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## **Parental Volunteering at Schools in the Light of a Qualitative Survey in Hungary**

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### **Abstract**

While a large body of international research deals with parental volunteering, the number of studies on the subject is low in Hungary. This paper investigates teachers' interpretations of parental volunteering. Our research involved three Hungarian counties where the proportion of schools with disadvantaged students is high. The population was composed of teachers of primary and secondary schools ( $n = 45$ ) selected by means of multistage stratified sampling. We processed 36 interviews in which parental volunteering was mentioned, conducting both a thematic and a typological analysis. The thematic analysis has revealed that 'real' volunteering is rare as parents do not typically initiate any activity themselves. They are most likely to volunteer occasionally, with most of the voluntary work done by members of the Parents' Association (PA). The typological analysis has differentiated between four types of parent volunteers: (1) committed PA members who also take part in school-level decision making, (2) PA members who are involved in class-level decision making and organisation, (3) parents who volunteer occasionally of their own accord, (4) parents who volunteer occasionally, if they are requested to. Our results indicate that it is essential to motivate parents to volunteer and to promote forms of volunteering that are suited to parents.

**Keywords:** teachers, parents, parental involvement, volunteering, parents' voluntary work, parent volunteers, Parents' Association membership, deductive coding, thematic analyses, typological analyses.

### **1. Introduction**

We conducted a semi-structured interview survey to investigate teachers' perceptions of the voluntary work of parents in schools in a disadvantaged region of Hungary. While this form of parental involvement in schools is examined in detail by international research (see the systematic literature

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review by Kocsis et al., 2022), we do not have sufficient data on parental volunteering in Hungary. In recent years, an increasing body of research has contributed to the Hungarian discourse on parental involvement. The main areas of investigation includes causal links between parental involvement and resilience (Ceglédi et al., 2022; Ceglédi et al., 2024), the role of school support professionals (Csók, Pusztai, 2022; Pusztai, Csók, 2023), the role of parental involvement in academic and sports achievement (Kovács et al., 2022; Kovács et al., 2024), parent-teacher communication (Major, 2023), and the impact of secondary school students' perceived parenting values on school choice (Tódor, 2023). Our work aims to enrich this discourse by focusing on volunteering.

In the literature, a volunteer is defined as a person who does non-compulsory work of their own free will, driven by some intrinsic motive, and without any remuneration. Some research narrows down the concept of volunteering to formal, organisational activities (Wilson 2000; Aydinli et al., 2015). In Central and Eastern Europe, during the socialist era, volunteering as it is known today did not exist. Instead, it was compulsory to do unpaid work for the good of the community. However, with the development of the NGO sector after the fall of socialism in 1989–1990, the first 'genuine' volunteers appeared in the CEE region (Juknevičius, Savicka, 2003). Their proportion is still below corresponding rates in Western countries, due to lower levels of economic development and urbanization as well as the fact that the non-profit sector and the culture of volunteering in the new democracies are not yet as developed as in the West (Voicu, Voicu, 2009).

Parental volunteering is considered a key factor in the literature on parental involvement (Epstein, 2010). For an international comparison of parental volunteering in schools, recent data can be obtained from the PISA 2018 study. According to the responses of the school leaders surveyed, 17 % of parents were involved in their local school councils, and 12 % volunteered for physical or extra-curricular activities (e.g. building maintenance, going on school trips). The data show that of all parental involvement variables, it is in parental volunteering that the Central and Eastern European region is not behind the West (OECD, 2019). Due to the pandemic, there is no recent data available at the moment, so the results of our current research may fill this gap as well.

In the first half of the paper, we begin with an overview of the literature that underpins the deductive coding of interviews, and then describe the research methodology. The presentation of the results consists of thematic and typological analyses of the interviews. The paper ends with a discussion section where we formulate the conclusions and limitations of the research, present our further research plans and make our policy recommendations.

## **2. Questions of investigating parental volunteering in the literature**

Firstly, we address the definitional issues of parental volunteering, including who initiates the activity, i.e. whether it is a truly voluntary activity and whether it falls within the classical definition of volunteering. In the 2000s, research showed that more than 90 % of schools actively recruited volunteers through letters and newspapers, which suggests that schools have exhausted their volunteer base and that few schools can attract volunteers without recruitment (Brent, 2000). Aguilar (2021) stresses that in most cases, it is the school that initiates the participation of parents in volunteering. Myres (2022) points out that some parents believe that the child's education is the sole responsibility of the teacher, and thus do not participate in school-related work, respecting the teacher's educational role. According to a systematic literature review by Kocsis et al. (2022), voluntary initiatives are mainly organized from above and in response to decision-makers' needs. There are also project-based initiatives, where schools involve parents in partnership with other formal or non-formal organisations. Parent-led initiatives were rarely reported in the studies reviewed, and what were named as grassroots projects included initiatives by local teachers or school management.

One of the barriers to volunteering is that parents' involvement is limited to a specific area, with the result that only a fraction of the parent community can participate. In addition, there may be barriers due to work, time constraints, language differences or lack of information (Dietz, 1997; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Aguilar, 2021; Myers, 2022). Another significant obstacle is that teachers do not know how to utilize parents as volunteers (Epstein, 2010; Nathans, Revelle, 2013). According to Marland-Peltoniemi (2015), the lack of opportunities to volunteer reduces the sense of cooperation and, as a consequence, reinforces the hierarchy of the school, where school staff dominate, which can increase the feeling of helplessness in parents.

Regarding the motivation for volunteering, parents seek affectively rewarding experiences when doing voluntary work, which, in technical terms, refers to implicit motivation (Aydinli et al.,

2015). Volunteering allows parents to offer their expertise and physical labour, which is driven by prosocial motives and which is dominated by the intention to help. In addition, the interest of the child is also present as a motivation. Smaller children like it when their family helps in the classroom. Parents also appreciate the time spent in their child's classroom, especially if the child is young, as volunteering is one of the ways in which they can help ease their child's anxiety. Furthermore, parents have the opportunity to build trusting relationships with teachers during volunteering (Marland, Peltoniemi, 2015; Myers, 2022).

Prior to the pandemic, parents were most involved in the following volunteer activities: working as in-class assistants, helping at class trips, sports coaching, maintenance projects, fundraising, committee and supervisory work (Brent, 2000; Myers, 2022; Larracilla-Salazar et al., 2024; Poliaková et al., 2024). Furthermore, some parents also support schools by doing voluntary manual work (Lemmer, 2007; Myers, 2022). While Aguilar (2021) argues that parental volunteering has declined due to the coronavirus, Fensterwald (2022) and Myres (2022) claim that there have been efforts to adjust volunteering opportunities to allow parents to volunteer online. According to a systematic literature review by Kocsis et al. (2022), the types of volunteering activities for parents include those directly related to schoolwork, i.e. supporting children's academic achievement or remedial education, those related to school events or healthy lifestyles, and finally cultural and community experiences.

The influence of background variables on parental volunteering is also widely analysed. The results of Aydinli et al. (2015) show that age and educational attainment are significantly associated with parental volunteering. Kocsis et al. (2022) found that volunteers were typically less affluent, but in certain projects, parents with better financial circumstances were reported to have participated more actively. Volunteers were more likely to have a more flexible presence on the labour market and to have participated in civic activities in the past. Being religious and having several children from the family attending the same school also increased the likelihood of volunteering.

There are also differences by cultural and ethnic groups in parental volunteering (Huntsinger, José, 2009). Merchán-Ríos et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of developing family involvement action plans, taking into account the perspectives of families belonging to other ethnic groups and minorities. Moreover, González-Patiño and Poveda (2015) argue that in places which are socio-economically and ethnically relatively homogeneous, but where parental dynamics of school involvement are varied and shaped by a complex and heterogeneous set of interests and beliefs, it is also worthwhile to periodically reconsider school-family cooperation and its potential.

Coleman (1988), referring to his work two decades earlier, pointed out that the way to make low-status pupils successful was through parental involvement in the school community. His results showed that strengthening the school community and involving parents in school volunteering and other community activities led to improved student outcomes, and that church institutions were particularly successful in this. Research also shows that parental involvement is higher in primary schools than in secondary education, and that there are only a few studies that focus on parents' voluntary activities in the latter (Kocsis et al., 2022; Myers, 2022).

### **3. Research context and research design**

The most important research questions are how parental volunteering is interpreted by teachers in our Hungarian sample and what types and characteristics it has. The qualitative research involved three Hungarian counties, namely Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, where the proportion of schools with disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged students is high. The population was composed of teachers of primary and secondary schools from every school providing sector selected by means of multistage stratified sampling. We created four school subsamples based on a combination of county, school type, social background-adjusted site-level achievement scores from the National Assessment of Basic Competencies and parental involvement data. Next, from each subsample, teachers were selected through non-representative sampling. Finally, the audio material of the semi-structured individual interviews, which were recorded in autumn 2021, was converted into a textual database. The length of the interviews averaged 68 minutes.

In accordance with Mason (2018), interviews considered pre-established general topics but maintained flexibility using open-ended questions, which were approved by the Education Ethics Committee of the University of Debrecen. The interview draft included the following items: teachers' self-introduction; a description of the school, community and parents; teachers' views on

the role of parents and on their communication with parents; patterns and gaps in the parent-school relationship (at the level of teachers); good practices and suggestions.

#### 4. The methodology of the interview analysis

Out of the 45 interviews conducted, nine did not contain any relevant information on parental volunteering, so 36 interviews were processed in the end. As our main aim, in line with Creswell (2012), was to become closely familiar with the data, we used simple hand-coding, which allowed for a broad understanding of the entire interviews. First, we selected the interview parts that contained the subject of volunteering. Despite the fact that we were dealing with 36 interviews, the amount of text on parental volunteering did not become unmanageable. In the first stage of the analysis, the texts were prepared and pre-read. Manual coding was carried out using a hybrid (deductive and inductive) approach (Fereday, Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Swain, 2018). If, apart from the deductive codes derived from the literature, so-called emic (or inductive) codes emerged from the meanings of the texts, these were also marked and included in the set of codes. Afterwards, the codes were added to the relevant text passage. In the final stage of the analysis, we carried out a thematic and typological analysis, supported by interview excerpts (Creswell, 2012).

During the thematic analysis, deductive codes were developed based on the literature including the following categories: the definition, motivations, who volunteering was initiated by, frequency, intensity, barriers and forms of volunteering, as well as the effect of parents' socio-demographic characteristics, the stage of education, the school provider, and the pandemic on volunteering. Inductive codes included time (long ago, before the political transition in 1989 and now) and children's negative image of parental volunteering. These were first interpreted, analysed in text form and then supported by relevant quotes (Braun, Clarke, 2006; Delve, Limpaecher, 2020).

During the typological analysis, treating each full interview as a unit, we attempted to establish the types of parent volunteers based on the teachers' accounts. Since the greatest differences between parents were found in motivation and the frequency of volunteering, we used these two factors as a basis for the typology. At this point, we characterized the types and did not necessarily use interview quotes to support our typology. The analysis was carried out by researchers of different ages and professional backgrounds, minimizing the possible bias on the part of observers and interviewers (Delve, Limpaecher, 2023).

**Table 1.** The frequency of codes

Code	Frequency
Volunteering is present in the school	54
Parents' Association	44
Volunteering at events	45
Regular volunteering	40
Initiated by teachers	39
Occasional volunteering	24
The aim is community building	23
Non-typical volunteering	19
Motivated by altruism	15
Volunteering by definition	13
Physical work	13
Mixed motives	12
Volunteering activities in the past	10
Covid-19	8
Motivated by the child's interest	8
Initiated by parents	7
Motivated by pressure	6
Parents with disadvantaged backgrounds	5
Volunteering can be negative	3
Initiated by a project	2
Parents with favourable backgrounds	2



## 5. Results

### 5.1. Thematic analysis

In the first stage of the analysis, we aimed to define volunteering based on what teachers considered it to be. The frequency of the codes showed that volunteering according to the traditional professional definition appeared in thirteen of the teacher interviews. Those who understood the concept in this way said that ‘genuine’ volunteering hardly ever occurred, and that parents did not offer their help themselves. However, a significant number of teachers interviewed regarded participation on request or under compulsion (compulsory participation in socialism) as volunteering (this was the case in 19 interviews).

“There are some creative parents who are very good at helping the children (voluntarily), or if we ask them, they happily agree to come along, say, on a class trip. They are ready to get involved in such occasions.” (I1)

“They are active, and if there is a request to them, all parents help” (I21)

“Earlier the parents were asked to do something like this, now here at this school the parents are not too keen to volunteer” (I9)

Following the definition of parental volunteering, the next important sub-theme was motivational factors. As it can be seen in the theoretical overview, volunteering is an activity that is offered voluntarily from some intrinsic motivation, so we can assume that parental volunteering is dominated by altruistic motives. However, in addition to the intention to help, the child’s interest (even as an investment) may also appear as a motivation. Table 1 is presenting more information about the extracted themes, process, codes, and frequencies of evidence statements. The frequency of the codes shows that community building as a goal was mentioned twenty-three times and altruistic motives fifteen times. Mixed motives appeared twelve times in the interviews, while the interest of the child eight times (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Description of codes

Theme	Process	Code	Frequency
frequency of volunteering	deductive	Occasional volunteering	24
unique	inductive	Covid-19	8
<b>definition</b>	deductive	Non-typical volunteering	19
<b>definition</b>	deductive	Volunteering by definition	13
type of volunteering	deductive	Physical work	13
<b>initiated</b>	deductive	Initiated by teachers	39
<b>initiated</b>	deductive	Initiated by a project	2
<b>initiated</b>	deductive	Initiated by parents	7
goal of volunteering	deductive	The aim is community building	23
motivation	deductive	Motivated by the child’s interest	8
motivation	deductive	Motivated by pressure	6
motivation	deductive	Motivated by altruism	15
motivation	deductive	Mixed motives	12
unique	inductive	Volunteering can be negative	3
type of volunteering	deductive	Volunteering at events	45
frequency of volunteering	deductive	Regular volunteering	40
<b>social background</b>	deductive	Parents with favourable backgrounds	2
<b>social background</b>	deductive	Parents with disadvantaged backgrounds	5
type of volunteering	deductive	Parents’ Association	44

Theme	Process	Code	Frequency
frequency of volunteering	inductive	Volunteering is present in the school	54
frequency of volunteering	inductive	Volunteering activities in the past	10

“They like to come to the school. We have charity afternoons organized by the PA. At those times, parents are involved in a lot of activities such as coordinating the event. They help with the buffet or the raffle draw.” (I4)

“Parents are very helpful, supportive, and willing to help with any kind of event, whether it’s a Santa Claus or carnival party. They readily help with the purchase of gifts, and they are happy to participate in the baking of carnival doughnuts, or in cooking and baking on family days.” (I15)

Especially parents from more favourable backgrounds were also aware that parental involvement in school life was in the interest of their children, so in this case volunteering was also a kind of investment.

“...if it is in their children’s interest, I think I can count on some people, but it is usually a small core from each class that can be firmly relied on. It depends on the background of the parents.” (I7)

There were also some respondents who felt that pressure could be a motivating force in volunteering, which appeared in six interviews.

“... Some people genuinely want to join, and they do have fun with us, others are forced into it, while others don’t go along with the majority even despite pressure.” (I24)

The interviews also reveal that the motivation to volunteer is related to who initiated the volunteering, whether it was teachers, parents, or whether volunteering was part of a project. The majority of respondents stated that it was teachers who asked parents to help. The frequency of codes (39 mentions) clearly shows that this type of initiative was the most prominent. One teacher mentioned parents’ self-organisation, and a few also said that parental volunteering was part of a project.

“There are classes that organise small gatherings for themselves even outside scheduled events, coming together as a small group of friends somewhere in the parish yard, or if someone has a farm or a place where they can receive people, they invite the parents from the class. I think that parents can work together very well.” (I15)

“We have occasional project events. Let’s say we have a European Union project week right around December, where a couple of parents help out by preparing some local food or something like that. This is how they get involved in such events.” (I25)

Another subject we analysed was the frequency, intensity and barriers of volunteering. We examined whether parental volunteering occurred at all, how many people participated, and whether teachers found it was mainly regular (e.g. done by PA members) or occasional. In terms of the intensity of participation, there were some teachers who said that they did not have active parents and any parental volunteering at all, the reason being that parents worked long hours, multiple shifts and did not have the time. Only one teacher mentioned that all parents in the class were involved.

“Well, parents are quite overwhelmed, and they have a lot on their plates. They’re really busy. They’re completely consumed by the stress of work and day-to-day problems.” (I7)

“I am very lucky because the parents in my class are so active, devoted and helpful. They are available and supportive no matter what event it is.” (I26)

In most cases, it is practically PA members who do (regular) voluntary work. Most teachers reported the number of active parents being 3 to 4 per class. It was rarely possible to mobilise masses of parents successfully for an event.

“This also depends on the class in question. There are parents who really go to great lengths; they’re the ones from the PA, aren’t they? But I would say others are really hard to get going.” (I27)

The significance of PAs is demonstrated by the fact that they were mentioned as many as 54 times in the interview. Data show that in Hungary, Parents’ Association membership is not only related to the frequency and intensity of volunteering, but also appears itself as a special type of parental volunteering.

Next, we analysed the forms of parental volunteering. One type of activity, as we have already seen, is PA membership, which mainly involves managing the finances of the class, but in most

cases, members also participate in other volunteering activities. They are involved, either voluntarily or on request, in the organization of school events and community life as well as in mediating between parents and teachers in major discussions concerning the institution. Tutoring or teaching, which are mentioned in the literature, were not referred to in the interviews, nor were extra-curricular activities outside school. The most common parental activity mentioned was participation in or organization of school events (e.g. family days, trips, proms), which was mentioned in almost all interviews and which is supported by the frequency of the code. Physical work, which used to be widespread even in state schools due to lack of resources, is no longer common, except for a few mentions. One teacher pointed out that certain tasks requiring physical strength also required the parents' professional skills or social capital.

"Earlier, we built the playground, cut fallen trees after storms or painted the fence together with the parents. Now, instead, they are happy to accompany children to competitions, for example, or to donate equipment to us. If necessary, they can go with the class on a bike trip or even on overnight trips." (I15)

According to the literature, parental volunteering is influenced by gender, age, social status, contacts, civic activity and religiosity, but our interviewees gave prominence to social status as the main factor. Presumably, teachers had less insight into other circumstances. The interviews suggest that parents from better backgrounds were considered more active by the teachers, and the interviewees also mentioned that in some cases the large number of parents with low educational attainment hindered the functioning of the PA, because it was difficult to involve them in the tasks at hand.

"There were three or four of the PA members who were leading the way, they knew each other well, one of them was a parent from a very well-off Roma family, and the other three parents didn't come from poor families either." (I11)

"Parents are reluctant to take on PA membership, but this is also due to the social composition. Well, it's all about low educational levels and carelessness. PA parents don't want to communicate and talk with other parents." (I16)

Parental volunteering was significantly impacted by the level of education as well as the school provider. Teachers reported that parents were much more active in primary schools, especially in lower grades, than in secondary institutions. Due to the sample size, we refrain from drawing any far-reaching conclusions, but the current interviews revealed that in church-run schools there were slightly more school events, community building was more of a priority and therefore parents were slightly more active.

"In lower grades, parents are more active, and one or two of them carry on in the upper grades as well.... However, it's lower-grade PA members who are enthusiastically involved. Later, if children lose interest in learning or have conflicts at school, parents withdraw from the school." (I11)

"I must mention family days, which matter a lot because families can also bring their little ones here. We have a playground, kids can play there. Another thing is parents' charity fundraising to collect donations, e.g. bottle caps for sick children. We have second-hand days, when parents can come and bring clothes. We usually receive other donations from a charity, which is not only important in social terms, but also because families get them from the school rather than from strangers. We are open and parents can come to look at their children or even record the events with a camera." (I11)

In the international literature, we have already found data on the impact of Covid-19 on parent volunteering. In total, the pandemic period was mentioned eight times in the interviews. At that time, parents were hardly involved in school life. It was a rare occurrence that PA members continued to work online (e.g. on Facebook), but in many schools they suspended their activity.

"The virus upset our system compared to previous years" (I2)

"Because of Covid, we only had online parent-teacher meetings. Or we talked in the street in the rain as we were not allowed to enter the school." (I3)

"The PA could not meet because of the pandemic." (I20)

As mentioned in the research methodology section, two inductive codes emerged during the analysis, one of which was time. In this regard, we found that in the past, years or even decades ago, parents were more involved (especially according to some older teachers), whereas nowadays parents typically excuse themselves on grounds of lack of time. Interviewees often mentioned that in the socialist era parents had been summoned to work together on a compulsory basis, and many helped as a result, but fewer do so voluntarily today.

“Maybe it was a bit easier to mobilise people before, now they indulge in comfort too much or maybe they just have more to do.” (I15)

“When my daughter was at primary school and parents were asked to participate in a joint project, quite a lot of parents did so, some with financial support, some with personal, manual work to make the school and its surroundings more beautiful... What I see here in this school is that parents are not in the least eager to help with anything.” (I9)

Our second inductive code was the negative effect of parental volunteering on children. One of the respondents pointed out that if there are only a few parents going on a class trip with the children, it might evoke negative feelings in the others because they will wonder why their parents cannot participate. In contrast, older children, e.g. in secondary school, do not need parental involvement and even feel uncomfortable if they are accompanied by parents.

“It can create some tension if one pupil’s parent is there and the other’s is not”. (I13)

“When there was an opportunity, they came to help... mostly with the preparation of the trip, organising the bus or preparing the meat for cooking that we took on the trip. They didn’t come with us, but the children wouldn’t have liked that anyway.” (I39)

In the next section, we give a more nuanced picture of parental volunteering through a typological analysis.

## 5.2. Typological analysis

Based on the 36 interviews, we distinguished four types of parental volunteering according to the intensity and motivation of involvement in volunteering. When establishing the types, we also tried to take into account the statistical data available on schools (type of settlement, school provider, size of school, proportion of pupils with disadvantages and multiple disadvantages), which helped to characterise the groups more precisely. The first two groups were composed of PA members, the difference being whether parents were also involved in school-level decision making or only volunteered in their children’s classes. The other two groups were made up of parents who volunteered occasionally, either of their own free will or only when they were asked to. [Table 2](#) summarizes the main characteristics of the four types.

**Table 2.** The main characteristics of the types

	Intensity	Motivation	Characteristics of types
Committed PA members who are involved in school-level decisions, as well	Active involvement at the school level and strong commitment	To take part in decision making at the school level To help the school professional development	PA members  Main activities: To provide suggestions on issues affecting the life of the school and help in the development of pedagogical programs
PA members involved in class-level decisions and organisational tasks	Active involvement at the class level and strong commitment	To take part in decision making at the class level To take part in organizational and planning tasks	PA members  Main activities: To manage the life of the class (managing the class money or helping with other activities)
Parents volunteering freely for occasional tasks	Low involvement at the school and the class level and low commitment	To help others To feel better To make themselves useful	Not PA members  Main activities: To help at the school and class events (decorating, painting, or selling goods)



	Intensity	Motivation	Characteristics of types
Parents volunteering occasionally on request	Low involvement at the school and the class level and low commitment	Extrinsic motivation (request of teachers)	Not PA members  Main activities: To help at the school and class events (decorating, painting, or selling goods)

**Type 1:** Committed PA members who are involved in school-level decisions, as well

This group of parents is made up of PA members who are actively involved in school decisions in addition to class matters. The schools, where this type was mentioned are typically located in a village or small town and are mostly state-run with a small or medium size student population. They have below 20 percent of disadvantaged pupils and a below 5 percent of pupils with multiple disadvantages.

The main characteristic of the parent volunteers is that they are all members of the PA and are much more committed than other parents to volunteering in the school. PA members are delegated by each class to represent their interests, and in most cases, they are selected by class vote. In the absence of new candidates, it is common for previously elected parents to be re-elected year after year. It is also common for PA members to be the first to be informed directly by school leaders about decisions affecting the school. Parents attending management meetings have decision-making rights at the school level, and the school management seeks the ideas and suggestions of PA members on issues concerning the life of the school and its pupils. There are schools where the educational programme is discussed with parents, or parents are consulted on the introduction of new subjects. In addition to their decision-making role, these parents are also actively engaged in the organisation of school life. They are of great help to teachers, as they volunteer their time to facilitate teachers' work both in and out of class.

**Type 2:** PA members involved in class-level decisions and organisational tasks

The second type of parent volunteers includes those who are also members of the PA, but who are only involved in decisions at the class level and in various organisational and planning tasks. The background data suggest that while the previous type was mainly typical of schools located in smaller settlements, those belonging to this group were mainly from schools in medium or larger towns with more than 200 pupils and a low proportion of disadvantaged pupils (below 5 %).

Here, PA members are no longer necessarily elected by the other parents through a vote, but this role is taken on by the parent who volunteers for it. Parents have a lower level of decision-making power than in the previous group, as they do not usually have a say in major decisions affecting the school. Their most important task is to manage the life of the class, including managing the class money or helping with other activities (e.g. providing escort on the way to the swimming pool and help with hair-drying, organising events). Wherever the system works well, they can be relied on for practically everything.

These parents are to serve as a bridge between the class teacher and the other parents. This mostly means passing on information from the class teacher to the parents or informing the class teacher of the parents' suggestions on certain class-level issues. The interviews reveal that teachers derive tremendous support from parent volunteers' work.

**Type 3:** Parents volunteering freely for occasional tasks

The third category of parents is composed of those who are not members of the PA but are actively involved in the life of the school and class. They do not participate in the decision-making process but are happy to help out occasionally at various events.

The background data show that, while the previous types were mainly found in state schools, this one occurred in higher proportions in church-run schools. The majority of schools are located in county seats, with a small to medium number of pupils and a low proportion of disadvantaged pupils (under 5 %).

Most of these parents offer their help voluntarily, and alongside the importance of helping. However it is not only important for them to help their children, but also to have good feelings

about the task and to do something useful themselves. Most of their voluntary work is related to school events. They mainly give a hand with tasks where several helpers are needed, such as decorating, painting, or selling goods. While the previous parent types only meant a few people per class doing the work, parents in this category are involved in larger numbers.

**Type 4:** Parents volunteering occasionally on request

Parents in the fourth type are not members of the PA, either, but they get involved in school activities only at the request of teachers or the school management, or perhaps under pressure. This group of parents is mainly present in state schools. The majority of schools are located in villages and are small or medium in size, with a medium to high proportion of disadvantaged pupils. From a socio-demographic point of view, this parent type was mentioned in the most disadvantaged school types.

While in the case of type 3, a relatively large number of parents are involved in the tasks, here teachers mentioned a few parents per class who can be mobilised, albeit on request. The nature of the tasks is similar to what is described in type 3. Typically, parents help at school events.

## **6. Discussion**

Recent research has emphasised the importance of parental volunteering as it is one of the six types of Epstein's (2010) typology. While internationally, a wide range of studies focus on parental volunteering and its types (Lemmer, 2007; Marland, Peltoniemi 2015; Myers 2022 etc.), there is little research on the subject in Hungary. The present study aims to fill this research gap and add the element of volunteering to the existing Hungarian discourse.

The main objective of our research was to explore parental volunteering in schools through data from a disadvantaged region of Hungary based on 36 semi-structured interviews with teachers. We conducted thematic and typological analysis, which was complemented with interview excerpts. Based on the literature reviewed, deductive codes were developed. The inductive codes used in the analysis were the temporal dimensions of volunteering (past and present) and the possible negative impact of parental volunteering.

The study has come to the conclusion that parental volunteering in Hungarian schools differs from the tendencies described in the international literature. Our results suggest that in Hungary, traditional forms of parental volunteering known from the literature are less prevalent; parents are mostly involved in the organisation of school events or very rarely in physical work, but the most common form is PA membership. The thematic analysis of our current data shows that in most schools it is only the PA members who do voluntary work.

A further finding was that, apart from a few cases where volunteering was defined as it is used in the literature, teachers also often identified volunteering as work that parents were asked or required to do. One reason for this may be a distinctively Central and Eastern European feature, namely that in the socialist system there was no real volunteering but compulsory work for the good of society, which meant, as some interviewees mentioned, that parents were summoned to do obligatory work together. Our respondents felt parents did little 'genuine', intrinsically motivated voluntary work which they also offered to do themselves. Although some parent initiatives were highlighted by interviewees, occasional help on request was the most common.

Some elderly teachers found that in the past, parents had been involved in voluntary activities more often and in greater numbers. Declining volunteering rates may be rooted in a number of causes, but our results have confirmed that the main barrier to parental involvement today is lack of time. Moreover, several interviewees felt that nowadays it is difficult to persuade parents to become involved in PAs. This is due to the fact that they would also have to carry out delicate, confidential tasks such as managing finances and to work under the constant criticism of other parents. It is also often their responsibility to mobilise other parents for various activities, which is not very easy to do, especially when it comes to disadvantaged parents. In addition, especially in secondary schools, it was found that PA members were not active in other tasks, possibly because older children no longer required the presence of parents at school.

Our results are consistent with previous findings that the frequency of participation is associated with parents' educational attainment, and that parental involvement is more frequent at lower educational levels and in church-run institutions (Lemmer, 2007; Aydinli et al., 2015; Kocsis et al., 2022), although we cannot confirm or refute this in a qualitative small sample study. We also found that our interviewees reported a decline in parental volunteering during the Covid-19

pandemic, which was not replaced by other new forms of engagement, contrary to the international trends (Myers, 2022). The interviews suggest that the tradition of parental volunteering is not so well-established as in other countries, which is why no initiatives were launched to involve parents during the Covid period.

An important finding of our research is that, based on the interviews with teachers, we were able to distinguish four parent types, which differed in the frequency and characteristics of volunteering and also in the characteristics of the school. The first type is made up of highly committed PA members who are involved in school-level decisions in small to medium-sized schools in small settlements, with relatively low proportion of disadvantaged pupils. The second type includes PA members involved in class-level decisions and organisational tasks, whose presence was mainly observed in large schools in medium-sized or large towns, with very low proportion of pupils with disadvantaged background. The third type is parents volunteering for occasional tasks, who are likely to be parents of children attending church-run schools with a low proportion of disadvantaged. The fourth type is parents volunteering occasionally on request, who are mainly from disadvantaged schools.

All in all, our results give new insight into the interpretation of parental volunteering in schools. While the international literature shows that parental volunteering has a strong tradition and parents' work is held in high esteem, in Hungary it seems to be a limited and unexploited area. Teachers' interpretations give the impression that parents are primarily motivated by their children's interest, but the intention to help also plays a part, which is something schools can rely on. The interviews suggest that being indispensable for school life, parents' voluntary work is in great demand.

However, it is to be noted that the results of our research can be interpreted with certain limitations. One limitation of the study is the sample size, which does not allow for broad generalisations. Secondly, in the current research phase, we interpreted the voluntary work of parents only through the experiences of teachers. Thirdly, the data used in the current analysis were part of a larger qualitative study which aimed to explore the forms and barriers to parental involvement. Parental volunteering constituted only part of that study, so the amount and depth of information available to us was limited.

Our recommendations for future research are derived directly from these limitations. Future research should be based on parents' experiences in order to fully explore the motivation, purpose, forms and barriers to parental volunteering, on which we hardly have any research data. The characteristics of parental volunteering could primarily be explored with qualitative methods, followed by a larger-scale quantitative study to investigate this important and, in Hungarian terms, under-researched area of education research. We believe that research on parental volunteering in Hungary should be encouraged in order to utilise the results in support of local and national policymakers, education professionals and school staff. In addition, the results could contribute to enriching the wide spectrum of international education research with data on parental involvement in Hungary.

Our findings suggest that parental involvement in schools could be promoted by popularising voluntary work. Lack of free time, in spite of being the primary barrier to volunteering (of which teachers are also well aware), can serve as a basis for developing solutions and recommendations. Parents' time limitations can be related to their position on the labour market, the distance between their residence and the school and the number of people they have to take care of apart from their school-age child (e.g. younger siblings or grandparents). For this reason, it is advisable to find out about families' capacity for free time before inviting them to volunteer. It is also worth assessing parents' interests and strengths that can be counted on in order to make involvement more flexible. Our most important conclusion is that schools and families should foster an unprejudiced and trusting relationship which enables parents to offer their help whether it is simple physical work or a more complex organisational task.

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