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**CZECH PRIMARY PUPILS' SPECIAL-INTEREST PREFERENCES**  
**IN THE CONTEXT OF LEARNING ASPIRATIONS**

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***Abstract***

The formation of the learning aspirations of primary school pupils is influenced by parents, the school environment, and also the pupils' goals and vision in what they want to achieve in learning and special interest activities. What are primary school pupils' interest preferences and what factors influence the pupils' learning aspirations? Our aim was to ascertain pupils' special interest preferences in the context of their approach to learning. Our purpose is to ascertain the links between the popularity of subjects and special interest activities that pupils choose from similar or related fields. A 5-point scale questionnaire with 27 items validated by factor analysis with a load of 6 factors with a total reliability of 0.8 was distributed amongst primary school pupils (N = 332). Cluster analysis showed that the pupils are divided into two groups: active pupils, who declared different interest preferences, mostly sports (61.3%), and passive (M = 19.5%), who were not interested in informal learning, preferring mobile, tablet and computer games (M = 34.1%) or who did not respond at all. Our analysis of the data thus obtained confirmed that pupils have personal motivation for learning and it is important for them to achieve the best results at school. Not only pupils' own attitude, but also the support through special interest activities contributes to pupils' activation and efforts to achieve good results in school and in leisure activities.

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**Keywords:** Learning aspiration, special interest activities, pupil attitude.



## 1. Introduction

It is not only the family as the primary socialisation factor, but also the school, which influences children's future career in quite a fundamental manner, as they help to shape their educational aspirations. Teachers too are equipped and endowed with the legal authority enabling their assessments to become an important part of the construction of school career (Vojtišková, 2011). Those who are important in the education process are children, teachers, school staff and fellow pupils. Within the school environment, it is mostly teachers who motivate pupils to learn through interaction and appropriate communication. They then create feedback to parents who in line with school rules support or otherwise replace the role of learning motivators for their children (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Experience in achieving objectives in aspirations, or experience linked to a difference between anticipated and achieved results, is involved in assessing aspirations and setting up a particular aspiration level.

Aspiration creation processes are determined by the degree of incentives and related influences of the surroundings in which the child lives and learns. Aspirations are linked to many aspects of life and are focused mainly on the future (Hart, 2016). Pupils' aspiration level is also influenced by the school environment in which they spend the majority of the active part of their day and where they are also confronted with the influence of their peers and friends who in terms of special interest activities can differ significantly, but can also offer inspiration. One should not disregard socioeconomic background and the cultural capital of their particular social group either, and so also the individual differences between pupils and the characteristics of their family environments.

## 2. Problem Statement

There are differences between children's natural talents and interests, between the interests declared in surveys and pupil reality in related fields of study and between what children really want and what they will actually do in future. Many factors influence their choice of leisure activities and fields of interest. Some of the key factors include the media, wider surroundings, family and parents, often friends, but also fashion trends and sociological changes within society (Badošek & Kimplová, 2016).

Informal education runs in parallel with formal education as a voluntary and optional counterpart activity. It is provided through the activities of various social and non-profit organisations, and sometimes also other entities. The objective of informal education is to support special interest activities promoting various activities of the individual. Motivation and interest here lead to surprising results and courses of activities (Mareš, 2013). It is important that the educational function is generally focused on skills and competencies. Active forms of spending leisure times are considered more beneficial, leading to greater establishment of new contacts and skills transfer. Also important is co-operation and efforts to achieve a shared goal leading to a sense of belonging within a social community (Částková, Kropáč, & Plishke, 2016).

Within school and psychology practice, interests are generally defined in relation to surrounding physical and social objects and processes, and also to the activities which pupils usually undertake. In this way, pupils can express their interest in various fields of interest (sports, art appreciation, history, art activities and many others). Fields of interest have a very close relationship to features of pupils' personality in particular, as well as value focus and social attitudes. Thus to create an aspiration level, the spectrum of

interests and activities which pupils focus on in their leisure time is a factor. Pupils' interests have a demonstrable prognostic value for the course of their career development (Mezera, 2005).

At the current time, we have records of a large number of institutions offering informal education and the opportunity for children to use their leisure time in an active, values-focused and organised manner. There are, however, groups of children who cannot adequately use their leisure time, who are inclined towards activities which endanger their health or to truancy. Thus, special interest activities should be a counter-pole to high quality work efforts in school, such that it can play a part in shaping children's values system and promote the development of individual personalities. One of the purposes of these activities is to shape and influence social relationships and interactions (Čech, 2002). We see possible barriers in individual conditions and possible restrictions in the opportunity of financial support from the family, in insufficient space for the child themselves to make a choice, or in parents' unreasonable demands on their children. Parents of all education groups are supporters of their children's interests, however increasing financial demands on purchasing school aids and equipment would appear to be problematic (Šojdrová, Swart, & Gabal, 2013). The same could apply to parents' ability to provide financial support towards high quality special interest activities, or towards a wide range of such activities.

### **3. Research Questions**

The key attributes of the research plan involved linking primary school pupils' learning aspirations and special interest activities. We wanted to know what special interest activities primary school pupils most often choose and also how their choice of special interest activities affects pupils' learning aspirations. The range of factors which affect pupils' choice of special interest activities became a sub-research question.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the submitted study is to ascertain what the current special interest preferences of pupils in Year 3 to Year 5 at elementary school are in relation to school success and shaping learning aspirations. Study skills, work habits and a certain level of social behaviour are supported through special interest activities too; although this is not declared as a priority and the children themselves do not perceive it as important, these aspects do support children's formal education. Metacognitive strategy, time organisation and an ability to deal with problems are shown to be key competencies which are also acquired in special interest activities, such as in team sports, learning to play a musical instrument and other artistic activities. In the Farrington et al. (2012) conceptual framework, noncognitive skills operate within a three-level environment, determined by student background, school and classroom context, and socio-cultural context, which may, in turn, shape their specific impact on achievement.

### **5. Research Methods**

In our quantitative research survey, we contacted pupils in Year 3 to Year 5 (N = 332) at elementary schools in accessible schools in the Czech Republic. A validated questionnaire with 27 items was chosen as the research tool, which focused on ascertaining the approaches of the pupils to education, in particular

in the context of their own education concept, objectives and aspirations for education. We also focused on the perception of the mother and father as people affecting approaches to their child's education. The questionnaire further focused on the relationship between favourite school subjects and special interest activities chosen.

Thus our central focus was on pupils aged 7 – 12 years, of which 167 (50.6%) were girls and 163 (49.4%) were boys, with two respondents (0.6%) not giving their gender. The pupils' family background mainly comprised living in a family with a mother and father (80.4%). As can be seen in Table 01 from the total number of pupils, 9% (N=30) live in joint custody of both parents. Other pupils live only with their mother, or only with their father, or did not give information on their family background.

**Table 01.** Pupil's gender distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Unknown	2	0,6	0,6	0,6
Girl	167	50.3	50.3	50.9
Boy	163	49.1	49.1	100.0
Total	332	100.0	100.0	100.0

Pupils responded using a five-point scale to individual statements, ranging from 1 – yes, this is entirely true to 5 – no, this is not true at all. Below is an example of the topical items chosen from the questionnaire: 24. *I chose my after-school clubs myself.*, 26. *I have an after-school club or another activity (e.g. training, musical instrument) every day.*

## 6. Findings

We selected a descriptive approach for analysing data focused on a percentage description of data obtained, as this approach seemed to us to provide the most clarity. We also used hierarchical clustering dendrogram (Ward's method) to capture two key groups divided according to respondents' declared preferences. These were naturally divided according to their choice of special interest activities into active and passive groups.

The average age of pupils ( $M = 9.31$ ) and average number of special interest activities ( $M = 2.23$ ) indicate that pupils spend at least two days a week on special interest activities across all primary school years (Table 02). There are also pupils who do not go to any true special interest club or group, with their leisure time not organised by the family in terms of informal education. Thus they make up their own entertainment during their leisure time.

**Table 02.** Pupil age and total number of special interest activities

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	323	7	12	9.31	1.062
Special Interest Activities	327	0	8	2.23	1.550
Total	332				

### 6.1. Special-interest activities and the question of preferences

From the pupils' statements, the most common activities undertaken by pupils include sport, dance, playing a musical instrument, artistic activities (arts and crafts, creative work). During their leisure time, children most frequently spend time playing on their mobile phones and tablets, and they are interested in information technology and computer games. Girls prefer looking after pets, or playing with younger siblings. Also seen, however, was passivity not more precisely specified, which one can assume involves spending one's leisure time without a focus or purpose.

According to the results of item – 27. My mum or dad chose my after-school clubs for me – special interest activities would seem to be up to the children themselves to choose. Girls and boys enjoy the clubs chosen ( $M = 1.54$ ;  $M = 1.75$ ). Parents are not particularly involved in choosing the clubs, as Table 3 makes clear:

**Table 03.** Differences between girls and boys in the selection of pupil special interest activities

Differences between girls and boys in the selection of pupil special interest activities	Valid	Missing	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation
24. I chose my after-school clubs myself.	325	7	1,76	1,00	1	1,339
25. I enjoy all my after-school clubs a lot.	324	8	1,64	1,00	1	1,165
26. I have an after-school club or another activity (e.g. training, musical instrument) every day.	326	6	3,35	3,50	5	1,546
27. My mum or dad chose my after-school clubs for me.	325	7	4,08	5,00	5	1,364

Differences between girls and boys in learning achievement are also a reason why parents have higher educational aspiration linked to girls. For boys (Smetáčková, 2010), interests and hobbies are an integral part of every day, and these are not conditional upon undertaking household or family duties. They are often linked to other purposes, most commonly developing the child's personality and his personal preferences. Rampino & Taylor (2010) have ascertained that girls have higher learning aspirations than boys do, determined by the family environment, in particular whether the child lives in a single- or two-parent family, while socioeconomic status also plays a part in the forming of learning aspirations (Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2007).

Looking at relationships between favourite subjects and special interest activities in Table 04 - Frequency of favourite subjects and own assessment in educational subjects, one can observe a match expressed in the popularity of less difficult educational subjects (art, sports activities, work activities) and pupils' leisure time preferences.

**Table 04.** Frequency of favourite subjects and own assessment in educational subjects

Frequency of favourite subjects and own assessment in educational subjects	Frequency	Percent
Czech language	63	19.0
Mathematics	165	49.7
Physical education	181	54.5
English	75	22.6
Music	57	17.2

Art	138	41.6
Work activities	99	29.8
Civics and science foundations	18	5.4
Czech studies	33	9.9
Science	44	13.3
Information technology	45	13.6
Sports education	14	4.2

Pupils in the given items also chose potential areas of future career, which included in particular:

*sports focus, teaching and psychology*

*art, craftwork, design*

*services, medicine*

*animals and countryside*

*ICT, science*

*transport, military*

*management*

*other.*

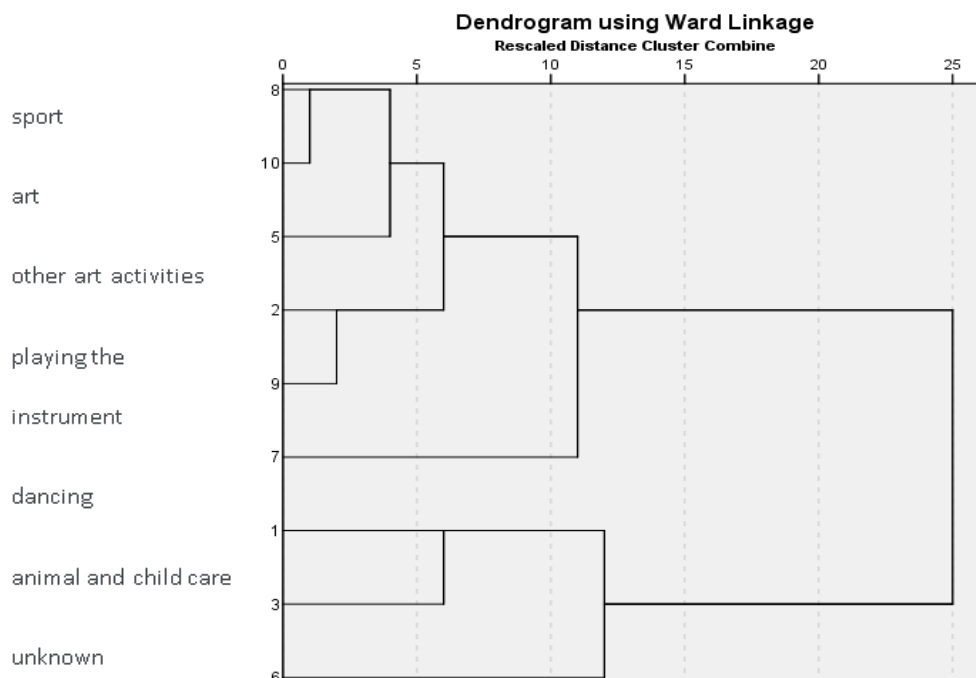
Results in Table 05 show that in the item – What are you good at outside school? – there was a strong level of interest in information technology (34, 1%), in sport (61.3%) and in dance (10.7 %) and art (12.3%). It is surprising that we also see a 19% level of passivity amongst pupils. These results confirm that not all pupils are actively involved in organised special interest activities, and those that don't prefer activities initiated by themselves, or else imply afternoons “without purpose, free” during the school week. A significant proportion of respondents did not give any preferred area of interest, and we can assume that lower level elementary school pupils at this age are not yet able to give their own assessment, or at the particular time they were answering they were unable to focus on a response to the question posed.

**Table 05.** Activity and passivity in children's leisure time

Activity and passivity in children's leisure time	Ward Method			
	1 "passive"		2 "active"	
	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %
Playing an instrument	0	0.0%	21	8.0%
Information technology	14	34.1%	0	0.0%
Not given	19	46.3%	0	0.0%
Other art	0	0.0%	10	3.8%
Passivity	8	19.5%	0	0.0%
Looking after children animals	0	0.0%	10	3.8%
Sport	0	0.0%	160	61.3%
Dance	0	0.0%	28	10.7%
Art	0	0.0%	32	12.3%

Also, the cluster analysis (Figure 01) shows the representation of the most frequent areas of pupils' interests, in which the art and dance area resonates. Pupils' worded statements in these areas most commonly referred to playing a musical instrument, dance clubs and aerobics clubs. On the other hand, we

also see passivity linked to playing a computer, tablet or mobile. A frequent activity in children's leisure time is looking after a pet, or looking after a younger sibling with the children also playing together with the siblings.



**Figure 01.** Cluster analysis of pupils' special interest activities

## 7. Conclusion

We consider aspiration to be an important aspect influencing children's key choices (interests, school, and occupation), with it taking on real form as children get older. To begin with, these are usually highly unrealistic, becoming real later. Aspirations in general are an important hallmark of meanings and values for individuals and social groups (Hart, 2016). One's life, study and working environment affect one's setting of individual objectives, giving one opportunities to meet these objectives. Children of young school age can already express their own position on the circumstances which affect their everyday life. It is not just the actions of parents and the school environment which contribute to the shaping of pupils' learning aspirations, but also the pupils' thoughts on the targets they wish to achieve in learning as affected by informal education. In terms of interests, in their leisure time pupils spend most time on sports and artistic activities, i.e. those activities which reflect the popularity of subjects in school, with pupils choosing similar or related fields which support education and aspire to achieving better results not just in school, but also in their special interest activities. Our cluster analysis has shown that pupils can be divided into two groups, i.e. an active group who declare various preferences in interests, mostly sport ( $M = 61.3\%$ ), and a second group comprising passive pupils ( $M = 19.5\%$ ) who express no interest in informal learning, preferring to play games on mobiles, tablets and computers ( $M = 34.1\%$ ). An analysis of the data obtained has confirmed that pupils have personal motivation to learn and it is important for them to achieve the best possible results in school, with more positive values seen amongst active pupils. It is not just the pupil's

own approach, but also support from both parents, which contribute to the activation of the pupil and his/her effort to achieve good results in school and in special interest activities.

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