Received: 16.10.2025
Revised: 03.12.2025
Accepted: 15.12.2025
Published: 19.12.2025

With authority and empathy: the dual voice of kindergarten teachers in homogenizing ethnic and class differences in early childhood integration in Hungary

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Abstract

The present article examines institutional discourses on preschool "integration" in Hungary through qualitative interviews with kindergarten teachers in three ethnically mixed communities. The research investigates boundary-making processes in everyday parenting practices related to the institutional context of early childhood education. In the paper, we focus on how boundaries are (re)constructed in and by the institution of the kindergarten. Our analysis draws on two theoretical frameworks to situate the empirical data: Bourdeau's concept of symbolic violence, which elucidates the hierarchical relationship between families and kindergarten professionals, and theories of street-level bureaucracy, which shed light on the dual identity of kindergarten teachers as both authoritative figures and empathetic caregivers. Findings from our research suggest that kindergartens, the first compulsory institutional settings for children in Hungary, play a key role in transmitting and enforcing community norms and thus serve as a key instrument for fostering social cohesion. However, the integration mission of teachers and institutions is framed around middle-class norms, positioning them as exclusive standards to which all children and parents need to conform. The key (unintended) consequence of this integration mission is the erasure of cultural and ethnic differences, often accompanied by racializing discourses about the Roma. This study critically examines the integration approach widely shared in early education pedagogy, revealing both its social costs and purported benefits.

Keywords: kindergarten integration, Roma, boundary-making, symbolic violence, street level bureaucracy

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1. Introduction[1]

To explore how institutions produce social boundaries and how ethnicization unfolds at the local level, we conducted field research in two Hungarian settlements in 2023–24. Drawing on the narratives of kindergarten teachers, we examined the subjective boundaries that are created and maintained within local communities, as well as the characteristics, perspectives, and processes that shape them. Through this work, we gained deeper insight into how kindergarten teachers interpret and reproduce local social dynamics. Kindergartens represent the first institutional environment with which children and their parents must interact. Since the centralization of schools in 2013, they have remained the only educational institutions maintained by local governments. This makes kindergartens a particularly suitable setting for investigating the formation and preservation of local community norms, as well as for an analysis of how internal boundaries and practices of inclusion are enacted through local institutions.

From the perspective of this article, Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* (1939/1969) is particularly relevant, as it addresses the dynamics of state centralization and the consolidation of European welfare systems. More broadly, Elias's work encourages attention to the situations and interpretations through which social relations are organized and reproduced in unequal ways, as well as to the forms of symbolic (and at times physical) violence that states can exert on socially marginalized groups.

In our case, this framework helps illuminate the power relations between middle-class, non-Roma kindergarten staff and Roma parents, who constitute a local minority. Through its institutions and their agents, the state simultaneously performs a civilizing mission aimed at modernizing and "lifting" people out of poverty, while also acting as a cultural oppressor that reproduces its own dominance through the very practices intended to "uplift."

We conducted interviews in three settlements with key institutional actors, including preschool directors, teachers, early childhood educators, and a small-town mayor, in order to analyze the practices and narratives of preschool education as a "civilizing process" through the lens of pedagogical discourse. While we do not lose sight of the integrative aims and positive intentions of preschool education, we draw on the concept of institutional symbolic violence to articulate a critical perspective on preschool integration. In doing so, we seek to highlight the "price" of integration – the less visible, often problematic underside of the "civilizing process."

[1] The present article draws from a Hungarian language paper, revised and adapted to an international audience (Árendás, Kende and Messing 2025). We believe that the research deserves to be shared with the broader international audience, as its findings are relevant beyond Hungary, especially in the Central East European region.

2. The historical and institutional context of Roma children's preschool attendance in Hungary

Kindergartens in Hungary occupy a historically and culturally significant position within local communities. Their role extends beyond mere custodial care: they represent the foundational stage of formal education, guided by pedagogical principles that seek to cultivate cognitive, emotional, and social competencies within an educationally structured yet nurturing environment. Consequently, kindergartens in Hungary are embedded not only in the educational but also in the communal fabric of settlements, reflecting community values concerning childhood, learning, and socialization.

The first Hungarian kindergarten was established in 1828. The Education Act of 1949 integrated kindergartens into the state education system, and centrally directed institution-building led to steadily increasing participation rates. During the 1950s, the large-scale construction of kindergarten facilities played an important role in supporting women's employment in line with the socialist state's ideology. By the 1960s, around 40–50% and by the 1980s, 80-85% of children aged 3–6 attended kindergarten (Németh & Pukánszky, 1999). After the post-communist transition in the 1990s, responsibility for maintaining and managing kindergartens was transferred to local governments, leading to territorial inequalities in service provision (i.e., richer local governments could run better institutions). Such socioeconomic inequalities were most pronounced in small villages with a high proportion of Roma residents, where limited municipal resources often constrained kindergarten access. Thus, non-attendance was mostly characteristic of rural, poor, and Roma children. According to Havas and colleagues (1995), among the Roma children, 40% of three-year-olds and 54% of four-year-olds attended kindergarten, along with 72% of five-year-olds, which was the compulsory kindergarten attendance age at the time. In addition to the structural constraints, the lack of trust of Roma parents also contributed to the lower attendance rates of Roma children. According to Pik (2002), these institutions often failed to provide Roma children with adequate attention, tolerance, or pedagogical competence.

In the 2000s, kindergarten attendance became a focal policy area for supporting the early inclusion of disadvantaged and Roma children. The key policy initiatives to this end were the *Preschool Attendance Allowance*[2] (Havas & Liskó, 2005; Kertesi & Kézdi, 2012) and the introduction of compulsory kindergarten attendance from the age of 3 in 2015. The participation rate among 3–6-year-olds increased to 93.4% (KSH, 2021).

Data support the effectiveness of compulsory pre-schooling from the age of 3 in terms of later school success. Hungarian studies have shown (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2012;

[2] The *Óvodáztatási támogatás* (Preschool Attendance Allowance) was a conditional cash transfer program introduced in 2009 to support families and encourage preschool attendance among disadvantaged children. It was discontinued in 2015, when preschool attendance became compulsory from the age of three.

Altwicker-Hámori & Köllő, 2016) that differences in test performance by social status decrease with longer preschool attendance. The delayed positive effects of longer kindergarten participation are much stronger among children from low-status backgrounds than those from high-status families (Cserti & Csapó, 2019).

In sum, kindergartens in the Hungarian context are especially significant educational institutions for two reasons. First, they represent the earliest point of contact between families and formal education, thus embodying the state's civilizational role at the local level. Second, their socializing influence extends beyond the children they educate: through the child, kindergartens impact the broader family environment, giving them a social outreach that exceeds their formal educational mandate.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

In our paper, we focus on teachers' narratives about their classroom practices in kindergartens with Roma and non-Roma children to analyze and understand the role of educators/educational institutions in these processes. To understand the narratives of institutional actors, we combine two analytical frameworks: the conceptual approach of symbolic violence with the framework of narrative dissonance.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence plays a central role in his theory of power and social reproduction, especially in the field of education. He used the concept of symbolic violence in the sense that those in power impose prevailing cultural values, norms, and meanings on those outside the power structure in a way that appears natural and legitimate, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Unlike direct physical violence, symbolic violence operates through discourse, pedagogy, and institutional practices, subtly shaping individuals' perceptions of their own abilities and social value. Translated into the context of the education system, this means that the cultural capital of dominant social group(s) is favoured, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds must adapt to this.

In Bourdieu's approach, education is the primary arena of symbolic violence, systematically reinforcing existing social structures (Bourdieu, 1986). Since the knowledge and language use valued by educational institutions reflect the culture of the dominant group(s), students without such a background are often labelled less intelligent or talented, when in fact they are simply unfamiliar with the cultural expectations of the school system or incompatible with it in terms of cultural capital (Grenfell & James, 1998). One of the most important mechanisms and characteristics of symbolic violence in education is that those involved in it misread or fail to recognize power relations. Students and teachers attribute academic success or failure to individual effort rather than interpreting it as a consequence of structural inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The internalization of dominant values leads marginalized students to blame themselves for their difficulties and accept their lower social status as natural rather than a consequence of systemic exclusion. As a result, symbolic violence ensures that the

education system reproduces class differences while presenting itself as neutral and objective (Swartz, 1997).

Critics of Bourdieu often argue that this approach overemphasizes the rigidity of social reproduction and underestimates the individual's capacity for action, or agency, within the educational system (Jenkins, 1992). However, empirical studies continue to support the idea that educational institutions favor certain cultural competencies over others, thereby reinforcing social stratification (Reay, 2004). Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence remains key to understanding how inequalities persist in suppose dly meritocratic societies and seemingly neutral education systems. Through the analysis of the education system, the concept helps to understand the hidden workings of power.

Elias's theory about the civilizing process (1939/1969) and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence are closely linked. The theory of civilization shows how self-discipline, etiquette, and emotional control became fundamental norms in modern European societies. The "civilizing mission" does not only involve a series of behavioral changes, but also a moral and cultural hierarchy that justifies the construction of a boundary between the "civilized" and the "barbarian" in the name of social progress. According to Elias, the internalization of social constraints occurred in parallel with the emergence of the modern state: external discipline was transformed into internal self-control, enabling the birth of the "civilized" subject. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence complements this process. Bourdieu pointed out that power in modern societies does not operate through overt coercion, but through the naturalization of cultural norms. Symbolic violence is enforced through habitus: individuals accept their own situation because the prevailing values and tastes seem legitimate. From this point of view, the civilizing mission itself is symbolic violence, as it justifies social and cultural hierarchies in terms of "development" or "moral superiority."

Elias and Bourdieu's thinking thus reveal two sides of the same logic of power: Elias provided a historical account of how self-discipline becomes a collective norm, while Bourdieu showed how these norms reproduce domination in everyday practices. The civilizing mission is a form of symbolic violence, a cultural power that presents discipline and morality as the natural order that sustains inequality. The "civilized" subject is thus not a product of freedom, but of internalized power.

Another conceptual and theoretical source for our study – M. Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach (1980) – provides a framework for interpreting teachers' narratives of everyday practices in kindergarten. Lipsky's work (1980) fundamentally questions the previous understanding of the practical functioning of public policies. Contrary to the traditional top-down model, according to which public policies are shaped by legislators and administrators and then simply implemented, Lipsky pointed out that public service workers in direct contact with people have significant discretionary power, which strongly modifies the outcomes of public policy. He recognized that "public policy is not best understood through decisions made in legislative bodies or the offices of high-ranking officials," but through the daily activities

of frontline workers who "define and limit people's lives and opportunities" (Kosar, 2011, p. 11). Lipsky's analytical framework provides an inspiring starting point for distinguishing between formal (bureaucratic) and informal (beyond bureaucracy) practices and customs in the narratives of nursery school teachers. We use the formal/informal distinction to capture how the principle of similarities and differences is realized and articulated along these two parallel "modes of operation" or narrative frameworks.

Ellmer's (2020) anthropological analysis, which highlights the contradictions of institutional (kindergarten) inclusion and the internal tensions of everyday practices, draws indirectly on Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucracy. Ellmer's analysis, which focuses on the creation and dismantling of differences ("doing and undoing" differences), presents the bureaucratic-official and private voices of kindergarten educators (state employees). In our view, Ellmer's analysis is also applicable in the Hungarian context to the interpretation of teachers' narratives about the preschool education of Roma children, as these narratives simultaneously render ethnic boundaries invisible and redefine and reinforce them.

While Weber (2002) emphasized distance and emotional detachment in relation to the ideal bureaucrat when discussing the role of institutional actors and role identification, the ideal teacher is the opposite: connected and compassionate. Ellmer (2020) attempts to address this contradiction in his detailed ethnographic analysis, which focuses on two types of educators: the formal bureaucrat, who represents a neutral version of acceptance, and the compassionate person, who, at the same time, practices distinctions that are re-woven into informality. Austrian kindergarten ethnography (Ellmer, 2020) examines the professional ethos of impartiality as part of kindergarten inclusion. As the author points out, through the ideal of impartiality, educators feel assured of kindergarten integration in an environment where children come from a variety of backgrounds. In Ellmer's research, kindergarten teachers talked about how attaching ethnic labels and labeling families as "good" or "bad" hinders equal opportunities for integration in kindergarten. In other words, the kindergarten takes a colorblind approach to institutional inclusion, and at the level of principles, this is indeed the goal (reflected in the official communication of the teachers). In practice, the principle of neutrality is undermined by casual references and bits of information about children (e.g., informal references to mothers wearing headscarves). According to the head of the institution, inclusive childcare and the corresponding administrative and pedagogical practices exclude the possibility of making reference to cultural differences and diversity and require an impartial practice in which kindergarten staff simply see children as children, yet this is not always the case in everyday practice. While the kindergarten director refrained from using the word "culture" because, in her opinion, this jeopardizes the fundamental equality among children, she referred to differences as "individual characteristics" and spoke about culture in relative terms, acknowledging that "it still means something to children" (Ellmer, 2020, p. 45).

4. Research sites and data sources

Our paper draws on a European comparative project[3] in which we conducted qualitative research in three settlements, interviewing parents of preschool children, kindergarten teachers, kindergarten principals, and professionals working in early childhood institutions. We focus on boundary-making processes from the perspective of kindergarten teachers. The fields of our study in Hungary included three settlements: a village in Nógrád county in Northern Hungary (rural site) (settlement A), a small town in Bács-Kiskun county in mid-Hungary (urban site) (settlement B), and a town in north-east Hungary (settlement C). One important criterion for selecting the sites was that the Roma population was significant but not dominant, i.e., approximately 20-30%. This was considered important because we aimed to study processes of boundary-making, which is possible in ethnically mixed communities.

The village in Nógrád county (settlement A), situated close to the Slovakian border, is home to a population of approximately 1,500 and – in contrast to other villages in the region, which have become partly or completely ethnically and socially segregated and marginalized over the past couple of decades – its ethnic composition has remained relatively stable, with a 20-30% Roma population. This is largely due to its proximity to the regional center, and thus easy access to jobs and services, as well as to a determined local leadership that is conscious of ethno-social inequalities and the risks of processes of marginalization related to them.

Roma live typically on the outskirts of the village, but not in a segregated area. Their social status is high compared to Roma living in other settlements of the region, but low compared to non-Roma within the village. Through public employment programs and small-scale food processing production facilities operated by the municipality, the local leadership ensures that no one becomes long-term unemployed. It also operates institutions that improve the living conditions of the elderly and the poor (e.g., social catering services and the Sure Start Children's program). The nearby small town, which functions as a regional center, plays a significant role in reinforcing ethnic hierarchies through its institutions – most notably schools – that selectively accept village residents, involving systematically excluding poor and Roma families.

The village kindergarten is socially and ethnically mixed. According to the principal's estimation, approximately half of the children come from Roma families. There are two groups in the kindergarten that have been organized to promote ethnic mixing.

We interviewed the kindergarten principal (A/1), two kindergarten teachers (A/2 and A/3), and two professionals from the Sure Start Children's House[4] (A/4 and A/5), and conducted multiple hours of participant observation. Most of the teachers, parents to

[3] RAISE: Recognition and Acknowledgement of Injustice to Strengthen Equality (Horizon Europe ID: 101094684)

[4] This facility is potentially a very important supporting institution for marginalized families, offering health care and parenting advice, developmental support, and a space for young parents to relax.

small children themselves, spoke about their experiences as professionals and as parents simultaneously. Additionally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with six Roma parents. Our questions primarily focused on the local society, norms, and boundaries. We also asked who they consider to be a "good parent."

Since we were unable to gain access to the state-run primary school operated by the school district, which – in maintaining ethnically segregated education – is a key actor in constructing and reinforcing ethnic boundaries within the community, we included an additional site in Northern Hungary. At this site, we spoke to parents and a teacher at a religious kindergarten located in a town (settlement C) that – unlike state-run kindergartens – accepts children from the region's increasingly ghettoized villages. This made it a suitable case for an examination of how a kindergarten accommodates children from Roma and non-Roma families who are escaping the conditions of the segregated educational institutions of a ghettoized village. We interviewed one kindergarten teacher here (C/1).

The third field is a small town with approximately 15,000 inhabitants located in the Great Plains region of central Hungary. The town is famous for its tradition of labor-intensive agricultural production, mainly of berries, fruit, and vegetables. We selected this town because it has three kindergartens and because its Roma population is unusually diverse. In addition to the local Roma, who have lived for multiple generations in a segregated part of the town referred to as "Gypsytown", Hungarian-speaking Roma families from Romania and Ukraine have settled there over the past two decades. Hungarian-speaking Roma from Romania have settled permanently and work in local agriculture. Hungarian-speaking Roma families from Ukraine are more recent immigrants, typically working in local industrial production facilities, while some families have arrived more recently as refugees.

The three kindergartens in this town are operated under one umbrella institution, and thus decisions about children's enrolment are centralized. We conducted interviews with all three principals of the local kindergartens (B/1, B/2, B/3), as well as with six Hungarian-speaking immigrant Roma parents from Romania. According to the kindergarten teachers, the position of the local Roma population living in the part of town referred to as "Gypsy town" has significantly deteriorated over the past decade. While previously they were employed as seasonal workers in local agriculture, characterized by patron-client relationships, they are now excluded from these jobs. With the exception of a few Roma families who have stable employment, poverty and exclusion have become widespread. Accounts by kindergarten teachers indicate that the community is increasingly affected by drug abuse and the resulting rise in criminality.

In this paper, we focus on institutions and limit our analysis to the interviews with kindergarten principals and teachers. This is a genuine limitation of the study: because we analyze only the narratives of institutional actors, we do not claim to uncover the full complexity of local social realities. However, our research does offer insights into

interpretations and understandings of social cohesion and the role of kindergartens, one of the key institutional actors in local communities.

5. Findings

The following chapter presents the findings of the analysis that applies Elias' concept of the civilizing process in the context of kindergarten education. The analysis is structured along the following three topics: (1) everyday practices related to teaching and enforcing the norms of the kindergarten; (2) the paternalistic relationship to parents; (3) teachers' institutional and personal voices.

In our analysis, we apply Bourdieu's concept of institutional symbolic violence, which helps to describe the role of the kindergarten and its teachers – acting as agents of civilization – in promoting the acceptance of community norms. We also use the concept of institutional dissonance to examine the duality of institutional neutrality and ethno-social differentiation that prevails in the local societies. We show how kindergartens' civilizing role (as described by Elias, 1939) and their colourblind approach reinforce ethnic differences.

a. Civilization mission: teaching community norms

The role of kindergartens as agents of the civilization process becomes most evident in their narratives about children's (and their families') integration into broader local society. This is the area where Bourdieu's symbolic violence is most clearly observable in relation to the kindergarten's function as a civilizing agent (Ferge, 1997). The main tool of integration is the teaching and enforcing of behavioral norms that clearly mirror middle-class contexts. The expectations towards families (as we will show later) – even if unintended – construct the "other," who must be integrated into the white middle class. Class-based and ethnic identifications appear interchangeably in the narratives of kindergarten teachers about integration and inclusion, especially in discussions about who needs to be integrated: sometimes the latter speak about poor, disadvantaged families and children, and at other times they refer to cultural traits, or directly to Roma families.

It is worth examining which expectations are most frequently mentioned across all three sites and what kinds of power relations they imply. The most important norms established by the institution that we encountered in all our sites concerned punctuality, cleanliness, proper clothing, and decent behavior.

In the context of kindergarten punctuality, timely arrival in the morning and afternoon was emphasized as an expectation, even when teachers were aware of and sympathetic to the challenging circumstances of Roma mothers with multiple kids living in marginalized circumstances.

> *Let me give you an example. There were some who liked to arrive at around 9 o'clock. But we need to report the headcount to the kitchen by 8:30 am, so I close the doors. And there were some who were upset about this. (...) We are very flexible, and we have learnt during [...] many years that during winter, when there is a lot of mud and ice, and they don't come, and don't notify us about it, that this [will] only [be a day of] non-attendance, and they will be here the next day. ... well, even though, after 5 days of unnotified absence, I must report [them] to the child services, after 10 days the guardianship authorities, and I am not sure, maybe after 20 days, their family allowance will be withdrawn.* (Kindergarten teacher, site A, No. 1*)*

The quote above indicates that the kindergarten teacher is aware of the obstacles that make it difficult for Roma mothers living on the margins of the settlement in poor conditions to arrive on time in the mornings, as they are often left entirely alone with childcare and household responsibilities. (Other parts of the interview revealed that the teachers are also aware that fathers are often absent, working abroad, or in distant workplaces.) However, teachers are sympathetic to mothers only as long as institutional considerations, such as the kindergarten's internal regulations, are not violated. The shift from solidarity and empathy to projecting the authoritative voice of the institution exemplifies Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, explicitly expressed through the actions of the kindergarten (and its teachers): while they repeatedly say "we are flexible," in the same breath, they explain the sanctions that norm-breaking behavior leads to. Notifying the authorities has serious consequences for families: the involvement of child protection services may lead to an assessment of parental competence and, later, to financial sanctions, such as the withdrawal of family allowances. The possibility of involving authorities due to late arrival or absence is a constant threat in contemporary Hungary and a clear manifestation of institutional power over poor and Roma parents (Szőke & Geambaşu 2022). Although kindergartens try to avoid using these severe disciplinary tools, their potential use is generally sufficient to demonstrate authority and exert symbolic violence against families.

The quote above also reveals another important phenomenon: kindergarten teachers are under constant pressure to balance the regulations of the kindergarten – that is, as an institution where attendance is compulsory, and absence is sanctioned by law – and the individual life circumstances of families and the needs and barriers related to these.

This creates a dilemma for teachers: either they refrain from reporting absences and become complicit with parents who violate the rules – out of understanding and empathy for their circumstances – or they enforce the regulations as institutional actors, even at the cost of putting families who already face multiple difficulties in an increasingly vulnerable position. The decision and the burden that come with these everyday decisions fall on kindergarten teachers because the institution, as a key agent of the civilizing process, is compelled to enforce adherence to community norms and is blind to individual circumstances.

Another expectation mentioned by all actors – one that is clearly tied to middle-class norms – is that children should be "neatly dressed." Kindergarten teachers frequently complained about children's clothing, though they consistently added that there are exceptions. These exceptions reveal that such complaints about children's outfits target Roma parents. The institutional expectation of "proper" clothing thus serves as a clear example of how the disciplining mechanism of integration operates: children from Roma and poor families are expected to align with middle-class norms in this respect, too, regardless of their financial circumstances. Behind the notion of the need for a "proper outfit" also emerges the ideal of "respectable poverty," which not only implies blaming those living in poverty for their social position but also expects them to conceal it.

Narratives about outfits may sometimes deviate from the principle of institutional color blindness and explicitly ethnicize parents who violate such middle-class norms. In the following quote, the teacher explicitly names the group that represents the "other" – the Roma – because in the context of the given settlement, speaking of "Romanians" and "Ukrainians" refers to Hungarian-speaking immigrant families of Roma ethnicity.

> *The problem is that these children – you may say, well, doesn't matter whether Romanian, Gypsy, or Ukrainian – come from circumstances in which there are no rules, no hygiene, etc. But there are some exceptions; even among the Gypsies there are some who arrive tidy and clean* [to kindergarten]. (Kindergarten teacher, site B, No. 3]

Norms attached to attire play a crucial role in the narratives of kindergarten teachers everywhere: while in the urban kindergarten the teacher identifies otherness through clothing, the teacher in the rural kindergarten employs it in the opposite way to illustrate how Roma families living in their village strive to assimilate to middle-class norms and majority expectations in contrast to the Roma living in other villages of the region.

> *I must admit, when I see the little kiddos, I always say: We have decent children here. They are so pretty. And you can't find any fault in their clothing or hygiene, either. There are, of course, exceptions, but the majority are really neatly dressed. They are pretty, and the parents make an effort to send their children to kindergarten dressed properly, and they do not stand out from the group. I often say that some of our Roma children are dressed in even nicer and more expensive clothing than some of the Hungarians.* (Kindergarten teacher, site A/3)

The quotation exemplifies another important observation: the realization that some Roma parents make extraordinary efforts to provide their children with suitable clothes, even beyond their financial means. The pressure of community expectations in small settlements is so strong that Roma families go to great lengths to ensure that their children's clothing is perfect and does not become subject to criticism or exclusion.

In other narratives, however, personal hygiene and every attribute linked to it, such as smell, become metaphors for broader social stereotypes. The narratives concerning smell are not solely about hygiene but speak to broader exclusion and the everyday mechanism of racialization. Accounts about cleanliness and human smell often serve as means of ethnic boundary-making (Synnott, 1997), defining rules of inclusion and exclusion through expectations and norms related to personal hygiene.

"Just before you, there was a parent here, and, well, 'you know how clean our family is?' [referring here to the parent's account]*, but I had to walk around for ten minutes before I could air the office space and get the smell out"* (Kindergarten principal, site B/1)

It is worth noting here the norms and expectations regarding behavior and speech that clearly reflect those of the educated middle class: well-mannered communication, the avoidance of vulgar expressions, and politeness. Teachers train children in these behavioral norms, yet these expectations are primarily expressed in a paternalistic attitude.

b. ***Educating parents: institutional paternalism***

The civilizing role of the kindergarten and the related symbolic violence – in a Bourdieusian sense – applies primarily to parents but also to the entire family. The professional identity of kindergarten teachers is not limited to educating children; they also formulate pedagogical tasks for parents. Their narratives reveal that they consider the education of parents as part of their job responsibilities – especially when it comes to Roma parents with low levels of education. The following quote demonstrates this approach:

> *As educators, it is our task to stay flexible, so that we keep being able to communicate with both parents from the elite and to find [the right] tone with the occasionally very young, uneducated Roma parents. So this is part of our job, to find the* [right] *tone* [to use] *with everyone. Obviously, you have to talk to these* [young, uneducated Roma] *parents on a completely different level and in a different way, but there are some who understand things easily, and others we have to treat in a way that makes them feel that this is an institution, where they have to follow certain rules and customs – and they're not the ones who define these. It was hard to make some parents understand that we don't just come and go as we please here – [for example] skip a day if it is raining … – we keep teaching them.*" (Head kindergarten teacher, Site A/1)

This quotation elucidates that the kindergarten teacher relates to the parents from a clear position of authority, as an educator rather than as a partner. Infantilizing parents and treating them like children is characteristic of employees of institutions in Hungary,

which trait can also be observed in other areas – such as healthcare and early childhood care. This approach reinforces unequal relationships, sharply delineating the roles of the institution and those of the family. In the case of Roma parents, this dynamic further reinforces the pre-existing ethnic hierarchy, resulting in an even more pronounced and patronizing approach.

> *We [are in] daily contact with the parents, as well. It is definitely very difficult to find a way to [reach] them, that is for sure. But it is worth it. I keep saying that if we find something we can genuinely praise them for, they will go to great lengths. If I say two, three nice words to them […] after making a critical comment, they take it much better.* (Kindergarten teacher, site B/2)

In this quote, when discussing interactions with parents, the kindergarten teacher refers to the same pedagogical tools she would use with children: identifying and reinforcing positive aspects and embedding problems and criticism within them. In this way, the parent is also viewed as a subject to be 'educated,' and the teacher applies what are considered progressive elements of pedagogy – in other words, fosters cooperation not through threats but motivation. However, this does not change the fact that the parent is viewed as a partner only if they unquestioningly accept the institution's norms, rules, and conditions and never challenge them. In this role, the teacher acts as a civilizing agent (Elias, 1939; Ferge, 1999), using various methods to ensure that parents adhere to the community norms conveyed by the kindergarten, a key institution that reinforces the local community's cohesion.

We found only one exception in which a kindergarten teacher spoke about parents as partners, not as subjects of pedagogy – the teacher of the religious kindergarten at urban site C, which accepts children from outside the locality. When we asked about how she would define a good parent, she emphasized, in addition to punctuality and personal hygiene, a partnership-based relationship in relation to the kindergarten:

> *[Those w]ith whom we can maintain a relationship, they listen, they share their concerns about the child, and if there's a problem at home, they help us understand why the child might be behaving a certain way. Parents have always trusted us – we don't dig too deeply, but if they tell us something, like that their child is struggling because the grandfather passed away, then we try to be partners in that. […] we talk every morning and afternoon, we discuss everything with them. If there's a problem with the child, we let them know, and we also talk about what the parent could do to help us, because cooperation is really needed in some cases."* (Kindergarten teacher, site C/1)

Often, the civilizing mission is not restricted to poor or Roma families. The paternalism of kindergarten teachers can manifest itself independently of ethnicity or social class:

> *We work hard on this* [enforcing the rules] *and sometimes we need to call the parent or the family in and discuss the kindergarten codes of behaviour with them individually .... Unfortunately, families living in very good circumstances are no exception to this. Sometimes they act as if they had the right to interfere in the educational process.* (Kindergarten teacher, site B/3)

Institutional symbolic violence thus extends to everyone, the aim of which is to regulate deviations from institutional norms and enforce them on clients. At the same time, these rules and the practices of enforcement most acutely affect those furthest from the imagined middle class – that is, those who must bridge the greatest gap. While the institution does not adjust its code of behaviour and expectations for families with different social backgrounds, the burden of adaptation clearly falls on those furthest from majority norms. In other words, the seemingly neutral, 'universally applied' treatment places the greatest pressure on Roma and socially marginalized families, as they are the ones forced to conform the most.

c. Two types of voice: the institutional voice and the personal voice of teachers

In the following, we examine how different voices and speech patterns can be distinguished and separated in interviews with kindergarten directors and teachers that we conducted in the two settlements. Following Ellmer's (2020) findings, a sharp divergence can be observed between the two main narrative levels: (1) the voice of the institution, which is the narrative of the kindergarten's pedagogical and bureaucratic principles and remains at the level of formal, official discourse (formal – public policy level); and, (2) the voice of the institution's teacher, which is a narrative about the practical implementation of kindergarten rules and norms and reflects on the implementation of bureaucratic principles; the latter is mixed with the personal voice of the kindergarten teacher(s), which is a narrative interwoven with direct experiences and opinions. This latter dual voice is closely related to Lipsky's earlier concept of street-level bureaucracy, i.e., the distinction between official public policy goals and their practical implementation. Analysis of the interviews shows that the speakers switch between these two voices in almost all cases ("narrative switch"), indicating that institutional norms are not always clear and that their interpretation and application vary depending on the situation and the speaker's attitude.

While (1) the institutional narrative emphasizes neutrality, the universality of acceptance, and the principle of equality, (2) the individual teachers' voices better highlight the difficulties of implementation and the speakers' personal opinions. Institutions – and, through them, their leaders and educators – often remain unreflective about social differences: they expect children and parents to follow middle-class norms without incorporating the individual or even ethnic characteristics of the children into the kindergarten's daily practice. This is evident, for example, in the fact that the Roma language and Roma culture have no place in the institutional space. The personal voice

often appears in response to the tension between the above, as an attempt to resolve it. This narrative reveals that teachers are not actually "color blind": they see the differences and, in many cases, are understanding towards Roma parents and children. At the same time, however, the enforcement of majority norms does not encourage solidarity but rather emphasizes differences and reinforces boundaries.

The following quote reflects a kindergarten teacher's personal voice, while in the background, we can glimpse the institution's bureaucratic norms, the rules that govern it, and the presumed tension between these and kindergarten practices – in this case, a more permissive attitude related to a crisis situation, which also indicates that such "alternative solutions" cannot become part of the kindergarten's everyday practice, but must be treated as exceptional, unique situations. This confirms that the institution's basic norms remain solid and inflexible in everyday life.

> *We know if they have health problems. We try to help them if we know that, say, a mother is due to give birth in a few weeks and says she is having difficulty bringing her child to kindergarten. If I have a mother like this, or a mother with a high-risk pregnancy, she comes in and asks if I can help her so that she doesn't have to come in for a few weeks, at least until she has help, for example – then the kindergarten is flexible*. (Kindergarten teacher, site A*/2*)

In this context, the voice of solidarity is presumably a female one that shows empathy and understanding regarding the challenges of pregnancy and the everyday difficulties of raising children. This facilitates the sensitive handling of individual situations and support based on human relationships. At the same time, in this environment, this attitude of solidarity is not integrated into the white middle-class system of norms. Instead, it appears as a kind of exceptional, individual reaction that does not become part of the institutional functioning. The kindergarten structure continues to strive to establish and maintain majority norms, so solidarity can only be expressed through temporary gestures limited to certain situations.

In the previous sections, we have shown that, according to the self-image and task perception of institutional actors, the kindergarten is one of the key institutions involved in local integration and a priority area for learning locally relevant social norms. At the formal-bureaucratic level, the narratives of the institutions emphasize the importance of “color blindness” and education independent of social class. In contrast, in narratives about the implementation of educational principles, permeated by informality, ethnic-based distinctions regularly appear. One example of this is provided by the account of a kindergarten teacher who first argued in detail and with conviction for the importance and practice of coeducation, but later stated, in a personal tone, that it was self-evident that she would not enroll her own preschool-aged child in the local school. She justified her decision by saying that she did not consider the “composition” of the institution to be appropriate, as “the proportion of Roma children is too high.” This contradiction

highlights the fact that while formal discourse emphasizes the principles of equality and coexistence, social and ethnic distance still plays a decisive role in personal decisions and their practical implementation.

In the following excerpt from an interview with an institution manager, the formal-bureaucratic institutional voice emerges. The speaker emphasizes the system of norms and rules that govern the institution's operation. At the same time, the narrative reveals a gap between the principles the institution represents and the everyday habits and needs of its "users" – that is, parents and children. This discrepancy is evident not only in the difficulties of complying with the rules but also in the extent to which the institution's operations ignore parents' circumstances and needs.

> *It is typical of Roma people that they like to live according to their own rules. When a not-so-young mother comes here, she also has to be taught that there is a system here. I always hammer it into the girls when they come here sometimes and say they want this or that, and I always tell them, girls, we are the institution. We don't adapt to parents and families; it's their duty to adapt to us*. (Kindergarten teacher, site A/1)

The last sentence in this quote is a clear example of institutional violence: it makes clear who dictates how this power relationship operates and shows that there are no compromises, no rapprochement between the interests of parents, families, and children and the institution's will. The superiority of the rules and norms and their one-way enforcement make clear the institution's superior position vis-à-vis its "clients"

The following quote reflects the voice of institutional practice. While at the formal-bureaucratic level (1) the principle of neutrality and colourblind integration appears as the dominant narrative, at the level of practice (2) differences are readily apparent – yet only unreflectively, or, as in this case, perceived as disturbing factors that must be brushed over as quickly as possible. This discourse highlights that differences not only remain invisible in the institution's functioning, but, when they do emerge, they are treated as problems rather than accepted.

> *Roma children start out at a disadvantage. Let's start with what I mentioned, that they have low levels of education and customs, so they bring that culture from home, and that's how they end up in kindergarten, where they have to learn everything.* (Kindergarten teacher, B /2)

The institutional, formal-bureaucratic, and personal narratives that can be distinguished so far point to the fact that colourblind neutrality prevails at the level of rules and norms in local, institutional-level inclusion, but at the level of implementation, in the narratives of everyday kindergarten life, the differences between children and their families are re-ethnicized. Individual narrative voices often attempt to resolve the tension

arising from the divergence between bureaucratic elements and daily practices, while reinforcing local group boundaries and re-ethnicizing them.

A local kindergarten teacher speaks emphatically about the institutional practice of integration at the community level: "*There are three kindergartens, but they are integrated, and we pay close attention to ensuring that they are also integrated at the group level.*" In Hungary, in pedagogical jargon, "integration" most often refers to mixing Roma and non-Roma pupils in the same group, which is rarely accompanied by pedagogical methods for addressing this diversity. In general, integration (aka diversity, in the form of group composition) and integration as a pedagogical approach to some sort of inclusion remain very insufficiently reflected upon in Hungarian institutional settings.

The following kindergarten teacher regrets the lack of participation and partnership on the part of Roma parents, but when she details the reasons for the parents' absence, the institutional and private voices become mixed. Thus, in the following excerpt, a narrative switch occurs.

> *"They don't come [...] they don't participate in parent-teacher conferences and other events. So they exclude themselves.*
>
> *(Interviewer): Why?*
>
> *I don't know. Maybe it's because they don't want to be embarrassed because they can't afford to buy their children nice clothes, or maybe it's genetic because [of the thought] they'll be singled out. 'I know I have shortcomings (official ones), and I can't fix them, nor do I want to, because it's comfortable for me this way, but I don't want to face them either' [here the teacher quotes an imaginary Roma parent].* (Kindergarten teacher, site B/1)

Attendance at all-day kindergarten, especially for children from disadvantaged social backgrounds, could pave the way for greater social integration. The kindergarten teacher quoted earlier correctly recognizes this and emphasizes its importance. However, when explaining why Roma parents do not take advantage of this opportunity, she speaks in a private voice, reproducing differences, and at times, stigmatizing:

> *And that's why Gypsies often don't want full-day kindergarten, because there are conditions there too, you have to bring pajamas, and you have to undress there, and then it turns out that they're dirty, I don't know. But we know that the [mothers/parents] are attached to their children. So [a mother] doesn't let them go on field trips either, because she is attached to her child. And she is protective. Because that's what she lives for.* (Kindergarten teacher, site B/1)

The institutional (1), formal-bureaucratic (2), and personal narratives identified so far in the accounts of kindergarten directors and teachers clearly show that local institutional

acceptance is a process fraught with contradictions. Color-blind neutrality prevails at the level of rules and norms, but in practice (that is, in the narratives about everyday life in kindergarten), the differences between children and their families are re-ethnicized. While institutional discourse proclaims a policy of equality and neutrality, cultural and ethnic differences still play a decisive role in practical operations – only they are not acknowledged, reflected upon, or incorporated into kindergarten practice; instead, they are presented as problems or differences that need to be addressed. The tension arising from the discrepancy between bureaucratic rules and everyday practices is often resolved by individual voices. Such personal narratives can sometimes express emotional identification and empathy, but at other times they convey rejection and stigmatization, and as a result, do not break down local group boundaries but rather reinforce and re-ethnicize them. Thus, kindergarten integration does not become an integrative process, but rather a field in which majority norms are enforced and hierarchical differences reinforced.

5. Conclusion

In our analysis, we have examined the narratives of institutional actors, preschool teachers, and preschool directors, seeking answers to how they interpret their own roles, what boundaries they perceive in local communities in the course of their professional activities, and how they contribute to maintaining these. Naturally, our analysis is limited: we cannot provide a discussion of the entire "social reality" beyond these narratives.

We have presented the hierarchical relationship that exists between the institution (and its representatives) and parents (families). This hierarchy seems natural to both kindergarten teachers and parents and appears to be inherent to such institutional functioning. We analyzed in detail the practices of symbolic violence in the Bourdieusian sense through which the institution exercises power over families and parents via the prescription and enforcement of norms. Institutional expectations not only regulate the upbringing of children but also indirectly shape the behaviour of parents and families, thereby maintaining the invisible mechanisms of integration through discipline. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the symbolic violence that maintains institutional power is a two-sided phenomenon. Although the enforcement of norms is clearly an act of power, it also plays a key role in laying the foundations for local integration: the institution not only has an impact at the individual level of integration, but is also a means of maintaining and reproducing the local social fabric, ensuring compliance with norms and behavioral patterns that hold the community together.

The presented narratives also highlight the civilizing mission of kindergarten teachers and kindergartens, which aim to balance cultural differences and reduce ethnic differences through colourblind integration, a pedagogical approach that does not address the management of ethnically and culturally diverse groups. In the latter case, the institution does not take cultural differences into account, i.e., it integrates on a class-

by-class basis. As shown above, paradoxically, colourblind integration results in the reproduction of ethnic hierarchies and the racialization of the Roma.

While the institutional symbolic violence discussed by Bourdieu may be a legitimate tool for improving social cohesion and integrating various social strata, our findings indicate that, within the framework of the state, symbolic institutional violence aims at pacifying disadvantaged and stigmatized groups (in this case, the Roma) locally, instead of creating pathways to social mobility for them (segregated education is a prime example of this); additionally, it produces further boundaries and strengthens racialized differences.

In the interviews with kindergarten teachers, we were able to distinguish two types of discourse: formal bureaucratic narratives and practical-personal narratives, which resonate in many ways with Ellmer's (2020) claims, as presented in the theoretical introduction. In addition to identifying and distinguishing these modes of speech in the kindergarten teachers' narratives, we also considered them important because they reveal much about the symbolic exercise of power by these institutions, as well as the dismantling and reproduction of community boundaries and the processes of local (re)ethnicization and racialization. The results of the analysis make it clear that in the kindergartens we studied, the formal bureaucratic level (norms and rules) is sharply separated from practice, the promised integration through color-blindness remains incomplete, while social boundaries are reinforced and re-ethnicized. The results indicate that kindergarten teachers are largely left to their own devices in implementing integration, and the resulting methodological uncertainty is compounded by their private voices (and opinions), fueled by majority prejudices.

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