

## TEACHER-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS, FORMS OF COMMUNICATION AND FACTORS THAT AFFECT THEM

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**Abstract.** Most parents want to be more involved in education, however, in practice, it can be challenging to achieve an effective relationship and communication between the parents and the teachers. The aim of this study is to find out whether selected demographic factors influence teachers' views of the teacher-parent relationship and which the preferred ways of teacher-parent communication are. In this study, we processed data collected in a sample of 139 teachers of Hungarian ethnic schools (i.e. Slovak teachers working in Hungary). According to the findings hereof, teachers from urban areas perceived their relationships with the parents to be more positive than the teachers from rural areas. As gender differences, we found that female teachers preferred messages and telephone calls. As far as age differences are concerned, we found that older teachers preferred individual meetings with parents and open days. We also found that urban teachers preferred messages more than their rural colleagues. The contribution of this study lies in the fact that it provides a better understanding of the different aspects of the teacher-parent relationships and communication.

**Keywords:** teacher-parent relationship; teacher communication; demographic factors; urban teacher; rural teachers

### Introduction

The population of all European countries include – smaller or larger – national and ethnic groups. In Hungary, there are thirteen national/ethnic minorities. The Slovaks are the third largest ethnic group. Compared to the Hungarian minority living along the borders of Hungary, the Slovaks living in Hungary do occupy a single territory, but are scattered all over the country, forming linguistic islands (Ďurková 2020).

Education in one's own mother tongue is one of the key areas of maintaining one's language and ethnic identity. As far as Slovaks living in Hungary are concerned, the task of ethnic Slovak schools is not only to teach the language, but also to maintain national identity. As the school system has become a crucial factor in maintaining

the Slovak language and culture, but also the Slovak population in Hungary. As handing down Slovak language and culture from generation to generation within the families is gradually fading away, ethnic schools are becoming increasingly important in this process (Đurkovská & Kentoš 2020).

Slovak ethnic education in Hungary currently operates through a school system composed of three different types of schools. Pursuant to the corresponding decree of the Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture, there are three types of ethnic schools: monolingual schools, bilingual schools and schools teaching Slovak as a separate subject. Monolingual schools are the ones educating their students in the ethnic language (with the exception of Hungarian and foreign languages). Bilingual schools - akin to their name – provide bilingual education, while 50 % of the lessons are being taught in the ethnic language. At schools teaching the ethnic language as a separate subject, students are educated in Hungarian; however, the curriculum also contains Slovak language and literature, along with “Slovak studies”. At these schools, by law, Slovak language is a compulsory subject for all pupils (Đurkovská 2020; Heldáková 2018).

### **Literature Review**

According to the research conducted by Hornby and Blackwell (2018), parental involvement in the teaching process improves not only the children's academic success, but also the teacher-parent relationship, the atmosphere at school, as well as the self-esteem and satisfaction of the parents themselves.

Most parents want to be more involved in education (Grant 2011); however, in practice, it can be challenging to achieve an effective relationship and communication between the parents and the school/the teachers. For example, fewer than one in four parents could name an education milestone their child had achieved during past year (Kraft & Rogers 2014).

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) argue that an effective parent-teacher relationship can be fostered by an open-minded teacher who actively engages the parent in the classroom and chooses appropriate means of communication in doing so. Another key factor is also how teachers perceive the quality of the relationship and contact with the parent. Understanding and improving this can foster the dynamic of the teacher-parent relationship, and - ultimately - contribute to successful teaching (Stormont et al. 2013).

Researchers (Kraft & Dougherty 2013) found that keeping in touch with students on the phone improved students' homework completion and engagement at school. In a later research study (Kraft & Rogers 2014), they also proved that weekly reports sent by the teacher to the parents (about their children's specific problems) reduced the chance of failing the particular subject by 41 %.

In a 2021 survey, Bergman (2021) studied the preferred forms of parent-teacher communication. The study showed that 79 % of the parents preferred text messages,

13 % preferred emails, and 8 % preferred phone calls. An Estonian research surveyed the preferred forms of parent-teacher communication, both in towns and villages. According to the findings of this study, parents living in cities preferred meeting the teacher in person and posting messages on the school website, while parents from villages preferred text messages and phone calls. Urban teachers preferred phone calls and emails, while rural teachers preferred emails and messages posted on the school website (Palts & Kalmus 2015). A 2018 research study found that in most situations, parents preferred written messages (text messages or emails) over other forms of communication (Albright 2018). A study conducted on a sample of 640 teachers showed that in communicating with their students' parents, teachers prefer meetings in person and written reports, involving parents in extracurricular activities (Akhter 2016).

As it has been repeatedly proven, the demographic variables of teachers correlate with many aspects of the teaching profession, for example satisfaction (Kume 2020). The purpose of this study is to verify whether selected demographic factors influence teachers' perception of their relationship with their students' parents and the preference and perceived effectiveness of various forms of communication with the parents. The purpose of this research is to verify whether selected demographic factors influence a teacher's perception of his or her relationship with students' parents, and the preference for and perceived effectiveness of various forms of communication with the parent.

### **Materials and Methods**

The data come from the survey conducted in 10 Hungarian counties between January and April 2019, using a sample of 139 teachers of ethnic schools (i.e. Slovak teachers working in Hungary).

Respondents were selected from schools teaching Slovak, both in cities and villages. The selection criteria were employment (working as a teacher of Slovak or in Slovak currently or in the past) and the availability of the respondent, regardless of other identification criteria (location, age, gender). The survey sample consisted of 18.7% of men and 88.3% of women. The mean age of the respondents was ( $M = 48.7$  years,  $SD = 10.02$ ) (ranging from 24 to 68 years). 62% of the participating teachers worked in cities, while 38% worked in villages. 7.3% taught at monolingual schools, 48.2% at bilingual and 43.1% at schools teaching the ethnic language as a separate subject. 54% claimed to be of Slovak ethnicity, 18.2% claimed to be Hungarian, while 27.7% claimed to be of both ethnicities.

We examined responses to two items:

1.) *If you had to characterize your relationship with parents of pupils/students in general, would you say that it is:...* Respondents rated the item on a seven-point scale (where 1 = *very negative* and 7 = *very positive*). This item is aimed at the teacher-parent relationship.

2.) *In communication with parents, I have found the following to be useful...* This item listed possible forms of communication; respondents rated these on a 7-point scale (where 1 = *definitely not*, 7 = *definitely yes*). This item is aimed at the preference for and perceived effectiveness of various forms of communication with the parent. The 6 surveyed forms of communication and their brief descriptions are as follows:

*Written messages.* These include written communication - letters, emails, notices on school websites, etc.

*Phone calls.* The purpose of telephone calls is usually to inform about exceptional events and circumstances at school (performance, behaviour etc.).

*Group meetings with parents.* These have two primary aims: to inform parents about their children's performance and to create an atmosphere of trust between parents and teachers.

*Individual meetings with parents.* These meetings are held to inform individual parents about their children's performance or behaviour.

*Open days.* Parents meet the teachers and discuss their children's achievements and problems in an informal fashion.

*Joint leisure activities.* The aim of these is to encourage children, parents and teachers to spend their time together.

We chose gender, age, and the school location of the teachers as factors influencing the teacher-parent relationship and communication.

We analysed the data using JASP 0.11.1.0 statistical software. For statistical evaluation, we used difference statistics, specifically t-tests. We used Levene's test to demonstrate whether the assumption of the equality of variances of the respective groups was met in the individual calculations or not. If the assumption of equality of variances was proven, we used Student's t-test and then the effect size was calculated using Cohen's d. If the assumption was not met, we used Welch's t-test to perform the calculations and calculated the effect size using Hedges' g.

## Results

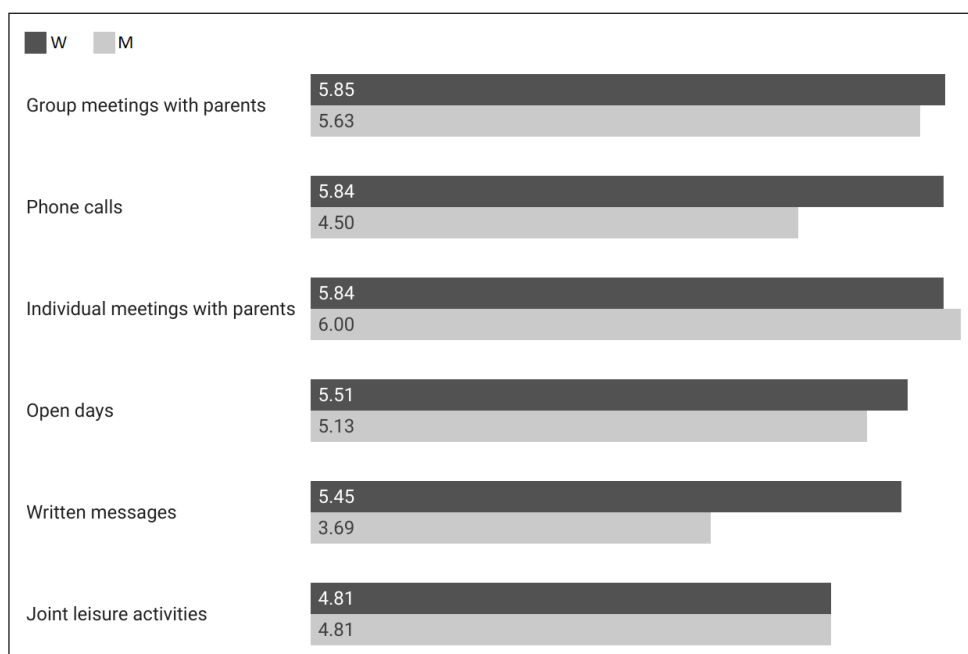
We investigated the differences between male and female teachers in their relationships with parents. Since Levene's test did not prove the assumption of the equality of variances, Welch's t-test and Hedges' g were used for calculations. Calculation results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Differences between male and female teachers in their relationships with parents

Item	M women (SD)	M men (SD)	t-value (p-value)	Hedges' g
Relationship with parents	6,17 (0,78)	5,81 (1,17)	-1,18 (0,256)	0,35

We did not find statistically significant differences between these groups. The overall mean for this variable was 6.13.

Next, we analysed the forms of teacher-parent communication. Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the mean values of the responses - forms of communication - to the item *In communication with parents, I have found the following to be useful:...* (on a 7-point scale, where 1 = very negative, 7 = very positive). The values are differentiated by the teachers' gender.



**Figure 1.** Men's and women's mean values considering the forms of communication

Overall, we measured the highest scores for the item *Group meetings with parents*. The item *Joint leisure activities* achieved the lowest score.

In this section, we present the difference statistics results of the 6 forms of teacher-parent communication, considering female and male teachers. Teachers gave their opinions concerning the following issue: *In communication with parents, I have found the following to be useful:...* The p-value tells us whether the differences are statistically significant and the effect size tells us how significant the differences are. We used Welch's t-test and Hedges' g. Table 2 shows the mean values, t-values, p-values, and effect sizes for the respective items.

**Table 2.** Differences in forms of communication used by male and female teachers

Item	M women (SD)	M men (SD)	t-value (p-value)	Hedges' g
Written messages	5,45 (1,86)	3,69 (2,39)	-2,84 (0,011)	0,82
Phone calls	5,84 (1,45)	4,50 (2,28)	-2,30 (0,035)	0,70
Group meetings with parents	5,85 (1,40)	5,63 (1,36)	-0,62 (0,543)	0,16
Individual meetings with parents	5,84 (1,50)	6,00 (1,37)	0,45 (0,658)	0,12
Open days	5,51 (1,64)	5,13 (2,09)	-0,70 (0,491)	0,20
Joint leisure activities	4,81 (1,81)	4,81 (1,76)	0,00 (0,993)	0,00

We confirmed statistically significant differences concerning the following items: *Written messages* and *Phone calls*. Thus, women and men differ in these forms of communication – we measured higher mean values of these items in the case of women: compared to the male respondents, female respondents reported that these forms of communication with the parents worked better for them.

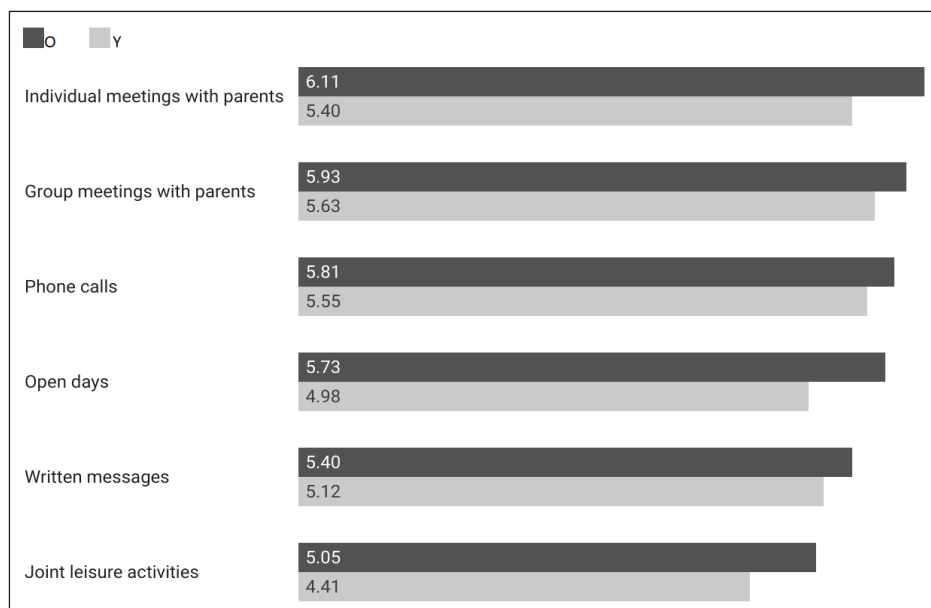
We also investigated the differences between older and younger teachers, considering their relationships with parents. For the purposes of these tests, we created two age groups – older teachers (aged 46 to 68) and younger teachers (aged 24 to 45). Since Levene's test did not prove the assumption of the equality of variances, again, Welch's t-test and Hedges' g were used for calculations. Calculation results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Differences between older and younger teachers in their relationships with parents

Item	M older (SD)	M younger (SD)	t-value (p-value)	Hedges' g
Relationship with parents	6,12 (0,83)	6,16 (0,85)	0,31 (0,756)	0,06

We did not find statistically significant differences between these groups either.

Figure 2 is a graphical representation of the mean values of the responses – forms of communication – to the item *In communication with parents, I have found the following to be useful...* (on a 7-point scale, where 1 = *very negative*, 7 = *very positive*). The values are differentiated by the teachers' age (older vs. younger).



**Figure 2.** Older and younger teachers' mean values considering the forms of communication

The figure shows that the older teachers achieved consistently higher mean scores than their younger colleagues.

In this section, we present the difference statistics results of the 6 forms of teacher-parent communication, considering younger and older teachers. Table 4 shows the mean values, t-values, p-values, and effect sizes for the respective forms of communication.

**Table 4.** Differences between older and younger teachers considering the respective forms of communication

Item	M older (SD)	M younger (SD)	t-value (p-value)	Hedges' g
Written messages	5,40 (1,75)	5,12 (2,29)	-0,73 (0,465)	0,14
Phone calls	5,81 (1,36)	5,55 (1,91)	-0,84 (0,402)	0,16
Group meetings with parents	5,93 (1,29)	5,63 (1,56)	-1,13 (0,263)	0,21
Individual meetings with parents	6,11 (1,20)	5,40 (1,83)	-2,39 (0,019)	0,45

Open days	5,73 (1,46)	4,98 (2,00)	-2,30 (0,024)	0,43
Joint leisure activities	5,05 (1,64)	4,41 (1,96)	-1,93 (0,057)	0,35

We confirmed statistically significant differences concerning the following items: *Individual meetings with parents* and *Open days*. The mean scores of these items were higher in the case of older teachers. Thus, older teachers found these forms of communication with parents more useful than their younger colleagues.

We also investigated the differences between teachers working at urban and rural schools, considering their relationships with parents. Welch's t-test and Hedges' g were used for calculations. The calculation results are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Differences between urban and rural teachers in their relationship with parents

Item	M urban (SD)	M rural (SD)	t-value (p-value)	Hedges' g
Relationship with parents	6,28 (0,68)	5,86 (0,99)	2,67 (0,009)	0,49

In this calculation, we confirmed a statistically significant difference. Thus, urban teachers rate their relationships with the parents more positively, compared to teachers working at rural schools.

Figure 3 shows the mean values of the responses - forms of communication - to the item *In communication with parents, I have found the following to be useful...* (on a 7-point scale, where 1 = *very negative*, 7 = *very positive*). The values are differentiated by the teachers' workplace location (urban/rural).

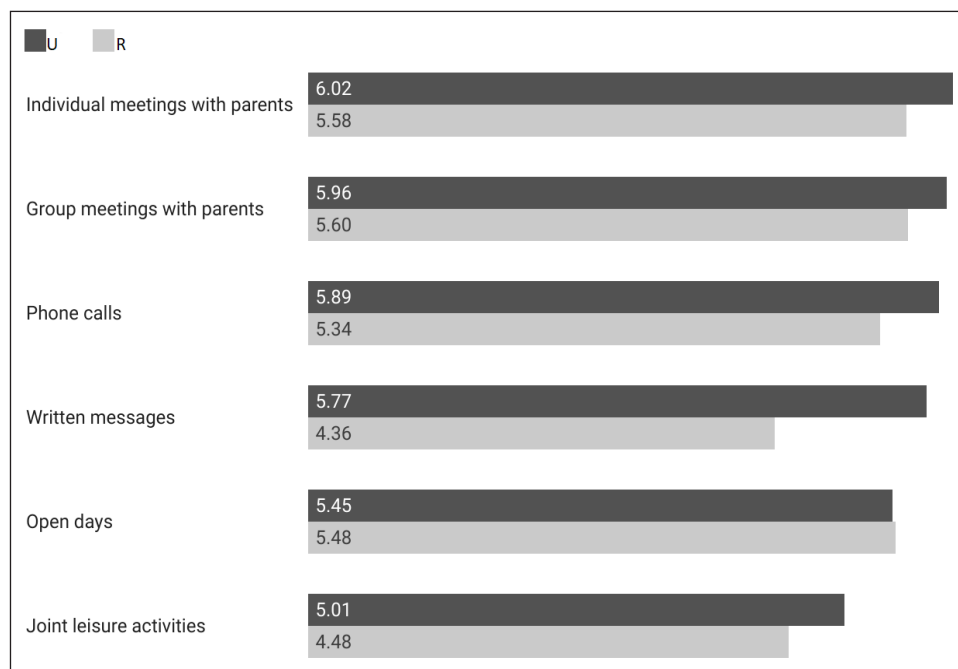
This figure shows that considering the presented items, urban-based teachers achieved higher scores than their village-based colleagues.

Subsequently, we present the difference statistics results of the 6 forms of teacher-parent communication, considering teachers from urban and rural schools. We used Student's t-test and Cohen's d. Table 6 shows the mean values, t-values, p-values, and effect sizes for the respective items.

**Table 6.** Differences between urban and rural teachers, considering the forms of communication

Item	M urban (SD)	M rural (SD)	t-value (p-value)	Cohen's d
Written messages	5,77 (1,66)	4,36 (2,20)	4,00 (0,001)	0,73





**Figure 3.** Mean values of teachers working at urban and rural schools, considering forms of communication

Item	M urban (SD)	M rural (SD)	t-value (p-value)	Cohen's d
Phone calls	5,89 (1,51)	5,34 (1,75)	1,87 (0,065)	0,34
Group meetings with parents	5,96 (1,31)	5,60 (1,50)	1,46 (0,148)	0,26
Individual meetings with parents	6,02 (1,33)	5,58 (1,67)	1,64 (0,105)	0,30
Open days	5,45 (1,76)	5,48 (1,60)	-0,10 (0,923)	0,02
Joint leisure activities	5,01 (1,73)	4,48 (1,87)	1,66 (0,101)	0,30

Statistically significant differences were confirmed considering the item *Written messages*. However, we measured higher mean scores in the case of teachers working in urban areas. Thus, this group was more successful using *Written messages* as a form of communication with the parents than their counterparts working at rural schools.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Our study confirmed a positive relationship between teachers and parents, as the mean score of the responses to the question investigating this variable was 6.13 (on a scale ranging from 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive)). We investigated possible differences as to the gender, age and location of teachers; we confirmed statistically significant differences as to the location of the teachers' schools. Teachers working at urban schools perceived their relationships with the parents to be more positive than teachers working at rural schools.

In general, teachers reported that the forms of communication with parents that worked best for them included *individual meetings with parents*, *group meetings with parents*, and *phone calls*. *Written messages*, *open days*, and *joint leisure activities* were rated by teachers as less effective. These results contradict the findings of other authors who report that both teachers and parents prefer mainly text-based written messages in most situations (Bergman 2021; Albright 2018). It is worth noting that the quoted research investigated mainly the preference for the respective types of communication, whereas our study was aimed – to some extent – at the perceived effectiveness (as the wording was *In communicating with the parents, I have found the following to be effective...*). Thus, despite a preference for written messages, it is possible that teachers in our sample perceived face-to-face forms of communication – such as face-to-face meetings with parents and phone calls – to be more effective and beneficial. The importance of face-to-face meetings and the participation of parents in extracurricular activities is also emphasized by other research in this area (Akhter 2016).

The investigation of gender differences showed that female teachers – compared to male teachers – preferred written messages and phone calls. We can speculate that men, on the other hand, prefer face-to-face meetings, as indicated by their higher ratings given to the *individual meetings with parents* item. However, as these differences are not statistically significant, this interpretation should be treated with caution.

Comparing the ratings based on the age of the respondents, we found that the older teachers were preferred individual meetings with parents and open days. It seems that older teachers prefer the more traditional forms of communication with parents.

We also found that teachers working at urban schools found written messages to be more effective means of communication. Even previous research shows that communication in writing with parents is preferred by urban teachers, even though the same was found also in case of teachers working at rural schools (Palts & Kalmus 2015). Rural teachers included in our sample preferred written messages the least of all surveyed forms of communication.

The contribution of this study lies in the fact that it provides a better understanding of the different aspects of the teacher-parent relationships and communication and

in that it provides an insight on which forms of communication are perceived as preferred and more beneficial by teachers. Moreover, the finding that the teacher-parent relationship seems to be better in an urban setting, compared to a rural setting may be an interesting starting point for further research. It would also be interesting to see if the differences in question also apply to other groups of teachers, as we worked with Slovak teachers teaching in Hungary.

A further contribution hereof lies also in the fact that it broadens our knowledge concerning the overall operation of ethnic Slovak schools. As the school system has become a crucial factor in maintaining the Slovak language and culture, but also the Slovak population in Hungary (Ďurkovská & Kentoš 2020), the teacher-parent relationship at these schools means more than it does usually. The teacher-parent relationship – normally outlined as the effort to educate and raise pupils together – includes also the effort to preserve the pupils' proficiency in Slovak and their identity. Therefore, we consider the investigation of this relationship to be particularly important.

The limited survey sample is also a limitation of this study. However, the sample consists of almost all teachers (139 out of 147) teaching Slovak at ethnic schools in Hungary. Another limitation of the study is that the items in our questionnaire do not sufficiently cover online forms of communication.

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