

Research Paper

Types of Fathers' Home-based and School-based Involvement in a Hungarian Interview Study

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Abstract

This study explores the ways that Hungarian fathers are involved, at home and at school, in their children's development and achievement. It also identifies the types of fathers that emerge based on this involvement. According to the literature, paternal involvement at home and at school contributes to academic achievement, similar to the involvement of mothers, but to a lesser extent and in different ways. The theoretical framework of the research relies on the types of parental involvement as defined by Epstein. The research was qualitative, based on 14 semi-structured interviews and the classification of fathers, resulting in three groups of similar size. The first group comprised fathers who contributed to their child's achievement at home, often by helping with school-related activities, while not participating in school events. The second group included fathers who were involved at home and at school alike. Finally, the third group consisted of four divorced fathers, three of whom were involved both at home and at school, due to their particular situation. Overall, fathers' school-based involvement can be increased by the supportive attitude of wives, fathers' greater confidence in themselves and their abilities, and by informal events organized by schools (cooking or sports days), in which fathers are more likely to participate.

Keywords: fathers, fathers' attitudes, parental involvement, qualitative research, role perception

Introduction

The quality of the relationship between parents, children, and teachers is a crucial factor, and its exploration remains an important area for research. The amount of time spent at school has a great influence on children's lives, so coordinating the work of teachers and parents is vital to the well-being, achievement, and development of those children. In addition, the involvement of parents in their children's life at home is also a key factor (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Fathers' involvement has been linked to greater school achievement, which is why fathers' increased involvement in parenting activities may become a demand, both among policymakers in education and by the general public (Nord et al., 1998; McBride et al., 2005; Hill & Tyson, 2015). Internationally, research on fathers is increasingly common, but in Hungary, such studies focus mainly on paternal roles and gender roles, (Spéder, 2011; Fényes & Pusztai, 2020) and they do not examine in detail the home-based and school-based involvement of fathers and its effects.

Gender roles and father roles

The traditional approach to gender roles can be traced back to Parsons and functionalism. This view depicts men as breadwinners who provide for the family and take care of material needs, and women as the providers of emotional security, who are also responsible for household chores (Fényes & Pusztai, 2020). However, with the mass entry of women into the workforce, the two-earner family model is now more common, resulting in the need to redistribute women's domestic and familial tasks that were set out by the traditional concept of the family unit. With the participation of women in the labor market and their gradual entry into educational

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institutions, gender roles have become more symmetrical and, at the same time, the roles of father and husband have also shifted (Fényes & Gál, 2020; Spéder, 2011). This egalitarian division of labor, in which women may become the breadwinner of the family and fathers may take on the role of caring for the household and children, is referred to as postmodern gender roles. However, in contemporary Hungary, women still tend to be responsible for domestic tasks in the home, which is often referred to in the literature as women's "second shift". Moreover, in Hungary, the number of female-breadwinner families is relatively low and, despite the prevalence of the two-earner family model, the division of labor within the family still reflects traditional gender roles (Pongráczné, 2005).

The concept of gender role attitudes reflects public perceptions of gender roles. Among young people, gender roles are shifting towards modern perceptions. Among higher education students, Fényes and Pusztai (2020) identified three clusters of gender role perceptions: one with traditional role perceptions and two with modern role perceptions. As for the difference between the two modern clusters, one group valued women's work and career as most important, while the other group, besides highlighting women's work, had a father figure involved in the family (Fényes & Pusztai, 2020).

The acceptance of the father in the breadwinner role, according to which fathers' main task is to provide family security and material resources, is still strongly present in our society today. However, in addition to the traditional view, the image of the father as someone involved in household chores, parenting, and family life is increasingly accepted, and is ever in demand. Thus, in Hungary, men are expected to play a dual role, as is the case for women: the father should be an active participant in family life and parenting but should also fulfil the breadwinner role, providing the family with financial support (Spéder, 2011). International data show that people with higher education and a favorable social background are more likely to identify with this modern role (Diniz et al., 2021; Nord et al., 1998).

Parental involvement

The parent-school relationship is not limited to mere communication. In the English-language special literature, the term "parental involvement" is used to describe not only parent-school communication but also the parents' attitude towards the school, including all those relationships that are related to the school and contribute to children's academic achievement (Bacsikai, 2020).

Following Epstein (2001), we can distinguish two main components of parental academic involvement: (1) *School-based involvement*: activities that take place in the school (*such as school days and events, but also parent-teacher conferences and teacher consultations*), and (2) *Home-based involvement*, which is any influence from parent to child that contributes to the child's academic achievement but does not take place within the educational institution (*for example, talking through the school material at home, visiting a museum, or expressing the value of learning to the child*).

The effects of parental involvement have been studied from various aspects, including how it plays a role in reducing school dropout, promoting resilience, and improving school performance (Ceglédi, 2020; Hill & Tyson, 2009). In addition, research has also demonstrated a relationship between parental involvement and parents' social status, with higher levels of school-based involvement among highly educated parents (Bacsikai, 2020). According to Imre (2015), this may be because parents with high educational attainment are more likely to see teachers as partners in their children's education and are more likely to participate in organized school forums (such as parent-teacher conferences). In addition, there is also evidence of decreased parental involvement at higher levels of education (Lannert & Szekszárdi, 2015). One possible explanation for this could be adolescents' increased autonomy (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Kim & Hill, 2015; Lee, 2019; Nord et al., 1998).

Hill and Tyson (2009), in addition to the two types of parental involvement mentioned above, consider a third dimension of involvement, namely *academic socialization*. This comprises parents' perceptions of the value and usefulness of school as communicated and transmitted to their child, emphasis on the long-term positive returns to energy invested in learning, parents' time management between the child's school and personal events, sharing of possible learning strategies, promotion of educational aspirations, and parents' planning and organizing activities. In addition, school socialization is more strongly associated with children's school performance than school-based and home-based involvement (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

It is important to highlight that communication between schools and families takes place primarily between women as several studies show that mothers are much more involved in school life (Bacsikai, 2020; Fényes & Gál, 2020; Imre, 2015; Lannert & Szekszárdi, 2015). Nevertheless, fathers are just as well placed to promote their children's academic achievement through these dimensions (Kim & Hill, 2015; McBride et al., 2005).

The relationship between fathers and schools

In their childhood, the current generation of fathers was socialized when traditional gender role division was widespread and accepted. Modern father roles are prevalent among young, educated and well-off people (Spéder, 2011; Fényes & Pusztai, 2020; Takács, 2017). The immediate environment, and especially the wife, can influence men's identification with modern role perceptions, thus determining fathers' school-based involvement (Diniz et al., 2021; Nord et al., 1998). In addition, Nord et al. (1998) showed that single fathers were able to shed their traditional roles and become more involved in the relationship with their child's school. In addition, among students in grades 1-12, the school-based involvement of fathers enhanced children's academic achievement and reduced the chances of failure or expulsion. Moreover, better outcomes were achieved when both parents were involved compared to when only the mother was involved. However, Pleck (2012) mentions that the maternal *gatekeeping* role may be associated with reduced paternal involvement. The mother sees contact with the school as her own domain, which prevents men from fulfilling their family roles. Lee (2019) showed this phenomenon in Korean fathers' school-based involvement. Paternal involvement there is considerably affected by the mother's supportive role or "permission" for the father to be involved in school, household, and parenting activities that would otherwise be her domain. Lee (2019) also measured fathers' flexibility at work, and found a positive link with their involvement at school. Research by Unal and Unal (2010) found that fathers are much more motivated to attend parent-teacher conferences if scheduled on weekends or at 5 in the afternoon.

Research questions, method, and sample

Our main research question asks about the manner in which the interviewed fathers are involved in their children's development and what differences there are in the forms of involvement between fathers. In addition to this, we would also like to use our findings to suggest ways to increase their participation in school events.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 fathers, averaging 47 minutes in length each. Four of the fathers in the sample were divorced, which was taken into account in the analysis of the results. The interviews, which were audio-recorded and then typed up, were conducted in person. Interviewees included both those with children of secondary school age (6 fathers) and those with children of primary school age (8 fathers). In terms of educational attainment, those with higher education were overrepresented (8 fathers).

In our analysis, we first grouped fathers along Epstein's dimensions (involvement at home, involvement at school). Divorced fathers were placed in a completely separate group because of their family structure. Then, we analyzed the groups of fathers according to the following criteria, among others: 1) What activities they did with their child (school-related and not). 2) What their motivation is for doing activities with their child. 3) What activities they do at home in their daily life (e.g. housework.) 4) What kind of family they grew up in, what kind of gender role pattern they experienced, what kind of relationship they had with their father. 5) What kind of events they participate in at school. 6) What motivates them to participate in school and what motivates them not to participate. 7) What kind of experiences and perceptions they have about school and teachers, what expectations they have of them. 8) What are their views and ideas about raising children. On the basis of these, we tried to find common motives and common points among the fathers belonging to the same group. We also compared the motives of the group with those of the other groups.

In all cases, the interviewees were informed of the purpose of the research, the anonymity of the information and they agreed to the audio recording. We used fictitious names for easier interpretation and to ensure anonymity. The basic characteristics of the interviewees are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic characteristics of the interviewees

First name	Age	Educational attainment	Family status	The child's school
(1) Géza	39	University	Married	Primary school
(2) Tamás	30	Secondary general	Married	Primary school
(3) László	41	University	Married	Primary school
(4) Imre	43	Primary	Married	Primary school
(5) Csaba	53	Secondary vocational	Divorced	Primary school
(6) Károly	46	College	Divorced	Secondary school
(7) Péter	44	College	Married	Primary school
(8) István	57	Secondary vocational	Divorced	Secondary school
(9) Szilárd	46	College	Married	Secondary school
(10) Balázs	49	Secondary vocational	Divorced	Secondary school
(11) Zsolt	54	University	Married	Secondary school
(12) Gábor	46	University	Married	Primary school
(13) Kornél	48	University	Married	Secondary school
(14) Áron	44	Secondary vocational	Married	Primary school

Results of the classification of interviewees

Three types of interviewees emerged, and the characteristics of each are presented below. For each type, deductive coding was used, and based on Epstein (2001), and distinction was made between school-based involvement and home-based involvement. In the analysis, the level of the child's school was not a grouping variable. In the case of secondary school-aged children, due to the structure and atmosphere of the institution, as well as the child's desire for independence, parental involvement is less common, but this is not primarily characteristic of fathers. Examined fathers reported the lack of school trips for secondary school children, and said that it was unpleasant for their teenager child if the parents appear in the school. However, these findings are in accordance with literature in the case of parental involvement in general (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Fathers involved only at home (5 fathers)

This type contains fathers who do not participate in school events, such as parent-teacher conferences, teacher consultations, or other school events. The group includes five fathers, two of whom have a child in primary school and three have a child in secondary school. Three of them are higher education graduates, one completed secondary education and the final interviewee completed primary education.

The main barrier to their *school-based involvement* is their view that there are no resources that could potentially be utilized through interactions at school. They see school as an impersonal institution and believe that there is no "benefit" in engaging with teachers. They do not think that they can have an impact on the processes taking place in the school. School events are seen as a one-way communication channel: the school is only a source of information and not a complex network of human relationships.

„Szilárd: I don't think it's important for both of them. You have to keep in touch with the teacher, but I don't think it's important for either of them.

Q: Why?

Szilárd: Well, it's enough if only one keeps in touch with him/her...

Q: And the other parent will tell what she heard?

Szilárd: For example.” (Szilárd, 46 years old)

This perception was held by all five fathers, but it was the most pronounced for the father with the lowest educational attainment. However, among higher education graduates, additional disincentives also appeared.

For one father, the maternal *gatekeeping* role and the constraints of his work schedule were also present, while another found his own skills inadequate to interact with teachers and the school. In addition to the main disincentive, namely that school is a one-way channel of communication, these interviewees also displayed traditional father role attitudes.

„...but I think that education, school and the relationship with the child are more the responsibility of mothers, I think somehow... or maybe this was the example before me too. My mother was more concerned with school and my school problems than my father. So I was brought up in this way that the father usually prefers to play with the child, do sports and show him the world. Physical things.” (Csaba, 53 years old)

The fathers of higher education graduates were professionally successful, viewing themselves as the glue that held the family together, a sentiment which the interviewees themselves also identified with. This role does not include involvement at school. The interviewees had not seen in their fathers' parenting the practices, examples, skills, and abilities to enable them to feel that they could succeed in the school setting. Another hindrance to school-based involvement was their workplace, the importance of their role there, and the inflexibility of their working hours.

However, the interviewees' fathers (with the exception of one) had provided a model for *home-based involvement*, in which interviewees were more comfortable. Only the interviewee with primary education had no positive associations about his father, whose actions he did not find exemplary at all and whom he described as a negligent alcoholic. This interviewee's parenting activities at home were rather limited, largely due to his lack of a father figure. Although he loved his child very much, he did not really know how to relate personally to the child or what he could do to give help; he was insecure and dissatisfied with his abilities, and his self-image was negative, which made his involvement at home even more difficult. His home-based involvement was greatly aided by his wife, however, who usually supported him emotionally and with ideas. Apart from this one exceptional case, the other four fathers' home-based involvement was satisfactory. Partly because of the father figure they had seen, partly due to their work environment, they saw the fulfilment of their parenting mostly in the provision of various material goods and in managing their child (*by analyzing information gathered about their children through their own observations and the feedback of others, they recommended various activities, jobs, extracurricular activities that fit the children's personality and interests, and encouraged participation*), but this does not mean that they ignored other dimensions.

„...And he tells me a lot, so I know that his teachers are good, who his teacher is, and my son played handball for years at DEAC (a sports association) and now, because of his studies, he doesn't have to go to separate training sessions, and he doesn't do that anymore, but I drove past him a lot when he finished training at 6 p.m. I took him there in the morning, then I went, sometimes much earlier... Sometimes I stayed there for the whole time and then I watched how the training was going.” (Zsolt, 54 years old)

They deemed it essential that their children should set goals by their own choice, but the fathers provided the experience and management necessary to do so. They gave their children the opportunity to take swimming lessons, used their network of contacts to help find summer jobs, and tried to instill values and norms that would intrinsically motivate the rejection of deviant behavior. Fathers spent time together with young children playing games of movement, and with older children doing sports and craft activities together. They emphasized the importance of broadening their children's social contacts with adequate support. They also helped with school-related activities at home: homework, paper recycling competitions, creating family trees, etc.

Fathers involved at home and at school (5 fathers)

Of the five fathers in this group, four have a tertiary education and one completed vocational training. Their children are all enrolled in primary school.

In terms of *school-based involvement*, the fathers participate in all kinds of events. They consider participation in school events to be useful and feel that this dimension is an integral part of their role as fathers. Most of them see this as a useful resource for their child, which is among the main reasons for their involvement.

„Q: Do you think it is important for both parents to keep in touch with a child’s teachers?

Peter: I think so! They (the teachers) must partially know the parents. This can also give teachers important information about who does what or who is what kind of person in order to understand certain children’s behavioral issues and/or characteristics.” (*Peter, 44 years old*)

Their belief in their capabilities and in themselves is outstanding compared to other interviewees. Their confidence in their ability to perform well in this field also drives their involvement. The confidence may be the result of two factors, which are, however not always, present simultaneously. 1) The fathers’ upbringing taught them to be sufficiently critical and open-minded, attributes they partly associate with their own fathers. This perception has helped them understand that their own will, consistency, and commitment often determine how their lives, and the lives of their children, develop. 2) The other reason is that they receive support from their wives, with whom they share insights, attentively listening to and assessing what the other has to say. Modern gender roles prevail in their family life, resulting in a balanced atmosphere, which is in tune with the pace of today’s world. As a consequence, fathers are content with themselves. The wife’s support also extends to attending school events: the parents usually go to these events together or take turns.

„Well, I go to all the ones I can. Or let’s say we go to everything. So usually my wife and I go together, if we can get a babysitter for the little one, so that we can leave him with someone, because he’s still little, we don’t leave him alone. But yes.” (*László, 41 years old*)

Often the fathers are critical and unafraid of a possible argument with teachers or fellow parents. They like to keep control of their child’s school affairs and are willing to attend events even if their spouse is unable to attend. One interviewee, however, only attends these events alone, as he says that his wife is not as good a communicator as he is and that his business allows him to have working hours with more free time.

Even for *home-based involvement*, their modern gender roles can be observed: the vast majority of such fathers do not refrain from any form of affection, such as a word of appreciation, an emotional hug, or a kiss on the cheek. They believe that all these things have their place, time, and importance. They also attach great importance to joint activities with the child, dominated by mobility games (cycling, “running around”, playing badminton, etc.) or activities that promote cognitive development (categories game, various board games) and contribute to the development of fine motor skills (Lego, building blocks). Most of them (with one exception) view joint activities as the greatest contribution to their child’s life and well-being. However, this does not mean that they do not participate in various management activities. The exception to intensive home-based involvement is one interviewee, whose own father was rather distant, and who accepted his child based on level of performance. According to him, he is unable to discern the need for his involvement in activities with his children, and cannot lose himself in the moment to the level he would expect. Instead, he focuses on management activities and conversations with his children, through which he wants to transmit his worldview to his children and teach them. Simultaneously, he also displays modern gender roles: he prepares breakfast, does the shopping alone, and does the laundry.

„...I usually go in the morning, get a crescent roll, etc. Then we have breakfast, I take the children to school, I do my tasks in the morning... the „children’s afternoon” starts at two, then there is a music school, a course etc. I bring the children here and there. Then that’s usually the end of the afternoon. I go shopping in between, so these are the things I have to do.” (*Gábor, 46 years old*)

Besides this exception, all other fathers (four out of five) want to pass down the values they received from their own father, who they view as a strong role model.

Divorced fathers involved at home and, to a large extent, at school (4 fathers)

The interviewees include four fathers who no longer live with the mother of their child. These fathers were classified into a separate category. Most of them (3 fathers) live with their children and are primary caregivers, and one father only sees his child on the weekends. The latter father has a child in primary school, while the former three have children in secondary school. Of the four fathers, there is an even split between those who continue their lives with a new partner and those who live without a new partner. In terms of educational background, one father is a higher education graduate and three completed vocational training.

In terms of *school-based involvement*, the father of the primary school-age child, who meets his child during weekend visits, is the only one not to participate in school events. In contrast, the three fathers of children of secondary school age attend parent-teacher conferences, teacher consultations, and other school events (e.g. carnival, sports days, cooking days) which are organized periodically. For all of them, the main reason for their involvement is to gather information. In their opinion, in order to have a good overview of their child's development and possible difficulties, it is necessary to keep in touch with teachers, a possible way of which is to attend such events, as they cannot get information through the child's mother. It is worth noting that these fathers have a negative or at best neutral relationship with the mother of their child. Furthermore, all of them reported flexibility in their working arrangements, which in principle makes it feasible for them to attend school events. The father who does not attend school events is in constant exchange of information with the mother of the child, so that he is informed about school matters through her. In relation to his reluctance to get involved at school, there are two other factors at play: 1) The traditional father role, in which the school is a part of the mother's "territory"; 2) The mother's *gatekeeping* role, something also indicated in his statements:

"Well, now it's the year-end cooking day, then my ex-wife was there, she used to be at the parents' meeting... when the little one had the opening of the year, so I was there, but I really have no say what happens in the school... No, I do not keep in touch with the other parents either." (*Csaba, 53 years old*)

These fathers' *home-based involvement* was mainly focused on creating a warm, relaxed atmosphere, which manifested itself in time spent playing with their children. The fathers' main aim is to enable their children to spend their daily lives in a calm and cheerful environment and to reduce as much as possible the negative effects of stress caused by a fast-paced world and excessive expectations. The main reasons for their involvement at home are: they love their children, they are divorced, and the mother figure is thus missing from the children's environment. These fathers had to learn how to operate the mother's role because of the separation from their wives. The divorce put them and their children through a difficult time, which they saw as another reason to maintain a good relationship with their children.

"I always try to approach them gently. Do you understand? I give them such a good big kiss. I want it back!! (-laughs-) Well, something like that! (-smile-)

Q: Was it the same with the boy?

Yes! Even to this day!" (*István, 57 years old*)

The difficulties the fathers had gone through together with their children proved to be bonding experiences, opening up the way for them to approach their children on an emotional level: to have deeper, more meaningful conversations and to pay more attention to their children's emotional problems. This phenomenon was even evident in the example of the father who currently has a relatively good or neutral relationship with his wife and therefore does not participate in school events.

Summary

The research aims to explore fathers' parenting activities at home and their participation in school events. Based on the interview findings, the fathers were classified into groups, with divorced fathers being a separate category from among 14 interviewees. The other two groups comprised fathers involved only at home and fathers involved both at home and at school. The classification was carried out using the two dimensions of parental involvement, following Epstein (2001), and deductive coding allowed for comparison with the literature.

The characterization of the three types revealed a tendency, which is also observed in the literature, namely that those from a favorable social background show higher aspirations to engage with schools (Bacskaï, 2020; Imre, 2015). Fathers who attended formal events at school (parent-teacher conferences and teacher consultations) were usually better educated. For fathers only involved at home, participation in school events was hindered by their identification with traditional gender roles on the one hand and their cold, impersonal view of school on the other. They were strongly influenced by the paternal model they had received, which made them more willing to participate in home-based parenting but reluctant towards educational institutions. Their wives supported them specifically to engage in home-based parenting activities, but in most cases this did not extend to school events. In contrast, fathers who attended school events were predominantly accompanied by their

wives. In their case, a rather egalitarian division of roles was dominant, which also contributed to their more frequent attendance of school events. An optimal work environment did not clearly lead to greater school-based involvement. Instead, this factor provided an opportunity for but did not lead directly to participation in school events, although in Lee's (2019) research, workplace flexibility was identified as a key factor in fathers' school-based involvement. In this case, the workplace conditions were presented only as an external barrier, which, once removed, still required intrinsic motivation for fathers to get involved at school. Most divorced fathers were involved both at home and at school, with only one not involved at school, presumably due to the good relationship he maintained with his wife. According to the literature, the situation of single fathers is unique and may result in higher involvement compared to when the child lives in an intact family (Nord et al., 1998).

Policy proposals

The home-based involvement of fathers who appeared to lack intrinsic motivation to participate in school events showed that they preferred to spend time with their children in the form of high-mobility activities and games. This suggests that sporting events, excursions, games and competitions organized by the school would be acceptable for them and would not conflict with their traditional role. According to Lee (2019), fathers appear most often at such informal events. Informal events would give them the opportunity to connect with the teacher, thus reducing their detachment from the school. They would also need support from their wives, who could be influenced by the teachers. It would be instrumental to pass on to them the idea that fathers have an important role to play at such events and that their presence and insights can contribute to the well-being of their children. It is important to increase fathers' confidence and awareness that they can in fact contribute to their children's success in the school setting. To achieve this, schools should first offer events that are better suited to fathers' roles.

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