



## Educational Psychology

# Who decides? On those involved in the choice of school for educational careers of children at the end of primary school

Christiane Hössl, Mag., Dr., MEd<sup>1</sup> , Harald Lothaller, Mag., Dr.<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University College of Teacher Education Burgenland , <sup>2</sup> Study Center, University of Music and Performing Arts Graz

Keywords: primary school, secondary school, transition, decision, choice, parents, child

<https://doi.org/10.46412/001c.13188>

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## Advanced Research in Psychology

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2020

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The choice of school for the secondary school sets the course for the future academic and professional career. This study clarifies who is the main decision maker in the choice of school based on an empirical survey using a questionnaire in which 828 parents from southern Lower Austria participated. In accordance with the literature, 618 parents state that they made the educational choice together with their children, with interesting significant subgroups regarding the gender of the child and the parents, the education of the parents, the siblings' success and the parents' educational aspirations.

## INTRODUCTION

The transition from primary to secondary school is a formative event for the entire family system and an important milestone in the educational careers of children (Griebel, 2004; Liegmann & Lumer, 2004; Schumacher, 2004).

In international comparison, this transition is relatively early in Austria, at around ten years of age. It can therefore be assumed that parents are still clearly involved in the decision-making process, possibly even make the decision without involving the child (Griebel & Niesel, 2018). Their personal wishes and ideas, the so-called educational aspirations about the child's further educational path, are important for the choice of a suitable secondary school. However, the early change and the associated selection of the appropriate secondary school is viewed critically in the literature. The reason for this is relatively unanimous that it is not yet possible at such an early stage to predict future school success with any certainty (Koch, 2006). Böhnelt (1993) also emphasizes that the time of selection after the age of 10 is too early, since reliable school career prognoses cannot be realized in a stable manner due to the fact that intelligence development is not fully completed (Böhnelt, 1993).

For children and young people, the family is an important factor in educational and developmental support. It is regarded as the primary socialization instance, in which a place of learning in terms of knowledge and skills is made available. Through this place of learning, the family can have a direct or indirect influence on the extent to which the children use the educational opportunities offered by the school according to their skills as well as whether or not they reach their potential (Kapella, 2017).

Van Ophuysen (2006) also states that for children at the end of primary school, their parents are still the most important contacts. Provided that parents are aware of this role and make full use of their educational possibilities, children are also able to face and successfully cope with "critical" situations, such as school leaving, with more confidence and self-confidence.

Children today are much more involved in parental educational decisions as well as in decisions concerning everyday life than they were a few decades ago. Pupils are now increasingly able to decide for themselves which options meet their needs and wishes in the best way. About 50 years ago,

decisions concerning the child were made by the parents, possibly still somewhat like orders, and the child's opinion was usually not included in the decision. Nowadays, pupils are offered different options from which they can or must choose (Büchner & Koch, 2001).

Wohlkinger and Ditton (2012) also speak of educational decisions in the family context, in which the parents do not register their child at a secondary school completely uninfluenced, but rather seek a consensus between the parents' wishes, the child's will and the teachers' recommendations in the sense of a negotiation process. The aim is to ensure that a decision is made that is fair to the child's abilities and interests and as optimal as possible (Wohlkinger & Ditton, 2012).

Looking at the parents' view of the involvement of individual family members in the choice of school type for the secondary school, Wiedenhorn (2011) shows that both parents attribute a "very strong involvement" to the mother (66 percent), whereas the father only has a 50 percent involvement. In comparison, the parents saw their child as "very strongly" involved in the transition process with 57 percent (Wiedenhorn, 2011).

In Koch's Göttingen Parent Study (2006), 958 parents were asked about certain aspects of the transition from primary to secondary school with the help of a questionnaire on school-relevant issues. It was found that the children's desire was given first place by the parents when selecting a particular secondary school (Koch, 2006).

In the Noesis project by Katschnig, Geppert, and Kilian (2011), a majority of parents (64 percent) stated that their child's wish was the decisive factor in the decision to choose a particular secondary school, followed by recommendations from the teacher (36 percent) or other parents (14 percent) (Katschnig et al., 2011).

Mahr-George (1999) found in his study of 1986 parents that, although parents make the decision for a particular secondary school, they consider the child's wish to be particularly important for the choice of a school after school performance (Mahr-George, 1999).

## METHODS

### RESEARCH QUESTION

The aim of the present study is to get to the bottom of the

Tab. 1: Crossed table of participants involved in the school choice and type of secondary school

participants involved in school selection	type of secondary school		
	AHS	HS, NMS, SS	total
parents	13	40	53
children	76	70	146
together	258	351	609
total	347	461	808

Tab. 2: Crossed table of participants involved in the school selections and parents' education

participants involved in school selection	education of mother			education of father		
	No A-Level	A-Level and more	total	No A-Level	A-Level and more	total
parents	25	12	37	25	12	37
children	50	62	112	52	52	104
together	289	195	484	283	147	430
total	364	269	633	360	211	571

decision-making process for the further educational path of primary school pupils after their participation in the selection process. Is the final decision preceded by a long period of preliminary reflection with many discussions within the family? Do the parents make the decision without involving the child or should the pupils decide independently for a particular school? To be able to evaluate these and other important criteria adequately, the following research-led question was developed: Who is the main decision maker in the choice of the future school?

#### SAMPLE AND MATERIAL

The consulted study participants were parents whose children were in the fourth grade of elementary school in Wiener Neustadt and the surrounding communities. In the end, 828 people took part in the survey itself, which corresponds to a response rate of 77.5%. The sample consisted of 462 mothers and 366 fathers, with the age range between 21 and 69 years. These were interviewed at seven elementary schools in Wiener Neustadt and eight elementary schools in Wiener Neustadt-Land using a questionnaire that was given to the children to take home from school. In addition to the German-language questionnaires, each a Serbian, a Croatian, and a Turkish translation was included. The parents could decide for themselves whether they wanted to fill-in the German version or the foreign-language version.

#### RESULTS

The big majority of parents, namely 618 (75.6%) persons, stated that they made the decision together with the child. Further 146 (17.9%) of the participants felt that only the child had chosen a particular school for him/herself. And from their point of view, only 53 parents (6.5%) had chosen a particular school for their child on their own.

For further calculations, the significance of the individual variables was determined with the help of  $\chi^2$  tests and the differences were worked out by means of cross tables.

With regard to those involved in the choice of school, with the categories "parents decide alone", "child decides

alone" or "parents and child decide together", significant differences are being determined in the type of secondary school based on the 808 responses ( $\chi^2(2) = 12,365$ ,  $p = .002$ ). If the secondary school is an AHS (Allgemeinbildende Hoehere Schule; i.e., academic secondary school), it is more often the children alone who make the school choice, whereas in the case of children who will move on to a NMS (Neue Mittelschule; i.e., new secondary School, HS (Hauptschule; i.e. lower secondary school) or SS (Sonderschule; i.e., special needs school) in the future, it is more likely to be the parents or the parents and child together who make the decision (see Table 1; for the Austrian school system, see Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, n.d.).

Looking at the participants in the choice of school in relation to the education of the mother, who were grouped into the two categories "no A-Level" and "A-Level and more" in relation to the highest completed school education, a significant result can also be seen too ( $\chi^2(2) = 10,079$ ,  $p = .006$ ). If the mother has no A-Level, more often the parents alone or the parents and child together make the school choice. If, on the other hand, the mother indicates an A-Level or more as the highest level of education completed, the child more often decides on the choice of secondary school itself (see Table 2).

Similarly, in the case of the father's education, the two categories "no A-Level" and "A-Level and more" were formed from the data on the highest completed school education of the father. If the participants in the choice of school and the father's education are taken into account, a significant result is shown ( $\chi^2(2) = 9.336$ ,  $p = .009$ ). Almost everywhere, the same results are found as for the mother's school education: If the father does not have an A-Level as the highest educational level, it is more likely that the parents or the child and the parents decide together on the school type of secondary school. The children alone as the decision-makers in the choice of secondary school type are independent of the father's education, as this was indicated by the same number of parents for whom the father did not indicate an A-Level as the highest educational level as if the

**Tab. 3: Cross table of participants involved in school choice and sex of the child**

participants involved in school selection	sex of the child		
	girl	boy	total
parents	23	30	53
child	69	75	144
together	336	280	616
total	428	385	813

**Tab. 4: Crossed table of participants involved in the choice of school and parents' educational aspirations**

participants involved in school selection	educational aspirations of parents		
	No A-Level	A-Level and more	total
parents	21	31	52
children	13	131	144
together	121	472	593
total	155	634	789

**Table 5: Cross table of participants in school choice and first/not first school decision**

participants involved in school selection	choice of school		
	not first decision	first decision	total
parents	33	20	53
child	75	71	146
together	321	297	618
total	429	388	817

father had at least an A-Level or higher education (see Table 2).

With regard to those involved in the choice of secondary school and the sex of the child, there is no significant result ( $\chi^2(2) = 4,002$ ,  $p = .135$ ). Thus, no combination of "participants in school choice" and "sex of the child" is more or less frequent than expected (see Table 3).

If we now focus on the educational aspirations of parents and those involved in the choice of school, we find a significant result ( $\chi^2(2) = 24,669$ ,  $p = .005$ ). Parents are more likely to make educational decisions alone or together with their child if the parents do not want their children to have an A-Level. If, however, the parents want their children to have an A-Level or an even higher qualification, they more often let their children make the educational decision alone (see Table 4).

In the case of only children or the first children in the order of siblings, the family decides for the first time on the type of secondary school. These two classes were combined as the "first decision" category for further calculations. In the case of siblings who are in the middle of the sibling order or are considered being the youngest child in the family, a decision has already been made by the family with regard to the older siblings. Accordingly, these groups were categorized as "not first decision" for further calculations. The frequency count showed that for 52.8% ( $n = 437$ ) it was not the first school choice in the family, whereas 47.2% ( $n = 391$ )

stated that they had to make the choice of secondary school for the first time.

Looking at those involved in the choice of school and the number of educational choices already made in the family, no significant result can be found ( $\chi^2(2) = 2,178$ ,  $p = .337$ ). Thus, it is irrelevant whether it is the first educational decision in the family or not. The families do not differ in terms of the people involved in the choice of school (see Table 5).

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to identify the main decision maker in the choice of school type. In the literature, there are not quite uniform results. It can at least be shown that children today are already much more involved in the decision-making process than in the past (Büchner & Koch, 2001). Some studies assume a family decision in which the parental will, the child's wishes, and possibly also the teacher's recommendations are taken into account in the decision-making process (Mahr-George, 1999; Schlögl & Lachmayr, 2004; Wohlkinger & Ditton, 2012). In contrast, studies can be found in which parents generally leave the decision for a particular secondary school to the children and give priority to the child's wishes (Büchner & Koch, 2001; Katschnig et al., 2011; Koch, 2006). The results of the present study tend to refer to the former way. 618 (74.6%) out of 817 parents who provided information on this in the

questionnaire indicated a joint decision for a particular secondary school. In contrast, 146 parents (17.9%) indicated the child as the main decision maker and only 53 parents (6.4%) indicated themselves as the main decision makers in the choice of school. This result suggests that parents of children at the age of school transition are still used as an important support component in important decision-making processes. Looking at this result in more detail, there is a strong association between the parties involved in the school choice decision and the type of school in the secondary school. Children who will enter an academic secondary school (AHS) in the future are more likely to make the educational choice on their own, whereas future pupils at lower/new secondary schools or special need schools either make the decision together with their parents or the parents pursue their parental wishes on their own. With regard to future AHS children, their parents seem to have more confidence in their children's decision-making processes and thus let them choose more often on their own. Also in the study by Clausen (2006), parents of future pupils of German secondary modern school (i.e., similar to Austrian new secondary schools) only stated the child's wishes as a secondary decision criterion and may thus have made their own decisions about the secondary school.

The level of education of the parents is also related to the level of autonomy in the decision-making process, since both fathers and mothers whose highest level of education is at least an A-Level more often give their children a free choice for the type of secondary school, whereas parents decide either alone or together with their children on a particular school if the respective parents do have less than an A-Level as the highest level of education. It appears that parents with higher education qualifications are more likely to trust their children to be able to choose a particular school on their own as compared to parents with a lower level of education.

In this context, the educational aspirations of parents and those involved in the choice of school also showed a significant result that can be equated with the previous result. If parents want their child to have at least an A-Level or possibly a university degree, the children more often decide on their own about the specific secondary school they wish to attend. If the educational aspirations of the parents do not provide for an A-Level, then the decision is more likely to be made by the parents alone or in a joint decision. This result can possibly be explained by the fact that parents with higher education consider it very important that their children achieve an equally high, if not higher, level of education (Ditton et al., 2005; Mahr-George, 1999). Accord-

ingly, they give their child more freedom in possible educational decisions as I can be assumed that their children's school performance is often very good and the decision has mostly to be made between different academic secondary schools only but no others. This means that they are more likely to let their children make decisions according to their interests, since the type of school they can choose is in any case in line with their educational intentions, namely that their children should complete at least one school-leaving examination.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of the present study was on the exploration of all involved person in the educational decision-making process. It could be shown that the decision for a particular secondary school is usually a common one within the family due to the child's young age. Nevertheless, a little less than 18 percent of the parents state that they let decide their children on their own about the choice of secondary school.

The fact that in this country the common educational path of the children divides in such an early way must probably be accepted as a fact at present. However, how to shape the "breaking point" and what priorities will be set in the future is completely open and depends on the extent to which it is seen by pupils, parents, teachers, and academics as a challenge to be changed (Koch, 2006).

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author contributed the empirical work and essential parts of theoretical and statistical work as part of a master's thesis project. The second author served as the supervisor of the master's thesis in these respects and contributed to the preparation of this article.

## FUNDING

*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any funding from any individuals or organizations.*





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