The ‘Soft’ and ‘Hard’ Processes of Student Streaming: Institutional factors in shaping educational trajectories in Hungary and England
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Research problem
This research study investigates how educational trajectories are governed (Dale et al., 2015) in two European countries: Hungary and the UK. Focusing on how 13-14 year old students experience their study choices and how these pathway choices are framed by institutional discourses and practices, I was particularly interested in exploring the internal selection mechanisms practiced by schools, and how soft and subtle forms of student categorisation constitute into ‘hard’ processes of social reproduction that generally manifest at points of educational transition. Thus, the aim of the research study is to explore the complex relations of school norms, the forms of assessing achievement and the rationales behind grouping students with special regard to social class and ethnicity. More specifically, the research centres on investigating how the following three domains of powerful institutional discourse and practice interact with and interact in student pathways:

- Institutional strategies of student grouping
- Behaviour management routines
- Discourses related to pathway choice & career guidance
- Ability
- Behaviour
- Choice

Research design and methods
Institutional case studies were conducted in two schools in each country, each within the same local educational authority. I aimed to select “average” schools that reflect the social composition of the wider educational area and show considerable social heterogeneity. The qualitative investigation consisted of:
- 74 schooldays of ethnographic observation (35 in Hungarian and 39 in English schools);
- 63 interviews with teaching staff (4 interviews with municipal decision makers, 59 interviews with teachers and senior teaching staff);
- 13 interviews with parents;
- 15 focus group interviews with students.
Quantitative data was also collected on student pathways in the first year of secondary education within the relevant Hungarian local authority. In addition, I am currently organising feedback discussions at the participating schools.

Within school selection mechanisms: streaming and setting

HUNGARY
Hungary has a tripartite secondary education system. Having completed the 8th grade of primary school, students are tracked to academic, polytechnical or vocational secondary schools. Primary selection mechanisms in primary schools effectively select students and thus prepare the tracking process. I found that in the studied educational authority:
- 1980-1990s: all primary schools introduced streams to attract middle class parents
- 2000s: two distinctive selection strategies developed:
  a) “elite” schools continued to stream students,
  b) more socially mixed schools abandoned streams, but enforced setting in year 5-8.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE (HU): Social status and ethnicity

School profiles:
Two state-maintained primaries in a former industrial town in East Hungary.

Key findings:
- Math sets are clear indicators of secondary school trajectories;
- School discourses about Gypsies and achievement are dependent on the overall social composition of the school. Where the social status of the Gypsy group greatly diverged from the average school intake, Gypsy background was a higher risk factor of educational failure;
- While career guidance was found to be non-systematic and scattered in approach, peer relations were identified as having a significant impact on study choices.

ENGLAND
For the majority of students in England, the main point of divergence in their study pathways is when they take GCSE examinations at age 16. Yet the sociological literature argues that:
- secondary school selection (at age 11) is an increasingly significant milestone and indicator of later trajectories;
- secondary schools increasingly employ internal setting and streaming systems, and further separate study pathways through the GCSE subject choice process.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE (UK): Within school selection

School profile:
Converted secondary academy in North London. A “working class school” with high percentage of migrant students and a long history of commitment to the comprehensive ideal.

Key findings:
2000s: experiments with various forms of setting
2010s: new, hierarchical setting system
Regular monitoring of achievements ↔ frequent class changes (see diagram)
- Mixture of behaviour and academic reasons behind changes;
- Bottom set shame;
- End of term anxiety amongst students: all students aim to “move up”;
- Discrepancies between math, science and English ability grouping;
- Generally less emphasis on the collective aspects of learning.

Summary
While educational pathways in Hungary are governed primarily through selection and transition between educational structures, in the UK, educational trajectories are dominated by standards, and not structures (Dale et al. 2015: 169). Although the forms of selection are essentially different, streaming and setting are increasingly widespread in both educational systems. The dominant pedagogical discourses and practices reflect an individualized and psychological understanding of abilities, which overshadows the links between social class and ethnicity to education and de-emphasises collective aspects of learning.

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REFERENCE

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Graph: Parent’s education in the two studied primaries

Diagram: Set changes through year 7 and 8 in a case study secondary academy