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**J. Csoba, P. Herrmann**

### **«LOSERS, GOOD GUYS, COOL KIDS» THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS**

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*КСОБА Юдит — профессор, заведующая кафедрой социологии и социальной политики, заместитель декана факультет гуманитарных наук по вопросам финансов и грантов, Дебреценский университет, Дебрецен, Венгрия. E-MAIL: csoba.judit@arts.unideb.hu ORCID: 0000-0001-5285-521X*

*ХЕРРМАНН Питер — доктор наук, профессор, факультет социальных наук и международных отношений Института мировой экономики Университет Корвина, Будапешт, Венгрия; кафедра социальных наук Университета Восточной Финляндии (UEF), Куопио, Финляндия; член научного комитета Европейского института политических, экономических и социальных исследований (EURISPES), Рим, Италия. E-MAIL: herrmann@esosc.eu ORCID: 0000-0001-5285-521X*

«LOSERS, GOOD GUYS, COOL KIDS» THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

*Judit CSOBA<sup>1</sup> — Prof. Dr., Head of Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Vice Dean for Finance and Grants of Faculty of Humanities E-MAIL: csoba.judit@arts.unideb.hu ORCID: 0000-0001-5285-521X*

*Peter HERRMANN<sup>2,3,4</sup> — Prof. Dr. E-MAIL: herrmann@esosc.eu ORCID: 0000-0002-0444-4704*

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<sup>1</sup> University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary

<sup>2</sup> Institute of World Economy, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

<sup>3</sup> University of Eastern Finland (UEF), Kuopio, Finland

<sup>4</sup> Scientific Committee of EURISPES, Rome, Italia

**Аннотация.** Описывается эмпирическое исследование, посвященное поколению NEET, проживающему в Венгрии. Под поколением NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) принято понимать молодежь, которая в силу социально-экономических или политических факторов нигде не работает и не учится. Авторы представили анализ качественных интервью, который раскрывает проблемы выпускников средних школ. Результаты исследования показали глубину общественного недопонимания причин сложившейся вокруг поколения NEET ситуации и позволили авторам выдвинуть предложения по модернизации молодежной политики.

**Ключевые слова:** выпускники средней школы, молодежь, которая не учиться и не учиться NEET generation, молодежь, не имеющая дохода, депривация социализации.

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## Introduction

We define early school leavers as those young individuals who leave the education system with the completion of their primary school studies at best or in some cases even earlier.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, both Europe and Hungary have seen a constant increase in the number of those young people aged from 15 to 29 who are not participating in education or the labour market either. These people are referred to as «the NEET generation» by the relevant literature<sup>2</sup>. The acronym stands for the status of this group — them being involved «Neither in Employment nor in Education

**Abstract.** The article describes an empirical study concerned with the NEET generation in Hungary. The NEET generation (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is represented by those young persons who do not work or study anywhere due to a number of social, economic and political reasons. The authors present the results of qualitative interviews revealing some of the problems of secondary school graduates. The findings point to deep public misunderstanding of the situation of the NEET generation and help the authors to draw up several proposals on the modernization of youth policies.

**Keywords:** secondary school graduates, youth, NEET generation, young people without income, social deprivation

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, they have not completed secondary (ISCED Level 3, vocational or matura-type) education.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance [Fehérvári, 2008; Mártonfi, 2013; Imre, 2014; Híves, 2015].

and Training»<sup>3</sup>. The phenomenon of early school leaving is discussed in both political documents<sup>4</sup> and in academic literature concerned with the development of the welfare state and issues of youth work as one of the most pressing social problems. Dropping out from school can be the result of various reasons. For instance, in Portugal and Holland, students claim to have dropped out because (professional) issues they are interested in are not covered by the educational system. Many do not intend to learn as they believe that even without formal education it is for everybody possible to find a job, even if most of them are aware of the fact that their future income would be lower than the income of those who have finished their studies [Fehérvári, 2008].

The increase of the dropout rate over the recent years is also due to the expansion of formal education [OECD, 2015]. With the extension of the age range of compulsory education and the increase of the number and proportion of those participating in the education system, the probability of those who perform worse and who are unable to meet the expectations entering the system also becomes higher. Among dropouts are also those who are not sufficiently motivated to acquire the accessible qualifications as they do not consider the given professions profitable, and acquiring the required training would mean too much effort or hardship.

In Hungary, however, the exact opposite of this development started: instead of an expansion we find a reduction of formal education. In 2011, the school leaving age was reduced from 18 to 16<sup>5</sup>. Looking at the statistics of the last five years, we see that the number of students who are particularly in danger of dropping out<sup>6</sup> decreased, [Óvodától..., 2013]<sup>7</sup>, the number of dropouts nevertheless increased between 2010 and 2013 — this applies in relative and in absolute terms. Only in the recent two years we see a slight decrease and compared to 2010 the figures are still unfavourable (2010: 10,8%, 2015: 11,6%)<sup>8</sup>. The proportion of early school leavers in Hungary highly exceeds the target number of the EU 2020 programme that aims to reduce the proportion of dropouts below 10%<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The relevant literature uses several different terms to describe the phenomenon. The least accurate, yet widely used phrase is dropping out, which signifies the idea of leaving a given education programme before finishing it, but does not specify the type of education and the characteristics of the involved target group. Due to the increasing occurrence of the phenomenon, the usage of more specific terms — such as «early school leavers» (explained in 2) or the category of the NEET youth — has become more common. In the present study, we mainly use the terms «dropouts» and «potential dropouts» to describe individuals who have discontinued their primary or secondary education at least once.

<sup>4</sup> See e. g.: the recommendation of the Council of the European Union aiming to reduce early school leaving <http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:191:0001:0006:HU:PDF>, or Hungary's «Mid-term strategy against leaving school unqualified» <http://www.kormany.hu/download/5/fe/20000/Vegzettség%20nélküli%20iskolaelhagyás%20.pdf>, or Hungary's National Reform Programme of 2016 [ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/nrp2016\\_hungary\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/nrp2016_hungary_en.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Act CXV of 2011 on National Public Education, Article 45 (3).

<sup>6</sup> The dropout rate is the highest between ages 14 and 18. This was primarily due to the high number of dropouts at vocational institutions. [Fehérvári, 2008; 2015]

<sup>7</sup> The 2015/2016 school year began with a significant decrease in the number of vocational school students. Compared to the statistics of the previous year, only 78,617 students participated in full-time education. The high decrease was due to the reduction of the school leaving age to 16. Young individuals who had reached the age of 16 in many cases did not even enrol in the new school year. (See Kormány (2015): Köznevelési statisztikai gyorstájékoztató a 2015/2016. tanév eleji adatgyűjtés előzetes adataiból. URL: [http://www.kormany.hu/download/0/de/80000/Koznev\\_stat\\_gyorstaj\\_2015\\_2016.pdf](http://www.kormany.hu/download/0/de/80000/Koznev_stat_gyorstaj_2015_2016.pdf) (accessed: 10.12.2017)).

<sup>8</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&ocode=tsdsc410&plugin=1>.

<sup>9</sup> To learn more regarding this issue, consult the following websites: the EU 2020 programme's targets [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/targets/index\\_hu.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/targets/index_hu.htm) as well as Hungary's 2016 reform programme. [http://www.kormany.hu/download/c/f1/b0000/Nemzeti%20Reform%20Program\\_2016.pdf](http://www.kormany.hu/download/c/f1/b0000/Nemzeti%20Reform%20Program_2016.pdf).

Leaving the fact aside that a multitude of reasons stand behind school dropout, some of them had been mentioned, it many of the young people concerned are members of disadvantaged families. Learning was in many cases already in the generation of the parents not highly valued and this attitude was in many cases entering also the children's mind-set. A successful parental model, that could be a motivational force for the students to continue their studies, is missing from many of the families. In most cases these parents have no knowledge, no experience and no authority within the family to provide help and guidance.

Dropping out from school comes at a price, both on the individual and on the social level. Over the recent years several studies aimed at revealing the causes and effects in order to find efficient ways of intervention. As for the generation between the age of 15 and 19, we are still far from seeing the whole picture of the continuous confrontations of everyday life and the efforts of these young people to survive in everyday life.

In the interview research we started in the spring of 2016 at the research seminar of the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at University of Debrecen, Hungary, we intended to get a clearer picture of the life of young individuals that had dropped out or that were extremely likely dropping [again] out of school. Through our exploratory research we conducted in the second half of 2016 48 semi-structured interviews to find out the family background of these young people, the people and networks on whom they can rely if necessary, and the «survival strategies» they use to organise their everyday live. We were also curious as to what the students' school-related experiences were, what kind of relationships they established with their peers, and what kind of future they imagined for themselves. The interviewees were students of a Debrecen «Second Chance» school, who — based on their life stories — were either dropouts or potential dropouts between the age of 15 and 19. Backgrounds of the (potential) dropout had been varied, reaching from low performance and even complete failure over leave without notice and aggressiveness to behavioural abnormalities. The students who had been interviewed came for the said reasons to the «Second Chance» school, however boasting the same problems at this school. In the first phase of the research, 36 interviews were conducted with individuals who had dropped out of an educational institution, and a few interviews with those who had come close to dropping out due to the number of unattended lessons at their current place of education. Our study is based on the analysis of these interviews.

### **15—19 year-old dropouts in the light of statistics**

Hungary has agreed to reduce the proportion of early school leavers to 10% as one of the main targets of the Europe 2020 development strategy. Examining the statistics of early school leavers makes it clear that at the beginning of the planning cycle (2010) the country performed on a relatively good starting position if compared with the 27 member states of the EU. However, in recent years, this favourable condition in terms of dropout rates came increasingly under pressure to be finally lost.

Table 1. **School dropout rates in Hungary and the EU 2011—2015**<sup>10</sup>

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Hungary	10.8	11.4	11.8	11.9	11.4	11.6
EU 28	13.9	13.4	12.7	11.9	11.2	11.0

Source: EUROSTAT 2015. <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsdsc410&plugin=1>.

Some typical characteristics of 18—35-year old, working age individuals in Hungary were described in Kertesi and Kézdi's study published in 2010. Their study did include (although only to a small extent) some young individuals between the 16 and 20 years of age who did not attend vocational school, secondary vocational school or grammar school. According to the authors' estimate, 1—2 % of the 18—35-year old generation had finished only the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school, thus not continuing their formal education. Even though dropping out is, according to the same authors as well, already a problem in primary education<sup>11</sup>, it is mainly institutions of secondary education where the phenomenon is especially prevalent [Kertesi, Kézdi, 2010].

According to previous studies, dropping out is highest at vocational schools when we look at the differentiated out institutional system of secondary education [Fehérvári, 2008; Mártonfi, 2013; Fehérvári, 2015]. In vocational secondary schools<sup>12</sup> and grammar schools this problem is less prevalent, yet not negligible. This distribution is already understandable from the fact that in vocational schools young individuals from disadvantaged families represent a significantly larger share. For instance, in 2013/2014 school year, a total of 105122 students were studying at vocational schools; 27,1 % of them were disadvantaged and 9,0 % of them were multiply disadvantaged. In grammar schools, on the other hand, the proportion of disadvantaged students was 8,5 %, while the proportion of multiply disadvantaged individuals was 1,3 % [Híves, 2014].

In addition to and complementing these issues if family background and position within the educational system we find disparities between different geographical regions. Low performance of the region in socio-economic terms — high poverty rates, low standards of living, and disadvantage — are closely linked to the phenomenon of early school leaving. When it comes to early school leaving, Hungary's most noticeable regions are in the North and in the Észak-Alföld region. The areas near the borders — which are highlighted regarding the accumulation of disadvantage — are especially endangered [Híves, 2015]. The regional differences of early school leavers in the 2005—2014 period are also obvious in the 2015 survey conducted by Eurostat. The analysis of the data allows us as well to observe the changes in the proportion of

<sup>10</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsdsc410&plugin=1>.

The statistics table shows data of members of the youth aged from 15 to 29. In the case of our study, we only analyse the 15—19-year-old generation, but the availability of studies and analyses of this group is limited in the Hungarian relevant literature, so we included information concerning a wider age group in our analysis as well.

<sup>11</sup> According to the study of Hermann and Varga [Hermann, Varga, 2011], from 2010 on, the proportion of those without primary education has started to increase and the proportion of individuals who completed primary education is stagnating rather than decreasing.

<sup>12</sup> There are three forms of secondary school: 4 years grammar school, 4 years vocational secondary school, and 3 years vocational school.

early school leavers between 2005 and 2014. Within the surveyed period, it was only the most developed region (Central Hungary), where the proportion of early school leavers decreased (7,5% in 2014). On the other hand, the Észak-Alföld region (where the present research had been conducted) had to face even a gradual increase in the percentage of primary and secondary school dropouts, and by 2014 it had reached approximately 13%. The region that performed in 2014 worst was Northern Hungary, where the dropout rate reached 18,5% [EUROSTAT, 2015; Fehérvári, 2015: 37—38].

The proportion of disadvantaged students in secondary education is the highest in the Észak-Alföld region compared to other regions of Hungary. Out of thousand students, 29,7 were placed in this category. Within the region, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county has the largest number of disadvantaged secondary school students (35,9 out of 1000 students), which is followed by Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok (28,1 out of 1000 students) and then Hajdú-Bihar (24,3 out of 1000 students). Regarding the statistics about disadvantaged individuals in vocational and special vocational schools, the Észak-Alföld region, Northern Hungary, and the Közép-Dunántúl and Dél-Dunántúl regions provided very similar results, being an average of 13 students out of 1000 [Híves, 2014]. Though detailed analysis is required, one can say at first glance already that these regions are by and large characterised by lagging behind: NEETS is a complement to the regional pattern of **No Economic Perspectives, Social Embedding and Backing** — what may be introduced as NEPSEB, specifically providing a procrustean bed of NEETS.

### Results of the research — what is not visible in the statistics

The statistics paint a realistic picture of the structural factors that significantly influence early school leaving. But there is something that is not visible if we only look at the numbers, namely the social micro-cosmos that shapes life and living of the young people in question. It is concerned with questions about how they perceive themselves and their surroundings, what their opinions are about school and learning, what goals they have and the kind of environment they spend their everyday lives in. Accordingly, the quotes from the interviews are selected with the aim of adding the qualitative perspective, using statements that reflect in a very clear and outspoken way this experience of the micro-cosmos. The line of the argument was focusing on the attitude of the students to school and their perceived difficulties, then personal contacts (family, friends) and finally the financial situation of the students.

The interviews performed during a workshop seminar made it possible to observe their everyday life more closely. The intended length of this study does not allow us to present all the dimensions observed among the young people, thus, we will focus on only five areas. First, we aim to summarise why school and learning are not appealing in the eyes of the interviewed students. As family and peer groups are extremely important in the socialisation of young people, the second dimension of analysis concerns the patterns that help overcoming disadvantages or are, on the contrary, regenerating factors. Money and money management have a special significance in disadvantaged families as neither generating income, nor spending money is a routine, unproblematic activity. During the interviews, we tried to find out how much the interviewees learned in terms of household management and what alternative strategies of generating

income are to be found among them. Finally, we were curious to learn about their ideas about their personal future, facing the lack of a stable background and qualification.

### 1. Attitudes toward school

Three quarters of the interviewed students are attending the secondary school in a new attempt (after they dismissed from or dropping out of the first school) yet, the majority of them are regularly absent from school. Thus, attending school was at first glance something they disliked. However, the answers obtained during the interviews suggested the opposite. In general one can say that the young individuals actually like going to school. However, it is not specifically because of learning or because of recognising the school as important institution but because of seeing it as meeting point, allowing them to meet their friends/classmates. As it turned out in many cases, they chose this school because of their friends, ex-classmates, acquaintances had enrolled in this school similarly to the interviewees, but usually earlier. However, it also became clear that both in their previous school and here again, it had been them who were a strong driving force towards absenteeism.

Learning plays barely a role in the lives of these students, a point almost all of them agreed. They consider it a necessary evil and they believe it is a waste of time. Only a small minority mentioned the fact that they prepare for a test every once in a while. Regular studying, from lesson to the next, was not mentioned even in a single case. Attending this school is perceived as compulsory task. They claim that their school presence is mainly a result of parental pressure (as parents believe one has to be somewhere during the day) or financial need (their families need the money issued as a child benefit, which is conditional on regular school attendance) as well as the fact that meeting their friends is here especially easy. Few of them mention that, if all goes well, they might obtain some kind of qualification, too. The reason behind such believe is that students feel that in this «Second Chance» school teachers are more understanding, forgiving, and patient. «Sometimes too forgiving!», they say.

Even though they do not like learning and they do not put a lot of effort into it, they express the desire to reach a status that is one step up from their parents', which means a higher level of education, too. This is a feature that is similar to the expectation of their non-disadvantaged peers. Apparently the parents' expectations also contribute to such perceptions and expectations as in the case of parents with lower education we can observe similar ambitions regarding their children's education. «40% of children whose mothers have less than eight grades of schooling aim to pass the Matura exam at least, 8—10% of them intend to complete higher education» [Balázs, Mártonfi, 2011: 59]. The interviewees confirmed these parental expectations as well.

*«Q: What is your parents' highest level of education?»*

*A: Mum was, I think, half a year away from becoming a qualified seamstress, or even less, like a few months when Dad eloped her from the family. Dad finished 10 or 11 grades. Something like this...»*

*Q: Have you talked with your parents about what they would like you to become?»*

*A: Of course, they bring it up, like, on a daily basis. Mum said that she would really like me to study to be a waitress, because everyone in the family has qualifications except her.*

*And she says that she would be really proud if I had it. If I succeeded. Well, they are looking forward to the exam even more than me.» (commuter girl at risk of dropping out, 17)*

For students who have not retained much knowledge from their primary school studies, and who are barely willing to put an effort into learning during secondary school, it is a real challenge to obtain a vocational qualification. It is especially difficult if the trade they are studying at school was not their personal choice. Two-thirds of the interviewed individuals did not want to attend this institution and they did not want to study this field. How did they end up here anyway? As we have mentioned, on the one hand, because of their friends or acquaintances; after a while they realised that this institution is not about «pals», but rather about their career, even if they do not like it. In the case of other interviewees (mainly those who had been dismissed from their previous schools — due to absenteeism or other behavioural problems) it was clear that they could not be picky and enrolling in this institution was the only option. Personal dreams and parental expectations are quite difficult to live up to if the studied vocation was not chosen by them and they can hardly relate to the studied field. They (would) have to perform well in a field which was a ‘given option’ rather than an opportunity within their scope of interest.

The choices and compulsions are further explained by the fact that the range of vocations offered by «Second Chance» schools in a given region can be quite limited. The table below shows a few examples of trades that are available in «Second Chance» institutions. Having looked at the list, we can make two distinct observations. On the one hand, there are relatively few typical feminine vocations available, as if only boys could become early school leavers or at-risk students — this is even more remarkable as the gender composition of the classes shows a high share of female students. On the other hand, the overrepresentation of industrial and metallurgical vocations and the narrow range of trades within the services sector implies that the scope of offering opportunities is not the most appropriate, which does not help the students coming from an already disadvantaged background [Makó, 2014].

*Table 2. «Second Chance» schools in the Észak-Alföld region and the range of vocations available (2016)*

<b>Name of school</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Vocations and duration of training</b>
Debrecen Vocational Training Centre — Gábor Baross Secondary School, Secondary Vocational School and Hostel	Debrecen	CNC operator (1 year) Structural metal worker (3 or 2 years) Cutting machine operator (3 or 2 years) Welder (3 years) Machinist (3 years) Auto body worker (3 years)
Sámuel Tessedik Vocational School and Grammar School	Kisvárdá Túrkeve Kisvárdá, Nyíregyháza, Debrecen:	Shop assistant (3 years) Catering assistant (3 years) Welder (3 years) Waiter /waitress (3 years) Cook (3 years) Social service assistant and nurse (3 years); Commerce (4 years);



Name of school	Location	Vocations and duration of training
Kata Telegdi Vocational School and Secondary Vocational School	Kisvárdá, Nyíregyháza, Debrecen: Kisvárdá: Kisvárdá, Nyíregyháza:	Healthcare/ IT/ Economics and beauty sectoral training (4 years) Computer repair technician (3 years) Administration sectoral training (4 years)

Source: The researchers' own findings, edited by them.

Despite all of this, no one has claimed to have experienced per se failures in connection with the school. Granted, noteworthy successes have only been reported in a few exceptional cases. They say that they are here right now as they have to. They hang out with their friends and the best part is that they belong somewhere. The teachers had accepted the situation, too. «They don't make any trouble» — they say [Imre, 2014].

## 2. Changing family roles

The families of the interviewed young people, in most cases, live under financially poor conditions. Their access to income is not consistent either, so the requirement of regular expenses are difficult to address. In the majority of the analysed cases it is the father who works and the mothers are housewives in the traditional sense. According to the students, it is mainly a cause of child-raising responsibilities or due to illness, but there are cases where the father had prohibited the mother from working. These fathers primarily oppose their wives' employment due to tradition — according to which, a man is supposed to be the breadwinner in a family. In only a few cases did mothers have full-time jobs. This is to a great extent explained by the fact that among the surveyed families, most women only had primary school education, or they did not have marketable qualifications, thus finding a job turned out to be nearly impossible.

Thus, on the parents' part, providing a role model and motivating their children to work are very limited, because they are not employed either, and working is missing from their routine tasks and activities [Fehérvári, Széll, 2014]. The skills and abilities (punctuality, efficient time management, quality work, performance, constantly living up to external expectations, effective conflict management, etc.) are missing in many cases. On the other hand, even if the young people in question are employed, they work most of the time in atypical jobs (mainly temporary jobs), trying to sustain themselves and their families on the periphery of the labour market. Such an inferior job — mainly a survival tool rather than an outlet for creativity and personal fulfilment — is not the most attractive model for a teenager. Despite these factors, or rather because of them all parents expressed during the interviews their expectations of their children acquiring a qualification, and reaching a higher status than the parents.

*«They help with this, too, they have the strictest attitude towards school, and they say that I should go there all the time, so that they know that I would become something, they are the most serious about this.» (boy that has dropped out, 16)*

In spite of all efforts of the parents, interestingly enough even if the father is involved in making money, the interviewees do not consider their fathers to be role models, it

is their elder brothers who get this privilege. This is probably due to the fact that the fathers can only participate in the lowest levels of the labour market, which is not motivational — be it from a financial or a prestige perspective. On the other hand the interviews showed that the fathers spend very little time with their families, thus, they barely have a connection with their children. Based on interviews, the father's motivational, role model function is taken up by the oldest child (most of the time a son). Often this «handover» undermines the father's authority, motivational power and limits his impact on the children's everyday lives. Being aware of this, one can understand better why — besides the general characteristics of the age group (separation from parents in teenage years) — an elder brother and a peer group have a massive impact on the young individuals.

*«Q: Do you have a role model in your family?»*

*A: Krisztián is my elder brother who lives in Érd. He started out the same way. He told me to make it through the end. He always tries to persuade me. You need to learn and you will succeed.» (dropout boy, commuter, 16)*

*«Q: If there is someone you can look up to in your family, who is it?»*

*A: My brother in the army; I look up to him because he made it.» (at-risk boy, commuter, 18)*

The lack of authority and the limited nature of the relationship are also indicated by the fact that communication between parents and children is limited, regarding both its content and the conveyed emotions. Even though the young individuals described at the time of the interviews their relationships with their parents as being good, we can see a narrow timeframe and limited content when we look a bit closer. When it comes to communication within the family, mainly superficial topics are talked about, conversations are usually limited to short and necessary messages which do not leave room for deeper exchange. When they are asked what they think, how their parents feel, the students are unable to provide sufficiently clear answers, while they also admit that they seldom inform their parents about their everyday experiences and challenges.

*Q: How do you feel when you get home and how do you spend your time?*

*A: I don't really like being at home, I'd rather go to school than to be at home.*

*Q: Why is that?*

*A: Well, yeah, so we don't really get along with Mum. The only reason why I like being home is that there is the baby, so many times I have to stay there, I have to babysit. But I'm not on very good terms with either of my parents right now. (commuter boy that has dropped out, 16)*

In the case of most young people, the strong emotional bond between them and their family — that should be the basis of their future cognitive ability and the ability to cooperate and converse — is missing [Darvas, Tausz, 2009].

The «conversations» that nevertheless occur from time to time take mainly place after returning home, and after these, each family member becomes again occupied with their own activities in their private spaces. The children usually don't even seek a closer contact with their parents as they feel that their everyday problems could not be solved by them anyway. The interviews showed that the parents do not possess the tools or skills that would have a real impact on their children. It is mainly because of this that the parents are usually unaware of their children's criminal involvements —

provided those are not officially discovered — but in some cases, they do not even want to be aware of these as the young individuals sustain themselves this way. However, young individuals — as they sometimes express it — would need the support and experience of parents, especially concerning their ages.

*Q: If you had your own family, how would you imagine it?*

*A: If I will have a family, I will make sure that I sit down with my child and ask them how school was. I will always try to avoid quarrels, even though this [conversing without quarrelling] does not exist in our home anymore. (commutergirl who has dropped out, 16)*

The parents' role is in many cases limited to expressing their expectations of their children acquiring a qualification. However, as for the accomplishment of this, — not having the needed tools and skills — they can neither help, nor control their children. The young people are left to their own devices when it comes to significant questions of their lives, or in many cases, they ask for the advice of their friends (pals) that are in similar situations. In fortunate cases, the good relationship established with an elder brother can substitute the missing family roles.

### **3. Friends, pals, «companions»?**

The school careers of the interviewed young people, but also the social roles taken up after finishing school are essentially defined by their relations outside of their families. That is the reason why at the time of the interviews, we contacted the friends and acquaintances that influence their decisions, and behaviour, and strengthen their formal and informal relationships.

The interviews show that young people consider friendships to be the most important of all their relationships. In a few cases, the interviewees described the relationship to their siblings of same strength. In most cases, though, they named someone of a similar age — as the person they have the closest relationship with. According to them, it is not only the adult generation but also their own class that lacks a genuine person they could get closer to.

In the interviews, friends are not only referred to as positive characters. In many cases the students talk about them as people who can «bring you down» — even further from an already low level. As for the friends, we can see similar deviances (absenteeism, alcohol/drug consumption, juvenile delinquency, theft, school fights, etc.) to the ones that had led to the interviewee changing school or repeat a grade. Is there a kind of «companionship» that works as a bond between the students? The questions asked about the topics of the conversations with their friends show that in many cases these are very superficial, without any deep meaning, and moreover that they do not even let their friends get closer to them. It is only in the fights between peoples or groups where they can certainly rely on each other.

*«Q: If you are completely honest, were you absent from school in last semester?*

*A: Because of my pals, they got me to hang out with them, oh, was I stupid. I followed them. We drank a lot, had a lot of crisps.*

*Q: And can you rely on your friends' advice when you get in trouble?*

*A: Yes, I do. They always help out, they tell me not to fight, they won't let me, they stop me.*

*Q: And how do you help them?*

*A: I also try not to let them get in trouble. I stop them from doing something stupid.» (young commuter who has left school early, 16)*

It seems like even friends cannot help the young individuals cope with their helplessness. Accumulating all their disappointment and bad experiences, they barely trust anyone. They suppress these bad experiences without discussing them with someone, so they just keep building up and amplifying, thus leaving their souls scarred for life. They keep their secrets, and they do not expect or ask for external help in dealing with their happiness and problems.

*«Q: If you had a secret, who would you entrust it to?*

*A: Well, I could tell it because I have that kind of strong relation among my friends, but I would not really tell it to anyone.» (commuter boy that has dropped out for the second time, 18)*

#### 4. Invisible money

During the interviews, we were surprised to find out that the interviewed young individuals had little knowledge as to how their families managed money, e. g. how much money they had available and how they divided the total amount between the different 'departments' of the family business. This is due to the fact that the family members essentially have irregular sources of income and the parents do not calculate the amounts made in each month and they do not properly balance the expenses either. In many cases they live of temporary income and even the parents would have trouble explaining how they would make money in that month to cover the daily living costs. As for the savings, reserves, and their use in the families, we cannot say much as their resources are — at least in most of the cases — hardly sufficient to cover their everyday needs. It is no surprise that in most cases, the students are not familiar with family resource management, and in such situation, they are less willing to prepare for an adult role connected to managing and financing a household.

*«Q: You live together with many people in a household. How much money do you think would be a «dream salary» which would make it convenient to get by in a month?*

*A: Let's say, maximum 100.000<sup>13</sup>.*

*Q: And how much do you live off of right now?*

*A: I don't know, I never ask about it.» (commuter boy, being at risk, 18)*

Despite the interviewees lack of information about money management, we were able to learn a few things about their sources of income and their outgoings. The bus tickets needed for going to school are usually paid for by the children's mothers. Two-thirds of commuters, travelling to the school from outside of Debrecen, receive pocket money from their parents while the remaining one-third does not. In the case of those who do, the amounts can vary. Some get 1000—1500 Ft for each day from which they also have to buy lunch. Others receive the same amount, but for a whole week, and there are even some cases, where the parents provide 1500 Ft for a whole month which has to cover the costs of lunch on school days<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> App. 360 USD which would be 4320 USD p. a. According to the OECD Better Life Index 'the average household net-adjusted disposable income per capita is USD 15614 a year' (<http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/hungary/>).

<sup>14</sup> This corresponds to about 5 euros, thus not getting them anywhere.

The majority of the youth, due to the lack, or the low amount of pocket money, is forced to start making money on their own. They augment the family income from alternative sources, part of which are illegal (trading, stealing, «helping out»<sup>15</sup>). Such ways to generate income as well as unregistered temporary work are done by two-thirds of the interviewed students. Less than one-third of the students (also) work legal jobs. Most of the interviewees use their legal or illegal income to support their families.

As they do not possess higher amounts of money, their free time activities do not belong to the kind of activities that require financial engagement. They hang out with friends, play football, chat in the city centre, and go window-shopping in the mall. Surprisingly, many of them mentioned that if they have some spare money, they spend it on energy drinks. Energy drinks are functioning as a relatively accessible status symbol among their peers.

## 5. What does the future hold?

As the most important expectation about the future, each interviewed student mentioned the acquiring a profession — mainly the ones they were studying, but some chose different ones. It was not clear during the study whether these expectations were reflections of internal desires or whether they just «amplified» the expectations of the students' environment.

*«If I don't get a trade, I am done for.» — says a 17-year-old boy, referring to the parents' expectations and rigor. In his case, the goal is not really the acquisition of the currently studied trade, but living up to the external expectations that pose a potential threat — in case he fails to meet them.*

Approximately half of the surveyed people would like to be employed in their current field of study. One part of the remaining students would like to take up another trade as they had originally wanted to enrol in a different school, but due to their friends' recommendation, they came here, and stayed even though they regretted later their decision. There are other young individuals who did not want to come to this school, but their desired school could not offer a space at the time, so they will try again.

During the interviews, it was clear that the students are lacking in many regards reasonably clear visions of and aims for the future. We got in many cases the impression that they had no clue as to what they would like to do. They would not have either short-term or long-term plans and their desires were limited to the acquisition of certain status symbols (phone, clothes).

*Q: What are your plans regarding the future?*

*A: Well, I don't know... I should do something.*

*Q: For example, will you finish your studies here for certain, or...?*

*A: No one knows» (early school leaver boy, 17)*

There are some, who, rather than having plans, have dreams which are connected to «stardom» — despite the fact that they are 16—18 years old. They want to be famous football players, dancers, singers, or race car drivers.

<sup>15</sup> The «helping out» is a form of usury.

*«So it is rather football, that is what I would rather like to do. And that's why I want to go to Pest in the summer, so that I would get in a good team. But I would like to finish this school in case I won't make it in football.» (16-year-old commuter boy)*

The interviewee's uncertainty shows how thought-through and promising of a strategy it is to «try your luck» without any connections or preliminary training. That the «fortunate» strategy without any relationship preparing is a doubtful strategy was indicated by the uncertainty of the respondent, presenting more a disparate attempt to change and gain a perspective.

What we found out about their plans was connected to being employed and their future families. After obtaining their vocational training, only few aim on continuing their studies, which in this case means passing the leaving cert. The majority, however, does not consider continuing their studies. They aim to start working as soon as possible and start making money.

*«I would [start working] as soon as possible, whenever I get an opportunity, I will take it. Around the age of 18—19.» (16-year-old girl, commuter. This is her second school)*

*«As soon as I get hired, immediately. When I will be maximum 20 years old.» (2<sup>nd</sup> grade boy, 18 years old. He was a repeater in primary school)*

The students plan to have a family and children at the ages 25—27 on average. Most of them would like to have one or two children, but in some cases the goal was three or four children. The reason behind the determination of the number of children is their personal experience (they come from families with many children) and the intention to establish financial security. The young individuals often play the role of a «step-mummy» or «step-daddy» in their families. They are «babysitters», as well as the ones responsible for housework and household farming, especially in those single-parent families where the parent needs help due to their health or the number of children.

## Conclusion

Combating early school leaving is a central strategic goal not only in Hungary, but also across Europe. The successful integration of the youth in society and the labour market are significant factors of economic and social growth. In order to reach these goals, unravelling the causes and gathering information about early school leavers have become key research programmes. Previous analyses and statistics do not tell much about the living standards, families, mind-sets and everyday lives of the young individuals. During our research, we aimed on finding out more about these aspects through interviews performed among dropouts or at-risk students aged between 15 to 19.

In the «Second Chance» school that hosted our research, learning barely plays a role among the interviewed students, it is rather considered a «necessary evil», or even a waste of time, and hence, they do not spend much time learning. Two-thirds of the students did not even want to attend this school or did not want to study this field. But the majority of them did not have another choice as their previous schools dismissed them due to absenteeism or other behavioural problems. Their choices and compulsions are further explained by the fact that the range of vocations offered by «Second Chance» schools is relatively limited. Girls are in an even more difficult situation compared to boys as there are few typical female vocations available

whereas industrial and metallurgical vocations are overrepresented. Thus, the resistance of «problem children» in this new system becomes understandable to an extent.

In most of the families of the interviewed youth, there is only one breadwinner. The father's status and income — despite all efforts — is not sufficient to provide a stable financial background to the family. In most cases this situation undermines the father's authority, motivational power and role within the family. The mothers typically do not have the chance to take up jobs and generate income through employment. The importance of benefits — like child benefit, which is conditional on the children's regular school attendance — is accordingly very high. A family usually cannot generate enough income to cover all needs, and the children hardly receive financial support from the family. They are forced to make money by themselves and the ways they perform are not always legal. Due to the lack of communication and trust within the family, parents are typically not aware of this. The young individuals try to make up for the lack of communication and support in their families among their friends, but as their friends come from similar backgrounds, they share the same experience and preparedness, thus they do not offer real support. On the contrary, their presence often reinforces the survival strategies associated with failure. When it comes to expressing their expectations regarding the future, the students are able to understand the necessity to acquire a vocation and generate income, but — even though they express their desires to escape the current situation — with the lack of models, tools and support, they draw a picture that depicts almost the same family and vocational situation as they are living in.

The information gathered during the interviews is of course only suitable for raising awareness about a microcommunity of the involved individuals and the fact that when it comes to combating the problem, it is also essential to list and deal with socialisation deficits, family dysfunction, lack of knowledge, and different mind-sets.

## Outlook

However, there is a much larger issue behind it, requiring to find the real challenges societies face today, these standing structurally behind early school leaving. The mainstream view is on promoting jobs and aiming on mechanisms that allow everybody to get into employment. In a short-term perspective this is surely the most important task. And as also our research showed, one of the challenges is to 'collect young people where they stand' — certain strata of youth are especially prone to call out of the system, and recognising their everyday lives opens an understanding for the real problems.

Beyond this, NEETS — as similar problems of disintegration — point on fundamental challenges the current hegemonic system has to face. These have to be located socially and societally, and can only be understood if a relational perspective is taken. The cornerstones of the hegemonic system, as far as they are relevant here, can be briefly outlined as follows:

- national economies that are immersed in a global world systems,
- the need for international competitiveness, for which the conditions are by and large defined externally, i. e. outside of the national reach and even to some extent outside of the realm of the national polities,

- the general socio-political claim of sustainable and inclusive societies and the increasingly obvious failure of providing spaces for the realisation of such goals,
- the ongoing will and ability to adopt some subversive strategies of conduct of life.

The information gathered indeed evidences the fact that the tension — solely focusing on the employment question — is falling short of the two other main lines: the one is the tension between the requirement of subordinating under and integrating into a system of employment that is in multiple respects characterised by alienation and the increasingly visible effects of this system, namely acquisition of added value going hand in hand with denied opportunities; the other is about the extension of promises, offering inclusion not least in the understanding of self-control as matter of self-competence and the reality of multiple restrictions. Taking this as framework, we see that the hegemonic system itself is under pressure, looking for answers in particular in connection with globalisation and socio-personal independence. This translates into the need for developing strategies that address four fields as presented in the following<sup>16</sup>.

*Table 3. Directions of policy development*

Employment as source for material resources	Equal opportunities as matter of recognising the specific potentials of regions and social groups in their own rights
Development of economic policies that reintegrate social spaces instead leading to harsh segmentation of life world and securing life [local and national level]	Socio-economic living conditions that allow a creative engagement with the employment and working conditions

In addition to tackling the challenges in the different realms, in particular local policies will have to seriously look for the answer on the question of how it will be possible to integrate the different fields, thus developing strategies that allow tackling the links and relations in an active way, active meaning by really opening spaces for young people: it only as matter of surviving the moment but also shaping the future. Of course, if this can be achieved by the current EU as a whole and the individual member states, being occupied with helpless attempts to find ways of surviving, is a question that is beyond of the scope of the present article.

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<sup>16</sup> This closely links into the social quality architecture especially outlined in [Social Quality... 2012].



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