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School, family and community against early school leaving

Qualitative Research on Early School Leaving In A Disadvantaged Community in Hungary

Flash report

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Alliance3: School, Family and Community Against Early School Leaving

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Introduction

The project “School, Family and Community Alliance Against Early School Leaving” contains an objective of needs assessment. In this part of the project a relatively small-scale qualitative research was conducted using interview and focus group methods. The choice of methods is adequate both for feasibility reasons and for the reason of validity. Since the project itself is international, generalizable results may lead to less useful outcomes, whereas deeper understanding of problems, opportunities and threats are essential for identifying possible solutions.

The research was conducted in Bag, a settlement with a significant Roma community in Central Hungary and coordinated by BAGázs Public Benefit Association.” The organization’s aim is to implement the peaceful coexistence of the Roma and Hungarian population, by assisting the Roma to formulate goals and to do something for themselves, providing tools and knowledge to make progress. Specific objectives are the decrease of drug use and crime, dialogue-based conflict management, promoting volunteering and alternative education methods, and through it, to enhance social sensitivity.” (Csaba, 2018, p. 91)

This analysis is a flash report, it aims to underline the main tendencies related to obstacles young people face, the possible ways to create better conditions and empower them, as well as to better understand the situation of teachers and youth workers. Besides, interviews were conducted with parents to understand their expectations and to have a multi-sided view on possible ways of collaboration, on the alliance of the related actors. The flash report does not aim to have a deep, discursive analysis (which at the same time is relevant to better understand the social-political realm of the situation, but is not closely related with the project aims), instead aims to show the typical structure of opinions and experiences.

Methodology

The field research was conducted between the 27th of January and the 6th of February in Bag. There were personal interviews conducted with 6 parents:

1. Mother with a 7-year-old child
2. Mother with 4 children, two of them with learning difficulties
3. Mother of 10, five of them still in the household
4. Single mother of 2, local coordinator of Bagázs
5. Mother of 8, 4 of them still in public education
6. Mother of 5, one of them in school, two in kindergarten

Interviews were conducted with 4 kids between the ages of 9 and 18, and additionally a group interview was conducted with 3 kids between the ages of 14 and 16.

As for the professionals, two focus groups were conducted with 7 and 4 participants consisting of teachers and youth workers (because of organizational issues the majority of the participants were teachers, but we had developer teacher and youth worker participants too).

The coordinating group of the research consciously decided to loosen methodological strictness in terms of relationships of participants and the moderator. As Blichfeldt & Heldbjerg (2011) argues “as a rule of thumb it seems that the interviewing of acquaintances may be especially relevant during the initial, exploratory phase of a research project and at the point in time(s) when the researcher works with his/her pre-understandings. Drawing on the preceding lines of reasoning, the interviewing of acquaintances does seem to add positively to interpretive research insofar it adds to openness, honesty, and trust; to the researcher’s pre-understanding; and to her/his interpretations and contextualisation” (Blichfeldt & Heldbjerg, 2011, p. 30). In our case, both practical issues and the research aims, and designs supported the decision to have the interviews conducted by an acquaintance. The interviewer, Áron Szilveszter is himself a member of Bagázs Association, deputy leader of the kids’ programme. He is a known person to the community thus trusted and reflective of the local realities.

It must be noted that the methodological looseness relates to the context of interviews too. Since the personal interviews were conducted in family settings, it was quite frequent that family members, siblings interrupted the interview and influenced the interviewee. We resolved the issue with including the interruptions to the typed down versions of the interviews and taking into consideration through the analysis and interpretation. The analysis is topically structured where the points of view of different actors is compared. We illustrate the opinions with excerpts of the interviews translated, especially focusing on the interviews with children – their narratives and experiences are crucial for the project. The translations aim to be accurate, but linguistic characteristics could not be fully included and adapted to English.

Analysis of the interviews

The role of schools

When trying to identify possible ways of collaboration and means to prevent early school leaving, it’s essential to investigate on the image of the school in the eye of different groups.

The kids’ narratives were mostly related to “learning” in general with some additional practical outcomes. In the group interview the spontaneous associations were characterised by the

concept of leaning and the practical outcome of the driver's licence, which in general seemed a widespread association of school completion.

boy1: What is it good for? To learn

boy2: Yes-Yes

boy1: So that you could move on and go to work and that's all.

interviewer: Sure, but do you need school to work?

boy2: to get a driver's licence

interviewer: for the licence. And [boy3], what do you think school is for?

boy3: What is school good for? To learn, to get the eight grades and then licence.

This conversation shows a very instrumental view on school where knowledge or further learning is not at all present, school is seen as a necessity to be able to enter the adult life that (as later parts of the conversation show) is characterised by independence and making money. Our only girl subject, an 18-year-old school dropout (who finished the 8 years of elementary school but dropped out from the 9th grade) had a similar, instrumental view, but more embedded to the context of adult life outcomes:

18-year-old girl: [School is for] Getting somewhere in life, to have a good job, because if we start a family, we can build our lives from the job. You need money to build up your life from your job. And that, who knows, you should have a profession, a proper profession where you can work properly. So that you wouldn't sweep the streets and suffer for 3-4 thousand Forints, because if you have a good vocation then you can work and earn more.

In a personal interview with a 17-year-old boy the outcome of literacy (reading and writing) was mentioned, but his answer to the question about whether he could use the knowledge provided by the school in practice was:

17-year-old boy: I don't know, I don't remember any more, I don't remember.

It seems, in this case the theoretical outcomes cannot be connected to practical benefits.

School is often not seen as the provider of practical knowledge:

interviewer: Has it happened that something that you had learned at school helped you in the everyday life? Like now?

boy1: No.

interviewer: No? But how are you chatting with the girls on Facebook then?

boy3: That's true, you learned to write here

(...)

boy1: True.

The excerpt shows that a directed conversation can lead to the recognition of certain practical aspects of school (later the ability to pay in the shops was agreed by the kids too), but the general attribution of importance seems to be lacking.

Only our girl subject could mention practical examples of the use of school material without guidance from the interviewer, but even she included the school context use of the school materials:

18-year-old girl: Well for example you go to a shop and pay and you check how much it costs. Or for example when a bill or something comes. Or when you go to the school and if there is, say, a test, you have to count there and so on.

The most abstract understanding of school from the kids' side came from a 11-year-old boy (the younger brother of our 17-year-old subject). He put it in a developmental perspective where the role of becoming functional adults might be noticed:

11-year-old boy: To develop a lot, not to be dumb, to be able to count, read, do maths, multiply, and not to be stupid.

Besides the abstract notion of school, even this kid couldn't name any examples when school materials benefited him in the everyday life.

Our youngest, 9-year-old subject had a very different notion of school:

Interviewer: What do you think school is for?

9-year-old boy: That we learn, that I'm beating up [name]

Interviewer: Are you fighting at school?

9-year-old boy: Yes and I'm kicking [name]'s ass and then his mother comes to complain

This excerpt shows the outcomes of unsuccessful integration. The role of school is interpreted in an interpersonal, conflictuous framework. Later on, he only reported the use of materials learned at school in the context of writing the homework.

The parental interviews mostly connected the role of school to integration to the labour market – The aim of getting a vocation for their kids was very characteristic among the parents.

All in all it seems very clear that school, in the best case is seen as an instrument for successful integration to adult life and less of a mode to acquire useful knowledge.

Difficulties with school, early school leaving

The group interview with the three boys has shown contradictory outcomes. Spontaneously the answer to the question related to difficulties with school was integration, where two of the kids agreed. However, in the following parts of the interview the narrative has changed to the helpfulness of teachers. This might be related to the interview situation, but it also might show that teachers did indeed play a positive role in the inclusion of the interviewees. Our youngest subject answered he didn't like school at all (at one point he mentioned he had liked kindergarten more – it seems that a less structured more game-based approach could have led to higher satisfaction).

We could suspect from the answers of our 9-year-old subject that racism is one of the reasons of the difficulties, but explicitly only our 18-year-old subject has mentioned this:

18-year-old girl: Well, it happened when I didn't get along with one-two teachers, because... there was the physics teacher, that was so anti-gypsy. S/he entered the worst grades even if you opened your mouth at class or something, s/he hated the gypsies. (...) I was excused from math, though I was pretty good at it in first and second grade, I was even sent to a competition in Budapest. And I did very well, I had one or two mistakes, but still I was excused, and I don't know for what or why. And then in physics, chemistry and maths I didn't have to do anything because I was excused.

At a later point she mentioned the low infrastructural supplies and poor cleanliness of her school as a potential barrier to positive well-being.

Parental interviews didn't touch school difficulties in depth, but it must be noted, that in one of the interviews the poor housing conditions were mentioned as a barrier for successful preparation, whereas the mother of four kids mentioned that the school is unable to successfully develop her kids with learning difficulties.

It seems that peer group influence is also perceived by many mothers as the reason of early school leaving:

Mother of 10: I kept on unsuccessfully telling him, took him home, talked to him that [name] don't do this, stay at home, go to school, I could wake you up because I can't

go there all the time, there is always something. He overslept, didn't go, went loitering with [name] and so he didn't finish school. He has never listened to my word.

Negative group influence has appeared in other parental interviews too. The mother of 10 children noted that one source of problems was bullying and abuse at school, but she also found excessive smartphone use problematic.

The views of the professionals

ESL was a key question in the groups with the professionals. The typical explanations were individualistic and/or on a family level, some teachers mentioned the lack of connections with the parents as a sign of a dysfunctional family background. Many teachers connected it with skipping classes, but linguistic disadvantages were also mentioned (which contribute to in-class isolation too). According to their experiences the older children get the more classes they are skipping, there is a downwards spiral. Another teacher mentioned the lack of motivation:

Teacher1: These kids are not expected to go to school, to get a vocation, to start working. They do not see positive patterns around them. And while smaller kids, in lower grades have the interest, the curiosity about things, and friends, and the class and community, and they are small, they are charmed by it, they find it important. By they are getting older, it's getting less and less important, and there is no motivation, no positive examples, no expectations. (...)

Teacher2: (...) And the kid sees at home that you can make a living from other things than going to work every day. And why should I wake up at 7 in the morning if the parents might still be sleeping still, or already, when you can make a living in other means too. (...) And then I'm telling them, that look, at least the driver's licence, that's important to have a car and the licence, that's motivational for everyone. And for most of them it's not, they believe you can drive without it too, and you can get it in other means too.

The smaller focus group's participants mentioned a role conflict of older kids, who are seen as adults in their family, whereas treated as kids in school:

Teacher2/1: I think it starts becoming visible around the 7th-8th grade, for example among Roma boys, at home in the settlement in the family they are in the status of men. And here we try to push them back to a children's role, where, well, they are badly subordinated to teachers- So they have to follow the house rules of the school, the situation, et cetera, and obviously they don't like it when they (...) have a much freer playing field: they can go out at night, drive a car, go to bars, maybe already date, have

brides, plan the wedding. And here we tell them that you have to sit down because that's what I say.

Structural problems came up less frequently, and often weren't agreed on:

Teacher3: I see problems in the educational system too, because these kids are entering first grade with such disadvantages that their integration is impossible in accordance with the current structure. Not only can't we compensate the disadvantages, they are becoming bigger and bigger. (...) As the curricular expectations are increasing and the school in the times of the centralization sadly does not have means to tailor the system to these kids, that's why they experience no success. The reception of the study materials is becoming so impossible for them that it discourages them, I think.

Teacher4: Sorry, I wish it was like that. I'm a bit disagreeing to what you said because it means, I know you start from what kids you're dealing with and what difficulties you encounter. But we have kids who would be able to acquire the material we expect, or the system expects. And they do not fail to acquire it because I want to make them learn something exceeding their abilities, but we cannot make them learn because they don't care, don't find knowing that knowledge important, to acquire it.

The notion of structural problems was mostly interpreted in the context of lack of professionals – this idea was more saliently represented by youth professionals than teachers. Some professionals also mentioned spatial segregation as a systemic problem that is hard to overcome because of the resistance of the mainstream society. The idea of forming parents' groups from the birth of the child on was very much supported by the professionals. Family planning and targeting young people before family formation was also mentioned by possible means of preparation for the parental role. Another possible element to the solution was mentioned in the smaller focus group: the involvement of Roma teachers who could serve as role models and could teach Roma and Hungarian language in additional classes.

The question of participation in extracurricular activities also brought up specific difficulties. Beyond the above-mentioned lack of motivation and parental support, the teachers reported a “*narrowed world*” of the families which lead to not supporting participation. The question of financial resources, as a more structural interpretational framework was also brought up: even “free” programmes often have financial implications.

Unsuccessful integration (or more precisely segregation) also came up as a huge barrier for school success, and in this case, there was a clear consensus among the participants:

Teacher1: As soon as we separate the class to – so to say – weaker and better students, then the weaker ones – weaker in quotation marks – there it's a lifestyle and behaviour, it has so negative effect, so terrible. So terrible. And even the good is not becoming so much better.

The lack of integration, in a wider context, came up in the smaller focus group too. One of the teachers mentioned that parents of the mainstream society tend not to allow their kids close to members of the minority. The participants of this group routinely used the term of “caste” to refer to these phenomena.

As certain ways to resolve the problems, the collaboration with family care was mentioned. Teachers saw the changes in legislation and the stricter regulation of skipping school fruitful (except for the increasing administration this led to).

As for the content of a training course related to the alliance of different actors, there was a strong consensus that it should be practical, playful and it should somehow take them out from their everyday context, showcase good practices

School success

Kids mostly defined school success as simply passing, and not as getting good grades. This can be explained by the instrumental view shown above, where school is just a necessity for a transition to adult life. Our youngest subject understood school success as a more successful integration:

Interviewer: And is it important for you to be successful, good at school?

9-year-old boy: Yes.

Interviewer: Why is it important?

9-year-old boy: Because so I won't be fighting any more.

Most of the parents did identify success with successful completion of the first 8 grades, but many of them incorporated a more abstract notion of knowledge too:

Mother of 5: To read and write, to become smarter. That's why they go to school, so that they develop, I think

Some of the parents viewed school success from a different perspective though. A mother of a 7-year-old boy primarily understood success as happiness, later she also mentioned successful transitions to adult life (that his son will “*become something*”). Generally, in terms of success, a successful transition to the labour market was emphasized. The highest

expectations, not surprisingly, came from our subject who was formally tied to Bagázs. She understood success in a school context as interest and motivation to learn.

Motivation of the kids

In the group interview questions related to school motivation mostly were interpreted in a material/financial framework:

interviewer: What could adults do so that you'd feel good at school, so that you'd like going to school? What is the role of adults?

boy1: They should give us a lot of money.

boy2: They should support us.

interviewer: Would it motivate you if you were given scholarship?

boy1: They should support us.

interviewer: If you go to school?

boy1: Yes, not only scholarship (...)

The guided questions of the moderator lead the group interview to the role of teachers. Our 11-year-old subject mentioned that teachers might entertain kids:

11-year-old boy: Such happy things, and such funny games, things like this.

The excerpt shows that gamification might be a useful way of student motivation and involvement.

Some of the parental interviews did not touch the question of motivation explicitly, probably because most of the parents see education as an objective necessity. The mother who works with Bagázs compared participating in education to labour market participation. She motivated her kids by telling them this was their workplace. The role of teachers and school leaders came up too. She reported that school attendance is mainly pursued by punishments which do not work as they even lower children's motivation. Another parent used negative examples as threats (family members in prison) to motivate their children to learn, and interestingly, this also served as a way to foster the children learn to write, as postal letters were used for communication with the family members in prison.

Collaboration with teachers

As mentioned above, the group interview of three kids showed a positive image of the teachers:

boy3: I was not behaving badly... once or twice. Teachers were all cool. Every teacher, I like the school

The personal interviews with kids also showed a generally positive relationship. The 17-year old boy reported that teachers were helping him in the more difficult tasks. His younger brother mentioned that teachers correct his mistakes.

In a directed question the three kids of the group interview agreed on that the teachers' most important role in enjoyable time in school is related to maintaining good personal relations with the children:

boy1: They should be able to be normal with us...

boy2: That's true.

boy3: They should be able to communicate with us normally. Like how the two of us are communicating, all the kids should stick together

(...)

Boy1: They shouldn't be strict

Interviewer: And what does it mean? Like they don't let you talk at class?

Boy1: No, not this of course, they let us speak, just not always. When they give tasks you need to pay attention to then we shouldn't talk and shouldn't go to the toilet, we shouldn't feel that then, that's what the breaks are for, to talk about everything then.

The interpersonal role came up in the personal interviews too: Interesting, that though the interviewer's question was related to well-being in school, the answer has put it to the context of conflicts between the pupils:

*17-year-old boy: we have to discuss, go to the teachers, you should make peace (...)
The teachers got to know us good enough to know the thing, when you're in a fight, they know what to say.*

Besides the interpersonal relations, it seems that the regulated nature of the school also leads to difficulties related to integration. Our least integrated subject, the 9-year-old boy stated he doesn't get any help from the adults. The questions related to the teachers lead to this conversation:

Interviewer: How much do adults help you at school?

9-year-old boy: Not at all.

Interviewer: Not at all? Not even teachers?

9-year-old boy: Just a little bit

Interviewer: And how?

*9-year-old boy: That she reads for us what is needed, and a little bit helps us, like that.
Not so...*

At a later point of the interview he reported that the teachers are “*shouting*” at him. This (perception) describes to a possibly mutual distrust between teachers and students and leads to a very negative interpretation of the school setting. As mentioned before, our female subject has reported racism too. She stated that a very strong reaction from her and her parents helped solving the situation:

18-year-old girl: First I had always let them know; I had warned them. And then my class teacher literally didn't give a shit. And then when dad's came in and shouted at her and such, and they told her 'why is my daughter different from the others? She is Roma, the same person as us, the same person as others. The same person at school studies the same way, exists the same way, everything'. And then my class teacher payed more attention too. Later it happened that I attacked the physics teacher, pushed her against the blackboard because I just had enough, totally enough. And then she became better at me, but I had to show my teeth.

Those parents who reported good relationship with the teachers described them accessible, reliable and helpful. The mother of 10 children stated that in case of problems she gets to be called. Negative views were characterized by lack of contact and lack of provision of understandable information. It also seems problematic in this case that the gradebook is online, so digital tools and internet are needed to access them. The narration of this parent also showed an unsuccessful integration of her kids with learning disabilities – when it came to extracurricular activities, she noted that only her daughter without learning difficulties participates in those.

The teachers reported many difficulties about keeping contact with the parents of disadvantaged kids. It must be noted that in this part of the conversation of the focus group with seven participants, negative generalizations and prejudiced terminologies were present in the discussion. It seems that there is a general distrust between teachers and parents which makes collaboration very difficult:

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Teacher1: And then we have to stand at attention if they are coming here to the school and feel like talking.

Teacher2: But I also think, and I have told it at the round table which led to the Swedish-Hungarian¹ lady's [the others are laughing] antipathy, that they don't understand what we are talking about and that holds them back, believe me.

Participants of the other focus group mentioned that parents' meetings are not that much about education, rather about care:

Teacher2/1: They rather expect a full control. If we want to be honest, we mostly have these kinds of problems. Even the parents of kids of different castes want someone to stand up for their child, and their child shouldn't mix. But here professional, that is classroom material related, problems are not really present. So they are not dissatisfied with that.

The role of family

The kids in the group interview reported that they don't need their parents' help. In some cases it was related to the lack of their time, but mostly it was framed as the free will of the kids. Time spending with the parents was mostly described in the sphere of leisure time. Learning, in the interpretation frame of free time did not come up. The personal interviews showed different parental (and family) roles too, the 11 and the 17-year-old boy told us about receiving help from his parents and his sister. The older sibling reported that his parents' intervention was needed to resolve a misunderstanding related to getting a warning note. Parents have generally also reported a strong support for their children. The biggest problem seemed to be methodological readiness, especially when it comes to children with special needs:

Mother of 5: Sadly, I don't have enough time for [name], but like when you, the mentors are coming, you practice with her. Then it's a big help for her that she practices at home, but besides, I can't do anything for her. It's very rare when I sit down with her and see what she knows, what I can help, but it doesn't last long. You can't with the kid.

In a different context, the case of our 18-year-old female subject must be noted too. She has left vocational school because of her relationship:

18-year-old girl: Well he hadn't gone to school and me neither and I was like 'why'?

This is very much in line with the narrative of the teachers, according to which the transition to adulthood precedes the end of the educational career.

¹ Reference to Roma people „mocking” the politically correct speech.

Learning outside the school

Outside the school learning was mostly understood by the kids in the group interview as doing the homeworks. They didn't relate to the concept of informal or non-formal learning.

interviewer: Not like writing the homework at home, but like something totally unrelated to school...

boy1: What? I don't understand, man.

i: That you can learn from, say, playing the PS or football?

boy3: Maybe we can learn

boy1: you can't learn from that!

i: you can't?

boy3: Why, they show you how to juggle the ball

The guidance of the interviewer did lead the boys for a certain understanding of learning outside the school, this was mostly characterised by sports rules and movements. Only one of the kids, whose father appeared to be a skilled worker, referred to learning profession from him and utilizing it in later education. It seems that the concept of outside the school learning shows relevance for those kids who have vision for further education.

The personal interviews showed a bit different understanding too (though the role of sports did come up very saliently there as well). Both the 11 and the 17-year-old boy agreed to the interviewer's question related to outside the school learning. They connected it to learning school-related subjects in the family setting. The questions did lead to references to informal learning though in both cases:

interviewer: Haven't you learnt something else, extra, for example when you were on the computer?

17-year-old boy: Yes, to write like this, with capital letters

Gamification might be a useful tool in this case too, our 11-year-old subject reported the use of a quiz-like application that he found helpful for school-preparation.

In the parental interviews the role of youth work was mentioned:

Mother of a 7-year-old boy: Well this Bagáz's is good, that they are coming to help, it wasn't like this before. And when we went to school this was not happening. And now it's good that besides the teachers there is help for them.

Mother of 5: Well now the support I'm getting is really good. For example, there is a volunteer girl. That she additionally deals with her. Because she is very good at reading and counting. She knows the multiplication table very well considering she's only in second grade. This girl is helping me a lot.

Generally, we can say that the role of informal and non-formal learning was more visible for the parents (probably related to the work of Bagázs), they were more likely to connect it with school success. Some parents' narrations were more focused on the practical help youth workers could provide. The approach of informal learning appeared in one case, where one of the parents mentioned that her daughter wants to learn Roma language and dances.

Future plans

The future plans of the kids were mostly characterised by becoming different types of skilled workers, one of the boys in the group interview stated he'd become a policeman. Most of the kids did understand that further education is necessary for it, but this didn't lead to a readjustment of the previous statements. The less school was seen as merely an obstacle, a barrier before adult life, the more further education plans became characteristic. Family also played a key role in the future plans of all the kids interviewed, those with positive role models were attributing higher importance to further learning. Parents generally did understand the role of further education, but according to the interviews, only those who generally had a more positive image on schools were actively fostering their children to keep on studying after the obligatory levels.

Summary

All in all we faced very different views of school. Generally, it can be concluded that kids see school success in completing it (mainly the first 8 grades). Parents' attitudes towards the school were more diverse. It seems that those more integrated in the community attribute higher importance to further education (the analysis did not touch the topic, but community participation was included in the interviews), also those having a more abstract view on school are coming from these parents.

Disintegration in the community and negative experiences related to the school lead to distrust and a less positive view on schooling and education in general. This can be seen both from the parents' and from the teachers' side. It seems that gender and age roles mean a major problem for the integration of older kids. School treats them very differently than their communities.

Sport, especially football means a central leisure time activity for the children interviewed (and also the children of the mothers participating in the research). Some parents have mentioned other extracurricular activities (especially, but not only, related to holidays and class excursions) and the role of Bagázs, but it seems that an effective way of involving non-formal learning and community development could happen through sports.

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