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LIFE PATHS THROUGH SEGREGATED SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE LIGHT OF ADULT NARRATIVES

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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1.Statement of the problem

In the context of the European Union's Lisbon Strategy[1] and the Europe 2020[2] objectives, the role of knowledge, the provision of competitive knowledge and thus lifelong learning has come to the fore in parallel with the challenges of consciously shaping social processes (szerző nélkül 2000, cited in Szekeres, 2014). An educational environment that is able to provide valuable and useful knowledge not only for typically developing students but also for students with some level of learning disability, to reduce early school leaving and drop-out (Mártonfi, 2008), and thus to promote later employment and successful social integration, can be seen as a key factor in achieving the goals set out in the above documents. Ensuring the right conditions for equal opportunities in education and knowledge acquisition is therefore important not only for the future of society and the economy, but also for equity and, through this, for social mobility opportunities (Pisa, 2018).

The highly selective nature of the Hungarian school system has been reaffirmed by the results of the latest international PISA study (2018). Selection can be found at all levels of the education system, where the main explanatory principle is not differences in students' performance and abilities, but rather differences in family background. Thus, it can hardly be said that the education system opens up a channel for mobility, but rather preserves existing relations (Bernstein, 1996; Bourdieu, 1978; Ferge, 1980; Kozma, 1975). In this way, more and more attention is being paid to the manifest and latent processes of school selection, which also tend to firmly anticipate the succession of important stages in the further life course.

The focus of my doctoral research is on the life trajectories of adults who have already been confronted with the above-mentioned selection mechanisms during their primary school education, as they have been studying for shorter or longer periods in segregated settings in the type of institution/class[3] for pupils with mild intellectual disabilities. Although the majority of primary school pupils, regardless of the type of institution, graduate and continue their studies, it is the vocational training that can make the biggest difference to life paths. The lack of vocational qualifications reduces the chances of finding employment and thus also makes it more difficult to earn a living (Gazsó, 1982).

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[1] Launched in March 2000 as the Lisbon process, the ten-year strategy for the EU as a whole aims to increase the Union's competitiveness and create a knowledge-based society (Gács, 2005)
[2] The European Union's 10-year strategy 2010-2020 (Wikipedia)
[3] The Education Act I of 1985 officially abolished the name "special education school", so I use the term "primary school with a different curriculum" to designate the type of institution. However, in order to provide a clearer picture and to illustrate the changes, I have retained the terminology used in the literature

For people who have attended primary schools with a different curriculum, the stigma attached to the school system's classification can also be a barrier to finding a job (Bánfalvy, 1996; Illyés - Erdősi, 1986, cited in Bánfalvy, 1997). And work can be seen not only as an income-generating activity but also as the basis and model for people's social relations, so that the success or failure of a job has a direct or indirect impact on other aspects of life.

We have little reliable data on what happens to young people who leave primary school with a different curriculum and then (special) vocational school, and even less over many years. In the words of Gayer - Krausz - Hatos (1985), a significant proportion of them are 'absorbed' into society, thus self-determining their own habilitation (cited in Bánfalvy, 2002).

In the Hungarian special educational needs and sociological literature, there are even fewer studies focusing on the 'voice' of people with special educational needs, in this case especially learning disabilities. Although we have a wide range of knowledge about certain stages of their life path, the characteristics of their developmental stages and their different nature, this information mostly reflects the perspective of other actors on the path (e.g. parents, professionals) (Mesterházi, 2019). I believe that the picture can only be truly complete if the rich body of knowledge we have is enriched by the perspective of the group concerned, so biographical work can provide a means of finding the 'lost voices' and making them heard by others (Atkinson, 1998).

Interviewing the people concerned is also important for pedagogical practice, since the educational and teaching goals set in the pedagogy of the mentally handicapped cannot be based solely on seemingly objective ideas about being mentally handicapped. If the forward-looking task of the school as an educational institution is to facilitate the successful integration of pupils into society, then mapping the social position of the interviewees and their attribution of meaning to certain life events can be an important input for feedback (Lindmeier, 2013).

2. Questions guiding the research

In the light of the research objectives and the examination of the 'specific' areas of life course development in the literature, I have formulated the following research questions:

Q1: What narrative motifs and story themes can be identified in the recollection of memories related to particular prominent life stages of the past?

Q2: How did the interviewees incorporate the years spent in segregated school/school into their individual life stories? How do they represent this in their narrative identity?

Q3: Where do the interviewees' lives currently stand, i.e., when looking along the objective variables, what similarities and differences can be found in the current individual life circumstances?

Q4: By including some of the subjective dimensions of well-being, what picture of their own quality of life do the interviewees paint?

Q5: What personal beliefs play a role in the everyday life of the interviewees, guiding their thinking, behaviour and actions?

Q6: What characterises the interviewees' orientation towards the future, what is their vision of the future?

3. Research methodology

3.1 Presentation of the research sample

In my research, sampling was mainly based on access. Prior acquaintance was important in the search for the sample, as in most cases it was the only way to reach the interviewees, to set up the interview and to create a climate of trust. In addition to personal acquaintance, in some cases I also used the "snowball" method, whereby the people contacted suggested new people and helped the research process by providing their contact details (Babbie, 2003; Szokolszky, 2004). The guiding criterion for inclusion in the sample was that the respondent's former primary school was a primary school/school with a different curriculum for pupils with mild intellectual disabilities. Since one of the foci of the research is social inclusion, a second criterion, in addition to school location, was the 'exit' into life, i.e. leaving the public education system. Time elapsed since then was not a factor influencing the inclusion in the sample. Taking these guidelines into account, a total of 49 evaluable life course interviews were conducted. The average age of the participants was 30.26 years. The oldest interviewee was 51 and the youngest was 20. The gender ratio was balanced, with 25 men and 24 women participating.

3.2. Research methodology

For the interviews I used McAdams' (2008) life story interview protocol as a basis. The set of questions was initially divided into seven main themes. However, the original version was significantly revised based on my prior knowledge of the study population. I kept the Key Scenes and Challenges sections, highlighted some of the questions, but tried to explore the chronology and events of the past, present and future along the lines of independently created

questions. Some of the questions that required abstract thinking were omitted and some were reformulated. Thus, keeping in mind the focus of the research, the main themes of my interviews were as follows:

1. Description of the current life situation, personal ideology

2. Events of the past, with a focus on the school life

3. Ideas about the future

4. Key events in life history (happiest or saddest moment; significant change event; good or bad childhood memories; decisive decision)

5. Challenges (greatest difficulty; health problem; loss; mistakes made and regretted)

3.3 Methodology for processing the results

The epistemological framework of my research is fundamentally based on the constructivist paradigm, and also represents a realist approach in that it is not based on objective truth, but rather on the exploration of the reality of subjective experience, and thus its recognition as real (Charmaz, 2000; Lincoln, Guba 2000; Daly, 2007 cited in Sallay - Martos, 2018).

As my research aims to present information from the perspective of individuals whose perspectives are still under-researched, my main guiding principle is to analyse and interpret data at a descriptive level. The focus is mainly on the level of meaning (semantics), on the question "What does it say?", i.e. the content of the recalled events and happenings becomes the central theme of the analysis (Daly, 2007 cited in Sallay - Martos, 2018; Mischler, 1995 cited in Elliott, 2005).

The data were processed using thematic analysis (TA; Braun - Clarke, 2006). During the analysis process, manual coding was used, which proved to be adequate not only for validity but also for the deepest possible interpretation of the text. Although the interviews covered several (five) main issues, in the context of this thesis, mainly due to space constraints, I had opportunity to analyse three main issues (Description of the present life situation, personal ideology; events of the past, especially the school life; ideas about the future). The structure of the thematic blocks that emerged along the interview questions is illustrated in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1. Structure of the thematic blocks that form the framework of the analysis
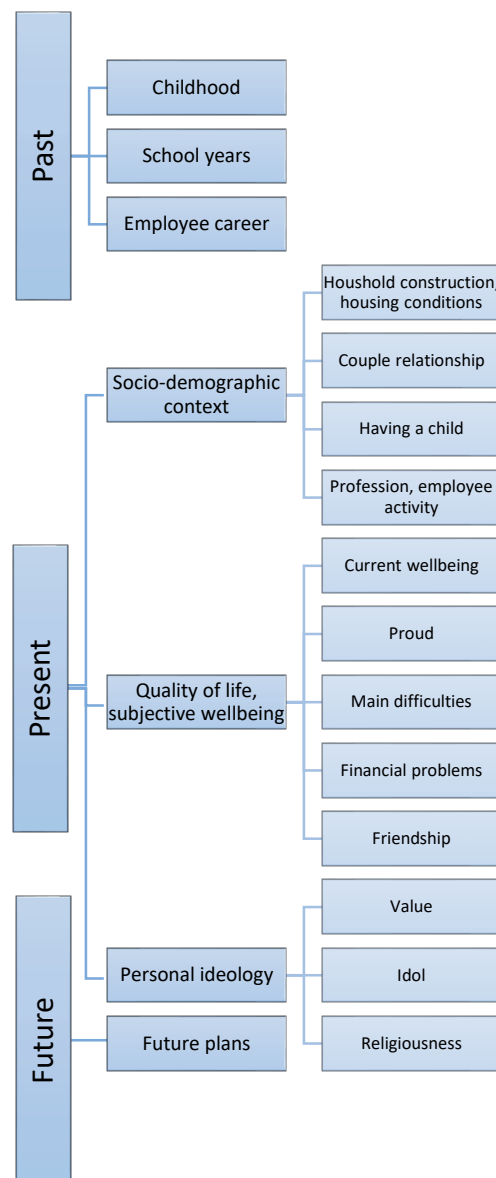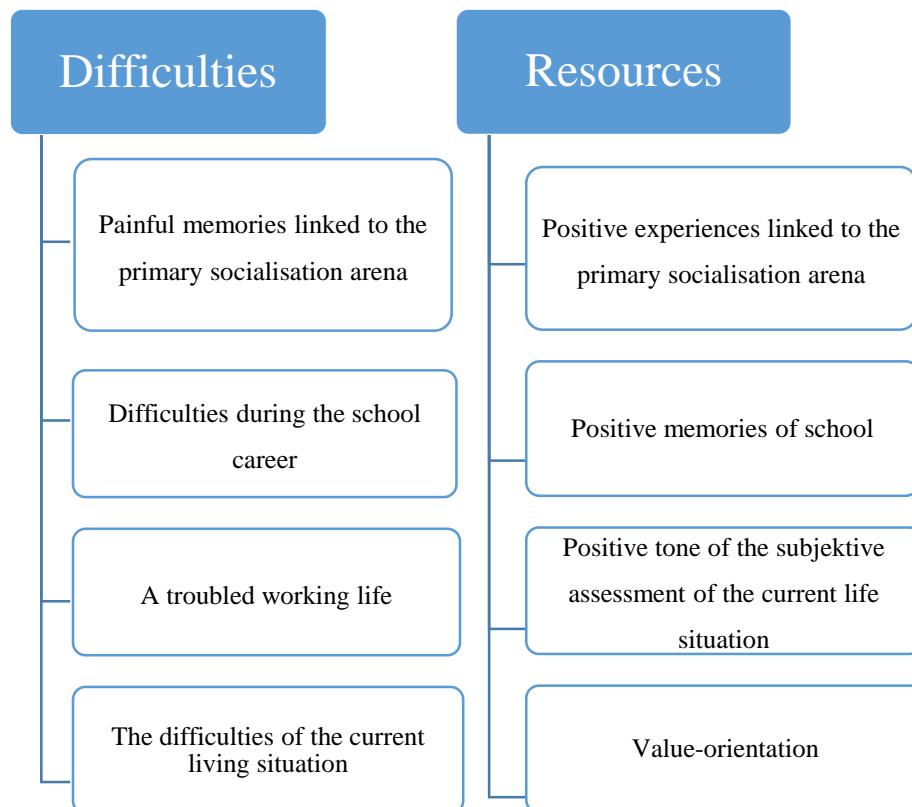

Source: own editing

The data were tagged without a predefined code list, i.e. with open code. The cross-sectional categories that emerged within the questions, in which I grouped the results of the labelling, were drawn inductively as I examined the data, so in effect I developed them as I understood them. Once the categories were created, where I had the opportunity, I grouped those with similar content together, which then became subcategories and were sorted into a higher category. In the course of my analytical work, my initial themes gradually broke away from the main issues presented as a starting point, thereby setting a direction of thinking, and rose above them to create a framework for the overall presentation of the data. The themes identified at the

outset eventually converged into two central themes, labelled 'Difficulties' and 'Resources'. Along these two main themes, the events at each stage of the life course that emerge can be well characterised and, by showing the connections, can serve to provide a deeper level of understanding (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2: Thematic map of the central and sub-themes emerging in the life course

Difficulties	Resources
Painful memories linked to the primary socialisation arena	Positive experiences linked to the primary socialisation arena
Difficulties during the school career	Positive memories of school
A troubled working life	Positive tone of the subjektive assessment of the current life situation
The difficulties of the current living situation	Value-orientation

Source: own editing

In the narrative way of presenting the results, I have proceeded thematically along the sub-themes linked to the two central themes, illustrating my analytical thoughts with interview passages quoted verbatim from the interviews. In each case, I considered it important to retain the language used by the participants, as the degree to which language is framed has informational value (Creswell, 2003, cited in Mitev, 2015).

After a summary analysis of the interviews, I also conducted a full longitudinal analysis of a highlighted life course, analysing the interviews along key themes in line with Kvale's (2005) narrative structuring, and then synthesising them into a narrative following a chronological order. This type of analysis allows greater scope for seeing causal links, for unravelling the

threads that run through each theme. The richness of the interview helped me to choose the right interview for this purpose, which already at the data collection stage drew my attention to the potential of the long narrative, told in a self-reported way, to be exploited in this way.

4. Results of the research

I would like to summarise my research findings primarily along the lines of the answers to the research questions. As space constraints do not allow me to substantiate my findings with interview transcripts – quoting verbatim the thoughts expressed by the interviewees – I have tried to build up a comprehensive picture in this chapter.

What narrative motifs and story themes can be identified in the recollection of memories related to certain prominent periods of the past?

When recalling memories of the past, it is important to take into account not only the specificities of the functioning of memory but also the current life situation of the individual. The primary aim in looking back from the present is not primarily to map the objective data, but rather how the individual has represented them and integrated them into his or her life history.

The recollection of childhood memories began with a kind of schematic ordering, whereby we encountered childhood narratives of good, bad and mixed emotions. More than a third of the respondents recalled their childhood with only good feelings, due to the care and affection of their parents and grandparents on the one hand, and the many good experiences they had (games, outings) on the other.

Childhood experiences also have a decisive influence on later life. However, almost a quarter of the respondents described their childhood as particularly bad, with deprivation, deviant parental behaviour and neglect being the most frequent factors.

How did the interviewees incorporate the years spent in segregated schools/schools into their individual life stories? How do they represent this in their narrative identity?

The leading criterion for inclusion in my research sample was the different curricular location of the school of study. The pathways of entry painted a very diverse picture. Only about a third of the respondents started their studies there in the first or preparatory grade, the rest were only transferred there later, from the majority primary school.

Most of the reasons given for transferring were problems in their learning, slower progress and falling behind. In some cases, these were linked to precise terms (e.g. dyslexia), and the peer review was also used as the body involved in the transfer decision. Some also mentioned their

behavioural and attitudinal problems, in many cases accompanied by self-reflection and a sense of regret. Both biological and environmental causes are decisive in poor learning performance. In many cases, the impact of family risk factors on learning pathways also emerged.

Interviewees who had only later moved to a different primary school/grade in a different curriculum described their years before the transfer as extremely difficult, with some painful memories surfacing. In several cases, the interviewee was only admitted to the special school after several changes of school, perhaps as a last resort.

In the lives of many of the interviewees, after experiencing initial failures, the years of schooling with different curricula settled into a pattern of "happy schooling", in which they mentioned accepting school atmosphere and, in particular, the attention and care of a teacher played a role. Several interviewees reported a formative experience of discovering their talents, in which the role of the different curricular primary school environment was undeniable. However, in addition to positive experiences, the interviews also revealed many difficulties in school, behavioural and motivational problems.

The older age group interviewed was the main group not continuing their education after a different primary school/grade, with financial, family or health reasons being the main reasons behind this decision. When interpreting the results, it is also important to take into account the specificities of the former institutional structure.

In many cases, the special schooling pathway was also a source of prejudice. In the narratives about this, we find mostly verbal manifestations and insults. There were even some who, perhaps as a defence, denied their place of study as far as possible. But there were also those who said that they were proud to have taken it, not only now but even then.

Many interviewees pointed to the limited opportunities for further study in a different curriculum primary school. There were several who, although they did not want to continue their studies in a (special) vocational school, ended up there, mainly because of their poor academic results. The main reason behind the decision to continue their studies in a specialised school was that the interviewees saw it as their only option, and in many cases they also expressed a low level of motivation to study or a kind of realistic self-image.

Most of them recall their secondary school years with good feelings, perhaps explained by the fact that many of them had already achieved their compulsory school age, so learning became a choice rather than an obligation.

Three of the interviewees have higher education, they have a school leaving certificate and two of them have a higher vocational qualification based on it.

Early school leaving was also present among my interviewees. Four of them finished their secondary education without a vocational qualification.

After upper secondary education, most of the interviewees tried to find a job in the open labour market, but difficulties in finding a job often emerged after leaving school. The lack of experience often made it difficult to find a job later on. Behind the diversity of career paths, there are often frequent changes in the workplace, caused by conflicts at work, inadequate working conditions, dissatisfaction with pay and undeclared work.

Retaining a job is a key factor in life chances, as the impact of unemployment in the lives of the interviewees for a longer or shorter period of time can have serious consequences not only in financial but also in psychological terms. Several interviewees also mentioned health problems that had led to their employment as a disabled worker.

Where are the interviewees in their lives at the moment, i.e. looking along the objective variables, what similarities and differences can be found in the current individual life circumstances?

Only a quarter of the interviewees (26.53%) can be said to be living either completely independently or with their partner or family, separated from parents or relatives, at the time of the interview. For the rest, we found a wide variety of living arrangements. Staying in the parental home is often the only alternative in adulthood, for a variety of reasons. Three quarters of the interviewees (63.3%) are in a relationship, but only one third (30.6%) have children. Looking at the average age of the interviewees (30.26 years), the results are in line with the social changes we are witnessing today, with the prolongation of the start of independent life (separation from parents, marriage, having children).

Three quarters of the respondents (71.4%) have completed secondary education, most of them with one or more vocational qualifications. Three interviewees have a school leaving certificate and two have a higher vocational qualification as a remedial teacher assistant. However, four (8.27%) have has not even completed eight years of primary school. Three quarters of the interviewees (75.51%) are currently in employment, but only six have found a job in their profession.

By including some of the subjective dimensions of well-being, what picture of their own quality of life do the interviewees give?

When looking at the subjective dimensions of quality of life, more than half of respondents currently feel well and have a good sense of well-being. Those who disagreed most often mentioned problems with starting a family, unemployment, employment and health. Responses about the greatest difficulties they experience in their current life situation can be broadly

grouped around four main themes, with material matters being the most frequently mentioned. Closely related to this were problems with work, housing and finally difficulties around family relationships.

In several cases, although not mentioned as a major difficulty, financial difficulties were still present in someone's life. Half of the respondents said yes to this question. On the other hand, a positive picture emerges from almost half of the respondents, who said they had no financial problems and some even shared their complete satisfaction with their salary.

Mental health is also affected by one's social relationships, which is an important dimension of social integration. Although a large majority of interviewees said they had a friend, looking behind the responses reveals a different framework for interpreting friendship.

What personal views play a role in the daily lives of the interviewees, guiding their thinking, behaviour and actions?

Positive emotions are important not only for current well-being but also for coping with difficulties. One such positive emotion is pride. Responses in this regard were mainly concentrated in two main areas, with positive expressions related to family on the one hand, and personal resources and achievements on the other.

In mapping individual value preferences, I mostly encountered values related to the dimension of 'conformity' (Schwartz 2006 cited in Luksander -Mike - Csite, 2012). Family and friends were the most important values in the lives of most of the respondents, and a number of positive individual and expected qualities (e.g. honesty, honour) were also found. he individual's role model also reveals a value orientation. In the majority of cases, we have seen immediate family members, parents, relatives being named as role models, mostly by highlighting achievements, deeds and positive qualities.

Religion can also help to find one's way around values and norms. Around half of the respondents consider themselves religious. If we look beyond the content of the answers and put the concept into a broader context, this proportion rises to with the introduction of the category "believer in his own way" (Tomka, 2006), so it can be said that faith is present in the lives of more than half of the interviewees and plays a role in them.

What characterises the future orientation of the interviewees, what kind of vision do they have?

Thinking about the future and acting towards the goals set are key factors for individual development (Strathman - Joireman, 2005). The future plans of the respondents ranged widely, with most of them mentioning independent housing, starting a family and work. I believe that these, although seem realistic, will be greatly influenced by external circumstances and the motivation and perseverance of the individual to achieve them.

5. Conclusions

The narratives of the interviewees painted a very varied life story. In dissecting the successes or difficulties of integration at each stage, it was not my intention to make assumptions about what might have happened if a particular school life path - which in my research had a common link with a different curriculum in primary school - had branched off in a different direction. After presenting the results, however, I feel it necessary to pause at several points, possibly by placing them in a deeper context, or even by formulating and circumscribing a broader interpretative framework. If we look at an inclusive society as a goal to be achieved - in which the constraints of exclusion are removed - then promoting the inclusion of disadvantaged groups is not only a political or economic issue, but also a pillar for achieving an effective democratic society (Semsei - Kovács, 2016; Varga, 2013). In a democracy, equality is a requirement without which we cannot talk about the rule of law. However, real social equality can only be achieved by taking into account existing inequalities. Thus, one important criterion of a just society is that assistance through activities aimed at countering inequalities can provide real access to persons and groups in unequal situations from different perspectives (Varga, 2013).

In achieving an inclusive society, I believe that the building process can only be started from the bottom up. And we need to look at schools and their proper functioning as an important building block for building in this direction. However, while the results of the PISA surveys confirm year after year the closed and selective nature of Hungarian society, the possibility of helping children from disadvantaged families to overcome their disadvantages remains an illusion.

This is also reflected in the fact that in Hungary there are very few regressive pupils who do better at school than their family background would suggest (Lannert, 2021).

In my research, we encountered several examples of milieu disadvantages related to the primary socialisation arena, against which the compensatory role of school should become even more pronounced.

In contrast, what do we find? As Judit Lannert (2021) puts it, instead of effective intervention points, we see a selective, homogenising school system, driven not only by the middle class but also by teachers.

In connection with these ideas, I would like to draw attention to the results of my research, which have, in many cases from the outset, revealed the vicissitudes of the school life course. Indeed, an inclusive society remains an illusion when children are brought up from a very young age in a school climate that is exclusionary and prejudiced, leaving traces, even in adulthood,

even if only in the form of negative memories. I have used a series of interviews to illustrate the pains and sad flashbacks that were evident in the narratives of the years before the children entered primary schools with a different curriculum. Perhaps it can also be argued, in relation to the input side, that in this respect, those who had been in the EAI sincet he beginning have been in a "more fortunate" position. As I have stressed before, my thoughts are not intended to argue for segregated education, and certainly not against inclusive education, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which an inappropriate learning environment can cause damage - not necessarily just 'tangible' damage - to an individual's life.

The specialised expertise that comes with a segregated school environment, the smaller student population, the more family-like atmosphere, the slower pace of progress, all appear to have been important compensating forces in overcoming disadvantage and related harms.

In my research, teachers, their attitudes towards students and their personality traits were central to both the negative and positive memories. I believe that the negative examples should not necessarily be used to condemn them, but rather to draw attention to the systemic mechanisms that are inadequate in many respects, by placing them in a broader context.

Behind the selection mechanisms of the school system are the majority of educators who are not, or only marginally, prepared and equipped to differentiate effectively in a heterogeneous environment (Lannert, 2021).

Yet the quality and effectiveness of education is strongly linked to the quality of teachers' work, which can only be of high quality if it is effective, efficient and equitable (Széll, 2013). In dealing with disadvantaged children, the teacher plays a key role. They can be the link to the wider society. The word of the teacher, the assessment, also plays an extremely important role in the lives of pupils, by motivating and giving a long-lasting initial encouragement on the hand, on the other hand under-assessment can lead to a slowing down of progress (Lannert, 2021).

A good atmosphere in the school and the commitment of teachers are not only important for successful learning, but also for raising aspiration levels for further learning. For the students mentioned above, positive school effects are the most likely to contribute to the importance of learning and thus indirectly, through the possibility of moving to a better job, to accessing higher social capital. I believe that the picture that emerges from my research supports these ideas. The positive memories of school were mostly related to the accepting and inclusive atmosphere, with the teacher as the main driver. Positive experiences of school are perhaps also reflected in the professionalism of the respondents.

The emphasis on the personality and competences of the teacher should also be seen in the content of the training. Although there are many positive examples of the renewal of the content

of teacher training, I believe that there are still not enough courses with specialised knowledge and special education content. And without this knowledge material, teachers can hardly be expected to provide professional assistance, given that the number of pupils with SNI and BTMN sitting on the benches of mainstream institutions is on the increase. Even if teachers do emerge from teacher training with sufficient quantity and quality of expertise, they face a number of obstacles early in their careers (large class sizes, lack of teaching assistants, inadequate equipment, etc.). Although the existence of objective conditions does not lead to a straight path to successful school inclusion, their absence can be a significant barrier to creating a collaborative learning environment.

Of course, focusing on the output side of schooling, it can also be seen that an education in a different curriculum primary school does indeed mark a straight path towards a special secondary school. My research has shown this, as well as the failure or inability to find a place in a mainstream secondary school. It is undeniable that the narrow spectrum of training offered by (special) vocational schools does not offer all young people attending them a promising and secure future in terms of social integration (Földes, 2002).

However, through the narratives of my interviewees, it also emerged that, in addition to the macrosociological dimensions (school performance, labour market behaviour, income) that form the basis of successful social integration, there are a number of other factors - at individual and social level - that can be significant for life and quality of life.

In the light of my results, it can therefore in no way be clearly stated that special educational establishments do not prepare people for life, nor do they provide an important basis for a start in life. Through the presentation of heterogeneous life paths, it became apparent that there were a good number of people who had successfully entered the labour market and, taking into account other aspects of life, reported satisfaction, happiness and well-being during the interviews.

So, going back to the initial ideas, I believe that the way to an inclusive society is through early positive experiences. But all members of society have an important role to play in this. If we start from the diversity of children and learners, we emphasise the diversity of learners, the variety and diversity of learning paths. And an 'effective school for all' (Ainscow, 2001) can be achieved by taking differences for granted, even as a resource. Such an institution can only become truly capable of meeting the educational needs of each child (Mohai - Perlusz, 2020). I hope that we are not so far away!

6. Outlook

In this dissertation, only a snippet of the analysis of the recorded life course interviews was possible, and thus several avenues for further research were laid out before me.

In the first instance, I would like to enrich the current research findings by cross-sectional analysis of the responses and narratives related to the other themes. Both my interviewees' articulation of the key scenes in their life stories and the challenges they faced in life can serve as interesting contributions to a deeper understanding of the interviewees' lives, their meaning-making processes and identity formation.

Although in the dissertation the so called "destiny events" were already recalled in a large number of past experiences, it was the later targeted questions that drew the interviewees' attention to such borderline situations, i.e. the extreme events of their lives. It is interesting to analyse why and how these events stand out from the ordinary, and to gain insight into the subjective world of the interviewees and their process of judgement. Identifying their common characteristics may also provide further insights. It cannot be ignored that life events and challenges, through their security-depriving or security-enhancing effects, also have an impact on the self-evaluation of the individual through the shaking of the self-assessment (Pataki, 2001). Thus, by learning about these events, the events that were previously revealed to us can be placed in a new context.

A further direction could be to enrich the number of longitudinal analyses. Although, due to the age of the interviewees, and thus the relatively shortness of their careers, it is not yet possible to talk about the development of career paths, I think that illustrative examples can be given of the different paths of starting from a similar life situation or moving on from a similar life situation, and the factors that support or hinder them can be identified and can provide further directions for micro-sociological investigations.

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