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Guilty of Success and Failure: Permeability Struggles of Unsuccessful Upper Secondary VET Examinees in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This article examines upper secondary vocational education students who have failed the exit examination (*Matura*) at least twice. Repeated failure leaves such students with only a basic education certification, restricting their access to higher education and limiting their labour market prospects. Although most of these young people wish to make another attempt to pass the *Matura*, they have lost their formal student status, along with its associated benefits, and most are compelled to seek employment. Academic failure, particularly at these critical transition points, can have profound implications on students' educational and professional trajectories and their identities. The research question we posed here, therefore, is: How do the identities of upper secondary vocational education *Matura* examinees evolve during the two years after they fail the final examination? The data corpus for this study consists of biographical interviews with 46 informants who failed the *Matura*. The data analysis reveals that they struggled to anchor their identities through study, work, or family, with some exploiting non-systemic permeability mechanisms.

Keywords

anchoring struggles; feelings of failure; identity struggles; *Matura*; permeability; upper secondary exit examination; vocational education

1. Introduction

Passing the *Matura* exam is a necessary precondition for entering higher education in the Czech Republic. There is no alternative pathway to higher education; all aspiring students must follow an upper secondary track

leading to the *Matura*. Besides, the *Matura* certificate proves the qualifications acquired through vocational education. This study concentrates on students from the vocational track (either from regular four-year studies or follow-up studies) who failed the *Matura* exam at least twice. These students failed their first attempt in their final school year and then failed their first retake attempt several months later. As a result, they were not awarded a certificate of completion of upper secondary education. Consequently, they were unable to perform as qualified workers in the job for which they had been trained or to pursue higher education (either higher scholastic education or higher vocational education). They are permitted to make one more attempt (a total of two retake attempts) to pass the *Matura* at the end of the following school year. This situation leaves them in a state of uncertainty, as they are no longer students, but they have not yet graduated either.

To more clearly present this research problem, we explain the key features of the Czech education system. One of its distinctive features (Table 1) is the division of students into different educational tracks at the upper secondary education level.

At the upper secondary education level, students enter the academic track, the non-academic vocational track, or the vocational apprenticeship track. Students who finish lower secondary education in the Czech Republic are distributed among the different tracks (Table 2). The proportion of students who continue on the academic track surpasses 30%. More than 45% of students choose the non-academic vocational track, leading to the *Matura* exam. Around 23% of students opt for a vocational apprenticeship track. Students with apprenticeship certificates can pursue follow-up studies to obtain the *Matura* certificate later. These figures may vary slightly depending on the specific year and region.

The academic track providing general education includes programmes whose primary aim is to prepare students for further study in tertiary education. This encompasses the Gymnasium educational programme and several Lyceum study programmes. The Gymnasium programme corresponds to what is typically referred to as a grammar school. A Lyceum is a type of upper secondary education that serves as a middle ground between a Gymnasium and vocational programmes. Students at a Lyceum receive a general education alongside an introduction to specific professional fields. Graduates from the academic track, which invariably culminates in the *Matura* exam, are expected to progress to higher education, a path followed by the majority (90%).

The secondary vocational education track offers specialised instruction in various fields of study, equipping students for both professional careers and further studies at higher vocational schools or universities. These programs last four years and culminate in the *Matura* exam. Among graduates of secondary vocational education, approximately 50% pursue higher education. This proportion has seen a slight increase in recent years, possibly due to a growing interest in higher education within technical and vocational domains.

The apprenticeship track focuses on practical training in specific trades and professions. The programs typically last three years, leading to an apprenticeship certificate or other qualification lower than an apprenticeship. The programmes do not culminate in the *Matura* exam, which is the condition for proceeding to higher education. Among graduates of secondary vocational apprenticeships, the proportion of those who find their way through follow-up studies to higher education is very low.

Table 1. The Czech education system.

Education level	Pre-primary		Basic								Secondary				Tertiary
Cycle			Primary					Lower-secondary			Upper secondary				
Type			Elementary schools					Elementary schools Grammar schools (8- or 6-year *gymnázium*) Art schools (8-year *konzervatoř*)			General track with *Matura* Grammar schools (*gymnázium*) Lyceum				
											Vocational track with *Matura* * Vocational school * Vocational schools with 50% time of apprenticeship				
											Vocational tracks with VET certificate Shorter professional schools (3 or 2 years)			* Follow up vocational schools for VET certificate holders, leading to *Matura*.	
Grade			1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	13th	14th
Tracking points							x		x		x					
Age	<4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
		Compulsory education														

Source: OECD (2023), simplified; *segments of education addressed in this article.

The educational outcomes of students differ among the tracks. This is reflected in the failure rate of the *Matura* exam. The *Matura* exam contains a uniform part that does not differ across tracks, even though the secondary school curriculum of the subjects represented, primarily in the Czech language, can differ significantly in terms of the number of teaching hours. While failure in the academic track is almost negligible (2%), failure in the non-academic tracks is much higher (8%). In the follow-up classes for graduates of the apprenticeship track, the rate is as high as 22%. These data, specifically concerning examinees who failed twice consecutively, have not yet been systematically monitored or coherently published. Therefore, it was necessary to reconstruct them from partial data published in the statistical yearbook of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS, n.d.), in reports from the Centre for Evaluation of Educational Results (CERMAT, n.d.), and in the annual reports of the Czech School Inspectorate (CSI, 2021). Table 2 presents the averages for 2018, 2019, and 2020, when the majority of our sample first took the *Matura* examination.

Table 2. Approximate indicators of the distribution of pupils and their outcomes.

Distribution of pupils among tracks at the upper secondary school level (age 15–19)		Failure rate in *Matura* exam*	Proportion of students who continue to higher education **
Academic track 31%		2%	80% (+10%)
Non-academic vocational track 46%		8%	40% (+10%)
Vocational Apprenticeship 23%	*Follow-up classes* 3%	22%	15% (+20%)
	Rest: 20%	Without the possibility of advancing to higher education	

Source: Based on data from CERMAT (n.d.), MoEYS (n.d.), CSI (2021); * after two attempts, ** higher education plus higher vocational education (in brackets).

2. Literature Review

Upper Secondary School Exit Examinations (USSEE) are a pivotal component of many education systems, as passing them is often a prerequisite for graduating and for obtaining a qualification certificate (Majcík et al., 2024). This diploma serves as formal evidence of secondary education completion; in some countries, it is essential for pursuing higher education (higher education entrance qualification) or career opportunities. It is clear that exit exams significantly shape student life trajectories in various ways, not all of which are positive. While the overall impact of these examinations remains ambiguous, two contrasting perspectives emerge. The first emphasizes that USSEE requirements serve as incentives, encouraging students to engage more deeply in learning before graduation and motivating schools to enhance the quality of instruction. The second perspective argues that USSEE can create barriers and perpetuate inequalities (Reardon et al., 2010). Research by Jürges and Schneider (2010) suggested that USSEE is linked to negative student outcomes, such as heightened anxiety, increased achievement pressure, and reduced motivation. USSEE requirements disproportionately affect students with lower abilities or those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013). Failing these exams often leads to decreased self-efficacy and increased discouragement toward school (Benner, 2013). L. J. Kruger et al. (2016) emphasized that failing can negatively impact academic motivation, with the effect varying depending on individual characteristics—potentially either diminishing or, in some cases, enhancing motivation. How such

failure affects examinee transitions to higher levels of education and/or the labour market remains a question that can be approached through the concept of permeability.

2.1. Limited Permeability in the Czech Education System

The idea of permeability between general, vocational, and higher education systems and the employment system was raised in the 1970s (Spöttl, 2013). The idea is based on the argument "that permeable structures of education improve the effectiveness of selection mechanisms in education and work that aim at equality of opportunities" (p. 458). The permeability is limited by the segmentation of the education system, the division of the student population into tracks, and the separation of academic and non-academic tracks with limited inter-track mobility (cf. Wolter & Kerst, 2015). These permeability limits also apply to the Czech Republic in some ways (Dvořák et al., 2016; Straková et al., 2024). Recent research examined some of the consequences of this track system. The effects of various secondary school tracks on cognitive and non-cognitive learning outcomes were analysed (Straková et al., 2024), and several reasons for differing school outcomes were suggested (Straková et al., 2023, 2024). Students typically choose their educational track at the age of 15, although some make this decision earlier, choosing the academic track as early as age 11. Once chosen, changing tracks is almost impossible. Mobility between the tracks is very limited, with downward mobility (from academic track to vocational tracks) being more common (Dvořák et al., 2020). While the permeability between upper secondary school tracks and higher education is monitored statistically, it lacks in-depth discussion and interpretation from researchers.

In the Czech Republic, in addition to the limits to permeability (Dvořák et al., 2020; Straková et al., 2024), the effect of the *Matura* as a final exam at the upper secondary education level is also evident in both the academic and non-academic tracks. One of the key permeability limits between vocational education and higher education is the existence of a single exit examination (*Matura*). Since passing the *Matura* is a necessary condition for entry into higher education, the *Matura* becomes a systemic element determining the future educational path. Therefore, even though up to 75% of students complete tracks leading to the *Matura* at the upper secondary education level, a significant part of them will remain at the level of a basic education, without qualifications and without the possibility of continuing their studies, precisely because of failing the *Matura* exam.

2.2. Youth Transitions After Failure at the Upper Secondary Education Level

Academic failure, particularly at critical transition points, can have profound implications for students' educational and professional trajectories and their identities. Upper secondary final examinations often serve as a gateway to further education or employment, making failure at this stage a significant life event. Leaving upper secondary education without a certificate is often perceived as a failure, leading to negative emotions, anxiety, and fears about the future (Majcík et al., 2024; Ogresta, 2023; Ramsdal et al., 2018). This experience can diminish internal motivation for further development and lead to adverse changes in self-concept, such as career-related confidence (Creed et al., 2003). Additionally, it may result in the abandonment of personal and educational ambitions, as well as a perceived decline in the quality of social relationships and an increased sense of social exclusion (Bühler-Niederberger et al., 2023; L. J. Kruger et al., 2016; Majcík et al., 2024).

Objectively, the consequences of incomplete studies include problematic employment in the labour market, limited participation in formal and non-formal education opportunities, and the chances of returning to the education system deteriorating over time (Ogresta, 2023; Schuchart & Schimke, 2022; Struffolino & Borgna, 2021). People with incomplete upper secondary education are at risk of poverty and poorer health, including mental health, in the long term (Matías-García et al., 2024). There are, therefore, many reasons to focus on failing *Matura* examinees in general and on permeability between the vocational track of upper secondary education and higher education in particular. Previous research has examined how students cope with failure through emotional regulation (Turner & Waugh, 2007) and resilience strategies (Martin, 2013), yet little attention has been given to how failing an upper secondary final examination shapes student identities in the aftermath. Given the societal and personal significance attached to passing such exams, understanding how students reconstruct their self-perception following failure is essential for addressing this gap. This study asks the research question: How do the identities of upper secondary vocational education *Matura* examinees evolve during the two years following their final examination failure? Specifically, we explore how students navigate the professional and educational implications of failure and how they redefine (or struggle to redefine) their educational and work identities. By focusing on post-failure identity reconstruction, this research provides insights into the lived experiences of unsuccessful examinees.

2.3. Identity Struggles of Young People in Transition

Since the beginning of the new millennium, a growing body of research has focused on the use of narrative and biographical approaches for studying young people and their transitions. The expanding use of narrative and biographical methods in youth research reflects a broader trend towards more qualitative, person-centred approaches in the social sciences. These methodologies are increasingly valued for their ability to capture young people's complex lived experiences shaped by societal contexts (Douglas & Poletti, 2017). This approach has been widely adopted across disciplines such as sociology, education, psychology, and social work (Moran et al., 2020). For example, studies have used narrative methods to understand the experiences of young carers (McGibbon, 2021), the impact of homelessness on young people (Toolis & Hammack, 2015), and the development of narrative identity in different cultural contexts (Cierpka, 2014; Hammack, 2008). Narrative studies were also done on the topics of study and career pathways (Rönnlund et al., 2017), early school leavers (Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000), and graduate transitions (Heinz, 2002).

Narrative research allows for a deep exploration of personal stories, providing insights into how young people make sense of their lives and identities. The narrative identity is understood as "the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life" (McAdams, 2011, p. 99). This study works with the fact that "investigations of people's narratives therefore allow a glimpse into their identity, shedding light on how they came to their present identity and how they view the impact of significant experiences on it" (Eriksson & Frisén, 2024, p. 17). Moreover, the narrative identity reflects the interplay between agency and structure, as it refers to how individuals create and maintain a sense of self through the stories they construct about their lives, and the extent to which they feel they can author those stories.

In the biographical work framework, the process of identity transformation always starts with identity struggles, defined as "struggles that people experience in different periods of life in relation to different

social situations that are narrated retrospectively in their biographical story" (Thunborg & Bron, 2019, p. 40). Failure at the *Matura* exam can be viewed as a potential identity struggle. Anchoring (Bron & West, 2000; Fenwick, 2006) refers to "being able to handle identity struggles and successfully integrate them into their biographies" (Bron & Thunborg, 2017, p. 120). Floating describes a biographical experience when the individual is unable to create a future (Bron, 2000); this can help understand the processes related to what happens with the ambitions of the examinees after their failure at the *Matura* exam. Research on dualities in transitions—particularly in the shift from education to work—has been well established (Brown, 2015; Wenger, 1998), illustrating how individuals navigate between structure and uncertainty. However, less attention has been given to dualities in transitions between other life roles, such as the movement between education and unemployment, or dependence and self-sufficiency. Understanding the interplay between anchoring and floating in these contexts can offer deeper insights into how individuals experience and negotiate instability, ultimately shaping their long-term trajectories.

3. Methods

Our research is part of the Life Pathways of Unsuccessful Graduates project, which included a broader sample from which we selected the relevant segment. For this particular study, the sample consists of 46 informants who were vocational education students and failed the *Matura* examination twice consecutively. The sample is composed of four different cohorts: examinees who attempted the *Matura* examination for the first time in 2018, 2019, 2020, or 2021.

Individuals who fail the *Matura* examination are difficult to locate and engage in research. They are dispersed throughout the population, not specifically registered with any official authority, and often reluctant to discuss their experiences. Consequently, we employed various strategies to identify these individuals, including requesting that schools reach out to them and approaching them individually based on peer recommendations. From a social research perspective, this approach constitutes convenience sampling. Adjustments were made to maintain the population structure in terms of gender and educational track.

Data was collected through repeated longitudinal biographical interviews. The informants were followed through these interviews over two years after failing the upper secondary final examination. For each of the series of longitudinal interviews, a specific version of the research instrument was created. As these were biographical interviews exploring informants' life paths, the interview scheme was based on a biographical narrative approach (Burke, 2014; Kutsyuruba & Mendes, 2023; Rosenthal, 2004; Schütze, 1992; Wengraf, 2001). The interview scheme used in this study was in line with Rosenthal's (2004) conceptualisation: There was (a) an initial narrative assignment, (b) internal narrative questions based only on the informant's narrative response to the initial narrative assignment, and (c) external narrative questions (pre-prepared questions, semi-structured interview type). The first interviews with each cohort and the interviews with the 2018 cohort, with which one interview was conducted, were based on the following initial narrative assignment:

> We are interested in everything that preceded your first attempt at the *Matura* examination, how you entered secondary school, how you recall your studies, how you prepared for the *Matura* examination, how your *Matura* examination went, and what you did when you learned the results, how you perceived it all, and also how your life went on. Everything you can remember is important to us, and we would appreciate it if you could tell it as a coherent story in your own words.

The follow-up interviews followed the logic of the repeated attempts the informants had made over time and other events that had occurred in their lives since the last interview. In addition, these follow-up interviews included questions on specific areas that had emerged during the initial analyses and needed more focus. The research adhered to ethical research guidelines. All participants were adults over the age of 18 and provided written informed consent; they were informed in detail of the research objectives and their rights as participants. They were fully briefed on the study's purpose prior to the initial interview and retained the freedom to control their level of engagement throughout the process. Interview transcripts and participant data were anonymised and securely stored on a protected server, with all recordings subsequently deleted. The data was used exclusively for this study, and access was restricted to researchers involved in the project.

In the earlier stages of the research investigation, the data were first analysed using inductive open coding in ATLAS.ti. Several subsequent narrative analysis techniques (Lieblich et al., 1998) that revealed processes in the life stories of examinees were also used in the research, and the results are presented in this study. Particularly, we used holistic content analysis, which is a type of narrative analysis. In a holistic approach to narrative analysis, Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest that the researchers read the text multiple times until a pattern emerges. An individual's story is viewed as a whole and the parts within it are interpreted in relation to other parts of the story (Beal, 2013; Lieblich et al., 1998).

4. Results

The narrative analysis of interviews showed two opposing processes in the life stories of unsuccessful examinees: anchoring and floating. Anchoring provides stability, structure, and a sense of belonging; floating signifies a state of uncertainty, disconnection, or liminality. For a young person in transition, in this case transitioning between levels of education, transitioning between education and the labour market, or more generally transitioning to a broader range of life roles characteristic of adulthood, anchoring is essential. However, the relationship between anchoring and floating is not one of simple opposition; it constitutes a duality. These two states do not exist in isolation but rather interact fluidly within the processes of identity formation and life transitions.

4.1. Floating as Represented in the Narratives

Students who fail the exit examination on their second attempt lose their official student status. This transition often leads to feelings of marginalization or even exclusion, as they are left without institutional support. Upon losing their student status, these individuals are required to cover their own health and social insurance costs, and some no longer receive financial or emotional support from their families. Bára describes her struggle to navigate life after her second unsuccessful attempt, facing significant challenges in sustaining herself:

> So, I actually lost my student status, moved back to [name of the city] and….I thought it would be easy to find a full-time job. But with only elementary school on my CV, it wasn't really possible. And I was actually only hired for one….Like, one company on a trial basis. But there's…[name of the company]. Crazy manic, so I just couldn't do it. Well, so I've been looking for, like, other jobs, like contract work. And I had to pay for my own health insurance. And on top of that, rent for the apartment, so it was just too much. And so, I was just chasing jobs, and mentally I was just so bad about it….And I was also

> taking a math course but through that job….Through those jobs that I just didn't have, like, Monday to Friday, from this hour to that hour regularly, I lost a couple of those lessons too.

Consequently, Bára was unsuccessful in her third attempt at the exam. Lacking a stable connection to her work—consisting only of random part-time jobs—and not engaging consistently in any stable form of formal or non-formal education, she found herself in a state of uncertainty. She drifted between working merely to cover her expenses and attending the course solely to pass the exam, without perceiving any deeper meaning or long-term direction in her actions.

In Dalimil's case, the narrative reflects a state of floating—a liminal, uncertain phase where the student struggles with a lack of direction and stability after dropping out:

> Well, university has fallen apart because of that, actually; I was already there to look at the registration. I was already there and I registered, they were just waiting for me to provide my high school diploma, of course I didn't provide that and then it just ruined it for me because all of a sudden I didn't know what to do next, I thought to myself why didn't I just give it a second go, everyone would perceive me as if I was the one who did it a third time, I just felt like a person who was basically stupid, I thought to myself that I didn't have it or didn't know how. And then they started charging me taxes, so I had to start working.

Initially, there was a sense of movement toward a goal (registering for university), but the inability to provide a high school diploma abruptly halted this trajectory. The student's sudden realisation of being without a clear next step, coupled with feelings of self-doubt and societal judgment, deepens the sense of disorientation. The hesitation in attempting the exam again stems from a fear of being labelled a failure, reinforcing an identity of inadequacy. The floating is further amplified by external pressures—no longer a student, the student is now faced with financial obligations (taxes) that force an immediate shift into the workforce. This transition appears unplanned and reactive rather than intentional, highlighting a lack of anchoring structures that could have supported persistence in education. The student's experience embodies educational liminality, where the absence of institutional and personal clarity leaves them adrift between past failure and uncertain future possibilities.

4.2. Anchoring as Represented in the Narratives

Although all examinees who fail their second attempt and exit the education system face similar challenges, some individuals manage to navigate this period of uncertainty by finding stability in their personal identities. By anchoring themselves in aspects of their identity—whether through family, professional aspirations, or personal values—they create a foundation that helps them regain a sense of direction and purpose. This anchoring serves as a crucial mechanism for overcoming the setbacks associated with educational failure, allowing them to reframe their experiences and pursue alternative paths forward. Three narrative identities were crucial for anchoring processes of unsuccessful graduates—their educational, work, and family identities.

4.2.1. Anchoring in Family Identity

Some students came to recognize over time that greater support from their families would contribute to their stability. This was the case for Bětka, who initially concealed her failure at the final examination from her boyfriend. However, she later realized the importance of support from him and from her mother. Through this process, she strengthened her connection to her family identity:

> Well, now it was completely different, it seemed to me. Well, so I studied on my own. It helped me a lot to study, like, with my mother. It helped me when I learned and someone kept testing me. So, I said out loud to someone, my mom always corrected me. That it was always like that….Better. And I didn't do that before. So now I did it differently and it was much better. So, somehow, I just learned it. Well, when that day was like the graduation day, I got up in the morning, I had a completely different feeling than the two attempts before. I wasn't really like….I wasn't just sick, I was just like more at ease. I have no idea what it was. Maybe because I was better at it? I really don't know. I don't know. But I already went with the idea that I would pass the *Matura* exam.

This was also the case for Eliška, whose parents provided her with a place to stay without requiring rent. Their support allowed her to focus on her studies without the added pressure of financial insecurity, reinforcing her sense of belonging within the family:

> The family was really great about this. I told them that I wasn't actually a student anymore and that I wasn't living alone yet; I was living with my parents. So, I said that I would contribute to the rent, and my parents were actually great in that. They just told me to finish my high school diploma, finish my driving licence, and then find a job and maybe give them more for that year. But they said that I should just finish my own things in peace, that that was more important to them than getting money from me right now. So, that was a lot of support from the family, and I'm really grateful to them for that.

In Elvis's case, the role of support and guidance traditionally provided by the school had to be assumed by his family, as the institution refused to offer assistance. Elvis asked if he could attend classes for one year while he was waiting for his next attempt:

> They didn't want to accommodate me. The reason I asked them was because I didn't pass the exam, so they just thought it would help me if I went to those classes and just sat there and listened to what the teacher was saying and actually discussed the topic that I was actually interested in in those subjects. They told me to go to hell, saying that they weren't a higher education where people go to lectures and stuff.

Faced with this lack of support, his family became the primary source of encouragement, structure, and resources, helping him navigate the challenges that arose from the school's absence in his educational journey to attain the *Matura* certificate. The most significant role in anchoring *to* his family identity was played by his father. During the Covid period, when Elvis's father couldn't work as a tennis coach, he became a study coach for his son instead, providing essential support:

> He studied with me as much as he could. Plus, he tried to explain things that I didn't understand as simply as possible so that I could understand. Overall, he just studied with me; he was a kind of

> substitute teacher. Actually, during his job, even when he was working or simply didn't have a job, unfortunately, because the government banned it, he just devoted himself to me as much as he could.

4.2.2. Anchoring in Work Identity

Throughout secondary school and in between *Matura* examination attempts, students acquire various work experiences (e.g., part-time jobs and internships) that influence how they think about their futures. However, in the narratives of unsuccessful examinees, it is possible to discern differences in how they perceive themselves within these experiences, i.e., in the formation of their work identity, as described by Damián:

> If I actually passed that *Matura* examination, I could actually progress and be a construction manager or something like that. Which is what I want to be like. That I would like to be there as a construction manager and not as a worker like that.

Damián successfully anchored his work identity, and that helped him to be more determined and pursue this goal. For secondary technical school examinees, gaining a *Matura* certificate meant the possibility of a qualified career.

4.2.3. Anchoring in Educational Identity

All the informants had completed their entire secondary education prior to the exam—some with difficulty, others without any indication of potential failure at the *Matura* examination. However, they shared a common trait: a lack of confidence in their ability to learn independently that hindered the development of their educational identity. Once they were no longer part of the formal educational environment, they often sought tutoring support and had to secure financial resources to afford it. Finding a tutor is often complicated and takes weeks or months that could be used for preparation. On the positive side, they were sometimes able to find a competent person, as illustrated by Aneta:

> So, through, like, an acquaintance we arranged for tutoring. And she came every week mostly, sometimes twice a week, just depending on how we agreed, but the time was usually once a week as standard. And she also recommended completely different textbooks for me to buy, which we just went by, she taught me vocabulary, and we really focused most on the grammar that's in those standardised tests. And by the fact that she knew it from the school she taught at, she just knew what to focus on.

Somewhat paradoxically, secondary school teachers often re-enter the scene as tutors to compensate for student deficiencies that their colleagues have failed to address. This happens primarily in the form of private tutoring, but it may have an institutional structure, such as in private language schools or even driving license courses.

Another viable route to obtaining a final certificate from upper secondary education is transitioning to the vocational education and training (VET) pathway. Despite not passing the *Matura*, Arnošt found a way to remain within the education system:

> So, [after the unsuccessful attempts] I immediately threw myself into the apprenticeship course that I applied for. I wanted to go straight into the third year to do an apprenticeship for a year, and I got there through the differentiation exams.

Arnošt was able to maintain his student status and education identity by continuing his studies, thus avoiding the need to end his education status and start paying for his insurance. Furthermore, due to his efforts, he was not automatically relegated to having only achieved the level of basic education, as happened to others. Even if they finished all four years of upper secondary education, without passing the *Matura* exam they have completed only the basic education level. However, transferring to an apprenticeship also meant that Arnošt was no longer eligible to enter higher education.

4.2.4. Anchoring in Identities Enabled by Non-Systemic Permeability

Anchoring allows students to reframe their failure, ultimately transforming it into success in a different domain and reshaping their self-perception beyond the label of "unsuccessful." A key example of this transformation is found in stories of non-systemic permeability—instances in which examinees discover alternative pathways through the structural barriers of the education system and labour market. The narratives include cases of conditional entry into higher education or access to qualified employment, demonstrating that, despite institutional rigidity, certain exceptions and opportunities emerge. In some instances, an external actor plays a pivotal role—functioning as a "deus ex machina"—by facilitating access to these non-traditional routes. Among our sample, Berenika was the only examinee who experienced conditional admission to university, illustrating this rare but impactful form of non-systemic permeability:

> Then I actually, during the fourth year, took the entrance exams at (name of the university), and I got into the production study programme. For me, it was very stressful at that moment, even just the fact that I was accepted to the school. And I didn't actually graduate. Now it's like, what to do next? What to do, where to proceed? And nobody actually tells you what to do or how to do it. Well, in the end, it turned out that I was accepted to two universities in the Czech Republic, where they always took five people altogether, and both of them were for production. And….I actually always called after that because I didn't have a *Matura*. They told me at [the first university] that I simply had to have a *Matura*, that the train just doesn't go through them, unfortunately. And at [the second university], they looked at my results and said that I was above average interesting for them, above average talented. They would take me on the condition that, of course, I have to pass the *Matura* exam, and I have less than a year to do so.

However, since this procedure was not officially sanctioned by law, her non-systemic educational trajectory was not met with understanding, particularly at the school she had previously attended. Some teachers criticized Berenika for enrolling at university without having formally completed the preceding level of education:

> And the condemnation of those teachers when you just said: "You know what, I can't come on this date because I'm just at school, I have lectures. I have that day."…I still had an exam that day, so I said I had an exam at university. That I couldn't come. And they asked me nastily: What did I imagine would happen? That I have an exam at some university, and that it's like….That I'm simply not supposed to

> study at university at all, that I simply can't afford it at all….That I didn't manage something so trivial and at the same time I'm studying at university!

Some of the qualifications the unsuccessful examinees were studying, e.g., health care, allowed them to enter the next level even without the *Matura* certificate. If they entered a profession without officially completing their upper secondary education, then those cases can be considered as cases of non-systemic permeability. This happened when Dulčinea became a paramedic directly after her failure at the *Matura* exam:

> Then I failed the exam again in September, so I ended up joining that department full-time. Since I no longer had student status, I had to take care of my health and social insurance myself. Fortunately, my brother had experience with that, so he helped me out….So I worked as a paramedic—I didn't need to take any course or anything like that, because I already knew the job from my practical training.

In Dulcinea's specific case, a certificate confirming the completion of her school years was sufficient, as it demonstrated that she had received training for work in a hospital setting. However, in order to qualify for a higher position—such as that of a nurse—she needed to obtain the *Matura* certificate. Consequently, her ongoing work experience served as a motivation to re-enroll in the fourth year of her secondary school and attempt the *Matura* exam again.

5. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The qualitative approach we have chosen does not permit us to generalise our findings, nor can we comment on causal relationships. Therefore, we cannot reliably comment on gender differences or measure the influence of socioeconomic status, which other research has identified as very fundamental (on gender, see Struffolino & Borgna, 2021; on socioeconomic status, see Munk, 2013). We can see these factors only through the life situations of the informants as described in their narratives. However, this view significantly contributes to our understanding of complex, lived experiences across various contexts. Additionally, by utilising a relatively large sample, we were able to identify specific cases that are often overlooked in statistical analyses and have yet to be addressed in existing research. This broad qualitative sample also enabled us to uncover instances of non-systemic permeability that have remained hidden in prior studies.

There are additional limitations to this study. Our research focused on the pathways of informants over a span of only two years, which means we cannot ascertain how their circumstances evolved afterwards or whether there were any significant changes in their identities. Furthermore, we are unable to trace the ongoing development of their life stories. Additionally, since the topic of permeability only emerged during data analysis, it was not explicitly addressed in our questioning; rather, we infer it from the broader narratives.

6. Discussion

This study examined the anchoring struggles of those who experienced failure in the upper secondary exit examination. Informants shared their perspectives on failure, reflecting on their experiences and on their subsequent plans. They discussed how they coped with failure and its consequences, their own prerequisites for mastering this life phase, and the external conditions influencing their experiences. The analysis of their biographical narratives revealed several key findings.

First, informants found themselves adrift after unexpectedly failing the exit examination. They are floating in a vacuum created by leaving the education system. Consequently, they struggled with new responsibilities, such as paying for their health and social insurance, searching for part-time jobs to cover these costs and their rent, as well as struggling with newly acquired adult roles. If they managed to overcome these struggles, they were able to integrate their identities through the process of anchoring. The analysis of their life stories indicated that anchoring can be beneficial for maintaining their work or academic ambitions.

Moreover, research shows that students who experience failure in examinations often carry their previous educational experiences into this new phase. These experiences frequently hinder the development of a strong educational and work identity. Within non-academic tracks, the culture of schools tends to provide a weak foundation for establishing a solid education identity. The narratives from some students revealed that they faced the challenges of academic futility, as evidenced by Straková et al. (2023) and other studies. In this study, the academic futility was evident in the teachers' disapproval of these students pursuing their university studies on condition, which was framed as non-systemic permeability.

When students need to reassess their study and career plans following a failure in the *Matura*, their educational and work identities can feel precarious, resembling structures "built on sand." This situation constrains their ability to make informed career decisions (Hloušková et al., 2022). However, positive changes in their trajectories often arise when non-systemic permeability measures are utilised. These measures allow individuals to participate in work experiences or gain valuable insights that contribute to their learning and growth. By engaging in both educational and professional contexts, they develop a sense of agency over their life trajectories, thereby reshaping their identities in a more constructive way. Consequently, their educational and career choices become a reflexive practice (Rönnlund et al., 2017). These conclusions align with earlier research by Matías-García et al. (2024), underscoring the importance of participation, engagement, and agency in the trajectories of young people at risk.

Although this research was conducted in the Czech context, its findings may be relevant to other educational systems as well. Structural barriers to educational transitions—particularly between secondary and tertiary levels—are present in many systems. These obstacles hinder both individual career development and the overall efficiency of the system, underscoring the need to address them. The sporadic emergence of non-systemic permeability further illustrates the importance of creating more flexible and inclusive structures.

If non-systemic permeability were integrated into the system, transition processes would become more transparent and inclusive. Young people navigating the shift to higher education or the labour market would benefit from structured, institutionalised pathways rather than relying on unpredictable, ad hoc interventions. One potential systemic measure could be the introduction of conditional acceptance to higher education for students retaking their final exams who have already been admitted to a university. Similarly, conditional entry into qualified employment—typically requiring a *Matura* certificate—could provide opportunities for individuals to gain work experience while completing their studies. Implementing such structured measures would create more equitable and accessible transitions, reducing reliance on external actors or chance-based opportunities.

This study highlights the importance of fostering positive identities as a means of gaining control over one's life. The study also sheds light on the complex interactions between study and work identities and the relations to family, peers, and colleagues in both educational and professional settings (Matías-García et al., 2024). Additionally, it points to the intricate interplay between individual dispositions and structural factors. When the condition of anchoring identities is met—ideally in conjunction with meaningful interactions with significant others—and structural factors and individual dispositions are balanced, the period following failure can be viewed as one of many transitional discontinuities (Heinz, 2002) throughout life.

7. Conclusions

Our findings are consistent with the conclusions of authors who have argued that support for students at risk of early school leaving remains markedly underdeveloped across national education systems. Based on these findings and in light of other research (e.g., Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Matías-García et al., 2024), it is possible to draw implications for educational policy aimed at improving the equity and permeability of vocational education. Our recommendations are grounded in findings regarding the potential for fostering positive educational and work identities. To mitigate the negative effects of failing the *Matura* exam, it is crucial to eliminate barriers to further participation in education. Consequently, all students should graduate, regardless of their success in the *Matura* exam, with a recognised certificate of competencies. This would enable them to either enter the labour market or pursue advanced adult VET. Additionally, formalising non-systemic permeability measures into a structured system for conditional admission to higher education would be beneficial.

Although various instruments aimed at enhancing permeability in the transition from vocational education to the labour market have been discussed, none have yet been implemented in the Czech Republic. One way to prevent problematic transitions is through the validation of acquired skills. An example of a systemic measure to support students at risk that is currently undergoing experimental verification is the option to obtain a professional certificate after completing the third year of a four-year study program (Kaňáková, 2024). Students could also benefit from the implementation of school portfolios that document the competencies acquired during their studies (E. J. Kruger et al., 2013).

The research results highlighted the significance of providing support between the attempts to pass the *Matura*. As the narratives have shown, floating is marked by uncertainty and a sense of disconnection from school. Monitoring students could be beneficial in establishing effective support activities (Haugan et al., 2019; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). A sense of belonging to the educational environment can be fostered by strengthening students' work identity through collaboration with companies and practical training opportunities (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Additionally, career counselling plays a crucial role in supporting students by enhancing career readiness (Dodd et al., 2022) and aiding in transitional decision-making (Psifidou et al., 2021).

The reintegration of young individuals into the formal education system and the improvement of their labour market prospects require educational and guidance structures specifically designed to meet the needs of this target group and equipped with the necessary competencies for effective intervention (Chisvert-Tarazona et al., 2024; Schuchart & Schimke, 2022). Addressing and alleviating the negative effects of academic failure constitutes a viable strategy for reducing long-term repercussions in the lives of young people.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data corpus (in Czech) analysed during the current study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

No generative AI tools were used in the writing or editing of this manuscript. However, an AI-based assistant was occasionally consulted to check the clarity and fluency of selected English formulations.

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