

Inclusive Schools

Engaging parents of vulnerable youth: The case of Roma in Hungary's education system

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Questions and answers about inclusive schools

Why do minority students underperform academically?

Children from low socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds have been shown to consistently underperform academically, as demonstrated in international comparisons (OCED 2015). According to OCED, inequality in schools is often driven by the ‘intergenerational transmission of advantage’. In other words, better performing students are more likely to have advantaged parents, in terms of both education and employment. As a result, they are better equipped to support their children’s schooling. (It is also worth pointing out that children of advantaged parents are considerably more likely to go on to tertiary education, while those of less advantaged parents are overrepresented in upper secondary vocational programs.) Moreover, children coming from minority backgrounds often face both language and cultural barriers, which have a significant impact on their schooling. For students attending schools in rural or remote areas, the issue is compounded by limited human and financial resources, and longer commuting times to and from school. And of course, in the case of Roma school children, all of these issues are compounded by racial discrimination, resulting in the separation of Roma children from non-Roma children in segregated education settings (Fox 2021; Farkas 2014). As a result, inequalities of income and ethnicity, besides gender, geography, and disability, are often compounded within schools, thereby undermining social mobility.

Educational institutions, therefore, have an important role to play in addressing the inequalities faced by ethnic minority students. By equipping students with a good education, schools increase the likelihood of employment and thus reduce the likelihood of poverty. In doing so, schools promote social mobility. Schools are also an ideal environment to promote the mixing of students from diverse background, thereby encouraging social cohesiveness and thus reducing barriers to equality.

Why do Roma underperform academically?

As noted in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014, Roma children are among the most deprived and discriminated ethnic minorities in Europe. In Hungary, for example 55 percent of Roma students dropped out of school before the age of 16, compared with 32 percent for their non-Roma counterparts (Jarvis 2016). In Croatia, while 90% of Roma children enroll in first grade, only 30% enroll in secondary school (Bedeković 2022, p. 84). And a survey of eleven EU member states similarly showed that only 15 % of Roma adults aged 20–24 completed upper-secondary general or vocational education (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014). The situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with dropout rates increasing by close to 11% at a regional level (Regional Cooperation Council 2021).

What is a student-centered pedagogical approach?

In response to growing diversity within classrooms, alongside the importance of mitigating lower levels of educational attainment among minority students, schools have had to adopt new and creative ways to approach education. This has led to the emergence and growing popularity of

more student-centered approaches, including culturally relevant pedagogy and collaborative learning approaches, which stress problem-solving.

Culturally relevant pedagogy builds on incorporating the culture of the concerned students into teaching programs, techniques, and communication styles. Highlighting the importance of a student's sense of belonging at school, culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on nurturing students' cultural and ethnic identities to promote self-confidence and well-being (Banks 1993; Ladson-Billings 1995). Underpinned by students' cultural identities, the model stresses the importance of celebrating cultural diversity in the classroom and has been demonstrated to improve academic achievements (Ladson-Billings 1995).

Collaborative learning approaches can be defined as "a pedagogical style which emphasizes cooperative efforts among students, faculty, and administrators" (Whipple 1987). Students work in small groups, encouraging interaction and peer discourse. Underpinned by a constructivist belief (i.e. knowledge is socially situated), the teacher, rather than dictating, works to create a sense of community and environment in which differences serve a productive role. This serves to reframe the teacher as a facilitator, in which learning occurs within a dialogue (Cabrera et. al. 2002). Research has demonstrated that a collaborative approach to learning benefits all students, regardless of race or ethnicity (Tinto 1997).

What pedagogical model is the student-centered model replacing?

These collaborative models work in contrast to more traditional, didactic models of education, referred to as a banking model of education in which the teacher is an authority figure and primary source of knowledge (Freire, 1970). The name 'banker' model is based on the idea of a teacher as bank clerk depositing information in their students; the onus of this learning method is on students to sit and listen, learning in a traditional lecture style based on memorization. Sometimes also referred to as a 'frontal model', such learning formats can often lead to unequal conditions for students, who do not learn in the same manner or at the same pace.

What should be the role of parents?

Parental involvement in children's education is a key determiner of educational success for all children (Jeynes 2007). Studies have suggested that to close the gap in achievement between minority and majority students, it is vital to address the relations between families (communities) and schools. These constitute "overlapping spheres of influence," and all three are vital to the learning and development of students (Epstein 2018). Research convincingly shows that students perform better at school when they feel supported both at home and at school, being less disruptive, achieving higher grades and are more likely to pursue further education (Henderson and Mapp 2002). Further research suggests that schools and families play important but diverging roles in students' education, with families encouraging academic aspiration and teachers providing vital support for students' academic achievement (Syed, Azmitia, and Cooper 2011).

What are the forms of engagement between parents and teachers?

Studies demonstrate that when parents actively participate in their children's education on both the school and home front, supported by teachers with whom they enjoy respectful and close relations, children demonstrate increased levels of educational aspirations, positive social behaviors, and academic achievement across all grade levels, (Fan 2001; Hill et. al. 2004; Hughes and Kwok

2007; Voorhis et al. 2013; Gutman and McLoyd 2000; Jeynes 2007). Evidence suggests that higher levels of parental engagement in elementary school years is associated with increased chances of completing high school (Barnard, 2004). In addition, higher levels of family involvement in schools positively effects children's well-being, attitudes toward education and feelings of self-efficacy (Dearing et al. 2004). Research also demonstrates that parental engagement in children's learning is especially critical for underachieving children (e.g., Henderson and Mapp 2002).

How engaged are minority and low-income parents in schools?

While research shows that children from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds would benefit from improved relations between parents and teachers, parents of ethnic minority and low-income children are less likely to experience the same degree of positive parent–teacher relationships as their counterparts (Hughes and Kwok 2007). This is not for a lack of interest in their children's education. Research demonstrates that both minority and low-income families share high levels of aspirations for their children's academic success (Boethel 2003). This is perhaps despite common stereotypical assumptions that the achievement gap among minority students is due to low aspirations or expectations among parents (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001). Studies also show minority parents are engaged in their children's education but in different ways to dominant majorities, with a tendency to engage more in their children's education outside of the school environment and more so in the home and wider community (Boethel 2003; Henderson and Mapp 2002; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999).

How engaged are Roma parents?

Educational inequities among Roma communities raise, of course, complex pedagogical, psychological, and social issues which schools cannot, in and of themselves, solve. Studies suggest that Roma parents, as in the case of other ethnic minorities, believe in the importance of education and want their children to succeed (Zachos 2019; Boneta et al. 2022; Dunajeva 2021). Indeed, Roma parents want their children to succeed at school and understand education is critical to encouraging integration and achieving a higher social status (Bedekević 2022). This runs counter to the opinion that Roma believe education to be antithetical to their culture.

Research does exist to support this position, suggesting some Roma believe that education is a threat to their culture (Levinson and Sparkes 2006; Zachos 2019). This is perhaps not surprising when one considers education as a “civilizing” tool used to suppress Romani culture (Matras et al. 2016). Reflecting a similar hesitancy toward formal education institutions, many Roma parents' own negative education of school leads to fears their children will experience similar discriminatory treatment at the hands of both parents and students (Lloyd and McCluskey 2008). As one author notes, the most important barrier to greater parental involvement in their children's education is that “almost all Roma groups have lived in isolation and on the margins of society for so long” that they have developed a “defense mechanisms against enforced state educational policy and the way it was implemented in schools” (Zachos 2019 p.20).

Of course, it is also critical to note that Roma are not a single homogenous group and differing opinions between diverging groups of Roma do exist. Some Roma parents feel that a vocational education is preferable to desk-based learning (Zachos 2019). Moreover, parents may want to see their children succeed in school but may simultaneously still harbor fears over how Roma students will be treated.

What are the barriers of engagement?

Parents of ethnic minority and low-income children face multiple barriers of engaging with schools, ranging from language differences, parents' lack of familiarity with the local educational system, parents' perceptions of discrimination by the school, life demands, especially employment and childcare, health and housing problems and lack of transportation (Levine and Trickett 2000; Henderson and Mapp 2002). In terms of categorizing these barriers, Eccles and Harold (1993) provide a useful model with 8 drivers of drivers of parental involvement:

1. The first is the social and psychological resources available to the parent – from mental health through to time.
2. The second is the parents' efficacy beliefs – or in other words, their confidence in their ability to help their children with their schoolwork.
3. Parents' perceptions of their children – this pertains to how parents view their child's abilities, receptivity, as well as aspirations for their children in the future, and opportunities they feel their child can access.
4. Parents' beliefs about their role in their children's education and school, and how important they believe their participation to be. For example, some parents might believe their participation in school benefits their children's education.
5. Parent's attitude towards school. For example, what their beliefs are regarding the school's expectations, and how active they want parents to be; how sympathetic they believe the school is; feeling the school blames them for the problems with their children, and so on. Such attitudes can be shaped by parents' own previous experiences, whether positive or negative, during their childhood.
6. Parents' ethnic identity. Here, perceptions about how minority ethnic identities are perceived will shape relations and impact parental involvement. Feelings of hostility can lead to feelings that children will be treated unfairly.
7. Parents' socialization practices – this related to how well parents can discipline their children and manage their children's expectations.
8. Parents' experiences of teachers at their child's elementary schools, where their formal experiences in engaging with schools will be shaped.

What are some models of parent-teacher relations?

Research demonstrated that perceptions of what constitutes good parent-teacher relations can widely vary among parents and teachers. This understanding may be different between teachers and parents: one US-based study found that while teachers understand parental involvement as designed to support the academic achievement of students, parents understood their involvement in terms of at-home activities and in broader terms as supporting the wellbeing of the child, including developing values of respect, cooperation, and good behavior (Smith et al. 2008). This difference can often lead to conflict and apathy, making each side more hesitant in engaging with one another.

We must then think of a multidimensional perspective of parent-teacher engagement, which can be defined in terms of various activities and levels of engagement, with some more effective than others (Fan 2001). Dr. Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University, one of the most prominent authors on the topic of teacher-parent relations, is arguably the most often quoted model for

categorizing parent-teacher engagement activities developed six different categories of parental involvement:

1. Partnership to ensure supportive learning environment at home, e.g. family support programs
2. Parenting or engaging in learning in the home, e.g., helping with homework
3. Parent-teacher communication
4. Involvement in activities at school, e.g., volunteering
5. Involvement in school decision-making
6. Involvement in community projects

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Strategies for collaborative school environment

“No matter their race, ethnicity, culture, or income, most families have high aspirations and concerns for their children’s success”
— (Boethel 2003, v)

There are several factors and conditions that may be conducive to creating a favorable environment for parent-teacher engagement. In this section, barriers in part identified by Martha Boethel are discussed that hamper minority and low-income family involvement in their children’s schooling. For each, strategies and examples are proposed that may help to overcome some of these barriers.

Parental engagement can be categorized in three groups:

- (1) conventional school-initiated activities in which the school dominates the relationship and parents conform to school policies;
- (2) activities reflecting shared power, in which parents are offered instrumental roles; and
- (3) activities in which parents autonomously set their own agendas and invite school staff to work with them (Delgado-Gaitan 1991 quoted in Boethel 2003).



Contextual factors and economic stressors

Limited family resource and logistical constraints, manifested in, for example, shortage of time and money, can negatively impact family contact with schools. Issues such as difficulties accessing schools due to their distance and lack of convenient or affordable transportation options are common issues, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries. Related to the question of finance, many Roma students also drop out early to seek paid employment to support their family financially. Poverty also prevents parents from acquiring the materials needed for their children's education and can inhibit children's learning in the home due to poor surroundings such as limited space, lighting, and heating (Pahic, Vidovic and Ridicki, 2011).

Strategy:

It is important to stress that it is not the socio-economic status per se that acts as a barrier. In fact, studies showed that the level of engagement among parents does not strictly vary simply based on income level (Armor et al.). For example, A US-based study found that some schools with lower levels of engagement could be found in stable neighbourhoods, with the converse true of residential areas which demonstrated signs of overcrowded living conditions. What was key to levels of engagement is the **leadership demonstrated by the school**.

Another study based on parental engagement in the Philippines came to a similar conclusion, noting that socioeconomic and educational background had little impact on parental involvement (Caño et. al). Based on an assessment of two student groups – one high performing, one low performing, each of which was represented by parents of varying income and education levels – parents differed on the following points: parents of high performing students were more likely to have a homework strategy in place, attend meetings and community activities, had reward systems in place for their children, and felt more empowered in terms of decision-making.

To remedy low-parental involvement, the authors of the study suggest “providing parents with information on the types of parental involvement; giving parents a voice on the views on parent involvement; and encouraging partnerships with schools through the implementation of extension program,” with the support of an aid to support in parenting education (Caño et. al. p.148-149). Some schools developed parent intervention programs designed to increase engagement through the provision of services such as flexible scheduling and childcare on school premises during meetings and events, accessible locations, and transportation for the same, and learning kits on reading, science, and math, accompanied by training on how to use them. (Boethel 2003; Henderson and Mapp 2002).

Example:

One Hungarian school with predominantly Roma students began holding parental meetings in an institution (an after-school program, a *Tanoda*) located in the village where the Roma community lived. Teachers noticed that attendance and involvement of parents increased greatly. Rather than parents attempting to travel to the town where the school was located, with little or no transportation options, the school organized a handful of teachers to travel to the village and hold a meeting with all parents. This change in practice led not only to greater parental involvement, but also growing trust between the school and parents.

Language and communication barriers

A study of Mexican American families noted that parent literacy levels impacted their school engagement. Language barriers left them feeling uncomfortable in communicating with teachers, intimidated (for example, by the use of educational jargon), and powerless (Peña 2000, p.44). Language barriers often lead to parents feeling like their attendance was unnecessary, and that they lack sufficient knowledge of the language of instruction and the whole education system (Peña 2000; Boethel 2003; Henderson et al. 2002). For example, a study among low-income Mexican American immigrant families in the United States found that despite parents being deeply involved in their children's learning, Mexican American parents felt that "their lower rate of participation at school was a result of their perceived lack of parental resources (including time), the fear that they have little to offer, and their limited English proficiency" (Birch and Ferrin 2002, p.74). Another study noted that proficiency in the language of school instruction increases several types of parental involvement (Kim 2002).

Strategy:

Linguistic diversity does not need to be seen as a barrier. In fact, culturally relevant pedagogy is a teaching approach that includes practices, such as encouraging the involvement of families and communities from diverse backgrounds; preparing teachers to handle linguistic and cultural diversity; and increasing proficiency in both first and second languages. As Ladson-Billings (1995) notes, "Culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning." This is vital for minority students, who may differ in the ways they learn and communicate; if school teaching styles do not match their style, they are likely to perform and behave poorly in school (Morgan 2010). One example of culturally relevant pedagogy is translingual pedagogy, which "describes a class of practices with the socially defined goal of leveraging students' full linguistic repertoires toward specific pedagogical aims" (David, Pacheco & Jiménez 2019). Considering that in most countries, including Hungary, schools have mostly monolingual policies, multilingual learning approaches tend to be rarely incorporated not only in the curricula, but also teaching practices and attitudes.

Example:

In Hungary, a [pilot project](#) in the Tiszavasvári school implemented the translingual pedagogy approach, which was described as follows:

"For more than a decade, the school in Tiszavasvári has been attended almost exclusively by Romani-speaking emergent bilingual children...In 2009, the school in Tiszavasvári was taken over from the municipality by a foundation, and in 2019 by the Hungarian Pentecostal Church... The introduction of translanguaging as a pedagogical stance in the schools... was a counter-point to the strong monolingual ideologies...[As translanguaging was implemented] teachers discuss[ed] the benefits of allowing the students to speak their home language variety in everyday school activities...[Practices included active inclusion of Romani, for example reciting Romani poems by Roma authors.]...The class which had started the school year with a translanguaging approach, performed significantly better...The teachers' new beliefs and attitudes had an impact on extra-curricular activities, which meant that the institutional environment also began to change." (Heltai et. al. 2022)

Cultural beliefs regarding appropriate roles for parents, teachers, and students

What constitutes parental engagement in the opinions of teachers and parents can often diverge, leading to unrealistic expectations and tensions between home and school. For instance, in the case of ethnic minority parents, their responsibilities for childcare may be culturally shaped as demonstrated in a study of Mexican parents, who saw their role as ensuring their child's attendance, instilling respect for the teacher and good behavior in school, and providing for their children (sometimes in the face of considerable poverty), while education was seen as the responsibility of the teachers and the school (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001, p.160). Moreover, teachers' beliefs and preconceptions of disadvantaged families can impact relations with both students and parents. These include perceptions that ethnic and racial minority children exhibit less control and have behavioral difficulties leading to diminished engagement; differences in the parenting practices, communication styles and educational beliefs between minority-parents and teachers; and teacher's ethnic or racial stereotypes about children. These may influence teachers' feelings toward students and their parents, and lead to behavioral difficulties manifesting as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Jan and Kwok 2007). According to Lynch (2010), teachers can hold stereotypes about poor families and those with less formal education. This is supported by another study, which found that teachers did not believe the parents of low-income children were interested in their children's education (O'Connor 2001, quoted in Boethel 2003).

Strategy:

Intervention strategies using cultural brokers can work to counter the limiting definitions of parental responsibilities that parents might hold, and empower them to play a greater role in their children's education (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001). Cultural brokers may be seen as 'bridging figures' among Roma or other vulnerable communities, implying the perception of parents as an extension of the school team. Bridging figures, in turn, act as a go-to point for parents, teachers and neighborhood organizations and a representative of the school in the pupil's home environment. In other words, "The bridging figure's task is to pick-up the signals given by teachers or parents about a pupil's school attainment or general well-being, and to frame those signals within the specific pupil's home context, striving for a shared solution to overcome the difficulties faced" (Wauters et al. 2015, p. 9). Since most of their work takes place outside of the school, bridging figures may be regularly found at the school gate at the start and end of the day, so they can have an informal talk with the parents, and are seen to be visible and approachable. They may participate in conducting home visits, and their role is to build long-lasting relationships between schools, families, and local communities.

Example:

In many schools, trusted persons emerge through years of interaction with parents, the community and teachers. These persons, or cultural brokers in a sense, tend to be members of the minority community who maintain ties with parents and are able to communicate needs on both sides (the school and parents). Cultural brokers may be appointed, such as [Roma school mediators](#) or [assistants](#) who are employed in schools of many European countries, but in some schools they emerge organically through their position as a trusted person. For instance, in one school the secretary, who was a Roma woman, enjoyed the trust of the Roma parents. In turn, school staff and teachers could capitalize on her bridging role and engaged with parents through the secretary. Considering that some vulnerable minorities, including Roma, may also belong to low socioeconomic groups, it is important to differentiate cultural elements from particularities of poverty.

Families' lack of understanding of school processes or value of education

One commonly cited factor in explaining the gap in the engagement levels of minority and non-minority parents with schools is the lack of knowledge among parents on how local educational processes work. For example, studies among immigrant families demonstrate that their diverging educational experiences along with language barriers mean that they are left with a lack of understanding of educational policies, practices, and expectations. Some studies of minority parents found that the lack of formal education among parents left them feeling unaware of what or how to ask questions of their children's parents (see Delgado-Gaitin (1991) analysing Mexican parents in California, USA). A study of Croatian Roma parents meanwhile noted that Roma parents felt a high-sense of duty to engage in their children's learning but did not feel competent enough to engage in school-decision making or class representative roles suggesting a lack of self-confidence, which the authors suggest stems from "an acute awareness that they lacked the necessary ability or knowledge to take on leadership roles" (Pahić et. al. 2011, p.288). Other studies suggest barriers to higher parental engagement among Roma in their children's school can be due to fears of losing their culture (Zachos 2019), which can arise from a lack of awareness of what goes on in their children's school.

Strategy:

Institutional support networks (NGOs, non-formal educational institutions and alike) outside of formal education may act as bridge between the school and parents, especially in cases when parents belong to a vulnerable group. The role of non-formal educational institutions has been extensively discussed in relation to improving academic success among vulnerable students, but there is still a lack of understanding how such institutions foster parental involvement and better understanding of school processes. Some examples point out the positive impact for NGOs on parental involvement: for example in Turkey, non-governmental organizations, such as the Mother-Child Education Foundation emerged to facilitate parental involvement in schools. The philosophy of this NGO is that "parents are the primary educators of children—it is not possible to achieve better educational outcomes for children without working with their parents and establishing learning environments in the homes" (Tekin 2011, p.3). Interestingly, while they initially targeted mothers, with time fathers were also involved.

Example:

Designed to prevent school absenteeism and reduce school failure and early school dropout of the most vulnerable students, the Dear Houseprogramme (Nyírteleki Kedvesház Esélyteremtő Program) in Nyírtelek was designed based on the premise that relations between the school and families of their students were vital to academic success and better understanding of school processes. As part of the program, one- or two-hour sessions are hosted for parents in which they have a chance to see what goes on at the school during a day and see and experience what their children are taught and how they behave first-hand. By opening up to parents, the school enjoyed higher rates of parental engagement, with more interest taken by the parents in their children's overall academic progress. Moreover, it helped to build trust with the parents, and led to decreases in absenteeism and improvements in children's attitude to learning (Torgyik 2004).

Families' lack of understanding about how to help their children with homework

A lack of knowledge concerning their children's curriculum is a common reason parents are not more engaged with their student's homework (Peña, 2000). Other common reasons include not understanding the language, a lack of time, and a lack of clarity as to how they could help. As noted by multiple studies, a lack of engagement is not synonymous with lack of desire. A study of Croatian Roma parents found that parents felt it was their duty to help their children in their homework, more so than among the mainstream population (Pahič et. al. 2011). The same study noted, however, that while parents stated that there was at least one parent in the house capable of supporting their children with their learning, statistics from the Croatian Central Bureau for Statistics suggest that 40 per cent of Roma have never finished primary school, and as such potentially do not have the schools to support their children's learning (Pahič et. al. 2011 p.287).

Strategy:

After learning about the benefits of homework, techniques on how to encourage a sense of responsibility toward learning among their children, strategies on how to get their children to finish their homework, and how to find resources to support them, parents were found to be more engaged in supporting their children's homework (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001). Parents who are more involved in school are also more likely to help their children with homework at home. One technique that was found to work in an assessment of strategies and approaches to improve Gypsy, Roma and Traveller GR&T) educational outcomes was to broaden the reach of the school "through the provision of family learning opportunities, the use of ICT, adult literacy and numeracy classes" which served increase GR&T parents' affinity/relationship with the school (Wilkin et al. 2009).

Example:

Csodaműhely is a social services organization that carries out its complex inequality reducing work in the town of Csobánka. The "tanoda" after school and educational program is an integral part of their work. In their activities, they place great emphasis on the fact that the members of the local community, the parents of school children, actively participate in the work of the organization and their children's development. By now, several mothers of students have become employees of the organization and at the beginning of 2021, they launched their Roma mediator program with 8 local participants, who actively represent the interests of the local community and play the role of a "bridge" between the community and the local public institutions. Active participation enables parents of students in particular to support their children's studies and to better understand the functioning of public institutions, such as the school system.

Issues of exclusion and discrimination

Questions of race and ethnicity are important to parental engagement programs. Experiences of discrimination are a significant reason why parents are not more engaged in their children's schooling. According to one study, parents who had reported "previous negative interactions with the school" appeared to be "more wary" of school staff's intentions and activities (Gutman and McLoyd 2000, p. 14), while another study suggested that minority parents felt excluded by the parents who belonged to the dominant ethnic group (Abrams and Gibbs 2002; McGrath and Kuriloff 1999). The study found that while mothers from majority group felt entitled to naturally assume leadership roles and access power, minority mothers felt restricted by such displays of power. This dynamic was also shaped by language barriers and socio-economic status as well. In addition, school personnel can inhibit parental involvement based on their own beliefs that parents are too busy, disinterested or ignorant. This is especially true among low-income and minority neighborhoods. As such teacher and school beliefs can shape a school's response to parental involvement and either limit or encourage it.

In other words, it is important that schools note that parental engagement programs can work against the interest of minorities by favouring those with existing cultural capital, especially if parental engagement programs are designed on the basis of unequal power relations and are often rooted in "white, middle-class assumptions about parent's outlooks, language, resources and time available for school" (Leistyna 2002 quoted in Boethel). In the case of Roma, a particularly acute issue is teachers' low expectations of their Roma students, as demonstrated in several teacher-training workshops conducted in Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia (Driel 2006). These same teachers often did not make the effort to liaise with the parents of Roma students, with several citing fear of the parents as their reason.

Strategy:

Research shows that parents are most engaged when schools actively encourage their involvement (Harold and Eccles 2002, p.579). Moreover, among lower income groups, families were increasingly involved in their children's school when schools reached out to them, encouraged them to get involved and helped them overcome barriers to their involvement (for a review, see Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In the case of discriminated and vulnerable parents, it is then particularly effective when the school initiates building ties with parents and encourages collaboration. By engaging parents in more planning, decision-making and leadership tasks, this helps to build positive and strong connections between them and the school. This has been the tactic of one school in the US, where a Parent Program Team was appointed to increase the involvement of parents as volunteers in the classroom in the belief it drives parental engagement in their children's learning at both home and in the school.

Schools may decide to involve parents in non-formal activities as well, reaching out to vulnerable parents specifically. Research demonstrates that schools that involve parents in non-formal activities succeed to have a better relationship with children's family (Cojocararu et al. 2015)

Example:

In one school, school balls were organized for parents as an informal socializing opportunity. Considering that the parental group was particularly active in this school, parents – dominated by white, middle-class mothers – took over the organization. The parents' association had open membership, yet none of the Roma parents were members. In fact, during meetings when Roma parents attended, there was a noticeable divide between the Roma and non-Roma parents, self-gathering in different circles. A breaking point came when one Roma mother decided to join the school ball – after she joined, the parents' association celebrated the opportunity to engage with

Roma parents and encouraged the Roma mother who came to facilitate the involvement and participation of other Roma parents. As a gesture of their openness, the theme of the next ball was Roma culture. In a sense, the one Roma parent who decided to break the cycle of non-cooperation then acted as a “cultural broker”, facilitating communication between Roma and non-Roma parents. The non-formal activity – the school ball – in this case provided the platform where collaborative ties may form and where inclusive practices can take root.

Educational involvement of fathers versus mothers

Much research on parental involvement remains blind to gender imbalance, discussing "parental involvement" without respect to which parent is in fact involved. By not recognizing the differences between the participation of mothers and fathers, there is an "implicit assumption is that family-school relationship frameworks function similarly for fathers and mothers" (Kim and Hill 2019, p.919). Meanwhile, there is a general consensus that the involvement of fathers in education and all aspects of child upbringing is highly beneficial for academic success and well-being of children (e.g., Potter, Walker & Keen 2012). Although there is limited understanding of reasons and consequences of lacking involvement of fathers, literature consistently points out that it is mothers who are predominantly engaged with educational institutions. In one US-based study of early childhood education among low-income families, 73 % of parental involvement was done by mothers and only 8% by father, with the rest by grandparents or other relatives (Fantuzzo et al. 2004). Considering that fathers' involvement is a relatively un- or under-explored aspects of parenting interventions, there is a need to understanding strategies of involving fathers more.

Strategy:

Admittedly, many interventions focus mainly on mothers, designed with the assumption that only mothers engage in their children's education (e.g., Panter-Brick et al. 2014). Hence, interventions should specifically target fathers. With that, some research suggests that "gender-differentiated approach, which did not altogether exclude mothers but focused on involving fathers, may be more effective for some men" in terms of engaging them in the school's life (Grayson 2013, 18).

Example:

The Fathers Transition Project was a one-year pilot run in a deprived area of northern England, aiming to engage fathers and male carers. The Project

"involved a series of activities designed to appeal to males, which were attended by fathers and children.... Face-to-face contact was reported as the most effective means of persuading fathers to take part initially, and during the intervention they received intensive follow-up contact via mobile phone. Key to the success of the scheme was the use of a dedicated Fathers Transition Worker who came from a similar background to the participants. This individual was able to forge relationships and build trust with fathers ... [because] practitioners with an intuitive understanding of local cultural beliefs may be more effective in areas of disadvantage" (Grayson 2013, 18).

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Case studies

Trust

Trust is a core aspect of relations between Roma parents and teachers. This then begs the question, what are the components of trust in parent-teacher relationship, and what are some good examples of trust in schools of Northern Hungary and Budapest, where field research and interviews took place. Another important question is what role gender may play in the parent-teacher relationship.

'Bridge-builders', also known as 'cultural brokers' or 'cultural mediators', who work in schools, are crucial to the relationship with Roma parents. A good example of this is the case of a second-chance school in a rural area, where students are almost exclusively limited to marginalised Roma youth. The school employs Roma female social workers, and several Roma women in the school kitchen or as cleaners, known as 'matrons'. According to the headmaster, the hiring of Roma women is a conscious decision, made specifically to build bridges between the school and the children's parents and to create an inclusive environment where Roma and non-Roma work together for the ultimate success of Roma children. Both social workers and matrons, not only because of their Roma background, but also due to similar past or present life circumstances, create a familiar and trusting environment for Roma youth and their parents.

Another important consideration in building trusting relationships with parents is that they are all women (mothers) who manage interactions with the school on a day-to-day basis. Fathers are involved in their children's academic life only rarely, on important occasions. Trust then rests on ethnic, gender and socio-cultural grounds.



Social workers can also build a bridge between the school and parents. Often teachers ask the social workers to pass on information to parents, pass on their insights concerning their children or simply find out why they did not come to school. Most of the parents I interviewed only maintained contact with social workers or matrons or identified them as important in terms of exchanging information about their child's school life. This clearly has a positive and tangible impact, as Roma youth who have been previously written off and abandoned by the education system are consistently graduating.

The bridging and trust-building actors between Roma parents and school communities also existed in the Budapest school, except in that case through spontaneous, informal connections. In an interview with one Roma mother, she explained that the main reason she enrolled her children in the school was due to an encounter with a Roma teacher in the hall, whom she could ask in confidence about the school. They told her that they had attended a prom organised by the Parents' Committee alone, and afterwards fellow Roma parents had asked them how it was and whether it was worth going to the next one. This individual is also often approached by Parents' Committee members or class teachers when they need to engage or reach Roma parents whom they would find more difficult

to reach. Based on the stories they tell, I suspect that they inspire confidence in teachers and in non-Roma middle-class parents, while their Roma status may inspire confidence in Roma parents, thus allowing them to spontaneously play the role of 'cultural broker' mentioned earlier. These spontaneously occurring processes and established roles, in turn, largely facilitate the integration of Roma parents into the school community, which presumably also slows down or prevents segregation processes.

Both examples illustrate that trust is a core factor in the integration of Roma children's education and their parents into school communities. And one of the most important elements in building such trust is to employ as many Roma people as possible in the education and learning institutions.

Consequences of COVID

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis are still being experienced in different areas of our lives, and this is no different in schools. Long periods of closure and restrictive measures have had a negative impact on various informal and formal communities, which in many cases have still not been restored to their pre-pandemic forms. Our field research raised the question of the impact of the above-described processes on parent-teacher relationships and school communities. In the following, we seek to address this question, based on information gathered through interviews and participant observation during our fieldwork.

Interviews with both parents and teachers revealed that one of the main forms of contact between teachers and parents was through spontaneous conversations during before- or after-school hours. This is particularly true for marginalised Roma parents in difficult financial circumstances who work from early morning until late afternoon, as they are often absent from parent-teacher conferences and other school activities, due to work or other reasons, and for whom these morning and afternoon encounters are crucial. One of the head teachers, who used to work in a segregated school in a rural village, said that over a long period of time they had managed to establish a system that was clear and acceptable to parents, whereby if they brought their children to school before 8am, they had the opportunity to consult with the head teacher and the child's other teachers. The school's efforts have been successful. Parents have regularly taken advantage of this opportunity and an acceptable and accessible form of contact has been established. Both parents and teachers reported that school closures or restrictions during the pandemic had a particularly negative impact on these meetings. Children typically had to be dropped off at the school gate and picked up in the afternoon at the same location. There are some schools where this practice persists to this day. In addition, previously established practices are difficult to re-establish. In many cases, connections are more difficult to make, although there were also schools that made a conscious effort to communicate to parents that the school gates were open to parents again.



The other personal parent-teacher contact was the family visit before the pandemic outbreak. This form of contact was more common in rural schools; in urban schools, teachers reported that they had not visited families for a long time, except when there were serious child protection or other concerns. During the pandemic crisis, this form of contact was of course not feasible either, the worst affected being the most disadvantaged children. They were the ones who had little or no access to digital education and were almost completely out of sight of schools during COVID. Fortunately, some rural schools have resumed family visits, but there were interviewees who reported that schools had not yet resumed family visits.

The pandemic has not only affected interpersonal connections between individuals, but also the communities within schools. For example, in the Budapest school where our field research took place, members of the school's SZMK (Parents' Working Group) also reported that the group's activity had declined since the outbreak, one reason being the prolonged closure of schools and drop-outs due to restrictions.

Nevertheless, the unique circumstances brought about by COVID, such as digital education, have also had a positive impact on the relationship between parents and schools. During the fieldwork, we found that the role of social media in parent-teacher communication has been enhanced, providing space for a wide range of parents to engage in the discourse on schools, and creating new opportunities and platforms for parent-teacher communication.

Another significant positive impact of the specific situations brought about by COVID is that new arenas and roles have been created in the relationship between teachers, parents and students. Teachers and social workers working in schools spoke enthusiastically about their charitable work during COVID. From organising daily meals for children in need to delivering tablets to families in extreme poverty in the middle of the pandemic to connecting children to digital education. Occasionally one-way teacher-student relationships have become multi-directional. Schools could become more aware of and closer to social challenges and different individual circumstances. It has become clear that there are other basic conditions for education to be effective, in addition to factors within institutions. Social care and the realisation of different social situations could play an important role in building a trust-based relationship between parents and schools, which could have long-term effects.

Overall, COVID had a negative impact on all forms of contact and community organisation that require personal presence. The process discussed above has had the most adverse impact on the development and maintenance of trusting relationships between parents of the most disadvantaged Roma children and teachers and, consequently, their connection to their school community. Nonetheless, it can also be said that new doors have been opened in parent-teacher relations, and people have been able to get to know each other in new situations and settings, which will certainly have positive implications for the future.

The role of leadership

In one city in southwest Hungary, a school for both primary and secondary school children located in a segregated area of the city teaches around 100 students. The school, which has a long history in the area, was at threat of being closed for many years. Eventually, it was taken over by the Catholic Church since which time the school has improved greatly. Central to these changes has been the school's new leadership and specifically the headteacher. Embodying the principles of compassion, empathy and a listening ear, the school understands in the importance of engaging and communicating with parents through open channels and is actively working to improve its parent-teacher relations.

By embodying these values, the school's headteacher is a key source of inspiration, not only for teaching staff, but the school's network of partners. Unfortunately, many of the better off parents of local families tend to send their children to other schools, which they perceive to be better. As such, the school's students are among those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite this, the teaching staff, led by the exemplary leadership from its headteacher, reflect a positive and upbeat approach to educating the students. Reflecting these values, the school's teachers appreciate the importance in communicating with parents to understand the unique challenges their students may be facing. They believe that they can be empowered in their jobs with such knowledge, so that they can tailor their methods to the student concerned.

This ethos is underlined by a commitment to working to build relations and trust with local parents. The school does this in many ways. One of the most critical is the fact that parents can reach the headteacher, anytime of night or day. Connected via messenger and mobile phone, no issue too big or small appears to phase the school's leadership. Other important



tactics the school employs are being visible at the start and end of the school day when parents come to collect their children. Other still are donation drives, parent forums, conducting family visits and hosting cultural celebrations, where students engage in song and dance and other such activities and parents are invited to attend. Moreover, the school goes above and beyond in supporting the local families of its students, and is willing to provide its support wherever possible, even if it is not strictly education related.

In line with working to build relations and trust with local parents, since the school's new leadership took over the school, it has taken a more proactive role in mediating between parents when problems emerge between students and their families. In the past, social workers were engaged in such issues to a further extent. Today, thanks to the school's leadership and approach, such problems are largely dealt with within the school, without the need for external engagement. This is because the school's leadership believes in dealing with issues as they emerge. This has also helped in building relations with supporting institutions, such as social workers, whose workload is reduced since the school is able to resolve such issues more successfully.

The role of non-formal educational institutions in facilitating school-parent relationship

In one Roma segregation located in the southwest of Hungary, an after-school program serves as a vital link between local community residents and the school. The program, which is part of a state-sponsored national initiative designed to improve educational outcomes among disadvantaged children, functions as a youth community center for children all the way through to high-school age. The center is managed by Romani leadership and support staff are all local Roma parents from the segregation, whose children attend the center and local primary and secondary school.

A crucial part of the local educational eco-system (consisting of the local primary, secondary school and the center itself), the center plays an important role in building a sense of community and trust in local institutions among local Roma parents, on the understanding that this is vital to educational outcomes for Roma children. Especially important for the center is a focus on supporting children making the transition from primary to secondary school education, where many issues with Roma children occur, often leading to them dropping out of education early. This is especially true in the case of female students. Practices among local Roma families include giving away girls to get married as young as 14. Furthermore, girls are also at risk of getting pregnant, which leads to them dropping out of school before graduating. By focusing on engaging parents, the center works to stress the importance and value of staying in education, in the hope that they will not only complete, but continue their education beyond high-school.

As part of the center's remit, children attend the after-school program, where they receive support with their homework and are able to play, besides being able to enjoy a number of programs, including seasonal events which the entire family can engage in. Examples of the kind of activities the center hosts include Easter, Christmas and national day celebrations, and activities like jam and pickle making and art classes. Many of the events organized by the center also have a Roma cultural theme – such as traditional musical performances or dance. With a focus on celebrating Roma history and culture, the center plays a key role in celebrating the identity of the children and their families, reflected by the many works of art created by the children that cover the walls of the center.



In addition, the center also provides value support services for families, such as donations, and support with children's learning, such as providing tablets during COVID. To engage harder to reach-parents, the center is focus on providing tangible goods to families to lure them in. The center also conducts family visit to try to help build relations. Looking to the future, the center and the local secondary school are looking to roll-out more programs for local residents, with a focus on activities such as cooking, to create an informal atmosphere where parents and teachers and other community members an engage to further strengthen relations.

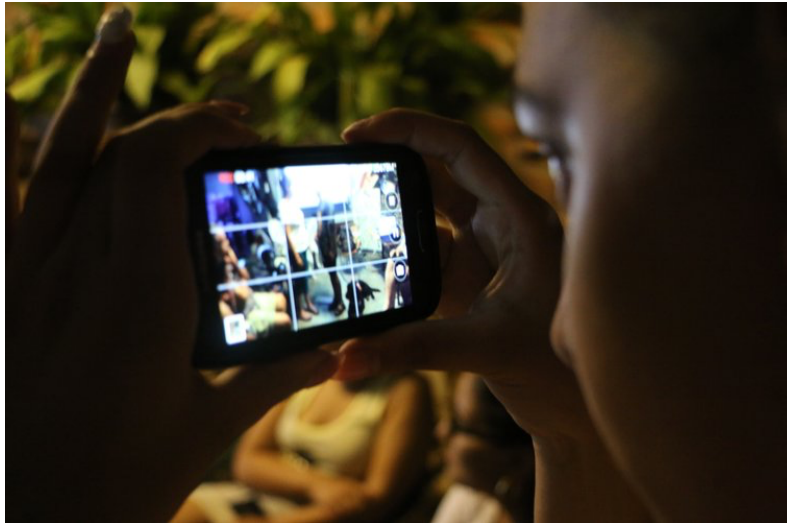
With an open-door policy, local residents are also welcome to come in at any time with any kind of personal problems they might have. One of the key ingredients for success in the after-school program is its visibility in the community. Located one street away from the local nursery, and right

across the road from the center, the program provides a vital space where children can spend time outside of their home and school. This is supported by the fact that the center is essentially run by local Romani parents and residents, who serve as a vital link between local Roma residents and the local schools.

Social media as a communication platform

The introduction of a digital curriculum during the pandemic has increased the role of social media in parent-teacher communication, giving a wide range of parents the space to engage in school discussions and creating new opportunities and platforms for parent-teacher communication. The process began before COVID, but the emergence of digital education has truly consolidated the role of social networking sites in the life of schools. In this paper, I intend to present how social media is being used and its impact in the relationship between schools, students and parents, teacher-parent relationships, parent communities and in turn, marginalised Roma youth and their parents.

Nowadays, almost all classes have Messenger and Facebook groups. There are groups specifically for parents and groups for students. The groups are used for both formal (homework, absences, events, etc.) and informal (pictures, experiences, stories) communication by parents and teachers. Typically, Roma parents living in poverty-stricken communities do not use the KRÉTA system, leaving Facebook as the only alternative for teachers to communicate homework to parents in a clear and timely manner. This practice became widespread during COVID, but even before that, there were some who used it for knowledge transfer.



For families living in poverty or on housing estates, Messenger and Facebook are also proving to be better alternatives to the telephone, as in these social groups, sim cards and therefore phone numbers, are often changed, rendering parents unreachable to teachers. On the other hand, Messenger and Facebook profiles do not change when a telephone number is updated, so the communication channel is preserved. School and pre-school social workers working in schools and Child Welfare Centres frequently use Messenger or Facebook to communicate with families or students. Typically, parents are reached via the child's profile, and in many cases, communication is also conducted through the child. Therefore, it can be said that the use and the large-scale uptake of social media is helping schools and marginalised Roma parents to connect and communicate. Another important effect of communicating in the online space is that it has a democratising effect on school communities by allowing more people to join the discourse on school issues and by using various Facebook features to encourage users in expressing their opinions. It appears that people express their opinions more freely in online spaces than through face-to-face interactions.

With the emergence of social media, however, personal boundaries are changing, as people's Facebook profiles reveal completely different information than a face-to-face meeting or a phone call. In many cases, these online personas can generate prejudices among people from different cultural backgrounds. The other important aspect of the transformation of personal boundaries was that in several interviews, teachers mentioned that parents contact them on Messenger after working hours, at weekends or in the evening, while this was not the case previously with telephone correspondence.

The examples and processes mentioned above have opened an exciting chapter in the communication between schools and marginalised Roma or other ethnic minority parents. On the one hand, it can render school communities more inclusive through its simplicity, accessibility and speed, while on the other hand, it can undermine personal connections and formal channels of communication (e.g., the Hungarian KRÉTA system).

Overcoming shame of poverty

One of the recurring themes in the barriers between more parent-teacher engagement among Roma is the shame of poverty. In a small segregated Roma neighborhood located in the southwest of Hungary, one local NGOs and school engages in the practice of conducting home visits to build parent relationships and better understand the circumstances each family face that could cause barriers to their children's education. This was regarded as vital for teaching staff, who could make accommodations for their students when they were provided insights into the unique challenges their students might be facing.

While teachers and support staff noted that, overall, most parents were open to such visits, a small number refused. The reasons cited was a shame a poverty. With the school located in a peripheral area of the city, in a segregated neighborhood, many of children attending school come from Roma families living in poverty, in run down homes. Many teachers and parents suggested that some of the harder to reach families did not welcome home visits, as they did not wish the circumstances in which they lived to be seen. Feelings of shame were also thought to emerge from past-negative experiences among Roma of their own interactions with schools in their childhood. Other barriers cited included perceptions of such home visits as unwanted due to their association with formal state-sponsored inspections conducted by social services, where there is a perceived threat of having children removed from their care.



Aware of these challenges, local schools in the area place a considerable emphasis on engaging with parents and families face-to-face, in the local neighborhood, in an effort to build trust. Besides being present at the educational institution at the start and end of the day when parents' pick-up their children, both school teachers and local support staff believe it is vital that they are seen regularly in the local area, connecting with parents as they go about their day-to-day chores, whether in the street, at a bus stop, or otherwise.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that the school operates in a wider eco-system of support services, including an after-school program, support from social workers, and a charity, which in many ways serve as a life-line for the community. By communicating with and leaning on one another, the school and its network of partners are able to provide critical support for local families in need. Beyond educating children, they extend many vital services to families, from financial aid through to donations, crisis emergency support, and more. For example, one family tragically lost their home in a fire, and by working together the partners were able to secure the family new housing and vital necessities. The collaborative approach of the local institutions working with one another means they can respond more effectively and support families when they are most-in-need.

In this way, the school and local institutions work to build trust with the families to reduce the barriers parents might feel, including shame of poverty. It should be noted, however, that the focus on building trust with local communities in the case of the local school was encouraged by the

school's headteacher. By embodying leadership, compassion, and understanding, the local headteacher set the example for fellow teachers to follow, inspiring them and encouraging them to act empathetically toward local families. The school's philosophy is to try and build relations with parents and families so that they have a complete picture of what challenges each child faces, information which then empowers them in their role to take the necessary approach.