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'There Is an Exemplar because I'm There.' Professional Roles and Experiences of Roma Teachers in Rural Hungary

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Abstract

Teachers are fundamental actors in education; without their contribution even the most progressive pedagogical ideas fail. However, few studies address how their individual biographies, community belonging, and intersectional identities impact their pedagogical views and practices. Furthermore, while the Roma are the target of numerous social and pedagogical initiatives, they are rarely considered as actors who shape education. Through an analysis of ten ethnographic interviews with self-identified Roma teachers embedded in two local educational settings, this paper scrutinizes the potential and challenges associated with the presence of qualified Roma teachers in rural Hungarian schools. Interviewees demonstrated a high level of commitment to 'leading by example,' and this was embedded in their relations with students and parents. Most teachers also believed that, besides professional expertise, shared ethnicity provided them with a specific opportunity to build trust, express empathy, implement curricula, and incorporate locally and culturally relevant knowledge. However, while professionalism and ethnicity often complemented each other, difficulties also arose due to the differing expectations and heterogeneity of local Roma communities. The findings suggest that Roma teachers may bring valuable resources for education through mobilizing their personal experiences and social and cultural sensitivity, but tapping these resources is limited by structural and contextual constraints.

Keywords: Teacher diversity, Roma teachers, social inclusion, Hungarian education.

1. Introduction[1]

Minorities in the teaching profession have been the focus of much public, policy, and scholarly attention since the 1980s in the United States and European multicultural societies (Villegas and Irvine, 2010). Discussions about the composition of teaching staff have come forth due to the growing diversity of the student body, the significantly lower educational performance of minority compared to majority students, and equal opportunity measures that support professionals from a minority background. Subsequent policy measures targeted the recruitment of minority youth for teacher training, underpinned by the goal of creating teaching bodies whose demographic composition resembles, at least to some extent, that of student communities. This was believed to help narrow the so-called ethnic/racial 'achievement gap' and foster the inclusion of minority students (Villegas et al., 2012; Donlevy et al., 2015).

Similarly to the United States and several European countries, there is a growing demographic mismatch between the teaching force and the student community in Hungary. Although the proportion of Roma students, the country's largest minority group, is increasing, the teaching force has hardly changed: the presence of Roma in the profession is minimal. This is not independent of the fact that Roma students have for a long time faced tremendous disadvantages in education. However, debates regarding the teaching staff have not been articulated in the same way as in the international context, and there have not yet been any targeted policy measures for increasing diversity among teachers (Fox and Vidra, 2013; Donlevy et al., 2015).[2]

Nevertheless, the experiences of Roma in the teaching profession deserve attention for several reasons. On the one hand, teachers shape their students' motivation, identities, and learning capacities, and thus play an important role in mitigating or deepening disadvantages (Schiff, 2014). By unfolding the biographical and contextual factors that impact professional identities and practice, this specific sub-group of teachers may bring new perspectives to the education of socially disadvantaged learners which are relevant to teacher education programs. On the other hand, minority teachers face a variety of specific expectations from colleagues, parents, and wider society concerning the education of minority students (Bressler and Rotter, 2017). A focus on Roma teachers' thoughts on their work and relations with their students and communities might shed light on the

[2] The exact number and proportion of teachers with a Roma background in Hungary is unknown due to the legal barriers to collecting ethnically de-segregated data, and the ambiguities of surveying Roma populations (Messing, 2014). According to one report, information provided by school administrations shows that 1.95 per cent of schools were employing teachers with a Roma background in 2013 (Donlevy et al., 2015). It is likely that Roma are represented in larger numbers among teaching assistants. However, the latter are usually employed on fixed-term contracts, have no pedagogical qualifications (or these are at a significantly lower level), and, most importantly, are not involved in teaching but rather help regular teachers.

otherwise hidden resources in education, as well as the problems this sub-group of teachers encounter. Reflection on this topic is also important for teaching candidates and staff and the general public as well.

This inquiry takes the first steps towards engaging with the potential and challenges related to the presence of qualified Roma teachers in Hungarian public schools through an analysis of ten interviews with self-identified Roma teachers working in two rural educational settings. It asks how these teachers see their pedagogical work in terms of the influence of personal experience and intersectional identities, and how this impacts their relations with students and families. The paper gives insights into why the teachers chose this profession, what opportunities and struggles they have encountered during their work, and what they think about their role in teaching Roma students.

The first part of the paper briefly introduces the Hungarian educational context and ethnic differences within it, and then provides an overview of the literature on minority teachers, focusing on their potential role in fostering the education of diverse student groups. Following a description of the data and the research sites, the second part of the paper presents three types of professional roles and identities that interview partners developed in their communities, and explores some aspects of their work in class and beyond. Finally, concluding thoughts point to further implications of the findings.

2. An ethnic lens on the Hungarian education system

In order to better understand the experiences of Roma teachers and the local conditions in which they work, it is important to first briefly consider ethnic differences in the broader context of the Hungarian educational landscape. Roma students face tremendous and severe disadvantages that stem from major structural problems with the education system. Most importantly, Hungarian public education is highly selective with regard to parents' socio-economic background. Instead of easing inequalities, the system further deepens disadvantages, above all by concentrating students with unfavorable social backgrounds into one school or specific study tracks (Fejes and Szűcs, 2018; Radó, 2018).

This selectivity particularly affects Roma due to the massive socio-economic disadvantage of the majority of Roma families, and their residential segregation and geographic distribution in economically deprived regions. Moreover, widespread ethnic prejudice also plays a role in selectivity insofar as non-Roma parents tend to relocate their children if the ethnic composition of a school is considered unfavorable (Messing and Molnár, 2008). Consequently, strong *de facto* involuntary ethnic segregation persists in education at the institutional level that leads to the concentration of socially disadvantaged Roma students. A particularly striking type of segregation is observed in many small and marginalized rural settlements, where due to massive 'middle-class white flight' the proportion of disadvantaged Roma students is significant. The problem-stricken schools in these areas are usually badly equipped, provide low quality education, and lead students

into dead-end vocational secondary schools from which drop-out rates are extremely high (Radó, 2018).

When it comes to ethnic differences and diversity at the school level, a 'difference-blind' approach dominates in Hungary; namely, the majority of public schools do not engage with ethnic differences, while some perceive them negatively (Feischmidt and Vidra, 2013; Kende, 2013). The role of teachers and principals is crucial here. Research about teachers' views of Roma students has revealed not only the persistence of deep prejudice (Takács, 2005; Gulyás, 2018) but also that teachers do not see that segregation amplifies disadvantages. They rarely consider their own responsibility for improving learning conditions, but mostly attribute Roma students' failures exclusively to family background (Bereczky and Fejes, 2013; Kende, 2013). In addition, teachers often use the label 'disadvantaged' when they refer to 'Roma,' despite the fact that not all Roma children have a disadvantaged background and vice versa (Kende, 2018). This practice has probably prevented an open talk on inter-ethnic relations in schools that has consequences for how Roma teachers understand themselves and their work too.

3. Diversifying the teaching staff: The role of minority teachers[3]

One of the core questions that researchers within the sociology of education are investigating in relation to minority teachers is the possible ways they may enhance the education of diverse learners, and minority students in particular. The most tangible contribution of minority teachers seems to be related to the formal educational outcomes of minority students. A number of studies have found a positive link between the presence of minority teachers and minority students' educational performance, such as grades or standardized test scores, and attainment, such as lower drop-out rates and an increase in college acceptance (see Villegas and Irvine, 2010 for the USA). Although these results were not unequivocally confirmed, they reflect a variety of factors that may indirectly affect school performance, such as enhancing motivation, creating friendlier educational environments, introducing new pedagogical tools, fostering positive identity-formation, countering stereotypes, and improving inter-ethnic relations (ibid.).

Two broad approaches have emerged in the literature to unfold the mechanisms through which the presence of minority teachers benefits diverse student groups; one is rooted in the assumption that minority teachers may potentially serve as role models; the other stresses their unique position in teaching minority students (Villegas et al., 2012; Donlevy et al., 2015). Core to the 'role model' argument is the recognition that the composition of teaching staff signals the place and status of ethnic/racial groups in society. When students are exposed to teachers who resemble the diversity of the student community, they receive a positive message about the social roles and positions minorities fulfill in

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[3] A considerable amount of literature addresses diverse groups of people (colored, black, native, immigrant, immigrating, non-white or ethnic/racial minority teachers, pedagogues, and educators) that are here compressed under the umbrella term 'minority teachers' for the sake of clarity.

society. This is motivating for minorities because it gives them hope that they too will be able to become successful adults, while it also benefits majority students by countering their stereotypes about minorities (King, 1993).

Importantly, the 'role modeling' rationale appears in the research on the career trajectories of minority teachers. Studies have found that members of minorities often enter and remain in the teaching profession due to their very high commitment to motivating minority students and increasing their sense of self-worth (Solomon, 1997; Su, 1997; Ochoa, 2007). This is because many develop a strong feeling of responsibility to their respective communities, and consider the profession a 'calling' rather than solely a source of income (Irvine, 2002; Dixon and Dingus, 2008; Lynn, 2006). However, role modeling can take different forms and have different meanings. Allen (1995) differentiated between role models as 'symbols of special achievement' who inspire students with their presence in responsible positions, and as 'nurturers' who directly engage with mentoring or counseling. She also noted that, through time, practice, and reflection, 'symbols' may become 'nurturers.'

Focusing more on the interplay between identities, aspirations, and actual teaching practice, the second approach postulates that minority teachers are uniquely positioned because they can bring an understanding of students' backgrounds to their teaching practice. Research from the United States shows that because many minority teachers come from a *lower-class background* and often grow up in segregated neighborhoods, they are familiar with students' everyday realities and struggles, and are better able to develop trust and intimate relationships with minority students than majority teachers are (see Villegas and Irvine, 2010 and Villegas et al., 2012 for examples). Moreover, minority teachers may have specific experiences with *ethnic/racial inequalities and discrimination* (Miller and Endo, 2005; Quiocho and Rios, 2000), while some teachers also directly address issues of power and embrace 'emancipatory pedagogies' (King, 1991).[4] This helps students to reflect on the disadvantages they face.

Furthermore, one specific segment of literature employs the concept of '*culturally-relevant teaching*,' which may be described as teaching practice that is grounded in teachers' cultural competence. It includes, for instance, the adaptation of distinct cultural content and codes in class such as children's everyday language use and way of interacting or approaching tasks. This can help to bring home and school closer, and thus engage students in learning (Ware, 2006; Dixon and Dingus, 2008; Lynn, 2006). Finally, minority teachers may also use their cultural expertise and sensitivity to act as *advocates, cultural brokers, or mentors* by easing students' adaptation to school, maintaining good relationships with parents, or modeling successful integration (Carrington and Skelton, 2003; Georgi, 2016; Schmidt and Schneider, 2016). The different roles and practices that teachers make use of varies according to national contexts, types of minority group, and in accordance with the capacity in which teachers are recruited (Schiff, 2014).

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[4] See also the 'Black Teachers Matter' movement https://www.equitableschools.org/

When evaluating the added value that either role modeling or teachers' unique positioning may bring about, a number of risks should be kept in mind too. On the one hand, the presence of minority teachers does *not automatically improve education*. While the former might possess valuable assets, minority teachers can only be successful if their experience is acknowledged (Achinstein and Ogawa, 2012), if they are prepared to tap into their resources and incorporate them into their teaching (Hasberry, 2013; Villegas et al., 2012), and if they are accepted by students and communities (Carrington and Skleton, 2003). Finally, teachers' insights should be embedded in institutional practices such as intercultural pedagogy, continuous reflexivity among staff, and close cooperation with communities. If schools fail to provide a generally inclusive environment, the employment of minority teachers may be only a consequence of the structural inequalities in the labor market; namely, a shortage of teachers in certain areas in which minorities are overrepresented (Schmidt and Schneider, 2016).

On the other hand, even if minority teachers are able to build their commitment and resources into education, *they should not be expected* to represent the sole and ultimate means of enhancing students' education. Resources are unlikely to pay off if teachers feel isolated or are subjected to tokenism at school (Hasberry, 2013). Furthermore, too much reliance on these capacities may lead school management to assign rather limited and simplified roles to minority teachers. There is the danger that these employees will become treated as a homogeneous group, with essentialized identities reduced to their ethnic/racial origin, while the role of other identities such as gender or class remain unrecognized. On the basis of these reductions, such teachers may be pressured to deal with *all* the problems related to minority students, and be made solely responsible for their successful integration This may lead to the devaluation of the ability of dominant group teachers and a decline in their corresponding responsibility for developing successful strategies for educating minority students (Mahrouse, 2005; Sontoro, 2015; Georgi, 2016).

4. Methods and research sites

4.1 Data collection and analysis

The following analysis is based on a synthesis of qualitative data gathered as part of two research projects to which the author contributed. By and large, both inquiries were designed to scrutinize inter-ethnic relations, the plight of Roma communities, and local educational institutions. Two localities were thus distinguished; a more affluent settlement with an integrated primary and pre-school in Pest County, Central Hungary; and a few marginalized villages with segregated primary schools in Nógrád County, North-East Hungary.[5]

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[5] In the Pest locality, data was collected during 2016–2017 as part of the author's doctoral research under the supervision of Violetta Zentai, while in the Nógrád locality data was collected during the fall of 2017 as part of the 'Roma in Nógrád County' research project under the guidance of principal researcher Ernő Kállai. Interviews and case studies were amassed in Pest by the author, and in

In order to learn about the educational opportunities of Roma students, interviews were carried out in both projects with local teachers and principals. For the purpose of this study, interviews with self-identifying Roma teachers were selected as the primary data sources.[6] However, local case studies based on interviews with key actors and citizens in the localities, class-visits, and brief ethnographic observations in the villages were also used to better understand how the teachers are embedded in their respective localities. Importantly, the present study does not claim to be representative of teachers of Roma origin in Hungary; however, the interviews are considered suitable for offering insight into some of the specific concerns that this group of teachers face, and for pointing to a few areas in which their biographical insights may be of particular value in the education of Roma and/or socially disadvantaged students.

The seven female and three male teachers had all pursued regular teacher training and were participating in local primary or pre-school education at the time of research. Experience with teaching ranged from half a year to more than two decades. Half of the interviews were undertaken in Pest County, and the other half in the Nógrád educational context. Interview partners were approached primarily for their insights into education, although their biographies were covered within the conversations too. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interview partners were given pseudonyms and some personal data have been removed in order to guarantee anonymity.

Data was analyzed following a general inductive approach as outlined by Thomas (2006). On the basis of an in-depth reading of interview texts, the main categories of analysis were appointed, which were then applied throughout the systematic coding process. To collect important biographical data, individual memos were prepared for each interview partner. This was followed by the construction of the most important themes for going beyond individual cases. Narrative passages of interviews which described memories, experiences, or the recall of specific conflicts were of special importance for the analysis, especially with regard to family background, schooling, professional trajectories, and pedagogical practice. Finally, the main findings of local case studies were used to further inform the analysis.

4.2 Sites of research

The first settlement under study is located in the central part of the country, relatively close to the capital. Based on estimations, about one-quarter of the inhabitants are Roma, while most of them, including the teachers in this study,

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[6] Note that although teachers were not approached as 'Roma teachers' in either of the projects, the fact that the category of ethnicity was central to both pieces of research affected the interview situations and the very fact that *these* teachers agreed to the interviews. This may have led to an overemphasis on ethnicity in the interviews.

identify as Romungro and live in a segregated settlement on the edge of the village. In recent decades there has been a slow process of upward mobility in this community which is rooted in the musical heritage of some families, and in the expansion of local educational opportunities during the state-socialist era. Today there are a few tertiary-educated professionals, and several skilled workers and successful entrepreneurs in the community. However, there is also another smaller Roma sub-ethnic group who live scattered throughout the village. They are considerably less educated and are in a worse employment situation.

The local educational institutions consist of very heterogeneous student bodies. Besides low-income parents with a low level of education, a few wealthier and more highly educated parents also enroll their children in the local school and kindergarten. Without any special curriculum or tracking, the school management has defined dual goals: enabling weaker students to 'catch-up,' and encouraging the talented to further develop. Despite these efforts, however, teachers have begun to face the accelerated out-migration of students. A growing number of parents take their children to the nearby church-maintained urban school, sometimes even before fifth grade starts. The teaching staff (so far) have not evaluated these processes through an ethnic lens. It is not the increase in the number of Roma – who by now make up half of the incoming classes, per se – but the perception of the low quality of teaching and infrastructure that is encouraging parents to transfer children, teachers believe.

The relatively significant presence of qualified Roma in this setting (three Roma primary school teachers and two pre-school teachers) should not be seen as a result of a conscious attempt to foster Roma participation. The school principal emphasizes rigorous equal treatment in the school's recruitment process. Roma applicants are welcome if they have the proper qualifications, but are not seen as having any specific assets. A similar attitude is reflected among the teachers in this study, who regard local institutions as generally open although they are believed not to pay specific attention to cultural differences.

Despite its relative proximity to the Pest research locality, in the Nógrád villages poverty and decline of the population are much more evident. During the state-socialist era most villagers worked in the nearby factories as unskilled workers, but these workplaces disappeared after the 1989 transition due to the decline in the region's industrial production. These structural changes in the economy have left many without jobs and a perspective. Today, many locals can find no other source of employment than the public works scheme. About half of the inhabitants in these villages are estimated to be Roma, and most of them live in segregated neighborhoods that often lack basic supplies. Although in recent years local Roma communities have become more heterogeneous, the upwardly mobile Roma are mostly those who manage to complete secondary education and find employment in the primary labor market.

In the Nógrád locality, the elite have long been taking their children to neighboring urban schools, and lately even wealthier Roma families have begun to follow this pattern too. It thus seems that the process of 'middle-class-flight' is 'complete' in many of the villages here. As a result, schools have become fully

segregated: almost all students are severely disadvantaged, and most of them are Roma. In some institutions the number of students has dropped so dramatically that different age groups have had to be merged into one class. These schools have very a bad reputation among parents and inhabitants. Teachers focus on developing the most basic skills, and delivering the most minimal curricula. Many agree that there is a lack of future perspective and role models for these students, while the prestige of attending school is weak.

Along with the student population, the teaching staff has changed too. The local professional strata has been unable to reproduce itself, while the schools cannot attract young teachers from elsewhere. Consequently, the teaching staff is substantially aging and a shortage of teachers is already apparent. Due to such a pressing lack of employees, it is common that some subjects are being taught by staff with no subject-related qualifications. It also happens, especially in administration and assistance positions but also in teaching, that qualified individuals can only be employed through the state public works program. Here, the teacher shortage also affects the perception of Roma teachers. Several key actors in the villages said that they would like to see more Roma in pedagogical positions, primarily due to a desire to strengthen the perceived importance of studying in the Roma community.

Due to the high number of students from disadvantaged families, schools adopted the Integrational Pedagogical Program (IPR)[7] in both localities, which made it possible to introduce a variety of pedagogical innovations. However, the termination of the program left a tangible mark on the pedagogical apparatus of schools, which in recent years have struggled to identify complex ways to improve material and learning conditions. Nonetheless, interview partners in this study worked in institutions which to an above-average extent experimented with new ideas and innovative methodologies, and there seemed to be agreement that only through pedagogical renewal could students' performance be enhanced. However, teachers, including those in this study, did not necessarily favor integrated education due to the fear that this approach would bring to an end the familiar learning environment in the village and children would get much less attention in urban schools.

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[7] Notably, the Integrational Pedagogical Program (IPR) is a pedagogical framework which was developed and maintained by the National Educational Network between 2003 and 2012 to facilitate integrational education in schools with a high number of socially disadvantaged students. The program was a result of the only comprehensive integration-based attempt at reform between 2002–2010 that defined the target group of educational intervention primarily on social grounds by introducing the category of the 'multiply disadvantaged' and making this the basis of funding schemes and extra educational services. Although its positive impact on compensating for disadvantages was empirically proven, the program was dismantled after 2012 (Fejes and Szűcs, 2018).

5. The understanding of the teaching profession

Through the development of their professional identities, teachers 'construct their own ideas of "how to be," "how to act" and "how to understand" their work and their place in society' (Sachs, 2005: 15). Studies highlight that the professional identity formation of teachers is a process that dynamically develops over time and is shaped by the interplay between the individual and diverse contextual factors (Beijaard et al., 2004; Rodgers and Scott, 2008). Working environments, life experiences (for instance, schooling, interaction with colleagues, students, and families) along with personal identities such as age, gender, and ethnicity are some of the crucial factors that influence how teachers understand their roles (ibid.). Importantly, research on minority teachers also draws attention to the societal and community expectations that may influence the roles this specific group of teachers take on (Bressler and Rotter, 2017; Sontoro, 2015). The three types of teacher roles that emerged through the analysis of this study represent particular intersections of the above-described influences which are all embedded in the respective local social relations.

5.1. The respected intellectual

According to the interviews and fieldwork data, the two oldest male teachers have acquired a unique position in their respective communities. They completed their studies and begun their careers in the state-socialist era and, over time, gained considerable professional experience. Bringing up generations of students, they acquired respect and developed a sense of authority in relation to both the dominant and the minority community in the locality.

Being the first in the Roma community of the Pest locality to earn a tertiary degree, István may well be called a pioneer. He began his studies at a time when the pedagogical profession had high prestige and it was often only his strong dedication that kept him going on with his studies. He recalls that 'when I decided to become a teacher, I immediately dreamed that I was here. And when I entered this holy place as a teacher, I felt the biggest happiness in my life!' indicating that becoming a teacher in his village was a true honor. István is not only a teacher but an intellectual committed to local education and an inspirational figure for the next generation of students. However, he clarifies that leading by example 'doesn't have an immediate effect. But [you can see the effect] when a Gypsy child sits next to the other children and there is no conflict. And when someone tells you that "I became a teacher because of you".' To be sure, István's authority today reaches beyond the school; some locals simply refer to him as 'The Teacher.'

Similarly to István, Pál begun to teach towards the end of the 1980s and has been working for more than two decades in the Nógrád area. He has gained experience in nearly all fields of education, including developing educational materials for teachers' further training and was involved in several pedagogical initiatives, among them the founding of a successful local after-school program. As he formulated it, 'I have always worked with children with difficult backgrounds.'

He accepted the leadership of a small school with multiply disadvantaged students because he felt it was time to realize his own ambitions which stem from a recognition that education 'does not work well the old way. New ways and new methods must be used in order to succeed.' On the one hand, Pál insists on utilizing new pedagogical methods (for instance, cooperative and interactive pedagogies); on the other hand, he is also committed to strengthening identity and community in the locality, for instance, through conveying multicultural content and promoting education about Roma cultural traditions through the contributions of well-known Roma artists and intellectuals. As a result of his hard work and innovative ideas, Pál believes that today his students enjoy attending school, despite all the difficulties.

5.2. The caretaker

Five mid-generation female interview partners define the second type of teacher in this study. For these teachers, negative experiences with ethnic differences in school and work have played a crucial role; for some this factor even influenced the choice of career. The motive of 'help' and 'lead by example' was so strong in their understanding of the profession that their engagement in teaching reminds one of social work. They have a special sense of responsibility to the Roma and the socially disadvantaged students.

Irma's narrative is a clear demonstration of this. She chose the teaching profession consciously due to a strong childhood memory, which she describes as follows:

> I became a teacher because my first year in school was a catastrophe. I was the only Gypsy in the class, my classmates were always mocking me and my exercise book was full of black marks. I began to show psychosomatic symptoms, like crying every morning when I had to go to school. This went on so much that at mid-term my mother was told that I must be placed in special education.

Luckily, Irma's mother refused to acknowledge her 'disability' and would not sign a request for her removal from class. Irma switched to another class in which she finished the semester with excellent results. Later during her teaching practice at the same school in the Pest locality she met her old teacher again and confronted her with her impact: 'I told her "thank you very much, it is because of you that I chose to become a teacher. And precisely for the reason that no child should have to experience what I did",' she recalls. Even today, Irma is committed to providing a helping hand to children in difficult situations, as will be shown in the next section.

Melinda and Ildikó, who work in the Nógrád region, reported that their personal struggle with poverty and exclusion had contributed to their drive to work in education. Melinda shared the fact that 'according to current standards, I was a multiply disadvantaged child too. My mother couldn't read and write, I'm a

first-generation graduate, as they say.' Although she always liked to study and easily finished secondary school, she had to start working instead of continuing her studies due to a lack of financial support from her family. Only after ten years did she decide that 'it's time to leave' and enrolled in college alongside her regular job. Her internalized duty to help the children of her village of origin became so strong that it now even seems to override her professional identity, as seen from this quote: 'I realized that I don't even want to work elsewhere. It's not even the profession but the school that I like so much.'

Ildikó used similarly harsh words when speaking about her childhood: 'I suffered very much due to my origin' – she shared. She was the only Roma at college and was continuously rejected by her peers. However, she feels that her efforts have paid off. 'I want to deal with Roma kids in my profession forever, because I would like to help them and show, by my example, that it is possible to break out.' Today, she uses her personal memories to relate to disadvantaged Roma children and to act as a role model for them.

A teacher from each locality expressed that their sense of responsibility to Roma students was strongly affected by their negative experience during teacher training or previous work. Erzsi in the Pest locality worked in her husband's small business until her mid-forties, when she decided to enroll in teacher-training college. She encountered serious challenges, above all the deep prejudices of majority students about the Roma. She explained that in the face of a lack of support from her teachers she often had to mobilize her knowledge to counter her peers' views about Roma students' 'inherent inability' to adapt to school. These encounters eventually led her to write her thesis about Roma children's education in pre-school.

Finally, Andrea's story is worth mentioning. For a short time, she worked in public administration in a nearby town in Nógrád, where she often felt undervalued as she was required to carry out menial tasks although she was a university graduate. 'It wasn't like school. There, being a Gypsy clearly mattered,' she stated. Despite the much lower salary and the difficult circumstances, Andrea chose to go back to school, which she regards as a more inclusive environment. Having recently been appointed to a leadership position, she has high hopes of revitalizing the institution and developing a 'revolutionary, renewed, showcase school' out of an institution with a particularly bad reputation. One of her colleagues (the previously introduced Ildikó) has high hopes for this, and believed that it was significant that a teacher of Roma origin had taken over the leadership. 'She knows what the kids feel, she knows how to speak to Roma parents, and she is not ashamed of the Roma. It's not sure that a Hungarian would dare to take things onto their shoulders' – said Ildikó in describing the new principal, indicating that in the local community, Andrea's ethnic belonging clearly brings advantages.

5.3. The young professional

The third group of interview partners consisted of three young teachers who had recently begun their careers. These teachers entered the profession much more at ease than their colleagues introduced above. As opposed to some of the aforementioned teachers who had to convince their own parents to let them carry on with their studies, Bianka, Csilla, and Márk enjoyed much emotional and some financial support from their families. They also encountered fewer negative experiences related to ethnic differences at school and university. Being Roma is nonetheless an important component of their identity, thus the presence of these well-qualified teachers with a proud ethnic identity make them what Allen (1995) described as 'symbols of special achievement.'

Bianka, who was the first in her family to obtain a college degree, claims that it was specifically her pleasant memories of school that made her choose the profession. She reported to having several role models she could look up to, among them István, who taught her in primary school, and Irma, who mentored her when she began to teach. This young teacher appears to be an energetic and dedicated professional who is most motivated by creative tasks and her enthusiasm for teaching. She says that 'I wouldn't even call it [teaching] "work," but "teaching" for which I get money. So, it's also my hobby. When I go home, I feel it in my guts, "let's get started!" I get my laptop, get an idea, and wow, the kids will enjoy this so much tomorrow!' Perhaps not surprisingly, the motive of 'helping' is not strong in Bianka's narrative; she rather presents herself as someone who the children can look up to. This becomes clear when she explains that being a Roma helps her to catch Roma students' attention because they look at her as an old acquaintance, and they are proud to live in the same neighborhood as their teacher.

'I come from a family of teachers' – said István's daughter Csilla, introducing herself, although she quickly added that she had long resisted copying her father's career choices. Only after completing vocational training did she decide to enroll in pre-school teacher college. Hence, for Csilla, the teaching profession was not a childhood dream as it was for her father, nor a channel of upward social mobility, as for many others in this study. However, later, out of a drive for self-development, she decided to do an internship in a kindergarten where the number of disadvantaged Roma children was overwhelming. 'I learned the profession there,' she said, by which she meant not only gaining new knowledge and skills, but also shaping her thinking about teaching in general: 'This is a calling. It cannot be only work because then we cannot do it well. It is a calling; you need to put your soul into it. You have to unconditionally love children, all children,' she said.

Last but not least, let us touch upon Márk's story. He attended a high school specialized in musical training and then obtained a university degree in violin and music pedagogy. His decision to teach music is not rooted in his local or family belonging, but in tutoring abroad. Upon realizing that as a professional musician he would not be able to sustain himself, he sought employment in education. Only after a long time did he manage to find a job in a segregated primary school in

Nógrád County. He believes that today his musical and teaching engagements complement each other; moreover, he is sometimes able to mobilize his music network for teaching. By familiarizing children with a wide spectrum of musical genres and a number of successful Roma, he believes that he can 'widen students perspectives' about their future opportunities.

In sum, the interviews show that a number of biographical and contextual factors influenced how the teachers related to their profession and their role in their communities. Despite the heterogeneity of personal backgrounds and experiences, there were similarities in how interview partners understood their role as teachers. Most importantly, the wish to 'lead by example' was present in all conversations; for some, it had even affected the choice of the profession. Teachers' frequently expressed the hope that they could act as role models, which can be understood as a sense of responsibility and commitment that pervades professional identities and embeds daily work. The next section will give more insight into the latter by expanding on how the teachers' ethnicity has affected their work in and beyond the classroom.

6. Biographical and contextual resources

Teachers' relations with students and families are often referred to as important domains in which minority teachers recognize and embrace their diverse personal and professional identities (Bressler and Rotter, 2017). These areas are especially relevant for study, as the interviewees in this study teach at the same location or near to where they live, thus they occupy a particular place in the system of local hierarchies.

6.1 Gaining the trust of students

Several teachers reported that being recognized as a Roma teacher made it easier for them to get closer to Roma students, and they could turn this into a pedagogical asset, such as increasing motivation, developing skills, discipline, or simply by creating a friendly learning environment. Those who adopted a primary 'caretaker' role said that earlier negative experiences had directly affected their relations with students. Going through many obstacles that their majority middle-class students had not encountered, they had become more emphatic and sensitive to Roma students' problems. Ildikó feels that, unlike in an urban school where the main task is to deliver knowledge, students in the small village first and foremost need patience and individual attention. She describes her earlier struggle as similar to that of the students in her class, and believes that this makes her particularly suitable for teaching this group of learners:

> I taught in mixed schools too earlier. It was very good that what I delivered, I got back. It wasn't like, no homework was done. They were also very nice, but the Gypsy children here just give me more. We struggle a lot, there are

so many students with special needs, but still, exactly because they require more care, they give more love too.

Irma gives several clear examples of how she turned her personal memories into educational resource. A few years ago she encountered a very delicate problem. An eight-year-old boy from a severely disadvantaged social background often came to school without changing his clothes or taking a shower. Upon visiting his home, it turned out that there was no running water in the family's apartment. Irma turned to the child and said the following: 'look, when I was a child, we didn't have a bathroom either. Until the age of sixteen, I washed myself every day. You know where? In a little plastic tub. You go to the stove, ask your mum to heat up water and pour it in there…'. The story shows how Irma was able to express empathy through recalling a personal memory. From the position of a teacher, Irma assured the boy that there was nothing to be ashamed about not having a bathroom, and that he was mature enough to overcome the problem on his own with a creative idea. The shared experience of social disadvantage brought her closer to the boy, Irma reports.

Irma's teaching practice involves what Ware (2006) described in relation to Afro-American teachers as 'warm demanders' – that is, communicated personal warmth and strong instructional language. Irma says that 'I can allow myself to do stuff which may offend them [students] if done by a Hungarian colleague. For instance, when they talk dirty I can say "you ought to watch your words! Don't shame me, because I am a Gypsy just like you!".' In this case, Irma makes the children realize that their behavior could negatively affect other Roma, including their teacher. However, she also includes a positive point of reference: her approach makes it seem that the two of them – the teacher and the student – belong to a secret club, which must be a community of honor if its reputation can be destroyed by dirty talk and bad behavior. This framing, which appears in several of her stories, makes it possible for Irma to realize her pedagogical goals but not lose the trust of the children.

Teachers also reported how they make an asset out of their knowledge of the local Roma community, which for some involved awareness and knowledge of cultural practices and traditions in the locality. Instead of leading to major changes in the curricula, these usually unfolded as small interventions in class or during after-school programs. For instance, Bianka drew on family traditions in class that she explained in the following way: 'It's not just that you teach them about "Gypsy culture," but for instance I always say that my father was a famous musician and I bring up examples – that it's like this, or like that with us.'

Class visits gave rare insight into similar examples in István's teaching. In a literature class, students were learning about the short stories of a well-known Hungarian writer from the nineteenth century. Based on a mandatory piece of reading discussion emerged about superstitions and fortune-telling in particular. 'Who were the fortune tellers?' asked István at one point. Receiving no answer, he went on: 'Where did they come from? Don't you guys know that? Then I'll tell you! They were the Gypsy women!' This answer may resemble the deployment of

well-known Roma stereotypes, but István depicted such stories proudly and vividly, and said that fortune-tellers could enjoy respect in the community. In his stories, the stereotypical image of the fortune-teller was replaced by the figure of a confident and proud woman. While speaking, István shuffled a deck of fortune-tellers cards and then read the palm of a volunteer. The performance was so successful that all the students wished to try it. But István fended them off with the following sentence: 'Guys, according to the traditions, only old Gypsies can do fortune-telling, therefore I do it.'

Importantly, the inclusion of the cultural traditions of Roma was positively perceived when mentioned by teachers in this study. Not only was the application of cultural content believed to raise Roma students' motivation and help to develop a positive self-image, but it was seen as recognition of the (local) community and thus a means of fostering inclusion, especially in the Pest locality. This is important in the light of previous studies about teachers' views in Hungary that found that reference to cultural differences contributed to the rather negative perception of Roma students (Bereczky and Fejes, 2013). Furthermore, incorporation of Roma-related knowledge was only embraced if there were many Roma in class; ethnic conflicts occurred; and the community was seen as 'keeping traditions' (ibid.).

However, interview partners barely felt that they had been encouraged to enrich their teaching with more cultural content. Csilla, for instance, thought she had lacked relevant courses in her training program, while Erzsi felt that the school leaders 'don't feel how crucial it would be to apply an "ethnic lens".' Finally, István stated that as long as there is barely any scope to deviate from the centrally planned National Core Curriculum, he can only 'smuggle in' additional content, like in the above example.

Employing the advantages of shared belonging was not always easy either. Younger teachers who were at the beginning of establishing their professional authority expressed that it was difficult to balance their different roles. For instance, Márk held that shared ethnic belonging makes it easier to bond with children because 'as they see that I'm also a Gypsy, they somehow relate to me better than to non-Gypsy teachers, and this makes it easier to catch their attention.' However, what seemed to be an advantage at the beginning could later easily lead to a disadvantage because students started to look at Márk as their 'older brother.' He has realized that this is perhaps due to the fact that he is one of the few Roma that students encounter in professional roles, and they have difficulties relating to him as a teacher. As he remarked, 'I think they immediately accept us as persons, but we have to work continuously to be accepted as teachers.' After my class visit he also told me that as a beginner teacher in a particularly hard environment, he is still looking for the best methods to build up his authority.

Although difficulties in relating to Roma students seem to be most striking in the practice of younger teachers, they occurred with the most experienced interviewees too. Teachers in the Pest locality, for instance, were able to build much less rapport with the few Vlach Roma students who had lower

socioeconomic status and did not share the Rumungro's musical heritage – the main source of pride in that community. Thus the potential advantages of Roma teachers also seem to depend on the heterogeneity of local Roma communities – an issue to be further unfolded in the next section about teachers' work with families.

6.2 Connecting school and families

Most teachers had developed connections with families prior to taking up their teaching position, which enabled them to obtain valuable insights into the family background of their students and develop unique ways to act as bridges between the schools and the parents. As a respected teacher in the community, Pál maintains good connections with parents. They often stop him in the street, call him 'Dear Uncle Teacher' and ask for his opinion about a variety of daily matters. Instead of conventional modes of contact, such as written requests and fixed parental meetings in school, he finds that personally interacting with families is more efficient. 'It's very rare that I call for someone in school,' he says, 'I don't call [them], but get in the car and go and just drop by.' However, he also warns that this is only possible because over time he has learned to navigate the fine line between treating parents as equal partners and maintaining professional authority, which would be easily undermined if he treated parents in a way that was 'too friendly.'

The pre-school teachers believed that the teachers' role in connecting school and home is especially important for small children. Being aware of the varieties and nuances of local practices and living situations, these teachers felt they better understood some aspects of their students' behavior. Erzsi lived in the segregated neighborhood herself and had daily contact with parents. Thus, she often took up the role of assisting majority colleagues in their work with families. 'It's important that colleagues can turn to us, asking, "what do you know about that family?" If there is no time, I quickly answer, "look, this and that is the situation. This just happened last week",' she shared. In the case that Roma live geographically segregated from the majority of the village, up-to-date information about families can be turned into important contextual resources. Interestingly, Erzsi was less confident when it came to transmitting school expectations to parents. She had mixed encounters with parents, including cases when shared ethnicity did not help her at all. Some families were, in her understanding, 'jealous' of her position as a teacher and did not take her advice well.

Erzsi's experience was not unique. It seems that the heterogeneity among families and the difference in teachers' and parents' socio-economic status in particular can be obstacles to teachers, despite their ambitions to act as role models in their communities. In the Pest locality, teachers barely spoke about having contact with Vlach Roma families, or even distanced themselves from this group, referring to the involvement of some families in local criminal networks. Such obvious distancing was not encountered in the Nógrád locality; however, the gap between teachers and parents' socio-economic status is more prominent here, leading to more everyday dilemmas.

An example of challenges that status differences result in may be seen in an excerpt from Melinda, who shared ambivalent feelings about being a Roma teacher in a marginalized village in Nógrád County. She was able to establish trust with parents quickly; however, this came with false expectations. This is how she described her relationship with parents:

> At the beginning, when parents came to see me, they were very happy. Those who came from another village, I told them that I was a Gypsy too. Then they kind of relaxed a little so that I could understand their problems. And I did, but when I defined the requirements, so to speak, I was already being too 'proud' in their words. (…) On the one hand, they come to me and want to conspire with me because I am Gypsy, but on the other hand, if I make the same demands as all my other colleagues, eighty per cent turn away. Gypsy parents don't like me more, and don't trust me more.

Melinda's narrative reveals that much of what lies behind parents' doubts is the perceived difference in socio-economic status. This social distance has prevented her from realizing certain pedagogical goals, despite shared ethnic belonging. Melinda believes that being a Roma teacher sometimes led to expectations that she alone should 'solve' all the challenges with the children that families are incapable of dealing with. Instead of taking this behavior personally, though, Melinda rather considers it a psychological reaction triggered by feelings of uncertainty and despair.

A few interview partners highlighted that status differences do not determine their relationships, but it takes a long time to develop the trust of parents. Andrea, who generally maintained good relations with families, explained that she had to work hard to maneuver well in a community in which traditional values and lifestyles are of much importance. She believed that growing up in a 'traditional Gypsy family' often helped her to understand the dynamics of the local relations, yet it took time to make herself understood by families, like in the following case:

> The other day a real Gypsy grandma came to the school – meaning a [woman with] completely traditional dress and mode of speaking. She started to shout and swear with anger. I said to her, 'listen, I grew up in such an environment, so this does not hurt my ears so much. I have aunts who speak this way, but please tone it down a little because we are now in a school. When I visit you at your place, I will comply with your requests.' And then she told me calmly that I give too much homework.

Andrea was apparently able to reduce tension through distinguishing between 'school' and 'home.' Instead of pointing at the impolite behavior, she searched for shared understanding in the private realm. When the common basis for understanding was defined, she made it clear that one should use different means to convey such messages in public. Dialogue could then begin.

However, in other situations norms and hierarchies could not be replaced by shared ethnic belonging. This is the case, for instance, when strict gender norms persist. Andrea explains that men's and women's roles are profoundly divided here: women rarely fulfill professional roles, take on positions of authority, or demand that men conform to institutional requirements. To achieve her goals, she needs to find ways by which she does not break the unwritten rules – or at least not on the surface. 'The mother is the head; she keeps control from the background. Eventually, what the mother wants happens. So, if I catch the mother, she will mollify the man so that he will stand by me' – displays Andrea her strategy, highlighting that she always approaches women in the community.

Overall, teachers' relations with Roma students and their parents emerged as the most important areas in which personal insights and local knowledge matter through the mobilization of biographical and contextual resources. Teachers often recalled developing trusting relationships, and thus motivating students or forming a bridge between home and school. Being part of the local community, however, posed a particular challenge to the teachers too, because they had to carefully and creatively juggle different expectations deriving from the local and societal hierarchies.

6. Conclusions and further implications

This small-scale explorative study has extended the literature on minority teachers by examining the professional identities, roles, and experiences of ten Hungarian Roma teachers embedded in local contexts. The findings support other studies that argue for the recognition of the potentially novel perspectives that minority teachers may bring to education, but which also draw attention to the specific institutional and structural conditions that limit the tapping of this potential (Achinstein and Ogawa, 2012; Hasberry, 2013; Villegas et al., 2012; Carrington and Skleton, 2003; Schmidt and Schneider, 2016; Mahrouse, 2005; Sontoro, 2015). In the Hungarian context, Roma teachers' commitment to acting as role models was very strong, although it was far from obvious what it takes to realize these ambitions in specific local settings.

These initial inquiries showed that a teacher's potential to improve educational conditions is deeply embedded in the context of institutional settings, local hierarchies, and the conditions of the broader educational system. Professional work always interferes with local hierarchies, hence maneuvering between school and home requires creative solutions from the individual, and embeddedness in communities, or the lack thereof, plays a crucial role. It is thus not self-evident that Roma teachers are able to (better) establish trust with Roma children and parents. The study revealed mainly individual efforts, creative ideas, and ambitions which varied depending on whether the teacher was working in a diverse student group or in a segregated environment.

Although more research is clearly needed to better understand the opportunities and challenges of Roma teachers, it may already be seen that long-term investment in the structural and institutional level and in teacher training are

needed to really tap into the resources that these teachers may bring to education. For instance, a supportive institutional environment is crucial; one that engages positively with ethnic differences. Targeted training and mentoring is also necessary for enabling teachers to reflect on their personal experiences and diverse identities and prepare them for the expectations they may be confronted with throughout their work. Last, while the teaching profession may be a source of local prestige that is vital in small, bounded communities, the findings of the case studies and interviews also warn that this role is functioning as a source of status attainment less and less due to a decrease in both salaries and the prestige of the teaching profession. Because of these and many further constraints, the ideal of the 'role model' position and the potential resources that Roma teachers represent are likely to remain underexploited, instead, those few individuals who enter the profession will become overburdened with dilemmas and expectations.

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