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Teachers' Attitudes towards Roma Pupils from the Perspective of Roma Pupils and Their Mothers

In this article, we will discuss the case of fair and inclusive schools that are considerate of the specific and unique needs of their pupils and offer quality education for all. We will highlight the most important indicators of inclusive education and focus on research that confirms the importance of the teachers' willingness to establish good interpersonal relationships with their pupils. In the empirical section, we will introduce the results of our qualitative study. Based on interviews conducted with 20 mothers and 20 primary school pupils in two Slovene Roma settlements, we explored how pupils and their mothers perceive teachers' attitudes towards Roma children. Our findings were very promising, for they showed that the interviewed pupils and their mothers had a positive experience with the teachers and their pedagogical work with Roma children. However, we should not ignore the few cases that pointed to ethnic discrimination towards Roma pupils.

Keywords: Roma pupils, relationships with teachers, inclusive education, ethnic discrimination, qualitative research.

Odnosi učiteljev do romskih učencev z vidika romskih učencev in njihovih mater

V prispevku obravnavamo pravično in inkluzivno šolo, ki upošteva različne potrebe učencev in vsem omogoča kakovostno šolanje. Izpostavimo pomembnejše indikatorje uresničevanja inkluzije ter se posvetimo raziskavam, ki izpostavljajo pomen učiteljeve skrbi za vzpostavljanje dobrih medosebnih odnosov z učenci. V empiričnem delu prispevka prikazujemo rezultate kvalitativne raziskave. Na podlagi intervjujev z 20 romskimi osnovnošolci ter 20 romskimi materami, opravljenih v romskih naseljih v Sloveniji, smo raziskali, kako slednji zaznavajo odnos učiteljev do romskih učencev. Izsledki naše raziskave so spodbudni, saj kažejo, da intervjuvani romski učenci in matere doživljajo odnos učiteljev in njihovo pedagoško delo z romskimi učenci pretežno pozitivno. Vendar pa ob tem ne gre prezreti tudi primerov, ki kažejo, da se romski učenci v šoli še vedno srečujejo z diskriminacijo, ki temelji na etnični pripadnosti.

Ključne besede: romski učenci, odnosi z učitelji, inkluzija v šoli, etnična diskriminacija, kvalitativna raziskava.

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1. Introduction

The Slovene Roma are usually classified as members of the lowest social classes. Even though their social status varies from region to region, it is still significantly lower than that of the rest of the population, which also affects, among other things, their low level of education (Ministry of Education and Sport 2004). Roma pupils' academic success depends on many factors, i.e., their linguistic and cultural differences, teaching content that does not take into account the characteristics of the Roma community, poor pre-existing knowledge before entering school, differing behavioural and thought patterns, different habits (Peček Čuk & Lesar 2006, 164), an undisputed environment, poor work habits (Lesar & Dežman 2012, 209), inadequate living conditions for homework assignments, uneducated parents, pupils skipping and leaving class (Krek & Vogrinc 2005, 8; Vonta & Jager 2013, 110), the absence of trained professionals who have experience in working with Roma children, low expectations regarding their school performance, lack of confidence in the school system, and Roma parents' poor involvement in the educational process and their lack of cooperation with the school (Bešter & Medvešek 2007, 139).

Pupils' performance and academic success are also significantly influenced by the school itself, especially its dominant culture, the school atmosphere, and interpersonal relationships. School is not only a place for obtaining knowledge, but also a space in which pupils can encounter other individuals with whom to shape important relationships. Numerous studies (e.g., Cornelius-White 2007, 127; Furrer & Skinner 2003, 159; Hamre & Pianta 2001, 634) have confirmed that pupils' relationships with their peers and teachers are significantly linked to the well-being and acceptance of the pupils into the school environment, their learning performance, and their academic success. Vonta and Jager (2013, 21) state that schools cannot resolve all the factors that affect the educational success of Roma pupils, but that they can change or have a significant impact on at least some of them, thereby increasing the pupils' chances for academic success.

Based on this, we decided to explore how Roma pupils and their mothers from Roma settlements in Prekmurje and Dolenjska perceive the pedagogical work and attitude of teachers towards Roma pupils in Slovene elementary schools and whether their attitudes and relationships with the children contribute to the poor academic performance of Roma pupils. We wished to determine whether the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils were encouraging, supportive, understanding, and non-discriminatory. Through this study, we aimed to give a voice and an opportunity to the members of the Roma community and thereby raise awareness of the current challenges in the primary school education system.

The article consists of a theoretical section and an empirical section. The first focuses on a fair and inclusive school that considers the varying needs of its

pupils and thereby offers quality education for all. We considered social acceptance, respect, and a sense of belonging as important indicators of social inclusion and emphasized that with the realization of all cultures within the school community we could help to create a tolerant coexistence. At the same time, this type of school community could help the pupils that belong to vulnerable groups to have different and more pleasant interpersonal experiences than in wider society. Next, we focused on the importance of the teacher's willingness to establish good interpersonal relationships with their pupils, which significantly influences the involvement and activity of those pupils in the classroom. We also introduced the results of our study to confirm that positive relationships between teachers and pupils are not only related to the well-being of the pupils at school, but also to their learning success and behaviour. In the empirical section, however, we will introduce the results of our qualitative study that focused on Roma pupils' and mothers' perceptions of teachers' pedagogical work and their attitudes towards Roma pupils. We aimed to determine whether their relationships affected the inclusive orientation of the studied elementary schools and whether the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils were an important factor that contributed to the lesser academic success of Roma pupils.

2. Creating a Fair and Inclusive School

Pupils enter school with varying prior knowledge, experiences, skills, abilities, interests, as well as wishes and plans for the future. Thus, it is the school's job to take into consideration all of the children's unique traits and desires and offer them a fair, successful, satisfying, and quality education (according to Lesar 2013a). In modern democratic societies, fair education is one of the most important characteristics of national education systems. When we talk about justice within the educational system, we also refer to social justice in general (Medveš et al. 2008, 75).

A fair school, according to Peček and Lesar (2006, 12), is one in which the processes and activities are equally accessible to all pupils. In this case, it is allowed or even necessary for underprivileged and privileged pupils not to be treated equally, so that the underprivileged can also benefit from the learning process. Among the latter, Rawls (1999, cited in Peček & Lesar 2006, 13) mentions those with lower social status (often typical for the Roma community) and the less naturally gifted. It is important to add that the privileged are not supposed to be punished because of their initial advantages, which are neither fair nor unjust. Only the ways in which the fundamental social institutions deal with the pupils' basic differences can be considered fair or unfair.

In the past, Slovene primary schools had to deal with various cases of group exclusion, which confirm that the school system was unfair, as these groups did not have the opportunity to develop to their full potential. According to Lesar

(2009, 10) these groups included pupils with special needs and ethnic minorities (Roma and children of immigrants from the former Republic of Yugoslavia). In contrast, it is necessary to advocate for an inclusive school, which tends to “reduce all exclusionary procedures and devaluation of pupils based on disabilities, race, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and other factors that make school life even more difficult” (Peček & Lesar 2006, 28).

Inclusive schools are meant to introduce a series of adjustments that take into account the unique and varying needs of its pupils. Lesar (2013a) highlights social acceptance, respect, and a sense of belonging as important indicators of inclusion. Namely, inclusive schools are supposed to create a culture that does not give priority to the values of certain dominant groups, but rather focuses on including all the cultures of its pupils and promotes tolerant coexistence. At the same time, Lesar (2013b) highlights that teachers and schools, the latter embedded in the socio-economic and cultural relations within an individual society, can help their pupils have more positive experiences in society. With their knowledge and engagement, as well as the awareness that they can influence their pupils, teachers can prevent the migration of existing relationships from wider society to the school environment as well as stop enlarging the differences between individuals, especially between the nation's members of the majority and the members of marginalized groups.

3. The Importance of Establishing Good Relationships between Teachers and Pupils

Teacher-pupil relationships can significantly influence pupils' development and their success in various areas of life (Peklaj & Pečjak 2015, 71). According to the PISA survey (OECD 2015, 2), positive and constructive relationships between teachers and pupils are key to promoting the pupils' social and emotional well-being. The results of this survey showed that, on average, in OECD countries, pupils who reported having good relationships with their teachers also made friends more easily, were more satisfied with their school, and had a stronger sense of belonging. A study by Chiu et al. (2016, 191) also confirmed that teacher-pupil relationships have a significant impact on pupils' well-being and their sense of belonging to their class or school. The same study demonstrated that pupils' sense of belonging to the school depends not only on relationships with their peers but also on those with their teachers. In another study, Uslu and Gizir (2016, 74) concluded that relationships between teachers and pupils can strongly influence pupils' sense of belonging and feeling that they are a part of the school. Other authors (Hamre & Pianta 2001, 634; Ottová-Jordan et al. 2015, 88) have even stated that pupils' well-being at school depends on their relationships with their teachers and peers. Hamre and Pianta (2001, 634) similarly determined that having a positive relationship with teachers is crucial, as they can help chil-

dren feel more comfortable at school, build more meaningful relationships with peers, and have a greater sense of safety.

Furrer and Skinner (2003, 159) pointed out that a teacher's relationship with their pupils is not only related to the pupils' well-being in the classroom, but also to their perception of learning. In this study, pupils who felt valued by their teachers were more likely to report feeling happy in the classroom. They even found school activities more interesting and fun. On the other hand, pupils who felt unimportant or ignored by their teachers reported to be bored and angry when they had to participate in learning activities. Based on previous research, Juvonen (2006, 659) pointed out that relationships between teachers and pupils that are based on support and characterized by a low level of dependence and conflict make it much easier for children to function at school. Such relationships are especially important for pupils who lack social support in their home environment. Moritz Rudasill et al. (2010, 406) came to similar conclusions, confirming that high-quality relationships between teachers and pupils have a positive effect on children, especially on pupils who come from less stimulating environments.

Hamre and Pianta (2001, 634) determined that negative attitudes reflected in conflicts and dependence on teachers can be an important predictor of pupils' grades and achievements on standardized knowledge tests. They can also predict the work habits of pupils in elementary schools. Cornelius-White (2007, 127) studied the relational characteristics of teachers (warmth, empathy, authenticity, non-directiveness, stimulation of higher thought processes, stimulation with challenges, adaptation to individual and social differences) in connection with pupils' achievements. He found that the associations of these variables with cognitive variables were above average, especially critical/creative thinking and academic achievements, while associations with IQ, grades, and perceived achievements were at a medium level. Associations with scientific achievement and performance in the field of social sciences, however, were very low. Another study also confirmed that teacher-pupil relationships significantly impact pupils' academic achievements. McCormick and O'Connor (2014, 10) stated that conflicts between teachers and pupils are more frequent at schools associated with lower reading achievement of elementary school pupils. We can also draw conclusions about the connection between teacher support and pupils' academic achievements from another Slovene study conducted by Puklek Levpušček and Zupančič (2009). The authors found that younger adolescents who perceive their teachers positively express more positive motivational beliefs and achieve better results in mathematics. Pupils who rated their mathematics teachers as responsive and helpful, and who evaluated their work positively, were more successful at mathematics compared to their classmates with negative teacher experiences (Puklek Levpušček & Zupančič 2009, 562).

Research further showed a connection between teacher-pupil relationships and pupil behaviour. O'Connor et al. (2011, 120) determined that quality relationships between teachers and pupils predict fewer behavioural problems and help prevent behavioural issues in the later stages of pupils' development. Obsuth et al. (2021, 17) concluded that a positive relationship between teachers and pupils serves as a protective factor against behavioural problems (aggression and delinquency) in adolescents. Children aged 10 who reported having better relationships with their teachers were less likely to be involved in delinquent behaviour later on at the age of 12, 15 and 17. Similarly, Archambault et al. (2017, 1707) found that pupils who had close relationships with their teachers reported greater behavioural adjustments compared to those who had less positive relationships with their teachers. Conflicting relationships between teachers and pupils have proved to be especially harmful for boys. Research has also confirmed that relationships between teachers and pupils are strongly related to the occurrence of peer violence. Thus, Marengo et al. (2018, 1211) found that pupils who were victims of violence or bullies perceived their relationships with teachers as more conflictual compared to other pupils who were not involved in any form of violent behaviour. Pupils who were both bullies and victims reported having more conflictual relationships with teachers than those who were just bullies. On the other hand, pupils who were only victims of violence reported having a similarly conflictual relationship with their teachers as the pupils who were both victims and bullies. The latter turned out to be the group that had the worst relationship with their teachers.

The research presented above shows a significant connection between teacher-pupil relationships and the pupils' academic success, behaviour, and well-being at school. These findings further point to the importance of good and healthy teacher-pupil relationships. Peček and Munda (2015, 174) investigated the attitude of teachers towards Roma pupils on a sample of 77 Roma elementary school pupils from Maribor. The results of their study showed that the majority of pupils who were included in the study had positive experiences with their teachers, while 4 pupils gave negative descriptions of their teachers and mentioned cases of discrimination. Of the pupils, 14 gave a mixed description of their teachers. However, we should not forget that the study also confirmed that teachers are not fully aware of the importance of their influence on the learning performance of Roma pupils (Lesar & Dežman 2012, 218; Peček et al. 2006, 161).

4. Empirical Research

In the following section, we present the results of our empirical research, in which we tried to find out how Roma pupils and their mothers perceive teachers' pedagogical work and their attitudes towards Roma pupils. The paper introduces some of the results of a more extensive empirical study, which was conducted as

the basis of a master's thesis at the Department of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Maribor (Kovač 2021).

4.1 Research Method and Sample

We used an empirical qualitative research method and included a non-random occasional sample of 20 Roma pupils (from Slovene Roma settlements) in the third educational period of primary school in the 2019/2020 school year. We decided to conduct the interviews in Prekmurje and Dolenjska because these two regions are known to have the largest number of community members with the most noticeable social differences (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2017, 7–11). The interviews in Prekmurje were arranged directly with the interviewed subjects, most of whom, just like the first author of the article, originate from the Roma settlement in Dolga vas and have children in the third educational period of primary school. Some interviews, however, were conducted with the residents of another Roma settlement in Prekmurje (Pušča) – the interviewees were not the author's acquaintances but were recommended by them. For the interviews in Dolenjska, we contacted the Roma activator employed at the Novo Mesto Developmental Education Centre, who made appointments with the interviewees and accompanied us to the Roma settlements during the interviews. These were conducted in the months after the distance education period, right after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia. The pupils had just returned to school and had only spent a month back in the classroom. We interviewed 10 Roma pupils from Prekmurje and 10 from Dolenjska, of which 12 were girls and 8 were boys. One of the interviewed pupils (from Dolenjska), had failed that year, nine had finished school with a 2, sufficient knowledge (two from Prekmurje and seven from Dolenjska), seven pupils had finished with a 3, good knowledge (five from Prekmurje and two from Dolenjska), and two girls had finished with a 2, very good knowledge (both from Prekmurje). One of the interviewed pupils from Prekmurje could not provide information on her grades. The interviewed Roma pupils from Prekmurje lived in two Roma settlements and attended four different primary schools, while the pupils in Dolenjska, who also came from two separate Roma settlements, attended three different primary schools.

Besides Roma pupils, the study also included the mothers of Roma children. Of these, ten were from Dolenjska and ten from Prekmurje. To be precise, our sample included 16 mothers of the interviewed Roma children and four other mothers, whose children we did not interview. On average, each of the interviewed mothers had 3.2 children. Ten of them had not completed primary school, seven had a primary school education, and three a secondary vocational education. Of the mothers, eleven had work experience, the remaining nine had never been employed, nor had they taken on any occasional jobs.

4.2 Research Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

We collected our data from a semi-structured interview with predefined basic open-ended questions, which, in some cases, were followed by sub-questions that arose naturally during the interviews.

The data was collected between July 2020 and August 2020, which is when the interviews in the Roma settlements in Prekmurje (Dolga vas and Pušča) and in Dolenjska (Žabjak-Brezje and Šmihel) were conducted. In Prekmurje, the majority of the participants were interviewed on the premises of the Multi-purpose Roma Centre Dolinsko-Dolga vas, while the rest of the interviews were conducted in the subjects' homes. All interviews in Prekmurje were conducted in a calm environment without any disruptions. In Dolenjska, the subjects were interviewed at home, mostly in their backyards, some of which were located next to the road or in family yards and louder environments where it was not possible to ensure enough peace and quiet. Some of the interviews were disrupted by small children.

The interviews were conducted by the first author of the article, who explained the purpose of the study to all the interviewed subjects and asked them to answer the questions honestly. In Dolenjska, where the author did not know the interviewees, she also had to introduce herself and inform them of her origin. During the relaxed informal gatherings in Dolenjska, we had the opportunity to get to know the subjects and explain the purpose of our visit. Nevertheless, some of the mothers were slightly tense and less relaxed during the conversations, since they were not actively involved or included in their children's educational process. We also encountered quite a few organizational obstacles, as we had to wait for or even go in search of the interviewees who forgot about our appointment. We did not encounter such problems in Prekmurje.

All interviews were conducted individually and in private. The conversations during the interviews were held in the Slovene language. Before each interview, the parents of the interviewed children had to sign a written consent form in which they were informed about the purpose and course of the study. By signing this form, they also confirmed that their children would participate in the interviews in accordance with the ethical principles of voluntariness and that their answers would remain anonymous. This consent also gave them the right to change their mind and withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. All interviewed subjects consented to being audio recorded. The average interview lasted about 20 minutes, the shortest 12, and the longest 32 minutes.

4.3 Data Processing Procedures

The audio recordings were transcribed into written form and changed into Word format after repeated listening. In order to analyse the results for the purpose of

this article, we separated the interviewees into two groups (mothers and children) and marked them with consecutive interview numbers (the pupils' interviews were marked with Interview 1 to Interview 20 and the mothers' interviews with Interview 21 to Interview 40). After the transcription was done, we listened to the tracks again to make sure that everything had been transcribed correctly.

To process the collected data, we first carried out a qualitative content analysis and then marked the parts of the transcribed text which we thought were relevant to and important for our research. Next, the text was broken down into its smallest meaningful components, thus obtaining coding units with information relevant to the purpose of this study. Following this, we gave code names to the latter coding units and divided them into categories based on similarity. During the last step, we sorted the categories according to their meaning and determined the central themes of the study (Adam et al. 2012, 123–162).

5. Results and Interpretation

Following this, we introduced the way in which pupils and their mothers perceive the attitude of teachers towards Roma pupils. In the context of the previous chapter, we were initially interested in how Roma pupils perceive their teachers, and what they think about their pedagogical work and knowledge assessment. In the second part of the introduced results, we focused on how Roma mothers perceive the teachers' pedagogical work and attitudes towards Roma children.

5.1 The Pupils' Perception of the Teachers' Attitudes towards Roma Pupils

First, we presented the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils from the perspective of Roma pupils, which, as seen in Table 1, were divided into two categories.

Table 1: The pupils' perception of the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils

Theme	Category	Code
The pupils' perception of the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils	The teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils	Kind. Helpful. Good explanations. Equal treatment. Depends on the attitude and effort of the pupil. Discrimination.
	Knowledge assessment of Roma pupils	Righteous grading. Discriminatory grading – considering ethnicity. Grading adjustments.

Source: Own Data.

5.1.1 Perception of the Teachers' Attitudes towards Roma Pupils

The Roma pupils mostly described their teachers in a positive way. They stated that they are kind, helpful, and really make an effort. One of the pupils said: "They were friendly and liked to help. If you did not know things, they tried to help, so you could finish the class with a positive grade" (Interview 8). The pupils also stated that the teachers explain things well, are very understanding, and are open to negotiation and common agreements. Some of the pupils pointed out that the positive attitude of the teachers is the main reason why they like coming to school.

Some of the pupils stated that not all teachers are the same – some are friendly, while others are not. This was also confirmed by the following statement made by one of the interviewed pupils: "The best teacher is the math teacher, but the class teacher and the physical education teacher are also very good. They are very nice, they listen to what we want to say, while the others just shout at us" (Interview 11). The same pupil used the Slovene teacher as a negative example. In his opinion, the Slovene teacher is a bad teacher, because she screams all the time. However, he did not say that she only screams at Roma pupils. Similarly, other Roma pupils, who gave a negative assessment of their teachers, stated that teachers often yell at pupils, but none of them said that this only applies to Roma pupils.

Most of the Roma pupils said that their teachers treat them the same as they treat their non-Roma schoolmates and that sometimes they even defend Roma children in front of other pupils. The following is the statement by one of the pupils that confirms this: "At this school the teachers stood up for us Roma pupils and told the other children that we are the same as anybody else. They even told them not to behave like this [note: be discriminatory]" (Interview 9).

The interviewed pupils stated that the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils depends on the Roma pupils' attitude towards the teachers and other children in the class. When asked if the teachers were equally kind to all students, one of the pupils replied: "They are equally nice to everyone, however, if the Roma pupils are not nice to the teachers or their peers the teachers react in the same way" (Interview 14). The interviewed pupils also believe that the attitude of the teachers towards Roma pupils depends on the actual effort made by the Roma children. One of the interviewed pupils even said: "I consider the teachers nice. They are nice to me [note: teachers], because I am trying harder than the others" (Interview 13). The opinion that the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils depends mainly on the Roma pupils' attitude towards their teachers was more common among the interviewed subjects from Dolenjska. They admitted that Roma pupils often disrupt class, which then affects the teachers' attitude towards them.

The interviewed pupils had negative experiences and admitted to having discriminatory teachers as well. This can be confirmed by the following answer given by one of the pupils:

We were doing something, I don't remember what exactly, and she [note: teacher] told me that I don't have the same rights as the other children. She kept telling me I will never be like my mother because I am lazy. She was also rude to others, but she told me that I don't have the same rights as others. She said that, because I am a Roma. (Interview 10)

Another pupil described a discriminatory experience with a teacher as follows: "There was this one time when me and him [note: a classmate] quarrelled. I was yelled at, he was not, because he has problems with his nerves" (Interview 5). At the same time, the pupil pointed out that this does not happen very often.

5.1.2 Perception of the Roma Pupils' Knowledge Assessment

Most pupils believed the teachers were fair in assessing their knowledge, as they always got the grade they deserved, sometimes even a higher one. One of pupils stated: "I always got the grade I deserved, sometimes an even higher one" (Interview 10).

Some of the interviewed pupils pointed out that teachers are unfair and strict in assessing their knowledge and that they give unjustified negative grades. One of them said: "Yes, the history teacher is like that. Some pupils don't do what they are asked during class, and she starts screaming and then gives them a negative grade. She should first warn them before giving out negative grades" (Interview 20). Some of the interviewed pupils also thought that teachers, when assessing knowledge, are more considerate of the academically more successful students, which was confirmed by the following answer: "Yes, for example the [...] teacher [...]. When writing a test, I was only missing one single point for a positive grade – just one point – and he immediately gave me a 1 (insufficient). To others, who were one point short, he gave a 3 (good), not a 2 (sufficient)" (Interview 7).

When asked why she thought she didn't get that extra point like the others, she said: "Because I was apparently stupider" (Interview 7). When the interviewed pupils talked about why their teachers were unjust, none of them, with the exception of one student from Dolenjska, stated that the reason for it was their ethnicity.

Some of the answers regarding the teachers' assessment of knowledge insinuated that teachers treat Roma pupils differently. The latter is clearly highlighted in the following answer: "If we know everything, they still do not give us an 5 (excellent). If I know everything, they only give me a 2 (sufficient), while the civilians [note: students from the majority population], even if they know a bit, they get an 5 (excellent) or a 4 (very good)" (Interview 12).

During the interviews, Roma pupils repeatedly pointed out that teachers adapt the teaching process to their capabilities. They explained that during exams and oral assessments of knowledge, teachers adjust the tasks or questions, so that they can get a positive grade, or that they only ask them questions or give tasks for a positive grade. One of the pupils summed up her thoughts as follows: “In some subjects, not everyone is treated the same way” (Interview 19) and emphasized that the teachers ask her easier questions or give her less challenging assignments. The pupils from Dolenjska talked about the adaptation of tasks and assessment, while the pupils from Prekmurje did not mention any of that.

5.2 The Teachers’ Attitudes Towards Roma Pupils from the Perspective of Roma Mothers

This topic was divided into two categories, both of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: The teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils from the perspective of Roma mothers

Theme	Category	Code
The teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils from the perspective of Roma mothers	The teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils	Equal treatment. Depends on the attitude and effort of the pupil. Kind. Helpful. Available. Discrimination. Cases of violent behaviour towards pupils.
	Knowledge assessment of Roma pupils	Fair. Discriminatory grading – considering ethnicity. Giving preference to certain pupils. Unprofessional. Grading adjustments.

Source: Own Data

5.2.1 Perception of the Teachers’ Attitudes towards Roma Pupils

The interviewed mothers perceived the attitudes of the primary school teachers towards their children as friendly and equal. They evaluated that the teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils depends mainly on the children’s attitude towards the teachers and their peers, as well as on the work and effort the Roma pupils are willing to put into their school obligations. One of the interviewed mothers stood out with her statement, as she said that teachers go easy on Roma pupils, continuing with: “[...] as far as I can tell, it is harder and stricter for those other kids, the Slovene ones” (Interview 26).

The Roma mothers referred to their kids’ teachers in a rather positive way. They believed that the teachers are friendly, helpful, and always available if the

children or parents need them. We detected a slightly more positive description of the teachers in Dolenjska, some of which even conducted home visits, especially during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the interviewed Roma mothers, who does not attend school meetings because she communicates with the teachers over the phone or through a Roma assistant, described the teachers as follows: “As far as I can see – they have come here a couple of times during this corona period – they are very friendly, also the class teacher. I have nothing bad to say about them. They are normal, they help if we need them” (Interview 23).

When Roma mothers described the teachers’ attitudes negatively, they mostly referred to unequal treatment of the pupils, but the reason behind it was not always ethnicity. Some of the interviewed mothers, however, warned that the teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils is discriminatory. They believed that teachers are not fair to Roma children, especially in conflicts with non-Roma children. One of the mothers shed light on the problem, saying: “Well, maybe sometimes there are conflicts. If they fight, it’s almost certain that the Roma child will be to blame” (Interview 36). Another mother shared examples of verbal abuse – a teacher insulted her daughter by saying she is a “Gypsy” (Interview 32). Another interviewed subject even mentioned a case of physical violence:

Yes, the class teacher. He threw chalk at him. [...]. They were loud in the class, and he threw a piece of chalk at him. Then he and I [note: husband] went, but he did not tell us [note: son]. The other children told us that he threw chalk at him, so we went to school and had a meeting. He [note: husband] warned that this can never happen again. We had peace for a while, but after two months the teacher hit him on the head again. (Interview 31)

From the statements of the interviewed mother, it is hard to tell whether the teacher’s actions were committed because of the child’s ethnicity or for other reasons. The same mother also said that the teacher probably hit the other child – her son’s classmate – who was also involved in the same conflict.

5.2.2 Roma Pupils’ Knowledge Assessment from the Perspective of Roma Mothers

The Roma mothers pointed out that their children’s teachers are fair when it comes to assessing knowledge and added that teachers used to be more unfair when they themselves attended elementary school. One of the interviewed mothers explained the situation as follows:

Because when I was at school, we were learning the same stuff, well actually we weren’t. They gave us something else to learn. But even if we knew a lot, they would only give us a D. Now, it is different. When school started, and the teachers came to talk to us,

I wanted to know how she was doing at school. I said that I would like to see how much she [note: daughter] knows. She should get a grade that reflects her knowledge. Grading nowadays should be different than when I was at school – I only got Ds, even if I knew more. But now with her it's not like that. Now they grade her according to how much she knows. (Interview 29)

Four Roma mothers from Prekmurje perceived their children's knowledge assessment as unfair, two of them even pointed out that the reason behind it is the children's ethnicity. One of the mothers stated: "I think they are treating them differently, the Roma children and those others. Some deserve it [note: a bad grade], but the Slovene children get fewer bad grades than the Roma children" (Interview 32). The other two mothers said that it is the teachers from smaller schools who are problematic. They explained that the teachers and parents from smaller schools know each other and as a result the teachers prefer the children of certain parents. One of the interviewed mothers added:

Acquaintances are a problem. Some come from the same village, live nearby and know each other. He will deserve a B, make mistakes, and still get an A. Some [note: children who's parents do not know the teachers privately, outside of school] try really hard and have it [note: knowledge], yet the teachers will not acknowledge it – they will even give them a lower one [note: grade]. There are huge differences, but that's acquaintances. (Interview 35)

Another critical description came from a mother who stated that the teachers are not experts in their field, do not take into consideration the differences between pupils or know how to adjust their work to kids with special needs:

Ugh, the teachers at this school are really terrible. Well, not to be rude to all of them; there is one young teacher who is new, and she is great, but the others, especially the older ones – they don't behave like teachers at all. You know that my older one [note: son] got a written confirmation, he is dyslexic. Still, they always bothered him with handwriting and were telling him he should write bigger or smaller. When he received the official diagnosis, they still didn't take this into account, even though everything was official and written on paper. He could have taken the tests orally, that was his right, but they did not care. And it is not just my son [...]. They don't understand that pupils are different, mine can't be like the others, and the others aren't all good either. They don't know how to adapt to anyone. (Interview 40)

On the contrary, some of the interviewed children and mothers from Dolenjska pointed out that the teachers adapt their teaching methods and content to Roma pupils, which means that they prepare easier questions and tasks for them. All of these mothers, with one exception, perceived this as a positive thing. The mother that was critical on this matter pointed out that this is not correct and that Roma pupils should be treated the same way as any other pupil in the class:

No, they don't treat everyone the same way [...]. Because, for example, sometimes mine [note: my son] learned everything that was on the question paper, yet he only got a B. I believe that it is the question paper's fault. It only allows for a B. If he hadn't studied from the paper, he would have received a higher grade. Because other pupils, non-Roma pupils, do not get this question paper – only Roma pupils get it – the questions and answers. (Interview 21)

6. Discussion

The purpose of this article was to investigate how Roma pupils and their mothers perceive teachers' pedagogical work and attitudes towards Roma pupils. Namely, the teacher-pupil relationship can have a positive impact on the pupils' well-being, sense of acceptance, and academic performance. In the case of Roma pupils, this relationship is even more important, since Roma are considered one of the most marginalized groups in Slovenia. This group faces many challenges both in the educational system and in other social realms. Although school is embedded in the socio-economic-cultural side of society, explains Lesar (2013b), it can give pupils a different, perhaps more positive experience than what they are experiencing outside of school in wider society. We use the term positive experiences to encompass interpersonal relationships, social acceptance, respect, and a sense of belonging to the school, which are all important indicators of an inclusive school.

Based on the obtained results, we could not connect the poor performance of Roma pupils with bad teacher-pupil relationships. At least in our study, the latter did not contribute to poorer academic performance in Roma pupils – namely, the interviewed pupils rated their relationships with their teachers as quite good. Therefore, we believe that in the future, our research should focus on other potential factors that may have an impact on lower academic performance of Roma pupils. These other factors were discussed in the introductory part of the article.

The results of our study, collected from the answers of Roma pupils and mothers, showed that Roma pupils from Prekmurje and Dolenjska generally perceive their teachers as kind and fair. They even pointed out that the teachers are helpful and good at their job – explaining and passing on knowledge. Good social relations with teachers proved to be important to Roma pupils. Their teachers, according to the pupils' statements, are the reason why they like attending school. Both the pupils and mothers assessed that the attitudes of teachers towards Roma pupils often reflects the attitude of Roma pupils towards teachers. Another study that refers to Roma elementary school pupils in Grosuplje, which was conducted by Koščak (2015, 55), showed similar results and confirmed that Roma pupils look for shelter and attention in their teachers, which is primarily a result of non-acceptance by their non-Roma peers. Based on this, we can conclude that the Roma pupils included in the study feel accepted and respected by their

teachers. Both the interviewed pupils and their mothers stated that teachers in primary schools treat Roma pupils the same as other pupils, which is definitely encouraging and confirms the inclusive attitude of primary schools. According to one of the interviewed subjects, teachers are warning non-Roma pupils not to discriminate against their Roma peers. However, the personal attitudes of the teachers towards Roma pupils sets an example for other non-Roma pupils and has a significant influence on the extent of the Roma pupils' being accepted by their non-Roma peers. The relationship between teachers and pupils is therefore essential for the social inclusion of pupils in the classroom (Paccione 2000; King 2005 cited in Peček & Lesar; 2006, 6).

Even though Roma pupils and their mothers perceive teachers mainly in a positive way, the study also revealed a few cases which are less encouraging. The teachers' negative assessments pointed towards an unfair assessment of knowledge and an unfair attitude towards the children, however, there was no confirmation of this attitude deriving from ethnic discrimination towards Roma pupils. The described examples and issues with the teachers could also apply to non-Roma pupils. Only one interviewed pupil from Dolenjska referred to teachers as being ethnically discriminatory when assessing knowledge and grading Roma pupils. In comparison to the interviewed pupils, more Roma mothers gave negative assessments of the teachers. The mothers from Prekmurje also gave more negative teacher assessments than the mothers from Dolenjska. At this stage, we should point out that in most cases the negative teacher assessments did not stem from discrimination against Roma pupils. The Roma mothers from Dolenjska stated that teachers adjust schoolwork for their children by giving them simpler tasks or evaluating them on the basis of pre-prepared questions and answers, which enable them to achieve the lowest positive grade. Some mothers perceived this as a discriminatory act – this way, their children, unlike non-Roma pupils, are not given the opportunity to attain a higher grade. Such adjustments for Roma pupils show that teachers demand less from them compared to other pupils. The latter was also confirmed in other, previously conducted studies (Chakir & Peček 2014, 30; Peček et al. 2006, 162). This kind of attitude towards Roma pupils is problematic, not only because it is discriminatory, but also because the teachers' low expectations lead to the Roma pupils' low academic results (Peček et al. 2006, 162). At the same time, it shows disrespect towards Roma pupils, who are being deprived of the same opportunities, knowledge, and progress other pupils are granted.

The unfair teaching methods and knowledge assessment could be related to the ingrained stereotypes about the Roma, which e.g., say that they are not interested in education. This stereotype probably derives from a lack of knowledge regarding the home environment of Roma children. Bešter and Medvešek (2016, 41) found that most teachers in Slovene primary schools try to encourage Roma children in their educational process and help them achieve the best possible results, however, they still lack knowledge and understanding of inter-

cultural differences. At the same time, the teachers do not go beyond an ethnocentric attitude and worldview, and they are also not too engaged in overcoming the existing social relationships of inequality between the majority population and minority groups. The authors pointed out that there are a few exceptions among teachers, who have well-developed intercultural competences. These result from training, openness, and the teachers' individual efforts, rather than from systemic incentives and support, which teachers could really use.

We believe that all the aforementioned difficulties could be at least partially omitted if the educational programs of future pedagogical workers as well as the programs for continuous professional development included more inclusive and Roma-related topics. Therefore, it would be wise to assess the curricula of university programs that train future teachers and if necessary enrich them with additional content on the typical characteristics of Roma culture and Roma communities in Slovenia, as well as national and other documents related to the Roma community and the education of Roma pupils. The universities that educate future teachers could connect their students with representatives of the Roma community who could directly introduce them to Roma culture and the Roma community itself or give the students an opportunity to visit Roma settlements and explain to them the specifics of living in such communities. These are just a few ideas with which students and future teachers could become familiar with the specifics of Roma culture in the course of their studies, get a better understanding of Roma pupils, gather knowledge on how to approach Roma pupils properly, and learn how to introduce Roma pupils' nature and characteristics to other non-Roma pupils in the class and at school. The latter is extremely important in light of the reasoning pointed out by Vonta and Jager (2013, 106) who said that professionals in Slovene elementary schools seem to be aware of the importance of including Roma culture in the educational process, but that they are currently pursuing this step only by encouraging Roma pupils to perform and introduce their culture at school events.

To fully understand and properly interpret the results, we have taken into consideration that the interviews were conducted during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia, in the months after home schooling, when the pupils had only spent a month back in the classroom. After the long period of home schooling, most pupils could not wait to go back to school, which of course could have affected their perception regarding the teachers' attitude towards them. The long-term distance education is also likely to have been reflected in the children's schoolwork. Bešter and Pirc (2020) investigated this topic further and wanted to determine how distance education affected Roma pupils in Slovenia during the quarantine period. Based on the data they collected from Roma assistants and teachers, the authors of the study concluded that approximately half of Roma primary school pupils were in regular contact with their teachers during quarantine, while the proportion of non-Roma students who were in regular contact with teachers was much higher. Almost half of the Roma pupils

in primary schools maintained contact with the school through Roma assistants. The same survey showed that in schools with Roma assistants, a quarter of all interviewed teachers estimated that during the quarantine period most Roma parents were not in contact with the school at all, while another quarter of teachers pointed out that the parents were in regular contact with the Roma assistants, but not directly with the teachers. Only a fifth of the interviewed teachers stated that Roma parents were in contact with them directly. Most of the teachers in schools with Roma assistants also reported that cooperation between Roma parents and the school remained the same as before the pandemic, slightly more than a tenth noticed an improvement, and about a fifth a deterioration in this area. In schools without Roma assistants, the situation was pretty much the same. The authors also determined that some teachers made home visits and brought Roma pupils class materials as well as gave instructions for schoolwork. In our study, two interviewed mothers from Dolenjska also reported having home visits from teachers. One of these two mothers had no contact with the teachers prior to the pandemic, but during the home-schooling period, thanks to home visits, she came to regard the teachers in a very positive way.

We must also point out some of the limitations we faced during the study. One of the major limitations were the interviews in Dolenjska, where it was not always possible to ensure a calm and relaxed environment. The interviews were often interrupted by the interviewed mothers' young children or by the brothers and sisters of the interviewed children, as well as by the noise coming from outside. We could have avoided this issue if the interviews had been conducted in a common space within the Roma settlements (like in Prekmurje), but the interviewed subjects wanted to talk to us in their homes, so we did as they asked. Some of the interviewed mothers in Dolenjska were very nervous – we even detected slight mistrust, which may have influenced their answers.

Even though the results do not apply to the entire population of Roma pupils and their mothers in Slovenia, they still present a valuable insight into the experiences of Roma pupils with teachers and their pedagogical work. The extra value of this research lies in giving voice to the ignored Roma community. By including Roma pupils and their mothers in this study and giving them the opportunity to speak up and share their perception of teacher-pupil relationships and the pedagogical work of the teachers, we can better understand the communities' experiences and perspectives. The findings are also important for raising awareness among teachers and school management not only about the impact of teacher-pupil relationships on the pupils' well-being and academic performance, but also about the fact that all pupils, regardless of nationality or special needs, deserve equal opportunities. The results can potentially contribute to a more subtle perception and understanding of the well-being and the situation of Roma children in Slovene schools and, as a result, help raise the quality of pedagogical practice in the field of Roma education in Slovenia.

The study also opened up a number of new research questions. Namely, the interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have affected the results, so it would be wise to repeat the entire procedure in the upcoming school year. In the study, we focused on two locations – Dolenjska and Prekmurje – however, for an even better understanding of the relationship between teachers and Roma pupils, it would be wise to include Roma pupils and parents from other regions as well. Another interesting thing to investigate would be how teachers perceive their relationships and work with Roma pupils. Our study confirmed that the relationships between teachers and Roma pupils are mostly encouraging, but it also revealed some discriminatory behaviour in teachers that prevents Roma pupils from achieving the same learning results as the rest of the population. We should focus on these practices during future research and study the remaining factors that could have an impact on the learning success of Roma pupils in Slovene schools. We should also focus on exploring examples of good teaching practice in the field of Roma education.

7. Conclusion

In the empirical qualitative study based on the answers of Roma pupils and their mothers, we focused on the experience and perception of teaching methods as well as teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils. Based on the interviews conducted with the members of the Roma community in Prekmurje and Dolenjska, we can conclude that the elementary school teachers in the two mentioned regions are successful in providing a safe and inclusive environment for Roma pupils. Even though the results are mostly encouraging, we should not ignore those few examples that indicate a discriminatory attitude in teachers towards Roma children. Such cases should not be swept under the rug. They call for further efforts to eliminate discrimination, reduce differences, and promote the inclusion of minority groups in Slovene schools. Considering both the positive and the negative experiences of Roma pupils and their mothers, the results indicate that we need to continue with measures that will help not only improve relationships between teachers and pupils, but also provide adequate support and resources for equal opportunities, learning, and progress of Roma pupils. However, we should also explore other factors that affect Roma pupils' well-being in school, their learning performance, and advancement in the educational system.

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