

Pupils' Access to the Teaching of Vocational Subjects at Secondary Vocational Schools

Ján Hargaš¹, Darina Matisková², Branislav Hargaš³

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53349/resource.2024.is1.a1245>

Abstract

The present article deals with a survey conducted among secondary vocational school pupils to find out what is causing a decline in interest in studying at secondary vocational schools among the pupils of selected primary schools in the Slovak Republic. The article evaluates the influences that can motivate students to choose a secondary vocational school and why they prefer to study at grammar schools. The result of the survey is the improvement in the student's attitudes towards the subjects taught in secondary vocational schools while they are still in elementary school.

Keywords: Pupils, Motivation, Professional subjects, Communication, Research

1 Introduction

Today's big problem faced by our society and the education system is the need for graduates to succeed in the labour market, find an appropriate occupation and develop their careers. The issues regarding selecting a secondary school and choosing the direction of one's future career should be discussed as early as elementary school. Therefore, particular attention should be paid to the teaching methods and the extracurricular activities in elementary schools, as improving these could affect pupils' attitudes towards vocational subjects taught in secondary vocational schools. Current forecasts show that the occupations most in demand are those in the service sector and the professions that require a high level of technical skill. The opinions held by parents and children are distorted by a belief that secondary vocational schools are only appropriate for pupils who receive lower marks and have a limited chance of being admitted to a grammar school. A significant part of the population has the ambition to complete university studies, while

^{1,3}DTI University, Ul. Sládkovičova 533/20, SK - 018 41 Dubnica nad Váhom, Slovak Republic

E-mail: hargas@dti.sk, hargasb@dti.sk

²Faculty of Manufacturing Technologies of the Technical University of Kosice with a seat in Prešov, Bayerova 1, 08001 Prešov, Slovak Republic

E-mail: darina.matiskova@tuke.sk, darina.matiskova@gmail.com

studying at a secondary vocational school is not associated with such a plan. As a result, the objective of this study is to characterise the factors that affect the selection of a secondary school, as well as the competences of teachers in this area, as they play an essential role in the pupils' attitudes towards the subjects taught at secondary vocational schools.

1.1 External Factors that affect Selecting a Secondary School

The primary group of people with whom an individual interacts is the family. The family is an environment where a child's personality is shaped and where all stages of life are experienced. We are born into the so-called family of orientation, i.e. the family of origin, in which we exist and maintain contact throughout our lifetime. Later, we create a new family, the family of procreation, in which we assume the role of a parent. However, one's personality is most affected by the so-called nuclear family, which consists of parents and children. A child's personality is also shaped by the extended family – the grandparents, siblings, and relatives (Koča, Havlík, 2011).

The Great Sociology Dictionary (Maříková, 1996) states that a family is the original and the most important social group, and the institution that constitutes the fundamental element of the social structure, as well as the primary economic unit, and that its leading roles include reproduction, survival of humans as the biological species, education, socialisation of children, as well as the transfer of cultural role models and the preservation of the continuity of cultural development.

The characteristics of a modern family, according to Zapletal (2015, p. 55-56), are as follows:

- Most frequently, a family includes two generations (parents and children); the coexistence of more than two generations is now very rare.
- A significant focus on the interests of an individual: the search for life, the preference for one's own needs over the interests of the society.
- Absent expectations of enduring relationships; an individual does not want to risk and reserves some space for potential changes.
- Frequent "trial partnerships" are long-term permanent relationships with children without a formal marriage.
- Postponing parenthood for later; a consequent decline in birth rates; possibly also unwillingness to abandon the lifestyle without children, a developing career, or due to health issues associated with higher age.
- The direct educational role of parents is increasingly assumed by institutions and other socialisation influences (peers, media, etc.)
- In increasingly frequent families where both parents pursue their careers, while the childcare is transferred to a third party, e.g., grandparents, tutors, boarding schools, etc., both partners strive for promotion in their careers.

- Activities that the family previously provided are now provided by the society (preschool and school establishments, service providers, catering establishments, etc.)
- Regular intergeneration contacts are not very intensive and are limited to two generations only (parents and children); diversion from a typical family coalition (a dominant and more hostile father and affectionate and more submissive mother) towards a wide range of alternatives.

As with any other group, a family also serves its functions. According to Prokop (2001, p. 42–45), the essential functions of the family include the educational, economic, biological, and emotional functions.

1.2 School and the School Environment in a Potential School

The crucial factors that affect the pupils in selecting a secondary school undoubtedly include the school and the school environment. Because an individual comes to a new environment, where he or she must adapt, integrate into a new collective, and engage in interactions with people in such a new environment, all that affects the development of that individual. The resulting impact of those factors is that the individual's values and goals are altered or become more specific.

According to Grecmanova (2008, p. 31–32), a school is an institution whose traditional role is to educate and train. It is under the pressure of societal expectations since it fulfils essential functions, such as socialisation and personalisation. Moreover, a school facilitates the young generation's gaining qualifications and is a place where various groups and generations meet. In addition to gaining new knowledge, pupils develop social behaviour in schools.

The critical aspects of the school education include:

- Promotion of the pupil's independence and development.
- Development of social competences (morality, tolerance and "fair play") and social behaviour (teamwork).
- Initiation of the social engagement (readiness to help, general effort) of pupils; a demonstration of the future perspective; efforts aimed at meaningful and achievable goals that lead to one's satisfaction.
- Realistic formulation of tasks and the implementation of those tasks while considering the pupil's capacities, learning support, etc.

On the other hand, the teacher's efforts may be dishonoured without the support from the family and the family environment, in which the relatives show their interest in the pupil's achievements and interests, and how he or she perceives the curriculum. In the family environment, children have an opportunity to ask for clarification of what they do not understand correctly, and they receive support for their efforts. The impact of the

environment where a child is raised has the potential to surpass (in the negative sense) even the child's projections of his or her personality and potential. If the child is deprived of the support, or if the child does not receive sufficient support that is required for the development of his or her knowledge and skills, it also affects the child's motivation to strive for a certain position in society in the future, including the selection of secondary education.

1.3 School and School Environment as the Starting Point

The quality of school life is closely related to the term "good school". The characteristics of a good school include:

- Both pupils and teachers accept it since they share this environment and engage in meaningful activities. In this environment, children may experience the joy of learning, and teachers may practice "open and developing teaching".
- Adults and children are encouraged to engage in adventures, in thinking and working; they all like helping and advising each other; they strive to create an atmosphere of trust, mutual support and recognition of their authority without fear; teachers have enough patience and time, and provide assistance to children; teachers do not only provide new knowledge and determine the behavioural rules, above all, they teach them to ask and present arguments, respond and explain reasons, create their own opinions and act responsibly;
- The vital sensory experiences are gained through interpersonal relationships; another important aspect of school life is the responsible building of such relationships – this means that in a good school, the teacher:
 - Recognise their critical roles in encouraging and supporting pupils and promoting collegiality with other teachers; ask about the pupils' living conditions, significantly to help them succeed not only in the school environment but also in their future careers; communicate with pupils primarily through arguments and questioning; and encourage them and not only give commands and limit them.
 - Believe that every individual has a good side (despite the contrary experience) and build trust, not fear in pupils; they should respect that they are less likeable and sometimes disoriented and pay the same attention to such people.

A good school's features include:

- Clearly defined educational and extracurricular goals.
- Pedagogical optimism assumes that pupils want and can learn something.
- Pedagogical engagement of teachers; taking care of the well-being of all pupils.
- Controlled diagnostics and support in achieving the desired effects of the learning.
- Implementation of the minimal rules of discipline and order and clearly defined procedures; strict adherence to those rules and procedures.

- Qualified management of teachers by the principal, individually and collectively (optimism, ability to solve conflicts, creative personality, engagement, etc.)
- Atmosphere of trust based on the personal contacts (between the teachers, pupils and parents), identification with the school and the feeling of collaboration.
- Good organisation of work; cooperation among teachers (shared projects, inspections in lessons, supervision, etc.); readiness of teachers to implement innovations.
- Engagement of parents; support by the pedagogical supervisors through the human and financial potential. (Prokop, 2011, p.67–72).

Teachers and their competences:

One of the key factors that affect the decision-making of pupils when selecting a secondary school is the impact of their teachers. “The quality of a teacher’s personality has an educational impact not only through shaping the pupils’ personalities but also on the relationships among the pupils. The teacher influences, positively or negatively, the atmosphere in the classroom.” (Dravecký, 2006, p. 38)

Concerning the need for a high-quality and healthy atmosphere in the environment for working and learning, it is necessary also to mention the atmosphere in the school and the classroom. The results of the pupils’ efforts and the quality of their work are positively influenced by a relaxed atmosphere without fear, pressure, and tension. One of the teacher’s tasks is to ensure a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom to enable the pupils to achieve the best possible results and, at the same time, allow the teachers to deliver their best performance, to provide the pupils with the information that is necessary for the further development of their personalities.

Petlák (2006, p. 9) stated that “multiple factors significantly affect the pupils’ performance and study results; however, it seems that some of them are underestimated in the real-life teaching process, and they are often regarded as granted or less important. Those factors include the atmosphere in the classroom and the school.”

The quality of the relationships between teachers and pupils is affected by:

- The scope, extent, and depth of the teacher’s educational impact; the learning by the pupils and the teaching process (the attitudes of the pupils towards the school subjects); the course of the lesson (the atmosphere in the lesson); the relationship to the school as such; as well as the mental health of teachers and pupils.
- The relationships between the teachers and the pupils are logically established through continuous interactions. The teacher develops a relationship with the pupil and the class. At the same time, every pupil develops a relationship with the teacher – it is referred to as the emotional connection between the pupil and the teacher. The teacher’s relationships with the individual pupils are referred to as the individualised relationship between the teacher and the pupil. This type of relationship may be the basis for building a unique approach to a particular pupil. The teacher’s individualised relationship with the pupil should be maintained while considering the following:

- Special characteristics of the pupil: the pupils’ interests, capabilities, talents, health and learning disorders, as well as their causes (dysfunctions); the living conditions: the family environment, quality of living, attendance to school; the environment where the pupil lives: the parents’ interest in educating the child, the relationship between the parents; the family environment: divorced parents, fighting in the family etc. (Dravecký, 2006 p.58–59).

Based on the facts above, it should be noted that the family environment, as well as the school environment in elementary schools, substantially impacts the pupils’ decision-making when selecting either a secondary vocational school or a grammar school.

The following graph presents the percentages of students who have registered for the individual types of schools in the school year 2023/2024.

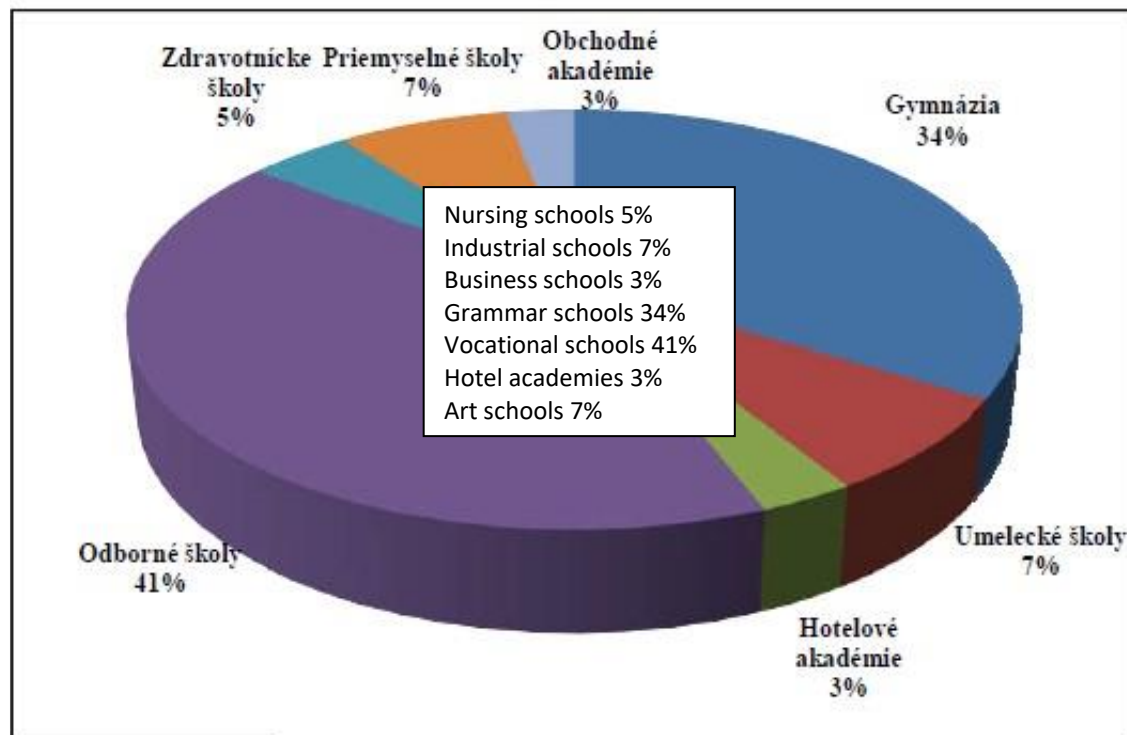


Figure 1: Percentages of pupils who have registered for the individual types of secondary schools in the school year 2023/2024 (Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic)

2 Survey methodology

Table 1 presents the data on the analysed secondary vocational school and the elementary school, as well as their comparison; the data show how many elementary school pupils have registered for grammar schools or secondary vocational schools in the individual school years.

Table 1: Comparison of the analysed schools and the pupils who have registered for secondary vocational schools or grammar schools.

	Year	Grammar schools	Secondary vocation schools
Joint School	2019/2020	35%	65%
	2020/2021	34%	66%
	2021/2022	33%	67%
	2022/2023	33%	67%
Primary schools	2019/2020	43%	57%
	2020/2021	43%	57%
	2021/2022	44%	56%
	2022/2023	43%	57%

(Source: author)

The survey aimed to analyse and describe pupils' attitudes toward vocational subjects taught at the studied joint secondary school and the elementary school. The survey's focus was the "Attitudes of pupils towards the vocational subjects taught in the elementary school". The survey tasks were as follows:

- To identify the factors influencing the pupils when selecting a secondary school.
- To identify whether the teaching method at the elementary school affects the decision-making in selecting a secondary school.
- To identify pupil attitudes towards the vocational subjects taught in secondary vocational schools.

A hypothesis is a conditional statement that presumes a relationship between two or more variables. The survey was carried out in the form of a questionnaire. Based on the survey tasks, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: When selecting a secondary school, their parents influence the pupils the most.

H2: When selecting a secondary school, neither the pupils nor their parents consider the needs in the labour market.

H3: The teachers may influence pupils' attitudes towards the vocational subjects taught in the secondary vocational school.

The questionnaire contained several questions, one of which significantly impacted the entire survey.

Question: Which factors strongly influenced your decision when selecting a secondary school (your family, your teacher or educational counsellor, or your friends and classmates)? The answers to that question are summarised in the graph presented in Fig. 2

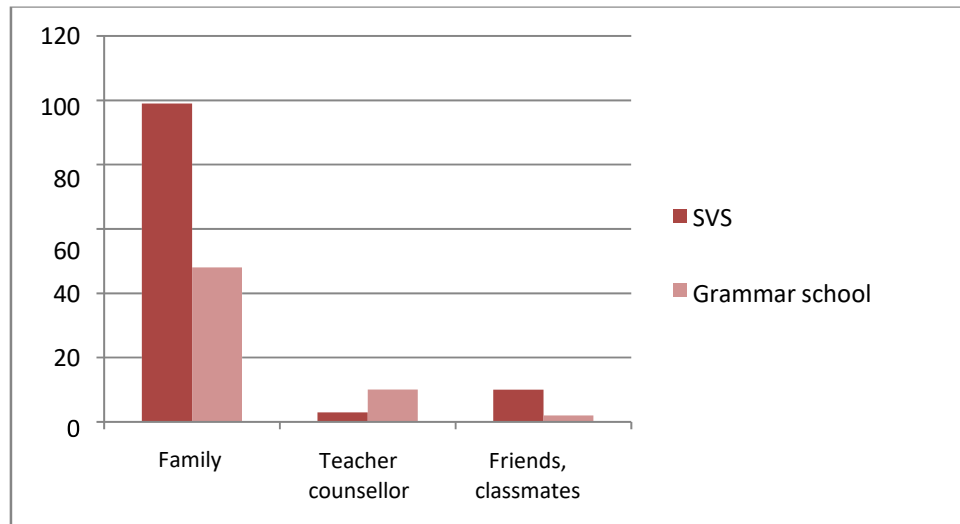


Figure 2 Factor with the strongest influence on the pupils when selecting a secondary school.

The graph above clearly indicates that the family had the strongest influence on the decision-making in selecting a secondary school for both the secondary vocational school and the grammar schools. Out of the total number of 172 respondents, as many as 147 pupils (85%) reported that their family had the strongest influence on their decision when selecting a secondary school; out of that number, 99 pupils were from secondary vocational schools, and 48 pupils were from grammar schools.

3 Discussion

In the final step of the survey, it was necessary to describe the findings resulting from the analyses of the pupils' attitudes towards the vocational subjects taught in secondary vocational schools, and what influences the pupils of elementary schools in their decision-making when selecting a secondary school for their future studies.

It is sad that increasingly fewer pupils hold positive attitudes towards vocational subjects. Each year, the number of pupils registering for secondary vocational schools decreases. That is why the attitudes towards vocational subjects among pupils in primary schools were analysed. We believe that to achieve that the pupils have a positive attitude towards the vocational subjects, it is necessary to start building such attitudes early. The teaching methods applied in two different elementary schools were compared. In one of the analysed elementary schools, the pedagogical staff teaches the pupils various technical skills through numerous projects as early as in the nursery school. Teachers strive to discover the talents in their pupils, and in cooperation with their parents, they support the pupils in developing those talents and building a positive attitude towards the vocational subjects taught at the higher level of secondary education. Moreover, statistical data on the number of pupils registered

for different types of secondary schools were compared. The survey results showed that the elementary school with the teaching methods that contribute to building a positive attitude towards vocational subjects at an early age also had a higher number of pupils who later registered for secondary vocational schools. Based on that data, it is possible to state that the teaching method and the practical training of specific skills is the path other elementary schools should adopt because children begin to build their attitudes towards vocational subjects in early childhood. The survey also focused on the factors that affect the decision-making in selecting a secondary school. During the initial meetings and consultations regarding the situation in elementary schools, it was possible to conclude that the parents interfere the most with their children's decision-making when selecting a secondary school. Children do not seek advice from their educational counsellors or possess information on the current needs in the labour market.

The pupils of two secondary schools, including one grammar school, represented the focus of the following part of the survey. The questionnaire results identified the factor that most influenced the pupils' decisions when selecting a secondary school based on the pupils' attitudes towards the vocational subjects. Another goal of the survey was to determine whether the pupils were allowed to develop their skills and capabilities in any of the vocational areas. The determined hypotheses were assessed based on the questionnaire results, while the initial assumptions were eventually confirmed. When selecting a secondary school, their parents influence the pupils the most. The findings also showed that neither the parents nor the children consider the current needs in the labour market, and they do not communicate with competent experts regarding the choice of a secondary school. Furthermore, the questionnaire results indicated that the pupils' attitudes towards the vocational subjects may be altered during their studies. It is therefore necessary to educate and train the pupils through practical activities in which they may use their theoretical knowledge. Such valuable training will prepare them for their future. That is one of the reasons why education in vocational schools is now being transformed to adapt it to the current real-life requirements. In cooperation with certain employers, the government has introduced the "dual education" system, which directly interconnects secondary education with practical training conducted directly in the facilities of potential future employers.

Our country needs qualified experts, so our primary goal should be to focus on working with pupils in elementary schools – introducing various occupations to children, letting them discover their skills, and supporting their further development. In addition, secondary schools should also be paid more attention since they are the institutions where theoretical knowledge may be practically applied. The attitudes towards vocational subjects are built throughout their lifetime and may also be influenced. Schools, in particular, are the institutions that play an essential role in this process.

References

- Dočkál, V. et al. (1987). *Psychológia nadania*. Slovenské pedagogické nakladateľstvo Bratislava. 184 p. ISBN 067-214-87.
- Dropa, M. (2010). *Riadenie ľudských zdrojov 1*. Vydavateľstvo Katolíckej univerzity v Ružomberku, 2010. 131 p. ISBN 80-89018-59-9.
- Ďuricová, L. (2004). Spôsob výchovy v rodine a formovanie osobnosti dieťaťa. *Rodinné prostredie ako faktor socializácie a personalizácie osobnosti dieťaťa*. Zborník čiastkových výstupov z riešenia vedeckovýskumnej úlohy VEGA 1/0244/03. Univerzita Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici. ISBN 80-8083-015-0, 9-15.
- Fořtík, V., & Fořtíková, J. (2007). *Nadané dítě a rozvoj jeho schopností*. Portál Praha. 128 p. ISBN 978-80-7367-297-3.
- Grečanová, H. (2008). *Klíma školy*. HANEX Olomouc. 209 p. ISBN 978-80-7409-0103.
- Končeková, Ľ. (2010). *Vývinová psychológia*. Prešov: Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 010 312 s. ISBN 978-80-7165-811-5.2
- Koča, J., & Havlík, R. (2011). *Sociologie výchovy a školy*. Portál Praha. 176 p. ISBN 978-80262-004-20.
- Maříková, H. et al. (1996). *Velký sociologický slovník*. Karolinum Praha. 747 p. ISBN 80-7184-310-5.
- Petlák, E. (2006). *Klíma školy*. IRIS Bratislava. 119 s. ISBN 80-89018-97-1.
- PROKOP, J. (2001). *Sociologie výchovy a školy*. Technická univerzita Liberec. 97 p. ISBN 80-7083-535-4.
- Pružinská, J. (2005). *Psychológia osobnosti*. Občianske združenie Sociálna práca Bratislava. 152 p. ISBN 80-89185-05-3.
- Salbot V., & Pašková L. (2013). *Psychológia osobnosti pre učiteľov*. Občianske združenie Pedagóg Banská Bystrica. 84 p. ISBN 978-80-557-0505-7.
- Sedlák, M. (2001). *Manažment*. Edícia Ekonomia Bratislava. 378 p. ISBN 80-8904-718.
- Smékal, V. (2002). *Pozvání do psychologie osobnosti. Člověk v zrcadle vědomí a jednání*. Barrister a Principal Brno. 517 p. ISBN 80-85947-80-3.
- Šatánek, J. (2004). *Komunikácia v rodine*. Univerzita Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici. Fakulta humanitných vied. 84 p. ISBN 80-8055-981-3.