

## DAYS AFTER A CHOICE IS MADE: TRANSITION TO PROFESSIONAL AND VOCATIONAL UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN CZECHIA

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### ABSTRACT

Researchers in the Czech Republic, as well as internationally, have traditionally studied the factors that contribute to the choice of upper secondary tracks and programs. Much less is known about the day-to-day experiences of the students in different tracks, particularly in professional/vocational tracks, and the possible mechanisms that produce the positive or negative outcomes of their schooling. We present the results of a prospective qualitative study of 22 students we followed from their last year of lower secondary school and through their first and second years in different tracks and schools. Data obtained in three waves of interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. Two major themes cutting across domains of daily routines, social relations, and the respondents' perception of curriculum/learning are described: school choice and professional/vocational specialization. The key findings are several important differences between the post-transitional experience of students in technical/professional and vocational programs. The study provides important insights into adolescent adjustment in various tracks of secondary schools in the post-socialist context.

### KEYWORDS

upper secondary school; technical and vocational education; transition; qualitative longitudinal study; Czechia

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## Introduction

A large share of Czech adolescents (around 70%) enter professional or vocational tracks of upper secondary schools. This structure of education is highly controversial. While employer organizations support the present dominant role of technical and vocational education and training (TVET), many researchers have pointed out that students in the vocational track are characterized by lower socioeconomic status and worse academic achievement than students from other tracks (Katrňák, 2004; Straková, 2015; Veselý, 2006). Great attention has been paid to the factors contributing to the choice of the track and qualification in upper secondary school, as well as the post-secondary education or employment of the graduates. Another traditional research topic in international literature is early school leaving (ESL). As the rate of ESL (previously very low) began to increase in Czechia, the focus on at-risk/unsuccessful upper secondary students also strengthened (Hloušková, 2014; Šlapalová & Hladě, 2020; and this special issue).

Much less is known about the day-to-day experiences of the “average” students in different tracks, and the possible mechanisms that produce the negative or positive outcomes of their schooling. In this study, we present and compare the results of a prospective qualitative longitudinal study of 22 students we followed from their last year of comprehensive lower secondary school and through their transition to different upper secondary tracks and programs.

### 1 Concept of transition and its framing

Transition is a widely used concept, but its more precise conceptualization is often lacking. It is possible to understand the entire life course as a continuous process of development and aging. In their research, Salmela-Aro and Upadyaya (2014) presented the opposite view, according to which transitional/liminal phases and more stable post-transitional phases can be distinguished in an educational trajectory. Longitudinal studies investigating transition often simply compare data obtained in the last year (grade) of a lower school level<sup>1</sup> with the data collected in the first year of a new, upper-level school and talk about pre- and post-transition phases.

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<sup>1</sup> It would be interesting to analyze whether this period falls into a “stable phase” or whether the final year is a more liminal time, because of the need to choose the next school or as a result of preparation for high-stakes exams.

Thus, the transition phase can be considered to start with the entry into the last year of a lower level, or when one starts to talk and think about the transition and related choices at school and in the family. Similarly, it can be considered completed after the first days at a new school, or, alternatively, upon successful socialization in a new environment or by failed adaptation and transfer to another track or school, or even by leaving education (Hladřo & řlapalová, 2018; Horřička, 2022). The transition is a normative event, but its beginning and end can vary greatly from person to person. Researchers who focus on understanding the antecedents of transition-related problems have therefore emphasized the importance of pre-transition events, especially in relation to the choice of school, but also more distant events such as the experience of the previous transition to lower secondary school (de Moor & Branje, 2022). On the other hand, monitoring the student for a longer period of time than just the first year makes it possible to assess both the stability of the changes brought about by the transition and their delayed effects (Benner et al., 2021) and possible evolutions in how students perceive and evaluate these changes (Wentzel et al., 2019). Our previous research (Dvořák et al., 2020) showed that over half of the transfers from the technical/professional (T/P) track to the vocational (VET) track and two-thirds of transfers within the T/P track took place in the first year of upper secondary school. If a change of track is seen as a signal of unsuccessful adjustment, it would indicate that post-transition processes take place mainly in the first year; on the other hand, the proportion of departures from the T/P to the VET track, even in later years, is still considerable, although it is not clear whether this indicates the ongoing process of transition to a new school, or whether it is due to the onset of other changes, e.g., those associated with adolescence. Therefore, in our study, we understand the transition as a process determined by a series of previous events, the consequences of which can manifest themselves even at a greater distance.<sup>2</sup>

### *1.1 Theoretical framing*

Research on transitions has often been framed by ecological or developmental theories.

In an ecological approach (e.g., the person-environment interaction theory; Symonds & Galton, 2014), transition is understood as a change in a student's role, environment, or both. The stage-environment fit theory is frequently

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<sup>2</sup> Many authors have studied the programs facilitating the transition to (upper) secondary education or evaluate their effectiveness (Test et al., 2009; van Rens et al., 2018); but there has been a lack of clarity in the definition of the transitional phase, as these interventions can last from one or a few weeks to years-long programs covering the entire upper secondary level (Donaldson et al., 2022).

used to study the transition to secondary school (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021), as it focuses on the match (or the mismatch) between the developmental needs of adolescents and the structure of the secondary school environment. It is not a theory of transition as such, but it explains negative or positive experiences in the environment to which the student was transitioning. A possible source of problems is a lack of “fit” between the needs resulting from an adolescent’s developmental stage and their environment. Adolescence is characterized by a need to exercise autonomy. If the transition to a new school is developmentally regressive, i.e., the environment of the new level of school is perceived as less friendly and less caring or teachers treat students in a more authoritarian way, then the transition can lead to a decrease in motivation and the deterioration of educational results and emotional well-being. An optimal school for adolescents creates conditions for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Eccles et al., 1993).

The life-course theory (Benner et al., 2021; Blossfeld, 2018; Cairns et al., 1996; Elder et al., 2003; in the Czech context Chaloupková, 2009) combines sociological/ecological and developmental psychological approaches and thus enables the connection of the micro-perspective of individual students and the macro-perspective of the system/context, as well as the effects of transitions, in two key areas: academic results and well-being. The educational attainment of a student can be seen as their trajectory through a culturally prescribed series of educational transitions (an educational pathway); at a particular stage, the student can focus on the immediate next transition or on the expected ultimate transition in the entire educational trajectory (Pallas, 2003).

In the life-course theory, actors are understood as agentic beings who construct their own lives through choices (cf. also Kalalahti & Varjo, 2022). Specifically, the transition is preceded by decision making on the further course of a student’s education and career (Hlad’o, 2010). In this process, Czech students and their families choose the track (type of program), field of study/qualification pursued, and in some contexts also the specific school. The choice of the track and qualification has been studied by a number of authors (for an overview for the Czech context see Hlad’o, 2013). Here, the second principle of the life-course theory is also at work: steps students take are enabled or constrained by the sociocultural context of the specific place and time in which the student comes of age. The structure of the opportunities (which crystallize in the form of educational institutions) from which a student can choose differs between North America and Central Europe and even within a single country, for example, urban/rural and central/peripheral spaces (Dvořák et al., 2021). Therefore, the next subsection addresses the institutional context in some detail. This principle also accounts for the unique historical events of the time in which individuals experience transitions.

Macrosocial changes affect human development and this influence is even transmitted to subsequent generations. In our case, this historical context is mainly the (still unfinished) transformation to a democratic society and market economy, which affected Czech TVET very significantly, as did the global COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Pallas, “the educational trajectories ought not to be studied in isolation from other social institutions and from the other social roles [...], because such roles are intertwined in complex ways” (2003, p. 170). Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) described parallel transitions in different domains (academic, social...) and different contexts (e.g., an adolescent transitioning from compulsory school to VET and at the same time from their family to a boarding facility) using the concept of multiple and multi-dimensional transitions (MMT). Horizontal transitions sometimes denote the transitions between different environments that the student attends simultaneously (Balduzzi et al., 2019). Pietarinen et al. (2010) emphasized the horizontal moves between social and cultural contexts within one school/class; such moves are often imperceptible to an external observer, but can be perceived as very significant by the students themselves. In a narrower sense, these are transitions between different educational institutions, e.g., between the school and a boarding facility; a broader sense could include the daily or weekly movement between home and school, including the commuting process.<sup>3</sup>

Here, the principle of linked and interdependent lives of relatives, peers, and teachers also applies. For example, the experience of transition is strongly influenced by the stability of the social convoys, which is related to the organization of education, i.e., the extent to which the student is among the same or, conversely, new and unknown peers after the transition, and how many friendly ties are maintained. A change of social group can be beneficial for students who were less successful in the previous level of education (Benner, 2011), as they have an opportunity to “reinvent” themselves. On the other hand, previously successful students are under pressure to confirm their identity.

Finally, the contexts and outcomes of transition “vary according to their timing in a person’s life” (Elder et al., 2003, p. 12). Specifically, adjustment to a new school can proceed differently when it is a repeated start after (unsuccessful) studies at another upper secondary school or track and the student is also older than his or her classmates as a result.

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<sup>3</sup> In yet another meaning, horizontal transitions occur at non-normative points and between different schools of the same type or between tracks of upper secondary education (e.g., from general to vocational upper secondary school; Dvořák et al., 2020; OECD, 2018).

### *1.2 Context of transition to upper secondary school in different systems*

Entry to upper secondary education (alternatively also known as higher secondary, senior secondary, high school, Sekundarstufe II...) is one of the most important normative transitions in the educational path for the vast majority of students in developed countries. Some features of this transition are relatively universal as a result of the biopsychological characteristics of adolescence, but at the same time there is great variability in the institutional contexts created by the form of national education systems. This applies both to the lower level from which the students are transitioning and to the next level they enter.

As regards the pre-transition context, post-socialist countries such as Czechia have often maintained a comprehensive school (*základní škola* [basic or elementary school]) combining primary and lower secondary school (first through ninth grades) at which all or most students receive their compulsory education. A similar model exists in Nordic countries (Pietarinen, 2000). Therefore, the transition from primary to lower secondary school might be perceived as relatively less significant for most of the age cohort, as the majority of students continue with their peers in a very similar social group, in the same building, and in the same geographical location.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the transition from a combined comprehensive school to upper secondary education brings about simultaneous change in more domains. In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, the transition from lower to upper secondary education (in England, from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4) is less prominent than entry to lower secondary school and hence the transition from primary to secondary school, as well as post-16 transitions, receives significantly more attention than the passage from lower to upper secondary school; in the United States, different models of secondary education exist side by side (middle school or junior high, K-8 or K-12; Donaldson et al., 2022; Taverner et al., 2001).

The transition process is also influenced by the structure of the upper secondary education itself. In North America, upper secondary education also tends to be provided in a comprehensive school (with a possibly more or less permeable setting or streaming). Nevertheless, the choice of school can play a significant role (Sirer et al., 2015). In post-socialist countries, as well as in German-speaking countries, upper secondary students are permanently split into several tracks (academic or vocational). Even where

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<sup>4</sup> However, significant differences may exist within the system. For example, there is a difference between urban and rural schools in that students in small rural schools tend to make more transitions between schools (Kvalsund, 2000).

there is strong VET, significant differences exist between how the vocational programs and institutions are organized (Nylund et al., 2018). In Western European countries with developed VET, students enter upper secondary school after having gone through tracked lower secondary education (e.g., Sekundarstufe I in Germany) or a comprehensive school (e.g., Finland). In Germany, the dual apprenticeship model with a strong role played by employers prevails, while in Czechia, VET has switched to an exclusively school-based model (Dvořák & Gal, 2022). In some countries (Denmark, Ireland), there is also an optional year on the way from lower to upper secondary school. In German-speaking countries, there is an entire system of transition/bridging courses (Brahm et al., 2014).

In Czechia, there are two main tracks of TVET: the technical/professional (T/P) track and the vocational (VET) track. While these are often considered similar to each other as compared with the academic (general) track, there are in fact important differences between the T/P and VET tracks in terms of admission requirements, course of study, and impact on the possible further educational and career path. At entry, applicants to the T/P track have to sit national standardized entry tests identical with the tests for the academic track, and T/P schools often apply additional enrolment criteria. If accepted, students in the T/P track are expected to cover core general education subjects to pass the same upper secondary final exam (maturita, Abitur) as students in the academic track, and they also take demanding exams in professional subjects. Last but not least, successful graduates of the T/P track can apply directly to universities or other post-secondary institutions. Graduates of VET obtain a vocational certificate. If they want to continue to post-secondary schools, they have to complete another two years of study, the success rate of which is, however, low in practice. Thus, Czech VET is often a dead-end educational trajectory.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Previous research

Although educational transitions are a traditionally studied topic, institutional contexts are fundamentally different across countries and findings from other systems cannot be automatically transferred to other locations. Furthermore, review studies sometimes do not distinguish between the transition to lower secondary and upper (senior) secondary level (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020).

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<sup>5</sup> Currently, few students take programs featuring characteristics of both the T/P and VET tracks.

Benner (2011) provided a review of studies focused exclusively on the transition to high school, i.e., from the eighth to ninth grade (middle school to high school) or from the ninth to tenth grade (from junior high school), but the review was limited to the United States. Longitudinal studies of the transition to upper secondary school that collect data at three or more time points are relatively few, despite the fact that the effects of the transition in different areas also differ according to the point in time after entering the new school when data is collected (Lohaus et al., 2004).

Not surprisingly, researchers from European countries with developed VET (German-speaking countries, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries) have paid more attention specifically to the transition from lower secondary school to vocational education (e.g., Backes & Hadjar, 2017; Blossfeld, 2018).<sup>6</sup> However, the transition to VET is sometimes conceptualized as only a partial step on the school-to-work trajectory (Osborne & Circelli, 2018). This then leads to the consequence that the actual experience of secondary school takes a back seat compared to the motivation for choosing a field and the success in entering the labor market after school.

A recent review study by Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) found the following main areas of research: how actors perceive the transition, what effects the transition has on cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, and which factors influence the course, perception, and effects of the transition. From the perspective of the student's experience, anticipated or current issues can be divided into the following areas: physical/material school environment, organizational/logistical challenges, social relations (peers, teachers and other school staff, and family), and the academic/curricular area (Crosnoe, 2011; Tilleczek, 2007; Topping, 2011).

Topping (2011) noted that transition research based on the perspective of teachers focuses more on curriculum continuity or benefits or educational results, while students perceive more sensitively the social and emotional aspects of the transitions (see also Weller, 2007). Similarly, Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) pointed out that different stakeholders may attach different importance to different stressors: adults pay attention to the impact of major changes, while children may be more aware of minor but frequently recurring conflicts with teachers and peers.

Research highlights the variability of student responses to transition (Symonds & Galton, 2014). Boys may have more difficulties in academic matters when transferring; girls report more problems with forming relationships

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<sup>6</sup> In Germany, many recent studies have used research based on the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) or similar quantitative longitudinal data.



in a new group. Previous transition experiences can also be important. Some authors focus on students with special educational needs (Forlin, 2013; Hannah & Topping, 2013; Hughes et al., 2013). Minority ethnicity has often been seen as a disadvantage during the transition to secondary and post-compulsory education, when knowledge of the language of instruction can be a key factor (Becker & Klein, 2021), but some studies from Western Europe have contradicted this prevailing view (Hustinx, 2002; Tjaden & Scharenberg, 2017). In any case, the process of choice and transition to upper secondary school for students with a minority or migration background is associated with paradoxes (Kalalahti et al., 2017) that can take different forms in relation to individual ethnic groups and in different national education systems. Studies of (upper) secondary transition have rarely been comparative; only a few discuss the influence of the structure of the educational system. The vast majority of studies in international literature have been conducted in a Western context. In the post-socialist space, Darmody (2008) studied transitions in Estonia, but mainly covered students heading to the academic track.

In terms of the (proximal) effects of the transition, studies have mainly focused on the effects on both academic performance/achievement and the well-being of students. Especially in systems in which secondary education is stratified, authors have often focused on distal effects, such as how the transition contributes to the reproduction of inequalities.

The vast majority of works have focused on the negative factors and effects associated with transitions (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020, 2021), or relative negatives associated with the inclusion of a student in a lower/VET track: compositional effects (for a critical review see Thrupp et al., 2002) and institutional effects (students in lower tracks have relatively worse learning environments – curriculum, teacher qualifications, instructional quality – than their peers in academic tracks – Maaz et al., 2008; van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010). Bleidorn (2012), however, asserted that normative life passages could trigger the maturation of youngsters when the demands of their new role call for consistent behavioral changes that might subsequently lead to positive personality change.

The decline in school popularity in the later years of compulsory education is a very general phenomenon known from a number of countries and from a number of differently designed studies (Cosma et al., 2020).<sup>7</sup> Therefore it may be important to look in some detail at the works that have indicated the

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<sup>7</sup> In the Czech environment, even compared to culturally similar countries, the popularity of secondary school is very low, and this is mainly due to the negative attitudes of boys and students with the worst results (Federičová & Münich, 2015).

opposite development after transition. A longitudinal quantitative follow-up of Finnish students showed that after the transition to upper secondary school and then after starting a job, negative attitudes (lack of interest, a sense of futility, inertia) started to decrease again, while motivation measured as attainment value increased. It is noteworthy that when entering upper secondary school, there was again a greater decrease in negative attitudes among vocational school students (Symonds et al., 2019). Symonds et al. (2016) compared changes in mental health in English adolescents after the transition from compulsory education. The greatest deterioration affected adolescents who were not in education, training, or employment. Interestingly, young people transitioning to apprenticeships, vocational college, or full-time work experienced gains in mental health. Using longitudinal data from Finland, Salmela-Aro (2017) also drew attention to the “dark side” of the environment in academically oriented schools, which can lead to school burnout among their students. These studies somewhat correct the traditional view of the “hierarchy” of three possible educational paths after the end of compulsory schooling.

A mixed longitudinal study with a design very similar to our research project was conducted by Niittyalahti et al. (2019). In addition to a quantitative study, they conducted qualitative interviews with 17 students in the first year of the vocational program. The research pointed out the importance of friendship for students and the difference in how students perceived teachers’ expectations: in compulsory school, teachers had the same expectations of everyone (that they were all academically gifted), but in the vocational program, teachers did not expect this (they accepted the students as they were). Nießen et al. (2021) found that the subjective well-being of German adolescents did not depend so much on the objective socioeconomic status of the profession they were preparing for, but on whether it corresponded to their desired position.

### **3 Research questions**

The aim of this study is to describe how Czech students experience the transition from lower secondary school to TVET. Using the life-course theory as outlined above, we are more concerned with capturing a complex set of influences at the micro and macro level and links between domains identified by previous research in different systems than with their detailed analysis. Our research questions are:

How do daily routines, perceptions of the curriculum and instruction, and interpersonal relationships change after the transition to TVET?

How is the transition experience of students of T/P and VET tracks similar and how is it different?

## 4 Data and methods

This research is a part of a prospective qualitative longitudinal study designed to explore the effects of tracking and specialization in secondary school from the perspectives of young people and to generate understandings of how their aspirations and realities are enabled or constrained by the structure of the Czech school system and broader contexts.

### *4.1 The participants and data collection*

In 2018, 29 students in the ninth grade (aged 15 or 16 years) were recruited through purposive sampling: 16 students heading to the VET track, 10 to the professional/technical track, 2 to the academic track, and one to a mixed program (academic/professional). In the Czech Republic, girls attend the academic upper secondary track more often than boys do and at the same time aspire to tertiary education. Therefore, our sample of students of vocational and professional schools featured a higher proportion of boys (65%).

Participants were recruited by three mechanisms. 1) We approached some respondents through four lower secondary comprehensive schools. These students transitioned to different upper secondary tracks and schools. In this way, we obtained a diverse group of students in terms of achievement and ethnicity (including members of the Roma minority and immigrants from Ukraine), but it proved difficult to keep in touch with some of them after their transition to upper secondary school. 2) Recruitment through one large upper secondary school with VET programs produced a relatively more homogeneous group of students coming from various geographical locations and from lower secondary schools, but all heading to the vocational track (different trade/craft fields such as bricklaying and mechanics). Given the support provided to our study by the vocational school administration, it was easier to maintain contact with the participants (only one student dropped out of the original group). 3) Finally, on the basis of availability, we included three students from selective academic lower secondary schools who were considering transferring to a professional track. Such a “downward” move is not very frequent in the Czech system (Dvořák et al., 2020).

Geographically, we focused on two areas: one half of the respondents came from the capital city, Prague, and its wider surroundings, i.e. urban or suburban areas characterized by high demand for the academic track and the capacity (supply) of vocational schools exceeding the demand. The second location was peripheral North Bohemia, an area where socioeconomic problems are concentrated and the demand for upper secondary education is directed mainly to TVET programs (Dvořák et al., 2021).

Subsequently, three waves of interviews took place with the respondents. The first wave of data collection took place mainly in June 2018, during the participants' last days of lower secondary school. The second wave of interviews took place approximately one year later, when the students were about to finish the first year of their upper secondary studies. Eighteen respondents from the original sample were willing to continue the research in the second year. A specific feature of the project was the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, which limited the possibility of personal contact with respondents during the third wave of data collection, and which also fundamentally modified the school education (i.e. the phenomenon under investigation) and, to a large extent, the students' lives as well as the work of the researchers. In the third wave, when the students were in the second year of their studies, 21 students took part in the interviews. Thus, 17 students participated in all three waves; 5 students participated in just two interviews, and 7 students dropped out after the first wave (Table 1). We believe that the longitudinal nature of the research overall led to unwanted censoring of the participants, as more "conscientious" students with a more stable family background were willing to take part in the second or third wave (e.g., after the first interview, we lost contact with those students from ethnic minorities or with immigrant backgrounds who were heading to the VET track).

We used two methods to elicit student experiences: individual in-depth interviews and group interviews. The two methods are not equivalent, but we respected the wishes of the students, who sometimes preferred one form of interview to the other, as well as the logistical constraints of the schools. The third interviews mainly took place online because of COVID-19. The interviews were conducted by various members of the research team using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide covered all the key domains identified in the literature review. The guide for the second and third interviews was always individually adapted using the information provided by the respondent in the previous interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 1  
*Participants who took part in at least two interviews*

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Track	Field/Qualification	Residence	Interview		
					1st	2nd	3rd
Alice	F	T/P	nursing	N	G	G	G
Aranka	F	T/P	art/design	N	I	–	I
Beata	F	Mixed	general/social	P	I	–	I
Bolek	M	VET	electrician	C	I	G	I
Eda	M	VET	locksmith/mechanic	C	G	G	I
Filip	M	A	general/academic	N	G	G	G
Florian	M	VET	electrician	C	G	G	I
Hynek	M	VET	electrician	C	G	G	I
Kamil	M	T/P	art/glass engraving	N	G	G	G
Klára	F	A	general/academic	N	G	G	G
Lumír	M	VET	electrician	P	I	G	I
Marko	M	T/P	agriculture/farming	N	G	–	G
Matyáš	M	VET	electrician	C	I	G	I
Nina	F	T/P	art/media	P	I	–	I
Oliver	M	VET	food/catering	P	G	I	–
Pavel	M	VET	machinery/farming	C	G	I	G
Petr	M	VET	bricklaying	C	G	G	G
Svatopluk	M	T/P	mech. engineering	N	G	G	G
Štěpán	M	T/P	civil engineering	C	I	I	I
Tonka	F	T/P	nursing	N	G	G	G
Zdenek	M	T/P	locksmith/mechanic	C	I	G	I
Zlata	F	VET	hairdressing	N	G	G	G

Notes: A = academic track, T/P = technical/professional track, VET = vocational track, C = Central Bohemia (more or less suburbanized area around Prague), N = peripheral borderland in North Bohemia, P = Prague, G = group interview, I = individual interview

In this study, we present a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of data obtained from the 22 students who participated in at least two interviews (one interview before the transfer and one interview while studying at the new school). We did not perform targeted inter-individual comparisons in the longitudinal data. The thematic analysis does not replace the detailed open coding of the data; it builds upon it. In the first stage, we read the transcripts and coded them with initial codes that were later refined. In the second phase, we proceeded to the processes of categorization and conceptualization in order to identify patterns and themes (Saldaña, 2016).

Although themes are usually characteristic of certain domains, they are not an identical match. The structure of the themes was discussed among the authors, who took into account their theoretical background as well as experiences on the basis of different entries into the research terrain.

#### *4.2 Researcher positionality and ethical issues*

Our motivation for the research was the shared conviction of the authors about the need for a better understanding of the situation of Czech students in TVET tracks. However, the individual members of the team of authors differ in their attitudes towards vocational programs in particular. Some of us focus on the contribution of VET to maintaining and reinforcing inequalities in educational outcomes and life chances; others appreciate the contribution of VET to the well-being of some students and higher completion rates of upper secondary education. We believe that the diversity of attitudes and the confrontation of the researchers' opinions have increased the quality of the data and its analysis. The fact that all the researchers went through an upper secondary academic track followed by tertiary study may have complicated their understanding of the world of students who choose different educational paths and have different aspirations. In retrospect, we see that it would be beneficial to use the voices of the adolescents themselves more in the design phase of the research.

Ethical principles, especially the rights of the research participants, were respected in the project. We obtained the consent of the parents or guardians of the students. Before each interview, the assent of each student was obtained again. In particular, we wanted to leave the decision as to whether to continue the research up to the students themselves. The students received a small financial reward for their participation. Negotiating the introductory consent with the parents was sometimes an opportunity to gain additional insights, as the parents sometimes wanted to talk to us about their child's choice and their own attitudes to that choice.

## **5 Results**

In line with the previous research reviewed above, we examined three main areas of predicted change: spatiotemporal regimes and everyday logistics, academic/curricular concerns, and the social domain – relationships with classmates/peers and adults (teachers). The thematic analysis yielded several significant issues or strands that affect all three basic areas (Table 2). This mapping is, of course, a simplification, as there are more complex links between the topics. For example, going to a boarding facility (logistics/space-time) may be a way of establishing new social relationships with adults

(family) and peers. In this section, we present the first two main topics in rich detail. The next three topics could either be logically integrated into these two main circuits or present challenges to further data analysis and research.

Table 2

*Themes related to transition to TVET programs in upper secondary school*

Theme/Domain	Daily routines/ Logistics/Space- time	Academic/ Curriculum and instruction	Social/Relationships
<b>Effects of school choice</b>	Commuting/moving to boarding facility	Set of choices for students with different academic achievement	Profound change of social convoy
<b>Professional/ vocational subjects/ Practice</b>	Different classification and framing: more autonomy for VET students	Different effects in different tracks: vocational/ professional	More homogeneous peer group/New heterogeneous school staff: trainers
<b>(Post-socialist) transformation of school system</b>	Emergence of private schools/ Uneven quality of schools leading to need for school choice	Supply of too many programs/ qualifications leading to narrow specialization	Mobility/attrition of school staff
<b>COVID-19</b>	From topography to topology of education provision	Reduction (or even absence) of workshop training during lockdown	New challenges to teacher-student relationships
<b>Marginalized/ minority/ migrant students</b>	Students in foster care move to new homes	Need for Czech language instruction for immigrants	Inclusion vs. isolation of immigrants

### *5.1 School choice and its ramifications*

As mentioned above, much attention is traditionally paid in the literature to the choice of track and program (field of study, qualification) of upper secondary schools. However, our respondents also actively chose between different schools offering similar or identical programs. Somewhat paradoxically, students with worse previous academic results and lower aspirations who wish to join VET programs can choose from a wider range of choices. The consequences of the active schools choice are new spatio-temporal regimes and a significantly altered social environment.

### 5.1.1 School choice at work

In most regions of Czechia, the demand for academic track places exceeds their supply; the opposite is true for vocational programs.<sup>8</sup> In recent decades, schools in most parts of Czechia have had difficulties recruiting students for many traditional VET track programs for mechanics or construction trades, despite demand on the labor market. These programs are often chosen by students with lower achievement in compulsory school. In order to avoid closing the program (or the entire school), schools develop a series of marketing activities aimed specifically at lower-performing, rural, or minority students. Thus, students who do not aspire to the academic track (or to prestigious professional programs such as applied art) often have a large set of schools to choose from, albeit in the least prestigious track.

Academic programs seem to be of more or less comparable quality across the country (Kostelecký et al., 2018),<sup>9</sup> so academic track students often attend the closest school. That was exactly the case for Klára and Filip, the only students from our study heading for the academic track (they were classmates and close friends in compulsory school and stayed together after the transition, which could also have played a role in their decision). But there are vast differences (by any measure – facilities, attainment, reputation) among the TVET secondary schools. Thus, our vocational students<sup>10</sup> often chose a school from among several similar TVET options that was further from their place of residence.

Our participants reported different tactics within the school choice mechanism with a fixed number of applications (two in the Czech case). Lumír preferred a specific school, so he submitted both applications to one school, but to two programs leading to similar qualifications. More often, however, students submitted each of their two applications to a different school, which they saw as a strategy to increase their chances of being accepted. In the event of their being admitted to both schools, they then chose the one they preferred.

Sometimes students mentioned pull factors, such as the quality of facilities/workshops for professional subjects. (Students often visit VET schools when they are in their last years of lower secondary school during “open days”

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<sup>8</sup> North Bohemia, where one group of our respondents came from, is an exception, where the supply/demand ratio is the opposite for academic and vocational schools.

<sup>9</sup> A more nuanced view shows that private academic schools tend to be at both extremes – either the best ones or the worst ones.

<sup>10</sup> Previous research has shown that Czech parents, especially from lower socioeconomic groups, leave a lot of room for field and school choice to their children (Katrňák, 2004).



with talks and tours of school facilities.) School quality as such was mentioned less often, as by Zdenek:

I kind of chose this school; I sought out some information about it and I believed that I might enjoy it there. I found out that it had a good reputation, one would probably learn there, that they would teach me something of value for my work, more than at the other schools [that are nearer my home]. (I1, Zdenek)

A school's partnership with a major enterprise and the possibility of obtaining an apprenticeship contract (bringing the relative certainty of future employment) or company scholarship was another important factor. Preferential scholarships are provided only to students in selected TVET disciplines, never to students in the academic track.

Some of the topics described above – such as the supply of education in traditional craft fields and large differences in the quality of schools and programs leading to an active choice of school – can be considered as a consequence of the transformation of the former state-controlled education system to the conditions of a market economy (Dvořák & Gal, 2022). The entry of new providers of education – private and religious founders – since the 1990s further strengthened the formal and informal differences within schools, and especially among them (Triventi et al., 2020). The transition to upper secondary school can therefore now take place from a public to a private school (Svatopluk) or vice versa (Nina), or between mainstream and alternative schools (Beata). All these teens talked about the differences in school cultures of private/public (mainstream/alternative) institutions and the greater ease or difficulty of adapting to a new culture after the transition.

The choice mechanisms represent an interesting phenomenon, but we will deal with the consequences of school choice for students' daily life after the transition to upper secondary school.

### 5.1.2 New spatial and temporal reality as a consequence of choice of school and program

The transition to upper secondary school usually means the necessity of commuting<sup>11</sup> to a more distant school or moving to a boarding facility. The distribution of the distance from home to school, however, differs among tracks. Dvořák et al. (2020) estimated that for Czech vocational students,

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<sup>11</sup> In the Czechia, there are practically no school buses (as known, for example, from North America) and a driver's license for a private car can only be obtained after reaching the age of 18. There is a functional public transport network, which at the time of our research was very inexpensive for students because of subsidies.

the median distance between home and school was 14.3 km, and for academic track students it was only 6.8 km.<sup>12</sup> Petr and Pavel, twins and classmates in lower secondary school, pursued different vocational qualifications and each transitioned to different schools that were almost 60 km<sup>13</sup> away. Neither public nor private Czech academic secondary schools are boarding schools; the professional and vocational upper secondary schools often provide boarding facilities, in some cases even free of charge. TVET students may therefore choose a specialist school located a significant distance from their home and not have the need to commute daily.<sup>14</sup> This was the case for two boys, Kamil and Marko, and a girl, Zlata, from a peripheral community in North Bohemia. Marko purposefully strove for a qualification in the field of agriculture, as his relatives operated a farm and working in agriculture appeared to be an important part of his identity. The nearest TVET school with agriculture programs was located 55 km<sup>15</sup> from his home, with a journey time by public transport that was close to two hours and involved two transfers. The boarding facility was thus a logical choice. Kamil – pursuing a very specific glass engraving qualification – also moved to a boarding facility next to the specialized art school.

For some adolescents, the choice of a relatively remote secondary school providing accommodation can serve as a significant step towards separation from their primary family and towards adulthood, yet without the need to run their own household (Eurofound, 2014). That might have been the case for Zlata, who was from the same municipality as Marko. Zlata chose a hairdressing program that was available at a large TVET school close to her home, but she preferred to enlist in the same program at another school in a more distant city.

Marko and Zlata did not report problems with life at the boarding facility. Kamil, however, had trouble pursuing his second interest – athletics – in the environment of artistically oriented peers in the dorm, and even in the third interview reported that he had “not adapted yet.”

The majority of the participants in our study commuted daily. This was the case with all the students from Prague. All the students from suburbs or small towns in Central Bohemia continued to live with their families (and

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<sup>12</sup> 9 and 4 miles, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> 37 miles, distance by road.

<sup>14</sup> Nationally, about 9% of upper secondary students live in an official boarding facility. Some students live in rented flats with friends or a partner. Sharing accommodation with a partner since the COVID-19 lockdown was mentioned in the last interviews by Hynek and Štěpán.

<sup>15</sup> 34 miles, distance by road.

pets, as one noted), despite the need to get up as early as at 4 or 5 a.m. daily – on average, they spent about three or four hours more commuting than their urban classmates (despite the availability of boarding). The reasons for not moving to a boarding facility were the higher costs associated with boarding facilities or the desire to stay in contact with the family. In some cases, the boarding alternative was disapproved of by parents who were concerned about losing control over their adolescent children and possible academic problems or involvement in risky activities (as reported by Petr and Pavel).

Thus, with the transition to upper secondary school, there was a significant change in the daily routines of the students. As the adolescent need for longer sleep is a popular topic in the literature (e.g., Minges & Redeker, 2016), we were surprised that the respondents did not comment significantly negatively on the necessity of getting up early and commuting, even though many of them also had part-time jobs. One possible explanation is that students from smaller communities were already used to commuting to their previous lower secondary schools, as well as the fact that in some cases there was no school or only a primary school (up to fifth grade) in their village. VET school students often come from blue-collar families and may be used to this time rhythm. Students may also factor commuting into their choice of school in advance.

When the participants were in their second and third years of upper secondary study, school closures and distance learning brought significant changes to their daily routine. When we conducted Interview 3 with Eda during lockdown, his school teachers were communicating with students only asynchronously through email.

Researcher: Is learning much more difficult for you now?

Eda: Well, sure it is, except that I don't have to get up at five or six [a.m.] every day. In training weeks, I got up at five, and normally during school instruction, I got up at six. Now, dad wakes me up at eight every day. Otherwise, I would always sleep until ten. (I3)

Distance education – even if the disadvantages still prevail – thus has the potential to create a new topology of space, where the geographical distance of the chosen school suddenly does not play a role. With asynchronous communication, the students' temporal rhythms collapsed as well.

But the lockdown offered some other advantages for students who already had their emergent career paths, for which the school sometimes provided them with improved skills. During the pandemic, the lockdown of service outlets enhanced the opportunities for Zlata's (unofficial) job: "Now I'm enjoying doing people's hair at their homes, because I'm making a good living. [...] Yes, actually, I was visiting people's homes and cutting their hair the entire

time that there was corona around.” (I3, Zlata) Zdenek regularly helped in his father’s shop and Štěpán already ran his own firm specializing in arboriculture<sup>16</sup> and woodwork. In addition, many students had unskilled part-time jobs in supermarkets or restaurants (when not closed during lockdown). Online teaching, which in some cases was almost non-existent, at least initially, and the new time rhythm provided the students with a welcome space for their work activities, and also for their personal life and interests.

### 5.1.3 New classmates

The very fragmented supply of study programs offered by competing schools and the actively exercised school choice cause, especially for TVET students, the disintegration of their existing social convoy of classmates and the transition to a completely new social group.

Changes in the composition of their peer groups were experienced differently by the respondents, depending on their past educational path. Many Czech students – especially in cities – complete their entire compulsory education in a very stable social group. Students are not reassigned across classes during school attendance, as looping is traditionally applied. The student group in the homeroom class, in which most of the instruction takes place, often remains practically the same for all nine grades. This was the case for Lumír, from a large city school, who was afraid of losing the classmates with whom he had shared his school life for nine years as they gradually got to know each other better. It bothered him that he did not know anyone at the new school after the transition. “If I only knew a few people there, for example, if two or three people from the previous school were to transition there with me...” (I3) However, his school organized a sports week for new students with a number of team-building activities at the beginning of the first year, which Lumír viewed as helpful.

In contrast, for Matyáš, a boy from a small village, the previous transition to lower secondary school had already meant a move to a new large urban school:

And there it was like they just took us there, and we [as graduates of a rural primary school] were scattered into different homeroom groups. Actually, me and just one girl went to one group, and that was all. And now she made some friends there, [the other kids] already had various acquaintances there, and I had to get involved somehow. (I3)

<sup>16</sup> Arboriculture (tree surgery) is the management of individual trees focused on safety issues and the plant’s health.

Matyáš was thus more comfortable with the fact that in the upper secondary school everyone is in the same starting position, all relationships being created from scratch: “It seems so much better to me now. Because we’ve actually all known each other here just since the first year, when everyone was about 15 years old.” (I3) This was confirmed by Marko (I3) as no one knew any of their classmates in his new school “so everyone got to know each other the same way; everyone was in the same position, so it was cool.”

If parents intervened in school choice, they sometimes cited the expected composition of the student body as a push factor, besides concerns about the low quality of education provided by TVET schools near their place of residence. Petr’s mother explained that she wanted her son to study in Prague. The other schools offering the bricklaying program were, according to her, “maybe closer, but the junkies... it is terrible [here]. I’m not saying that it can’t happen in Prague, too, but for that reason it’s better to keep an eye on them like this” (field notes).

At the time of the research, we as researchers were not clearly aware of the significance of the then “frozen” conflict in Ukraine. Nevertheless, especially in VET schools in the capital, there were already many students from migrant backgrounds. Our respondents repeatedly described their Ukrainian classmates as a closed group that did not communicate with their Czech peers. On the other hand, the Ukrainian students’ professional skills were appreciated by the students in construction programs: migrant teens learn a lot on the job as they help their parents, who in the Czechia often work in blue-collar jobs. TVET programs can thus successfully prepare students from a migrant background for the labor market, but less so for integration into Czech society, above all because of their limited knowledge of the language, although we encountered both the teaching of Czech as a foreign language and extra-curricular activities designed to support the inclusion of students with a different mother tongue.

### *5.2 Effects of professional/vocational specialization*

Most Czech students transfer to TVET programs. This brings a significant change to the curriculum, but also to the organization of instruction. The transition from a comprehensive general school to a tracked and specialized program also means a qualitative change in the composition of the peer group, who may be more homogeneous in terms of abilities or interests. In contrast, the teaching staff is more diverse now, with the VET trainers representing a new group of adult models.

#### 5.2.1 Curriculum

In both the T/P and VET tracks, subjects from three domains are mandatory: 1) general education subjects (Czech as a first language/language of instruction;

English as a foreign language with some degree of specialization; mathematics; civics; PE); 2) specialist subjects providing theory and technical/professional knowledge for the qualification being pursued; and 3) workshop and workplace practical training. This curriculum had a very different effect on our respondents depending on the track.

Some students in the T/P track (such as Svatopluk) struggled with academic demands after the transition. Marko transferred after some time from a professional to a vocational program in agriculture, while Tonka repeated a year in her professional nursing program. Students in the vocational track, on the other hand, reflected on the substantially watered-down general education curriculum. Bolek perceived the academic subjects in the VET track as “vokolní” [marginal or peripheral]; professional subjects and practice took center stage. VET students often had the [apparently justified] opinion that the same content as at the previous level of education was just repeated in these subjects. Eda was dismissive (I3) of the citizenship education: “It doesn’t have to happen here at all.” Overall, the lower level of requirements could have contributed to the positive outcome that those VET students who maintained contact with us until the end of the research all successfully completed their studies. Pavel reported happily about academic achievement in his VET school: “Well, here we’re all good at learning now and we’re happy about it” (I3).

### 5.2.2 Practical training

Between the themes of the curriculum and the rhythms of the day/school is situated the practical training (usually called “practice” or “practicum”) – either in school facilities/workshops or in partner companies. Practice usually starts around 7 a.m., so on practice days especially, students who commute have to get up very early. Nevertheless, for most of them, practice is their favorite part of school education, as Bolek stated: “I would simply no longer be able just to sit at a desk and study each day all day long – not any more” (I3).

From a temporal point of view, practice also differs from ordinary school teaching (at least in the prevailing form in Czech schools) in terms of what Bernstein (1973) calls framing. This includes the layout of tasks within the school day, the pace of work, and breaks that are not dictated by a bell or a teacher’s instructions but are left to the responsibility of the student.

We come in the morning before 7 a.m. The master [takes attendance] and assigns work to everyone. The master just puts in the task, and we hand over the finished work to him at the end of the day. For example, when someone has completed the task earlier, he can produce something according to his choice or assist the master working on some contract as needed. But if you’ve already finished your task for the day, the master also assigns you the task for the next day and so you can start the new task and have it half-ready for the next day. (I2, Pavel)

Such weak framing seems to be a better match for the adolescents' developmental need for autonomy.

Students of the T/P and, even more so, of the VET tracks also have various opportunities to earn their own financial income or contribute to the family budget during their in-company practice or in part-time jobs. They use their emerging skills and at the same time it can be a significant source of self-confidence. As VET students move from the school workshop to an actual workplace in a company, the way to a smaller or larger financial reward for work opens up for them. Eda (I3) stated that then he enjoyed training much more since he received a salary.

Of all the domains of the entire education system, practical training in vocational education was probably the one that was most affected by the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Štěpán complained about the lack of practice (to which significantly less time is allocated in the technical/professional track curriculum), which, however, was also compounded by the lockdowns: "It's really very sad... for the entire first half of the year [2020] we had two 2-hour sessions [of practice] and that was actually all" (I3, Štěpán).

### 5.2.3 Teaching staff: VET Trainers and professional subject teachers

The students' statements about their teachers in upper secondary schools were highly variable, spanning a number of specific complaints as well as praise, but also a relatively mature attitude: "Simply, you don't choose your teacher, so it may happen that I won't be satisfied with a particular teacher, but you can manage to live with all of them" (I3, Matyáš). Students also perceived a certain trade-off between when the teacher was strict and effective at the same time or acted more leniently towards students (which sometimes meant less academic pressure). Higher requirements were generally applied to students in professional/vocational subjects.

COVID-19 closures were once again a decisive test of educational leadership and teacher-student communication. In Czech schools, there is a tradition of weak instructional leadership and monitoring of teachers' work by school management, which backfired during the crisis; students perceived big differences between the approaches of individual teachers. Difficulties with the transition to online teaching could also be related to the relatively high age of VET teachers. Struggling youngsters who felt threatened with failing their studies perceived the new situation as particularly unfavorable.

During practice, students meet a new group of adults – specialized VET trainers (instructors). In the Central European environment, these trainers are traditionally addressed as master trainers or “masters.”<sup>17</sup> Some students expected VET trainers/masters to connect with them more closely than other teachers: “The master should be such a supportive person for the students. If I say it like that, like a friend, right?” (I3, Zdenek). Unfortunately, our respondents repeatedly reported a high trainer turnover rate (attrition), with three or four masters coming and going in one school year. Therefore, it was not possible to establish the expected student-adult relationship. The staff turnover also had a negative impact on the training, as the students re-learned the same skills several times from scratch under each trainer and the progress of instruction was minimal. High mobility was a problem that was frequently mentioned not only among VET trainers, but also among other teachers.

Problems with teacher attrition are the result of the long-term underfunding of Czech education in general. Especially in large cities, there is a shortage of some craft professions (especially construction and engineering trades) on the labor market. Therefore, it is very difficult for schools to recruit and retain quality specialists for the positions of VET trainers.

#### 5.2.4 Qualitative change in peer groups

The existence of a fragmented supply of highly specialized TVET programs leads – as we described – to the disintegration of the original social convoy from compulsory school, but at the same time to the emergence of new and more homogeneous groups of peers.

Some students appreciated being able to share their (future) professional interests with new friends. In Kamil’s art school, almost all the classmates talked about glass or art. “And I’ll join them too, because the glass itself is beautiful, and if you add some decoration or something to it, it’s great” (I3, Kamil). Smaller peer groups were formed at Marko’s school: “Out of maybe twenty people [in my class], there are only three of us who talk to each other mostly about crop production. [...] The others discuss what they enjoy the most. For some it’s horses, for others it’s engines and machines” (I3, Marko). The shared interests and hobby activities of TVET students are contrasted with academic track students, who are described as not knowing what they want to do in their future life and therefore having nothing to talk about with each other (I1, Nina). TVET is simply not just a matter of instruction, be it theory or skills training: joining the professional community and acquiring a professional identity play a key role.

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<sup>17</sup> The Czech expression is *mistr* (from the German *der Meister*) meaning a master or expert.



On the other hand, Zlata perceived her new social environment in the hairdressing program as much more limiting than the heterogeneous group in her previous school: “Like me, I don’t talk to [new classmates] much, it’s not even possible to talk to them properly. Because they mostly discuss gossip, you could say. Well, it was much better at the lower secondary. The crew was much better [at the comprehensive school].” And even after two years, Bolek also showed a slightly troubled attitude to his new classmates in the vocational track:

“[In our village] I have known the other boys since childhood. [But in the new school] I don’t know them, I don’t know what they can do, and I don’t know just what they have done. Like most guys smoke. I’m one of the few who don’t smoke. There are four of us in the class who don’t smoke. [...] But the boys from [my previous] comprehensive school still don’t smoke even now.” (13)

These statements remind us that the reality of some VET schools is complex and has its darker sides. The concentration of lower-achieving and minority students in the VET track reduces academic pressure (a reversed big-fish-little-pond effect), but environments with specific values and cultures bring in new social pressures.

## 6 Discussion

Our study brings rich qualitative findings about the transition and adaptation to upper secondary education in the context of a tracked school system in a post-socialist country. The insights presented here contribute to the interpretation of the results of earlier quantitative longitudinal studies and complement the findings from other types of educational systems.

Vocational students are generally considered to be the most disadvantaged group of post-compulsory students (other than those not in education or training at all). VET students often had a mainly negative experience of lower secondary education as they graduated from their comprehensive school with an explicit or implicit sense of futility (Simonová et al., 2021). Our conclusions are in good agreement with quantitative studies that pointed to the recovery of student engagement or general well-being in the VET tracks of upper secondary schools (Salmela-Aro, 2017; Symonds et al., 2016). We describe some of the possible mechanisms that are compatible with the stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993): at least some VET students appreciated the opportunity for a fresh start in a new social group. A significantly different curriculum and instruction placing great emphasis on professional subjects and practical training allow students to apply their real-life skills and experiences and provide them with greater autonomy and

an opportunity to meet new adult role models and also earn a certain amount of their own financial income. This may also explain the findings of Straková et al. (2021) that Czech students of various upper secondary tracks have a similarly optimistic attitude about the future.

It turns out that the choice of a particular school has a significant impact on the future daily life of students, because it determines whether the students live at home or in a boarding school during their late adolescent years, or how much time they spend commuting, but also in what physical and social environment they spend their school days (Dovemark & Holm, 2017). Similarly to what Condliffe et al. (2015) found in an urban environment in the United States, students take a very active role in the choice of upper secondary school, but unlike in the Condliffe study, Czech students with a poor academic background can choose from a relatively wide range of choices (choice set), at least in terms of the number of programs within the VET track and schools where they can study. On the other hand, the frequent active choice of a (distant) school indicates the perceived variability of school quality in the TVET sector. In addition to discomfort, commuting to school or living in a boarding facility also brings a greater degree of freedom away from social control in the family and place of residence.

The life-course framework proved useful when it focused our attention on the historical context of student transitions, represented by the “never-ending” post-socialist transformation of the education and economic system, but also by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, our results contribute to earlier findings that question the assumption of the life-course theory that greater similarity or consistency between lower and upper secondary school will have a favorable impact on the educational career of students (Benner, 2011). In a significant number of cases, lower secondary school does not create an environment corresponding to the needs of the developmental stage of (younger) adolescence. The new pattern of curriculum and instruction/training in T/P and VET programs can therefore, on the contrary, disrupt previous negative attitudes to education and facilitate positive developmental processes.

In particular, we want to draw attention to the technical/professional track, the most popular choice of Czech compulsory school graduates, which has so far been little studied compared to the VET (apprenticeship) and academic tracks. The T/P track could combine the advantages of both the academic and VET tracks, but – as our research suggested – specific risks are involved. We shall be careful in this comparison, too, because we do not actually have enough information about “elite” academic track upper secondary schools in Czechia or other post-socialist countries either.

### *6.1 Limitations of the present study*

We focused mainly on the changes caused by the transition and on the properties of the new environment that are perceived as positive. We do not want to idealize VET; nor do we deny that a significant number of VET students face serious problems while still at school, change their field of study, or drop out. The longitudinal design that was used might have resulted in the more “stable” teens remaining in the sample. A certain signal of such censoring of the research group may be the fact that the respondents who remained in the sample generally completed secondary school successfully, or at least remained in education.

In addition, our research population suffered from the attrition of students from marginalized groups. At the beginning, we managed to recruit two Roma students in foster care (specifically in a residential children’s home). Both were supposed to continue their studies in the VET track in another city; after finishing compulsory school, they moved to another residential home. Unfortunately, we were not able to contact their new legal guardians and obtain their consent to further interviews.

Another group that is significantly overrepresented in the VET track is students of Ukrainian ethnicity, who had formed a significant and growing minority group in Czechia even before 2022, when another large wave of immigration was triggered by the new phase of Russian aggression against Ukraine. We lost contact with one student of Ukrainian origin who completed the first interview. It is obvious that this topic needs to be further investigated, also in connection with the war in Ukraine and possible other waves of migration to the formerly relatively ethnically homogeneous Czechia. We know little about how well Ukrainian or other minority adolescents manage to create the relationships with adults and peers that are needed for successful integration (Benner et al., 2017). Our sample did not include students from the shortest (two-year) and least demanding VET programs that provide only incomplete qualifications and that tend to be attended by migrants and other at-risk groups.

The opportunistic way respondents were selected also led to a similarly opportunistic use of individual or group interviews from the beginning of the study. In addition, data collection was significantly complicated in 2020 by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when some of the interviews had to be conducted online without much preparation. Given that our study is primarily a heuristic entry into a little-researched field, we believe that the validity of the main findings was not compromised by some eclecticism in the data collection. We are also aware that our respondents almost always avoided talking about anti-social behaviors such as bullying or drug trafficking in their schools.

The method of thematic analysis that was used made it possible to identify some key issues and patterns that need further detailed analysis, including the use of the longitudinal nature of the data and the addition of further contextual information. At the same time, it would be desirable to follow our respondents further during their transition to post-secondary education or the labor market.

### Conclusion

Our study provides a rich description of the transition to Czech upper secondary education and the post-transition experience of students in the T/P and VET tracks based on three waves of longitudinal qualitative data. Applying the life-course theoretical framework, we focused on: a) the agentic choices of individuals and the ramifications of those choices; b) the influence of previous individual experiences (e.g., the transition from primary to lower secondary school) on anticipation and perception of entry to the new school; c) the simultaneous study of transition in different domains (daily routines, academic/curriculum; relations with teachers and peers); d) links between the lives of the participants (classmates) and their disintegration as a result of transition (change in social convoys); and e) the specifics of the post-transition environment resulting from the type and location of the students' place of residence and the unique historical circumstances between 2018 and 2020. Our key finding is the differences in post-transitory experiences between the T/P and VET track students. Dichotomous conceptualizations of upper secondary schooling based on the polarity of academic versus TVET education (Nylund et al., 2018) can obscure the specific features of the T/P track, but also the vast variety of qualifications within the VET track, as well as the differences between individual upper secondary schools.

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