



School-Friendly Parents? Characteristics of Parents' Involvement in Vocational Schools in Hungary
Rodzice przyjaźni szkole? Charakterystyka zaangażowania rodziców w szkołach zawodowych na Węgrzech

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: Our goal is to examine parental involvement in schools with higher dropout rates, lower dropout rates and disadvantaged family backgrounds.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: In our study, we focus on vocational schools that do not offer a baccalaureate (matura) degree as well as vocational schools that do offer a baccalaureate (matura) degree. In the present study, we used data from a large sample database in Hungary.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: A number of international studies have examined the importance of parental involvement, especially for pre-school children and primary school students. Few studies have focussed on parental involvement in secondary education, especially in Hungary where it has only recently become a focus of educational research, but the relationship between secondary education and parental involvement has only been partially investigated.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Our results show that we need to pay more attention to these two types of schools.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: Based on our questions on parents' involvement in school, we obtained several significant results. Of the barriers we investigated, we found one to be relevant. Our study is exploratory in nature and aims to gather data and information on parents of VET students. Our objective was to obtain results relevant to VET.

→ **KEYWORDS:** PARENTAL COOPERATION, PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT, PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOL, VOCATIONAL TRAINING, TECHNICAL COLLEGE

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Naszym celem jest zbadanie zaangażowania rodziców w szkołach zarówno o wyższym, jak i niższym wskaźniku porzucenia nauki i w rodzinach znajdujących się w niekorzystnej sytuacji.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Skupiamy się zarówno na szkołach zawodowych, które nie oferują matury, jak i na tych, które maturę oferują. W niniejszym badaniu wykorzystaliśmy dane z dużej bazy danych na Węgrzech.

PROCES WYWODU: W wielu międzynarodowych badaniach analizowano znaczenie zaangażowania rodziców, zwłaszcza w przypadku dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym i uczniów szkół podstawowych. Niewiele badań koncentruje się na zaangażowaniu rodziców w szkolnictwie średnim, zwłaszcza na Węgrzech, gdzie dopiero niedawno stało się ono przedmiotem badań edukacyjnych, ale związek między szkolnictwem średnim a zaangażowaniem rodziców został zbadany tylko częściowo.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Nasze wyniki pokazują, że należy poświęcić więcej uwagi tym dwóm typom szkół.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Uzyskaliśmy kilka znaczących wyników. Jedną spośród badanych przeszkód uznaliśmy za relewantną. Nasze badanie ma charakter eksploracyjny i ma na celu zebranie danych i informacji na temat rodziców uczniów VET. Naszym celem było uzyskanie wyników relewantnych dla VET.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **WSPÓŁPRACA RODZICIELSKA, ZAANGAŻOWANIE RODZICÓW, ZAANGAŻOWANIE RODZICÓW W NAUKĘ W SZKOLE ŚREDNIEJ, KSZTAŁCENIE ZAWODOWE, TECHNIKUM**

Introduction

The research literature on national education has been concerned with changes in vocational education and the characteristics of students for decades (Fehérvári, 2021; Józsa, 2022), but very few studies have focused specifically on parental involvement.

In Hungary, the role of parents in vocational schools has not been sufficiently studied. The paucity of recent research focusing on this specific area has resulted in a lack of empirical evidence. Vocational school students often come from disadvantaged backgrounds, which renders such studies indispensable for longitudinal, regional and contextual comparisons.

The objective of this study is to characterise parental participation in a vocational school located in a disadvantaged region of Hungary. The article begins with an overview of theoretical findings, followed by the results of a quantitative survey of parents. This study is novel in that it addresses the issue of secondary school student and parental involvement in Hungary, which has not been extensively studied, with few international examples.

Theoretical Overview

A Historical Overview of Vocational Education and Training From the 2000s to the Present

The Hungarian education system is comparable to continental models observed in Germany and Poland, with a greater emphasis on classical secondary education than is typical of community schools in the British and American systems. General characteristics of continental education systems include tripartism (primary, secondary and tertiary education), selectivity and early choice of the type of training (Kozma, 2006). The history of vocational education in Hungary is rich (Benke & Rachwał, 2022), and the development of our public education system started long before the regime change.

The objective of our study is to provide an overview of the relevant background of vocational education and training, with a particular focus on recent changes. It is not our intention to provide a comprehensive history of the subject.

Frameworks for Parental Involvement

There is a considerable body of educational research literature on the definitions and domains of parental involvement. However, the conceptual frameworks employed by researchers sometimes adopt disparate perspectives and emphasise different aspects of the topic (Bakker & Denessen, 2007).

The theoretical framework for this study is Epstein's model. The Epsteinian category system is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and begins with the innermost micro-environment. Epstein identified six different forms of parental involvement. 1. parenting refers to the skills that parents use to create emotional and physical safety within the family, thereby facilitating the child's learning and development. 2. communication: communication between the school and the family, which can be initiated by either party. 3. Volunteerism: involving the parent in the life of the school through volunteerism. 4. Home learning: the provision of assistance to students in their studies outside the classroom, such as helping them with homework. 5: Participation in decision-making at school. 6: Engagement with the local community. In a reinterpretation of the term, Epstein et al. (2002) suggested using the term "family-school partnership" in place of "school policy," suggesting that the latter term may be too narrow.

Parental Involvement in Hungarian Secondary Education

Previous research has demonstrated that the parent-teacher relationship is somewhat impersonal at the secondary education level (Lannert & Szekszárdi, 2015). This process is partly natural, but there are reasons for the narrowing of the parent-teacher relationship.

Parents frequently feel less of a need for more profound involvement at this level, while teachers are often constrained by a lack of time for interaction. In most cases, schools offer parents and teachers a limited number of opportunities for interaction, such as parent-teacher conferences and welcome events. One of the primary factors contributing to these constraints is the distance between parents and schools, which is often influenced by the age of the child (Lannert & Szekszárdi, 2015).

In examining parental involvement, it is of paramount importance to analyse the barriers and obstacles that may impede such involvement. A significant factor influencing parental participation is their socioeconomic status and level of education (Auerbach, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Driessen et al., 2005; Imre, 2017; Smit et al., 2007).

In light of the above, it can be concluded that research focusing on secondary schools, both those that provide A levels and those that do not, is of utmost importance. It can be observed that parental involvement is less common in secondary schools, and the social status of families is lower in this type of schools. Consequently, it is particularly important to investigate the extent to which parents are considered a resource in secondary schools. The current study aims to address this gap and contribute to national research on parental involvement.

Purpose of the Study

A review of the literature revealed a paucity of research on vocational education in secondary schools in Hungary. Moreover, there is a lack of studies on parental involvement in vocational education, with the majority of existing research focusing on the characteristics of parental involvement in primary schools and the children's academic achievement (Bacskai, 2020; Fehérvári, 2016; Harsányi, 2021; Józsa & Fejes, 2010; Koltói et al., 2019; Nyitrai et al., 2019; Pusztai, 2004; Szemerszki, 2015). There is little research on the participation of parents of VET students in Hungary.

The current research is limited to data from Hungary and VET. The present study is exploratory in nature and aims to obtain data and information on parents of children enrolled in VET schools. The objective is not to make comparisons between different types of schools, but rather to obtain results pertaining to this specific type of school that can serve as a foundation for future research. The current study is limited to examining parental involvement in the school and does not extend to the home. In the current study, we formulated two research questions, which are:

1. What are the characteristics of parental involvement in vocational schools and training institutions?
2. What are the most common barriers to parental involvement?

Based on the literature reviewed, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: A methodical analysis by Kocsis & Pusztai (2022) indicated that parents' volunteerism is more prominent in primary schools and kindergartens. Thus, based

on the literature, we hypothesise that low engagement rates will be observed in different areas of school participation.

H2: We hypothesise, based on the literature (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2008), that barriers will be mainly related to family difficulties, with few school-related barriers.

Research Methods and Tools

Method and Sampling

The current quantitative research was conducted under the leadership of the MTA-DE "Families and Teachers' Cooperation" research group. The current data collection is titled "Family-school relations through the eyes of parents." The questionnaire was completed anonymously and voluntarily. A total of 1002 parents participated in the survey. The questionnaire was sent to 100,000 parents from Hungary, Transcarpathia and Transylvania. During the survey, parents from the districts of Hajdú-Bihar, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok were interviewed. The research team considered parents to be primarily involved in their child's upbringing and have the most information about their child's affairs. In terms of educational level, parents were contacted whose children attended upper primary school, upper secondary vocational school (with a school-leaving certificate), vocational school (without a school-leaving certificate), and general secondary school (gymnasium). A paper questionnaire was used for the data, which took place in autumn 2022. The non-representative sample is a limitation of the research, and therefore our results cannot be generalized, and our findings are specific and valid only for the study sample.

Despite the limitations, the research is of great importance because it surveyed a group that is less frequently studied and more difficult for researchers to reach, and it was possible to collect data that is incomplete in Hungary. SPSS 22 was used to analyse the data, and descriptive statistics were used in the analysis.

Measurement Tools

The main structural elements of the questionnaire were: (1) questions about the child and the child's school, (2) experiences with school, (3) habits of working with the child, (4) barriers to the child's participation in school programmes, (5) questions about school-family collaboration, and (6) questions about the respondent.

Responses were narrowed to Hungarian data and to vocational education and training only. This survey focused on parents' involvement in school and their experiences with school. Parents' social backgrounds were examined using closed-ended questions. For school participation, we included 19 questions. These questions were answered

on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). For barriers, 10 questions were included. Respondents were also asked to indicate their response on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Sample

The questionnaire was completed by 1002 respondents from 4 counties in Hungary, Transcarpathia and Transylvania. The vast majority of respondents were mothers/caregivers (84%). The gender distribution of respondents' children was almost the same, 55% girls, and 45% boys. Preliminary examination of the questionnaires revealed that the majority of parents who completed the questionnaire had the highest level of education, at the university level, followed by secondary education, and then primary education.

Preliminary analysis of the questionnaires provided information on the schools that the respondents' children attended. The distribution of the subjects' children in the sample was as follows: 38% children attended a school run by a school district, 23% by a church, 19% by a municipality, 16% by a vocational training centre and 4% by other institutions.

Primary analysis of the questionnaire yielded information on the type of school attended by the child. Of the children of the respondents, 41% attended a primary school (upper secondary) (N = 225), 38% attended an upper secondary school (N = 214), 13% attended an upper secondary vocational school (N = 83), and 7% attended a school that does not offer a high school diploma (N = 65).

A cross tabulation was used to obtain the correlation between the county and school type. In the Hajdú-Bihar county, 79 of the 201 respondents' children attended an upper primary school, 61 attended an upper secondary school, 35 attended a vocational secondary school/technical school with a school-leaving certificate, and 19 attended a vocational school without a school-leaving certificate. In the Szabolcs-Satmár-Bierég county, 61 of the 249 respondents' children attended an upper secondary primary school, 130 attended an upper secondary school, 17 attended an upper secondary vocational schools/technical schools with a baccalaureate degree, and 41 attended a vocational school without a baccalaureate degree. In the Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, 90 of the 153 respondents' children attended an upper secondary primary school, 32 attended a grammar school, 26 attended a vocational secondary school/technical school with a baccalaureate diploma, and 5 attended a vocational school without a baccalaureate diploma. Of the 24 respondents from Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok county, 7 of their children attend upper primary school, 3 attend secondary school, 14 attend vocational secondary school/technical school with a diploma, and 0 attend vocational school without a diploma.

With regard to the education of the respondents, a higher proportion have a baccalaureate or university/college degree than a certificate from other types of schools. In terms of the labour market status, the percentage of parents who are employed is underrepresented in non-grammar schools. On the other hand, they are overrepresented

in terms of the educational status. Among the parents of these students, the proportion of parents who are public employees or have another labour market status is higher, but no significant correlation was found in this respect.

Results

Study of the Characteristics of Parental Involvement

Involvement in School

Research suggests that parental involvement is lower in secondary schools than in primary schools, partly because older students require less parental presence. Our study examines parental involvement in school programmes and events in vocational schools. Of the 19 questions, a significant correlation was found for whether parents can get their child to read every day.

Table 1. School Attendance in Upper Secondary and Vocational Schools

		Technical secondary school/ technical school (baccalaureate)	Vocational training (without baccalaureate)	Sign.
I always support my child's participation in excursions, theatre visits and community activities organised by the school.	I disagree	1.2%	6.3%	.016
	yes and no	2.4%	9.4%	
	I agree	96.3%	84.4%	
I always take part in the doors open day organized in our child's group, and in classroom observations open to parents.	I disagree	17.1%	20.3%	.000
	yes and no	24.4%	31.3%	
	I agree	58.5%	48.4%	
I take suggestions from my child's teachers about how I could help him/her study.	I disagree	41.5%	48.4%	.308
	yes and no	23.2%	15.6%	
	I agree	35.4%	35.9%	
I successfully control the time my child spends on the phone and computer.	I disagree	25.6%	25.8%	.000
	yes and no	35.4%	22.6%	
	I agree	39.0%	51.6%	

In the past 12 months, I have participated several times in events organized specifically for parents at my child's school, such as family day, school party, charity fair, school dance, etc.	I disagree	47.6%	41.3%	.009
	yes and no	26.8%	22.2%	
	I agree	25.6%	36.5%	
In the past 12 months, I have participated in several sporting events organized by my child's school.	I disagree	62.2%	57.1%	.063
	yes and no	13.4%	19.0%	
	I agree	24.4%	23.8%	
In the past 12 months, I have participated several times in art events at my child's school	I disagree	59.8%	57.8%	.045
	yes and no	12.2%	17.2%	
	I agree	28.0%	25.0%	
Talking to my child's current teacher is always uncomfortable.	I disagree	82.9%	74.6%	.897
	yes and no	11.0%	14.3%	
	I agree	6.1%	11.1%	
I do not understand the homework that my child brings home from school.	I disagree	47.6%	43.8%	.000
	yes and no	35.4%	32.8%	
	I agree	17.1%	23.4%	
I feel very uncomfortable when I have to talk to the headmaster or headmistress of my child's school.	I disagree	79.0%	73.4%	.168
	yes and no	14.8%	12.5%	
	I agree	6.2%	14.1%	
If my child was having problems at school, I wouldn't know how to ask for special help for him or her.	I disagree	79.3%	64.1%	.021
	yes and no	12.2%	10.9%	
	I agree	8.5%	25.0%	
I know the laws that apply to schools.	I disagree	22.2%	11.3%	.009
	yes and no	19.8%	22.6%	
	I agree	58.0%	66.1%	
Over the past 12 months, I have attended several school meetings.	I disagree	34.1%	39.1%	.092
	yes and no	18.3%	18.8%	
	I agree	47.6%	42.2%	

I have volunteered at my child's school in the last 12 months.	I disagree	59.8%	51.6%	.021
	yes and no	15.9%	17.2%	
	I agree	24.4%	31.3%	
In the past 12 months, I have made a voluntary donation to my child's school.	I disagree	58.5%	56.3%	.010
	yes and no	14.6%	15.6%	
	I agree	26.8%	28.1%	
I know of many school programmes for students.	I disagree	27.2%	31.7%	.019
	yes and no	22.2%	22.2%	
	I agree	50.6%	46.0%	
I always attend programmes and information sessions organised by the school counselor for parents.	I disagree	58.5%	61.3%	.437
	yes and no	20.7%	14.5%	
	I agree	20.7%	24.2%	
I often receive the help of a teaching assistant in my child's progress.	I disagree	56.1%	40.6%	.034
	yes and no	12.2%	23.4%	
	I agree	31.7%	35.9%	

Source: Author's calculations.

A review of the literature indicates that parents who view involvement in school as an integral aspect of parenting are more likely to be effectively engaged in their child's education. Among the 18 questions, we identified significant correlations in the following areas: parents' participation in open doors days was notably lower among respondents from secondary schools without a graduation certificate. Furthermore, the effective management of children's screen time demonstrated significant results. Moreover, the results indicated that parents' attendance at various school events over the past year, the fact that they understand homework and are familiar with school regulations were also significant. It was observed that respondents from high schools without diplomas were over-represented for some questions. The types of involvement identified by Epstein (2011), already cited in our study, confirm that parents who place a high priority on their child's academic performance are more likely to be involved in school life and organise various programmes.

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Previous research has demonstrated that parents encounter difficulties in participating in school programs. Questionnaires were designed to assess the barriers faced by parents, with respondents able to indicate whether each was experienced as a full, partial or non-existent barrier.

Table 2. Barriers to Parental Involvement

		Technical secondary school/ technical school (baccalaureate)	Vocational training (without baccalaureate)	Sign.
The time was not convenient for me.	not obstructed	74.4%	56.3%	.061
	yes and no	11.0%	21.9%	
	obstructed	14.6%	21.9%	
I couldn't get off work.	not obstructed	63.4%	55.6%	.271
	yes and no	8.5%	20.6%	
	obstructed	28.0%	23.8%	
There was no one to look after my child.	not obstructed	84.0%	74.2%	.100
	yes and no	2.5%	8.1%	
	obstructed	13.6%	17.7%	
The road to school is not safe.	not obstructed	98.8%	87.5%	.252
	yes and no	0.0%	9.4%	
	obstructed	1.2%	3.1%	
Transportation is difficult.	not obstructed	92.7%	79.7%	.062
	yes and no	2.4%	10.9%	
	obstructed	4.9%	9.4%	
I did not feel welcome at my child's school.	not obstructed	97.5%	92.2%	.096
	yes and no	0.0%	7.8%	
	obstructed	2.5%	0.0%	
I usually felt uncomfortable at the school.	not obstructed	91.5%	88.9%	.203
	yes and no	4.9%	7.9%	
	obstructed	3.7%	3.2%	
I felt like I didn't understand what they were talking about at the school.	not obstructed	96.3%	90.6%	.205
	yes and no	2.4%	7.8%	
	obstructed	1.2%	1.6%	
I thought that participation was not important for my child's development.	not obstructed	91.1%	85.9%	.236
	yes and no	5.1%	10.9%	
	obstructed	3.8%	3.1%	

I did not know how I could participate in school activities.	not obstructed	81.7%	79.0%	.358
	yes and no	9.8%	14.5%	
	obstructed	8.5%	6.5%	
My child did not want me to participate.	not obstructed	86.6%	83.3%	.005
	yes and no	6.1%	10.0%	
	obstructed	7.3%	6.7%	

Source: Author's calculations.

The table indicates that the primary obstacle to parental involvement is children's reluctance to engage with their parents in school activities. A series of 10 questions yielded significant results in this regard. The Hoover–Dempsey factors indicate that the main obstacles to parental involvement originate from within the family, rather than from school-related issues. This also supports our second hypothesis, based on the literature (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2008), that the barriers would be mostly related to family difficulties, with few school-related barriers.

Conclusion

The present study was confined to analysing Hungarian VET data on schools both with and without a high school diploma. The study was exploratory, with the objective of collecting information on parents of students enrolled in vocational education and training programmes and obtaining VET-specific results. No comparisons were made with other types of schools or of differences between providers. A study of parent-school relationships in the four selected counties was conducted with a focus on vocational education. A review of the literature revealed a paucity of data on the quality and content of interaction with the target group.

In terms of parental involvement in VET institutions, significant correlations were found that are consistent with the types of involvement identified by Epstein (1987). Parents who prioritise their child's academic success tend to be more involved in school activities. In terms of barriers, family-related challenges were expected to outweigh school-related ones, but the main barrier appears to be children's reluctance to involve parents in school programmes. The study highlights significant differences between types of school, underlining the need for closer examination, particularly in institutions that offer A levels and those that do not.

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