right. (small town, ESGS teacher)

In a similar school in another settlement, the family background is named as *the* most important and necessary factor:

If the family background is such that they don't care what their child does, they don't check if the homework is ready, then this whole system falls apart... so we would like to have students who have the right kind of family support.

These accounts show little reflection on how such notions as the 'family's support' regarding educational matters is related to the social status or how such notions as 'talent' or 'being gifted' are socially constructed.

However, expressions of more reflective views on the importance of social status from the part of some teachers occurred also. This is illustrated by the following view, from a similar medium-sized town teacher:

One question is whether theoretically they [children from disadvantaged backgrounds] can get admitted, but another question is about where do, in general, we get our students from. And in our school, 70 per cent of our students are from a good average or even a better than average background, their parents have at least a secondary degree but in many cases higher education degree. [...] this doesn't mean that we lack absolutely talented and smart children who come from lower background. Those who are disadvantaged from a financial point of view can be helped by our foundation. [...] The other type, when parents are not so educated, is not easy...

In fact, this is one of the rare examples when a teacher reflects on the distinction between being disadvantaged from a financial or from an educational point of view. In most interviews, disadvantage was solely conceived of as a financial problem and therefore it was easy to state that the school can help in managing problems deriving from financial problems, especially temporary ones.

The non-presence of the 'disadvantaged students' are perceived as a structural problem only in the most elite schools in Budapest, although the teachers here also have some stories of disadvantaged pupils in their schools, but they clearly see them as very rare exceptions.

We are a really middle-class school, full middle-class I think, it is very seldom that someone from a less good background can get in [...] we are looking for skills, not even what the child had learnt about Petöfi, ... so it leaves open the way for talented children from any social background if they were to apply. But maybe they couldn't even score high enough on the central written exam, it is possible that for this exam, you do need that kind of cultural background that is much easier to absorb in an intellectual family. (Budapest, university maintained school)

This gap cannot be closed. When a disadvantaged child arrives to a grammar school then the school can help. But the problem is that they don't arrive. (Budapest, school district maintained school)

These interviews strengthen the assumption about the importance of what was called 'step zero' earlier, which calls attention to the fact that the biggest barrier to the ESGS being a mobility channel is that the overwhelming majority of disadvantaged students remain excluded from the application process from the beginning.

6 Conclusions

A successful application to one of the Early Selective Grammar Schools is the result of a complex and gradual educational selection process.

By borrowing Mare's (1981) concept, that in education, the entrance into the next step is always the consequence of earlier steps and one should view the social composition of an educational level as a result of dependent probabilities of all the important steps. This research identified four steps that influence the future composition of the early selective tracks.

The main decisive step precedes the application process itself: personal networks and everyday experiences in elementary school influence whether the ESGS can appear on the mental horizon of the potential school choosers. And although elementary schools are seemingly passive actors in the process, they have a crucial influence on whether one will pass 'step zero'. In other words, those who attend an elementary school where the social composition of the students is favourable and/or a class from where several pupils consider applying to an ESGS are much more likely to consider the application themselves than their peers in very different schools.

The data about the exclusive nature of the 'sending' elementary schools to the ESGSs, and the very advantageous social composition of the survey respondents indirectly also suggest that many potential applicants among the 4th and 6th graders remain non choosers mostly due to factors such as the socio-economic composition of their primary school, socio-geographical factors (whether an ESGS is available nearby) and whether they see their peers applying to an ESGS or not – factors that are either contextual, structural or institutional ones, but none of them are intrinsic individual characteristics of the given pupil.

These findings call attention to how this kind of gradual, non-compulsory school selection intrinsically involves high levels of early self-selection and self-exclusion strategies, that lead to non-involvement in the process for members from lower strata of society.

Furthermore, elementary schools do not encourage students to participate in the process, and nor do other actors. In the meantime, the application process is generally seen as complex and demanding. As a result of all this, the significance of the family background is as crucial as it can get in this process. The analysis testifies how the cultural, economic and social capital of the family is heavily used during the preparation process from step 1: private tutors, different forms of shadow education and the time and cultural capital of the parents are used (and services are paid for). Although the centrally organised written exam itself gives the impression that it assesses the 'skills' of the applicants purely and objectively, the research identified elements of the preparation process that exclusively rely upon parental tactics: an early decision about the application to the selective tracks (step 0), the use of more than one kind of preparation, devoting parental time on a regular basis during the preparation period (steps 1-2), and applying to more than one school seem to be important factors that contribute to success (step 3).

Social selection is present through the different steps of the actual preparation process, however it is never nearly as important as it is at 'step zero'.

In fact, the majority of those considering the application to the ESGS eventually gets accepted. The homogeneously favourable social composition of the ESGS students comes into being thus more by preceding facts and strategic decisions than by the competitive entrance exam itself. Furthermore, this homogeneity derives also from the fact that this school choice process is a particularly unregulated one regarding the social composition of the applicants.

The existence of the early selective grammar school tracks makes the entrance into secondary education a *gradual process*, where the earliest step is not compulsory nor is it emphasised by official education communication. Mere participation in the application process to the ESGS is entrusted to the decision of the parents.

In most school choice programmes around the world, where school choice happens when the whole cohort starts a new school level, active choosers come on average from a more favourable social background than non-choosers. The ESGS intersects the elementary school grades which further widens this social gap between choosers and non-choosers. Studies on school choice and ability tracking have already identified many different characteristics of both types of educational selection that contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities. In the case of the ESGS entrance process, a common set of such characteristics can be detected simultaneously, and altogether they produce a particularly elevated level of social selection in the case of the ESGS.

This leads to the fact that students from an unfavourable social background almost inevitably become non-choosers, and this is the main reason why the ESGS contributes extremely to the reproduction of social inequalities and cases when it serves as a channel for upward social mobility remain almost invisible.

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