



Roma teachers' resilience: A sociological study of life course experiences and professional impact

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ABSTRACT

Ensuring equity for Roma students remains a critical concern across many countries. Roma teachers play an essential role in addressing this issue. Their life course experiences offer invaluable insights into the barriers faced by students from similar backgrounds. This study investigates the lives of Roma teachers who have demonstrated resilience, defined here as the capacity to succeed despite adverse circumstances. The study addresses two research questions: RQ1: What resources and obstacles characterized the life courses of Roma teachers on their way to obtaining a degree? RQ2: What markers does the legacy of the “resilient life course” leave in teachers’ current educational practice, and do these experiences manifest themselves as obstacles or resources?

Given the uniqueness of the target group, we employed snowball sampling. 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Hungary between 2019 and 2023. The interviews focused on both the participants’ biographical experiences of resilience and their pedagogical work. Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Brown and Clarke’s guidelines.

Findings suggest that resilient Roma teachers actively draw on their life course experiences in their teaching practice. A strong sense of mission – shaped by the experience of succeeding against the odds – appears to sustain long-term professional engagement. The present study argues that overcoming hardship can serve as a vital resource in the teaching profession. The insights generated have implications for teacher education programs, particularly in preparing educators from underrepresented backgrounds. Furthermore, the findings inform education policy by highlighting the value of lived experience in fostering inclusive and equitable school environments.

1. Introduction

Despite numerous initiatives aimed at improving educational opportunities for Roma children, many programs are considered lower than expected in effectiveness and sustainability (Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017; Council of Europe, 2024; Curcic et al., 2014; FRA, 2023; Rutigliano, 2020). We know only fragments of the underlying causes, and there are even fewer effective practical proposals and long-lasting solutions for intervention. Crucially, the main roots of the problem are not to be found in the classroom, but rather in

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the relationship between the community and the school (Desforges et al., 2003; Epstein, 2018; Jeynes, 2016; Papp & Neumann, 2021; Pusztai & Ináncsy-Pap, 2016). Teachers from the student community can play a key role in fostering this relationship and bridging worlds often perceived as distant. In this study, we strove to highlight the unique insider view of Roma teachers who share an ethnic background with their students. This allows them to play a special bridging or translator role, narrowing the otherwise significant gap between the distant worlds of family and school. In doing so, they may contribute to improving children's academic success.

The diversity of teaching staff is not on par with that of students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Lampert et al., 2016; Valenzuela, 1999), therefore, any information we have about diverse-background teachers is particularly valuable. Diverse-background teachers may include teachers from voluntary, involuntary, and autonomous minorities (Ogbu, 1992), who often encounter challenges not typically faced by majority-group teachers. This study focuses on Roma teachers who were born and live in Hungary and who, according to Ogbu's typology, are classified as an involuntary minority due to their centuries-long historical presence in the country (dating back to the 1400s) and the non-voluntary nature of their incorporation into the majority society.

The target group of this study represents a very narrow base of teachers who, today, are among the few to have successfully stepped into an intellectual career despite the difficulties generally faced by Roma children. Since very little is known about teachers from underrepresented backgrounds, especially Roma teachers (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Chang & Viesca, 2022; Fejős, 2018; Lampert et al., 2016; Messing et al., 2011), this study provides a wealth of insight into an area where there is still much untapped potential for knowledge building.

In many countries, ensuring that both pre-service and in-service teachers receive high-quality professional development to support diverse learners remains a serious challenge (Mu, 2024; OECD, 2019a, 2021; Sleeter, 2001; Wang et al., 2025). This study addresses this gap by contributing knowledge that remains limited in the broader field of Roma education research in general and from studies conducted in Central and Eastern European (abbreviated to: CEE) countries. First, while existing Roma education studies predominantly focus on Roma students, this study contributes novel insights by examining Roma teachers as educational actors – a group that remains largely invisible in the literature. By analysing their life courses, identity development, and classroom practices, the study highlights manifestations and patterns of resilience, agency, and professional strategies that remain insufficiently or unevenly documented in the literature. Second, the study offers one of the few empirically grounded accounts of Roma teachers working within a CEE context. This regional focus is important because teacher education systems, minority-majority relations, and the historical incorporation of Roma communities differ significantly from Western European settings. By capturing the specific structural and institutional constraints that Roma teachers face in Hungary – as well as the adaptive strategies they develop – the study provides context-sensitive knowledge directly relevant to Hungary and CEE countries.

Resilience has been conceptualized differently within various scholarly traditions and research frameworks, yet certain core characteristics are consistently identified across them: (1) Resilience can be understood in relation to hindering, threatening, challenging, or endangering circumstances. (2) A positive response must emerge to these factors. (3) There is potential for it to be supported and developed (Békés, 2002; Garmezy, 1974; Grotberg, 1995; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2019, 2025; Ungar, 2021; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1982; Wosnitza et al., 2018). On this basis, the Roma teachers studied can be regarded as resilient (as may be true of other voluntary, involuntary, and autonomous minority teachers who struggle with similar difficulties). For them, challenging circumstances were represented by sociological factors, namely minority status and self-reported underprivileged family backgrounds. Their pursuit of a university degree exemplifies a positive adaptive response to these circumstances. However, we examine resilience not only in relation to the life courses of the teachers, but also in terms of how they support students in developing resilience in their own lives. Previous biography and first-in-family research points out that a teacher's social background influences how they view their students, what they expect from them, and what kind of relationship they develop with them (Bersht, 2018; Everington, 2014; Lee, 2012; Nieto, 2003; Reay, 2017; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Research confirms that teachers who share similar backgrounds with their students are successful in teaching (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Boreczky, 2000; Fejős, 2018; Lampert et al., 2016; Reay, 2017; Sleeter, 2001). By analysing the life course experiences of Roma teachers in relation to their work with Roma students, the present resilience-based study aims to provide new practical implications in this area, adopting the sociological approach to resilience in our research (Mu, 2024).

Our study goes beyond the task-centred approach, in which the teacher is viewed as an interchangeable, replaceable executive person. Although they are the focal point of research, only the assessment and evaluation of their work are emphasized, they are seen only in the present and approached from the perspective of what they can do, rather than their individual needs. At most, their current social and marital status are taken into account; meanwhile, their social status during childhood is considered less important (Gore et al., 2022; Lutfiu & Lutfiu Hoxha, 2024; Reay, 2017). In contrast, the present study applies a teacher-centric perspective, examining not only what a teacher should be like, but also how they get there. It aims to draw attention to the resilience of teachers and to understand how the difficulties and advantages associated with a resilient life course and social mobility are incorporated into their work. Presenting examples of positive career paths can provide direct assistance in addressing the everyday challenges schools face when teaching diverse students.

Throughout the current study, two questions will be investigated. These are as follows:

(1) What resources and obstacles characterized the life courses of Roma teachers on their paths to obtaining a degree (Durst & Bereményi, 2021; Kende, 2005; Pusztai, 2004; Törkös, 2005)?

(2) What markers does the legacy of the “resilient life course” leave in teachers' current educational practice, and do these experiences manifest themselves as obstacles or resources (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Everington, 2014; Villegas & Irvine, 2010)?

2. Theoretical frameworks

2.1. Resilience in pedagogical and sociological perspective

The word “resilience” is of Latin origin. “Resilire” means “to leap or spring back”, “to leap up”, “to spring forth”, “to rebound after contact”, and “to return to”, according to dictionary (Lewis & Short, 1879). As mentioned in the introduction, resilience can be defined by the following core characteristics: (1) Resilience can be understood in relation to hindering, threatening, challenging, or endangering circumstances. (2) A positive response must emerge to these factors. (3) There is potential for it to be supported and developed (Békés, 2002; Garnezy, 1974; Grotberg, 1995; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2019, 2025; Ungar, 2021; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1982; Wosnitza et al., 2018). In line with this definition, students in the PISA assessment who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds yet achieve high test scores are called resilient. PISA analyses measure resilient students in several ways, depending on whether national, international, or absolute reference points are applied. These methods also vary in terms of the ratios used to define social background and academic performance, most commonly based on the lower and upper quartiles (Agasisti et al., 2018; Gaudin & Hindriks, 2018; OECD, 2023). Educational sociologists argue that a person’s life is resilient when it is successful, notwithstanding a disadvantaged social background. A disadvantaged social background may mean an unfavourable place to live, parents with a low level of education, low employment status, low income, family disintegration or belonging to a non-majority ethnic group. Early resilience literature interpreted resilience as an internal personal trait. Later, however, multi-level dynamic models emerged that captured the combination of internal and external factors (Masten, 2025; Sanders et al., 2016; Sigad, 2023; Versfeld et al., 2025). Moreover, there is a growing emphasis in recent publications not only on resisting adversity, but also on recognizing positive outcomes and developmental opportunities, namely, the constructive and transformative potential that emerges from the struggle itself (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2025; Mu, 2024; Wosnitza et al., 2018; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). The current paper examines these positive outcomes and developmental opportunities, specifically the resources inherent in the resilient life courses of Roma teachers.

This raises a key question: What does resilience mean in a pedagogical sense? There are four different (but interconnected) approaches when speaking about resilient teachers.

(1) Professional resilience conceptualises teacher resilience as a quality-related issue and refers to the resilient characteristics reflected in teachers’ professional work (Beltman et al., 2011; Bordás, 2020; Day, 2007; Gu & Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2016). Teachers are resilient professionals, in the sense that they can deal with pedagogical challenges and are able to improve as a result. Environmental or contextual characteristics play a crucial role in this process on the one hand (social support, mentoring, recognition for their work, managerial support, strong professional and personal relationships, e.g. with colleagues, leaders, mentors, friends, a supportive school environment and sense of community, positive relationships with students, professional development opportunities) along with personal characteristics and internal resources on the other (self-awareness, emotion regulation and stress management strategies, the ability to “reframe” negative experiences, a strong professional identity and sense of vocation, meaningful goals, and a belief in the impact of their work) (Beltman et al., 2011; Bordás, 2020; Doulabi et al., 2025; Gu & Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2016; Versfeld et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025).

(2) Personal resilience among teachers, which closely aligns with teachers’ professional resilience, represents the personal perspective/dimension of a teacher’s work. It focuses on the teacher’s well-being and mental health (Beltman et al., 2011; Gu & Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2025; Zhang & Luo, 2023). While the psychological approach to resilience is closely related to this dimension, it falls outside the scope of the present study. However, a majority of the studies are rooted in a psychological approach to teacher resilience. Supplementing this, the present study’s goal is to include a sociological perspective in the discourse on resilient teachers.

(3) One of the sociological perspectives of teachers’ resilience highlights their childhood social or ethnic background. In this sense, teachers may be considered resilient if they come from a socially disadvantaged or an ethnic minority family. Biography and first-in-family research emphasize that overcoming hardships caused by being socially disadvantaged or ethnic minority provides a unique set of experiences that can be drawn upon in teaching, and a teacher’s background influences how they view their students, what they expect from them, and what kind of relationship they develop with them (Bersh, 2018; Everington, 2014; Lee, 2012; Nieto, 2003; Reay, 2017; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). When individuals from socially disadvantaged or ethnic minority families enter the teaching profession, they often encounter several new challenges in their work, such as being in a subordinate position within a dominant school culture. Furthermore, based on Bourdieu and Passeron, one can raise the question of how a teacher can help transfer cultural capital to their students, capital they themselves may not have had access to in their own families. These teachers are often faced with a choice: either to remain close to their students’ cultural background, or to become representatives of the dominant culture of the school, knowing that failing to do so may jeopardize the positions they have fought so hard to achieve (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lampert et al., 2016; Mu, 2024; Valenzuela, 1999).

(4) One can also speak of resilient teachers when they are effective in supporting and fostering learning among socially disadvantaged or ethnic minority students. Based on this sociological perspective, if they help students overcome their hardships (in other words, help students become resilient), the teachers are resilient. Research on teacher resilience suggests that when teachers are successful, their students are more likely to be successful as well. Researchers point out that only a successful teacher can promote student success (Beltman et al., 2011; Day, 2007; Mansfield et al., 2016; OECD, 2019b, 2021, 2023). Building on this approach, the present study poses the following question: does successfully overcoming the challenging circumstances really enable resilient Roma educators to transmit the same life course pattern to their students?

Herein, the educational sociology approach was applied, with the understanding that the four approaches cannot be distinctly separated from one another. From a sociological perspective, we emphasize that teacher resilience is not merely a psychological phenomenon, nor can it be interpreted solely within the context of the individual left to their own devices, but rather within the context of the social environment (Doulabi et al., 2025; Mu, 2024; Ungar, 2021). Currently, the research analyses Roma teachers who are victorious over the challenging circumstances in their lives. Their life courses began with adversity, which they have successfully overcome, and today they can work to pass on their resilience to their students.

2.2. Personal life knowledge and pedagogic work

Pre-service teachers do not arrive at teacher training courses with a tabula rasa; in fact, all that they learned and experienced in their childhood and until their adulthood can play a role in their career choice (Beijaard et al., 2004; Nieto, 2003; OECD, 2019b, 2021; Reay, 2017; Sigad, 2023). Moreover, the skills and attitudes present during the teacher training course, through a personal filter, become part of the teachers' cognitive and emotional repertoire. Subsequently, it is not only their university experience and subject knowledge that they carry into their workplace. Their life courses touch all those areas that define their jobs as educators: their commitment to the career, the relationships they form with colleagues, leaders, parents and children, their well-being, and their ability to show empathy, among others. As Clandinin states, "to understand teachers, we need to understand each teacher's personal practical knowledge" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 172).

There is growing scholarly interest in research on teachers and teacher candidates that explores the significance of life history, oral history, biography, autobiography, or auto-ethnography case studies regarding teacher preparation and professional development. The practical actors and researchers of teacher training and advanced studies also observed that the personal and professional lives of teachers are connected, and that the use of personal life knowledge is a critical part of the process of becoming a teacher (Bersh, 2018; Day, 2007; Everington, 2014; Lee, 2012; Nieto, 2003; Sigad, 2023; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). They defined this as essential: "knowing myself to know others" (Lee, 2012, p. 38), or "we teach who we are" (Bersh, 2018, p. 36). Self-insight, self-evaluation, reflection and a multitude of other personal factors that develop long before the teacher training (e.g., "proactive problem-solving skills including help-seeking, high levels of interpersonal skills, strong networks; socially competent, take active responsibility for own wellbeing") (Beltman et al., 2011, p. 196) are mentioned among the factors necessary for overcoming professional challenges in the journey to becoming a teacher.

Literature on the education of students from diverse backgrounds highlights the teacher's professional assumptions, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs and significance as the primary factor behind the success (Everington, 2014; OECD, 2021). Nevertheless, a teacher's personal life course, professional self-concept, and professional identity greatly affect the formation of these (Beijaard et al., 2004; Everington, 2014).

The above-mentioned special literature represents a distinct branch within the broader field, explicitly focusing on teachers from minority ethnic (ME) backgrounds. "There appeared to be particular value in investigating the practice of teachers from minority ethnic (ME) and religious backgrounds, given evidence of the crucial role that ME teachers' life experiences and knowledge can play in supporting education for and about diversity" (Everington, 2014, p. 156). Everington differentiates between insider and outsider knowledge. All teachers can have knowledge about, for instance, the multicultural environment (which can also be improved upon during teacher training and advanced studies) (Everington, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2001), but those who have lived through such experiences, shaped by their own life courses, possess an authentic basis from which to bridge the gap between the often distant differences of student and school. Studies proved that teachers from the same ethnic group act as cultural ambassadors and brokers or translators. If the teacher understands their students' cultural characteristics and their real-life problems, teacher-student cultural differences will not generate inferiority or superiority.

These teachers can also help bridge the language barriers arising from linguistic differences or different cultural code usage. Studies show that the presence of teachers from the same ethnic background in schools has a positive effect on the overall school environment, upon students' school performance, ratios of further study, reduction in dropout rates, the cessation of discrimination, etc. (Lampert et al., 2016; Papp & Neumann, 2021; Reay, 2017; Salinas, 2002; Sleeter, 2001). According to Connelly et al., a teacher's personal practical knowledge is "...in the person's present mind and body, and in the person's future plans and actions..." (Connelly et al., 1988, p. 25). A teacher of the same ethnicity as the students can be a role model for them and perhaps being viewed more favourably by those students. Thus, a teacher can increase motivation through placing higher expectations on students. They can also break down stereotypes in school or be the voice for minority students facing discrimination or racism. It is this shared background that underpins initiatives aimed at supporting the employment of minority teachers or teacher's assistants (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Akkari & Radhouane, 2022; Battaglia & Lebedinski, 2017; Boreczky, 2000; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Everington, 2014; Fejős, 2018; Lampert et al., 2016; Messing et al., 2011; REWG, 2001; Salinas, 2002; Sleeter, 2001; Starčević et al., 2016; Szalai, 2011; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Teachers' advantages of shared cultural background are connected by researchers to Bandura's theory which argues, "The impact of modelling on perceived self-efficacy is strongly influenced by perceived similarity to the models. The greater the assumed similarity, the more persuasive are the models' successes and failures." (Bandura, 1994, p. 5).

The literature that (self-)criticizes the positive impact of teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds mainly claims that the presence of such teachers is not an automatic advantage, but rather a potential one. It underscores the importance of the conditions necessary to realize this potential (e.g., teacher training), as well as the structural frameworks that shape school life and extend beyond individual teacher competence. This body of work also highlights the importance of recognizing diversity within minority groups (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to match students and teachers based solely on background, this match must be translated into

pedagogical practice on a daily basis. Accordingly, it is critical for pre-service and in-service teachers to reflect on their own lives and preparedness to explore the connection between their personal and professional lives, and to embed all this into their work (Beijaard et al., 2004; Everington, 2014; Sigad, 2023; Valenzuela, 1999). The reflective process of learning and discovering can also support them in helping their students develop similar reflectiveness about themselves and their (school) trajectories, so that they might be able to ask questions and form opinions. For this, it is necessary for teachers to reflect on themselves and then share these reflections with their pupils (Everington, 2014; Sigad, 2023).

While shared backgrounds between teachers and students can foster trust and mutual understanding, this dynamic also raises important pedagogical and ethical questions. What challenges does this process conceal? Literature addresses the concern that the teacher-student relationship should not head to an extreme direction: the teacher's views should neither oppress their students' thoughts nor overly influence students' opinions on their own identities (Everington, 2014; Fejős, 2018; Salinas, 2002). Authors emphasize the importance of maintaining professional boundaries and caution against inappropriate forms of openness (Beltman et al., 2011; Day, 2007; Everington, 2014; Parkes & FitzGibbon, 1986; Sigad, 2023).

Therefore, it is important to know when and what aspects of one's own life experience to share. The training courses and advanced studies aid teachers in learning this. Throughout the process of becoming a teacher, and indeed the entire course of the career, these candidates must struggle with the fact from time to time that personal and professional identity are difficult to mesh together (Beltman et al., 2011; Messing et al., 2011; Nieto, 2003). In American examinations, for instance, candidates testified to the conflicts of black and teacher identities (when trying to manage tensions between their identities) (Everington, 2014). In Hungary, the target area of our study, similar hardships of identity can be found among disadvantaged and/or Roma students seeking to become teachers. These hardships are rooted in the elementary trials of social mobility. More and more studies are focusing on the crises arising from the creation of social divide, the loss of community, and the toils of fitting in, along with their negative consequences, such as "emotional cost", and identity crisis (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Beck, 1983; Berki et al., 2025; Bicsák, 2024; Durst & Bereményi, 2021; Godó et al., 2020; Kovács, Ceglédi et al., 2022; Messing et al., 2011; Pusztai, 2004; Reay, 2017; Varga, 2019).

What practical examples do we see of how pre-service and in-service teachers are helped to process their life course experiences, how they are helped to consciously connect their work as teachers to the personal life course experiences of participants? To begin, through interviews or autobiographies, they are led to the multicultural meaning of self and are helped to emphasize self-disclosure of lived experiences, creating emotional responses and deep personal and emotional investment into educational work. This then pushes them to connect their experiences to the process of becoming a teacher, supports the development of culturally responsive competency through the creation of an autobiography which helps them become more culturally and socially sensitive, and consider themselves sociocultural beings (Beltman et al., 2011; Bersh, 2018; Kirk & Wall, 2010; Lee, 2012; Milam et al., 2014; Quintero et al., 2013). Dewey distinguishes between two kinds of experience: instructive and non-instructive. Each contains both active and passive elements, suggesting that people can collect their experiences and later use them cumulatively. Personal experiences can pre-judge the whole life of a human (Dewey, 1938).

The goal is for the pre-service and in-service teachers to become capable of expressing lessons learned themselves, in which they connect their experiences with their present (or future) work and their (future) students shared life contexts. For instance, one such program participant wrote: "They considered it important not to make pre-assumptions or pre-judgments until knowing students' personal cultures and conducting independent research on students' personal and cultural backgrounds and past experiences." (Lee, 2012, p. 40). Among other things, it is built upon the premise that if teachers recognize, accept, and respect themselves, then they will be open to recognizing, accepting, and respecting others too (Beltman et al., 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2012). Additionally, they can teach this to their pupils as well (Bersh, 2018; Everington, 2014; Sigad, 2023).

A lesson to be learned from the literature is that a connection between one's life course and teaching work inevitably occurs, often without specific preparation, and may lead to either successful or unsuccessful outcomes.

2.3. The situation of Roma students in Europe and Hungary

The Roma¹ constitute Europe's largest minority group (Cserti Csapó, 2019; Curcic et al., 2014; FRA, 2023; Polónyi, 2016; REWG, 2001; Rutigliano, 2020). In Hungary, they make up the largest non-majority ethnic group. The latest external classification survey estimates the Roma population at 876,000 (Pásztor et al., 2016; Péntes et al., 2018), accounting for approximately 9 % of the total population. Compared to other European countries, this is a relatively high percentage, as only a few countries, such as Bulgaria, Romania, and the Slovak Republic, report higher rates (Creţan & Turnock, 2008; Rutigliano, 2020).

European research at the turn of the millennium clearly demonstrated that large disparities existed between Roma and non-Roma students at all levels of education (Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017; Council of Europe, 2024; Curcic et al., 2014; FRA, 2023; Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018; REWG, 2001; Rutigliano, 2020). The Decade of Roma Inclusion Program (2005–2015, abbreviated to: The Decade) attempted to support the Roma populations of (primarily) CEE countries. Evaluations of the program revealed widespread criticism,

¹ "The term 'Roma' used at the Council of Europe refers to Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as Gypsies" (Council of Europe, 2012). Accordingly, and given that academic literature tends to use the term "Roma", we have adopted this term throughout our article to refer to all Roma groups in Hungary (Durst & Bereményi, 2021; Pásztor et al., 2016; Rutigliano, 2020; Szalai, 2011). In the present study, we referred to participants as *Roma* if they had previously self-identified using this term. We do not equate the term Roma with socially disadvantaged situations. However, according to their own statements, the interviewees were severely affected by social disadvantage during their childhood.

with some viewing it as largely ineffective; even the more optimistic assessments reported only sporadic progress (Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017; Curcic et al., 2014; Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018; Rorke et al., 2015). The Hungarian analyses also showed that the project failed to close the gap between Roma and non-Roma students (Cserti Csapó, 2019; Forray & Óhidy, 2019; FRA, 2023; Polónyi, 2016).

While many challenges are shared across Europe, several are particularly pronounced (also) in Hungary, among which the following three stand out. First, there are strong disparities between urban and rural, and between developed and underdeveloped regions, in terms of schooling opportunities. Following the economic decline after the regime change in 1989–1990 in Hungary, the Roma workforce experienced greater hardship than other social groups (Bocsi & Ceglédi, 2021; Kárpáti et al., 2014). The Roma population is over-represented in the rural, as well as eastern and northern areas of the country, regions that continue to lag behind the rest of the country economically (Bocsi & Ceglédi, 2021; Papp & Neumann, 2021; Pásztor et al., 2016). The current research focuses specifically on this geographical area.

Hungary's second challenge is the persistence and institutionalization of school segregation. Although segregation is prohibited by law, it is deepening and intensifying over time (Fejes & Józsa, 2018; FRA, 2023; Málovics et al., 2019; Nagy, 2025). In the European context, the level of segregation remains high in Hungary, in both rural and urban areas (Cserti Csapó, 2019; European Commission, 2024; Fejes & Józsa, 2018; FRA, 2023; Hajdu et al., 2015; Málovics et al., 2019; Polónyi, 2016). The primary causes of high levels of segregation include parents' freedom to choose schools and the selective range of schools and classes available (to serve parents' demands), as well as the aforementioned regional inequalities (Fejes & Józsa, 2018; Hermann & Kisfalusi, 2023; Málovics et al., 2019; Papp & Neumann, 2021).

Thirdly, a structural environment marked by insufficient inclusive education provision fails to adequately and sustainably serve Roma students and educators (Papp & Neumann, 2021). Although, numerous programs have been launched which, when successfully implemented, have been able to achieve results only at the local level and have had a positive impact only on the lives of individuals. Examples include the Network of Christian Roma Colleges for Advanced Studies, the 'Útravaló' (On the Road) Scholarship Program, the so called Tanodas (Foundation Schools), the 'Let's Teach for Hungary Mentor Program', etc. At the same time, most macro-level analyses continue to report significant systemic problems, which is why they mention only sporadic successes and need of more effective structural interventions (Cserti Csapó, 2019; Kovács, Haficova et al., 2022; Papp & Neumann, 2021).

Based on one of the metrics of the Decade program, the Roma Inclusion Index, which is calculated using data on the difference between the Roma and non-Roma population, Hungary ranked 4th among participating countries in 2005 and 3rd in 2014 (Cserti Csapó, 2019). The distance between Roma and non-Roma students does not decrease at higher levels of education in most European countries (Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017; Cserti Csapó, 2019; Curcic et al., 2014; Polónyi, 2016; Szalai, 2011). Thus, similar tendencies have emerged in Hungary over the past decades as in other CEE countries.

However, the situation is not equally negative across all age groups. When examining the current European statistics, it can be argued that in Hungary, early childhood institutional education among Roma children is high in a European comparison but low compared to the total population. In 2021, 59 % of Roma children in Hungary participated in early childhood education and care between the age of three and the (country-specific) starting age of compulsory education (Roma children, total in Europe: 44 %; general population, in Hungary: 93 %). In several other countries the rates were considerably lower, for example, Romania: 27 % (total population: 79 %), the Slovak Republic: 33 % (total population: 78 %), Serbia: 11 % (total population: 67 %), and Croatia: 24 % (total population: 79 %). Only in Spain was the participation rate higher: 69 % (total population: 97 %) (FRA, 2023).

Table 1

The highest educational level of the population aged 15 and above in Hungary (self-reporting, %).

		<8 years	8 years	secondary vocational education without secondary school leaving examination	secondary school leaving examination	tertiary education with degree (college, university, etc.)
2022 Census (aged 15 and above)	Whole population (N = 8 210 402)	2.3	21.2	21.1	33.1	22.3
	Gypsy (Roma) (N = 157 431)	13.2	54.1	19	10.7	2.9
2016 Microcensus (aged 15 and above)	Whole population (N = 8 381 900)	3.2	23.2	20.9	32.2	20.5
	Gypsy (Roma) (N = 212 568)	17.3	60.3	14.2	6.9	1.3
2011 Census (aged 15 and above)	Whole population (N = 8 489 969)	4.9	26.8	21.3	30.1	17
	Gypsy (Roma) (N = 213 259)	23.1	57.6	13.1	5	1.2

Source: Ceglédi et al., 2024.

Note: "Gypsy (Roma)" = "The respondent belonged to the given nationality if the respondent indicated the given nationality in at least one of the questions concerning nationality, mother tongue or language used in the family or among friends." (HCSO: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2018, p. 7).

Note: In 2022, the proportion of people identifying themselves as Gypsy (Roma) decreased compared to the previous census (in all age groups: 244, 834 in 2011; 209,909 in 2022) (HCSO: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2011, 2018, 2024). Therefore, the increase in educational attainment data shown in the table does not necessarily represent a real increase. It may also mean that respondents with higher educational attainment were more likely to identify themselves as Roma.

Following elementary education, the gap in secondary school enrolment between Roma and non-Roma students appears relatively small. For instance, a comparative study of the educational track of a Roma cohort born in 1971 and 1991, assessed at the ages of 20 and 21, demonstrated that the ratio of those enrolling in secondary education rose from 23 % to 89 % (Hajdu et al., 2015). Meanwhile, participation alone does not guarantee equal opportunities. In terms of further study, Roma students attend segregated and lower quality schools, those that do not result in secondary school leaving certificates (which would permit them to participate in higher education). Furthermore, they are more strongly impacted by dropout during their secondary education (a phenomenon which is exacerbated by the fact that the minimum school leaving age is 16, which is reached prior to the completion of studies). Thus, overall, the chances of Roma students getting a secondary school certificate (whether academic or vocational) is lower than general population in Hungary (European Commission, 2024; Hajdu et al., 2015; Nagy, 2025). At the same time, in 2021 Hungarian data reported a higher proportion than the European average in terms of completing at least upper secondary education among 20–24-year-old Roma population (Hungary: 41 %, EU total: 27 %). Based on these data, Hungary ranks at the top of the list, together with former Yugoslav countries: Serbia (46 %) and North Macedonia (41 %), while Hungary is ahead of countries such as Romania (22 %), Slovakia (28 %), and the Czech Republic (22 %). (FRA, 2023).

At the start of higher education, however, a very high level of detachment is observed (Cserti Csapó, 2019; FRA, 2023; Hajdu et al., 2015; Polónyi, 2016). The likelihood of young Roma obtaining a higher education degree remains only a fraction of that available to the majority population (Table 1). To summarize the above: it can be stated that a positive process has begun, but the inequalities have simultaneously crept upwards (Bocsi, 2015; Boudon, 1974; Róbert, 2000).

3. Research questions

RQ1: What resources and obstacles characterized the life courses of Roma teachers on their way to obtaining a degree (Durst & Bereményi, 2021; Kende, 2005; Pusztai, 2004; Torkos, 2005)?

RQ2: What markers does the legacy of the “resilient life course” leave in teachers’ current educational practice, and do these experiences manifest themselves as obstacles or resources (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Everington, 2014; Villegas & Irvine, 2010)?

In the current study, the personal and professional life courses of resilient Roma teachers are analysed. What happens between these two phases of life (the resilient private life course and the teaching career)? Are they connected to one another, and, if they are, then what characterizes this relationship? Does the “knowledge” gained through struggle with hardship along one’s personal life course appear in the teaching career? Even the literature on teacher resilience provides only superficial insight into the life experiences that underlie teachers’ personal characteristics, their reactions to challenges, or their relationships with students. Moreover, there is even less information available about Roma teachers’ resources and obstacles. This raises further questions about the background and motives that drive their teaching, and about how, and to what extent, parallels may emerge between the life course of teachers and their students.

4. Data and methods

Researchers do not have exact data on Roma teachers in Hungary, but during the 2017/18 National Competency Test in Hungary, 6 % of school principals testified that there were Roma colleagues in the teacher faculty (Bocz, 2020). In total, it can be said that the ratio of Roma teachers is far below the ratio of students attending school (Fejős, 2018; Messing et al., 2011; Papp & Neumann, 2021), and unfortunately, there is still a lack of information about the career paths of these teachers.

In the present study, first-hand collected data are used. The research subjects are Roma teachers with resilient life courses, i.e., who

Table 2

Anonymous characteristics of interviewees.

Subject ID	Place of Residence (Type)	Age at the time of the interview	Gender	Occupation
1	large village	30+	female	humanities teacher
2	village, town	60+	male	teacher, foster parent
3	large village	50+	female	Romani minority educator
4	village	40+	female	kindergarten teacher, principal
5	village, town	50+	male	kindergarten teacher, social pedagogue
6	village	60+	male	science teacher, teacher in a residential care institution
7	village	20+	male	science-humanities teacher
8	small town	30+	female	kindergarten teacher, physical education teacher
9	village	20+	male	humanities teacher
10	village	20+	female	humanities teacher, mental health professional
11	village	30+	female	humanities teacher, drama educator
12	village	20+	male	primary school teacher
13	village	30+	female	science teacher, Romani studies specialist
14	village	30+	male	violin teacher
15	village	20+	female	humanities teacher, psychologist
16	village	20+	male	primary school teacher, teaching assistant

Source: Own editing based on the interviews.

Notes: Due to families moving, several types of settlements may be listed in a cell. Exact ages are not disclosed for the sake of protecting anonymity.

have obtained a teacher's degree despite their self-reported adverse circumstances. The study took place in 2019–2023 in Hungary's eastern counties. Semi-structured, personal interviews were conducted, during which the Roma interviewees recounted their lives, gave account of the social backgrounds and challenges faced by their students, the teaching methods they as teachers used, as well as their educational *Ars poetica*. Participants were informed in advance about the aims of the research project, and all ethical procedures were duly followed, including obtaining informed consent prior to data collection.

The average age of the subjects was 38.2 years. Every second Roma teacher interviewed was male, which is considered over-represented within the Hungarian educator population (Table 2). In terms of occupation, the parents were typically homemakers (not in formal employment, engaged in household work), public works programme participant (Hungary), seasonal agricultural workers, factory workers, construction assistants, cleaners, but there were also security guards, (former) miners, kitchen assistants, musicians, and in some cases skilled or semi-skilled workers. Inactive status and job changes were common in the parents' lives. In one case, there was no information about the father.

Given the uniqueness of the target group, we used qualitative snowball sampling ($N = 16$) (Babbie, 2017; Creswell, 2012). During the analysis, we reached code saturation by the 12th interview with respect to the central question of the research, and the emerging patterns were adequately supported by the data. Based on the literature, code saturation can often be achieved with 9–10 interviews, especially in cases such as those characterizing the present analysis: the research question was sufficiently narrow and focused; the participants constituted a relatively homogeneous group; they were genuine experts on the topic; the extracted data were sufficiently rich, meaningful, and informative; and the researchers were well-acquainted with the relevant literature and had substantial field knowledge. Under these circumstances, additional interviews no longer enriched the understanding of the key code categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Thomson, 2011). The above factors reduced the sample size required to achieve saturation, thus, with the participation of 16 subjects, we consider the results of the research to be adequately substantiated. The interviews also fulfilled Malterud and colleagues' concept of information power, which posits that the more specific the research question, the more homogeneous the sample, the more information the interviews hold, and the more relevant and higher quality the data, the fewer interviews are needed (Malterud et al., 2016). However, as the results developed during the analysis, it became evident that the results could be further enriched by refining additional codes. This way, data collection will continue in future phases of the research.

In line with the research union of Saunders and colleagues, this study adopts an interpretivist philosophy and follows inductive, deductive and abductive approaches to theory development. The methodological choice is mono-method qualitative, and the research strategy is narrative inquiry with a cross-sectional time horizon (Saunders et al., 2019). Data collection and analysis were carried out through a qualitative study using the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives related to the research question; therefore, a qualitative research design was the most appropriate choice (Babbie, 2017; Creswell, 2012). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as a broadly established method in similar types of research, aims to discover and describe not only common themes, but also semantic and latent meaning patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023; Terry et al., 2017). As Naeem et al. have indicated, thematic analysis frequently leads to new insights and deeper understandings of the topic under investigation (Naeem et al., 2023). One such new insight in the analysis was that the emergence of experiences of resilient life courses in teachers' views, beliefs, and classroom practices occurs along a specific circularity.

The interview data were transcribed and analysed to uncover and systematically organize common patterns of meaning related to resilient life courses and working as a teacher. These meaning patterns were elicited using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Braun and Clarke's six thematic analysis phases were followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023; Terry et al., 2017).

(1) Familiarization with the data: During the first phase, the researchers read the transcribed texts and listened to the audio files numerous times to immerse themselves in the data and gain a thorough understanding of their content. (2) Generating initial codes: In the second step, initial deductive codes were defined along the main themes based on the theoretical background. The researchers allowed inductive codes to emerge, which included both descriptive and interpretive codes. For example, the relationship between personal life course and pedagogical work emerged as the content of several inductive codes. (3) Searching for themes: In the "searching for themes" phase, researchers identified themes and subthemes from codes that contained common meaning and content. For instance, several codes were grouped around the relationship and cycle of the resilient life course and pedagogical work. (4) Reviewing potential themes: The importance and validity of the cycle emerged in the third phase was also confirmed in the "review of potential themes" phase. (5) Defining and naming themes: In defining the themes, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke, the researchers created clearly focused, non-overlapping themes that were related to both the other themes and the research questions. The criteria for naming them were that they be sufficiently informative, concise, and impressive (in Braun and Clarke's word: catchy), while remaining closely aligned with the words teachers used. (6) Report writing: The researchers prepared a research report, from which three major themes were identified and summarized in the current study.

During the analytical process, informal notetaking and memo writing were also employed throughout phases 1 to 5 of the research. Steps 1–5 were assisted by simple manual coding. The analytical team included two researchers. The coding and analysis process was carried out while we were constantly monitoring each other, sharing notes, comments, and questions aimed at uncovering what lay beyond the surface of the data. These authors conducted the interviews themselves; therefore, the texts were recognizable to the researchers in their natural context, in a real sense. In the phase of interpreting the themes and writing the report, the external perspective of the third author also enhanced the objectivity of the analysis, which the researchers sought to achieve as fully as possible through personal triangulation. The novelty of the analysis lies in the identification of the circular pattern that emerges from the thematic connections, providing insight into the dynamics of the entanglement between the individual life courses of Roma teachers and their current work.

5. Results

5.1. Personal life course

The interviewees spent their childhoods mainly in disadvantaged small villages. These settlements lacked appropriate infrastructure and job opportunities, and, with one exception, were inhabited by significant numbers of Roma families. In the beginning, the families lived in segregated areas within the settlements as well. Subsequently, they took a certain social step forward, either by moving out of these segregated areas, or through their parents' employment.

Although the difficult circumstances are evident, in most cases there was at least one working parent in the family, which ensured a basic livelihood, even if not prosperity. This income proved enough for these families to represent the lower strata's "middle class" and "elite" in the given micro-social environment. All of this created an important minimum living wage necessary for the interview subjects to find their place in the education system (Kende, 2005).

All respondents stated that their parents placed great emphasis on studying. Resignation was not their response to a hard life; rather, the contrary attitude gave them strength. Acting as a sort of springboard, the more difficult their financial situation, the stronger the desire to break out (Ceglédi et al., 2018). Their parents' commitment to education is an extraordinarily powerful factor in making their life courses resilient (Bank et al., 1990; Masten et al., 2008; Ungar, 2021; Waxman et al., 2003; Werner & Smith, 1982). These results are consistent with previous research, in which Roma parents recognized the value of education, but were also aware of their limited resources in achieving their educational goals (Bloomer et al., 2014; Bouillet & Miskeljin, 2017; Boyle et al., 2020; Hamilton, 2018; Luciak & Liegl, 2009; Lukšfk, 2019; Nguyen Luu et al., 2019; Pahic et al., 2011; Rosu, 2021). Such boundaries often manifested in modest future expectations. Obtaining a vocational qualification (even without completing the secondary school leaving examination) was considered a more realistic goal for their children than earning a university degree.

"My mother wanted us to be bakers because then there would always be bread on the table, and we could somehow make a living. That was her dream too." (female, humanities teacher, mental health professional)

Several of our participants reported that distancing themselves from the Roma community was necessary for academic success. This finding is consistent with research that draws attention to the pressure students face to choose between their community and school in order to succeed. Such dilemmas often arise in contexts of irresolvable conflict, where schools expect students to distance themselves from their own culture and assimilate into the majority culture, while the community may respond with disapproval or social sanction (Derrington, 2005; Hamilton, 2018; Nguyen Luu et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 1999). However, the literature also offers counter examples (Brüggemann, 2014; Jun & Zhou, 2021; Zhou, 2005). For example, Jun and Zhou's research showed that the entire ethnic community supported the social mobility that could be achieved through education. Zhou observed new Chinese immigration in Singapore (Jun & Zhou, 2021), where Chinese parents proved to be exceedingly supportive of and invested in their children's education to ensure their academic success in the host country, which is well known for its high educational standards and competitive nature. The author also highlights that in those immigrant Chinese families in the USA where the parents have low educational qualifications, children can stand out due to the encouragement they receive from their ethnic community (Zhou, 2005).

"One thing I know well is that I need to study. They knew that they had a clever little girl, and she needed to study. They paid much attention to this, lest she too earn her bread and butter in such misery, with work this hard." (female, Romani minority educator)

The research participants were characteristically encouraged by their teachers to choose an academic career path (Elekes, 2022; Fejős, 2018; Sanders et al., 2016; Sigad, 2023), even when the family had the opposite opinion, due to the above mentioned paradox of supporting their children's learning while being aware of the limitations of their opportunities. According to similar research, it is stated that families with low social status, low income, or ethnic minorities often hold high hopes for their children's success, but poverty or even discrimination can hinder them (Bloomer et al., 2014; Bouillet & Miskeljin, 2017; Boyle et al., 2020; Hamilton, 2018; Luciak & Liegl, 2009; Lukšfk, 2019; Nguyen Luu et al., 2019; Ogbu, 1981; Pahic et al., 2011; Rosu, 2021).

The interviewees began their elementary school studies at the appropriate time. They spoke about how they loved to attend school. Thus, school for them was a place of comfort, which is a critical recurring motif in resilient life courses (Agasisti et al., 2018; Haficová et al., 2020; Masten et al., 2008). At the same time, as suggested in previous studies, subjects in this research also shared that they had faced prejudice and discrimination based upon their ethnic background. Faced with such challenges, the interviewees developed multiple strategies to cope with discrimination, the most typical of which was gaining acceptance by demonstrating strong academic performance, which is consistent with the results of previous research (Brown, 2008; Brüggemann, 2014; Cose, 1995; Hughes & Johnson, 2001; Varga, 2019). Therefore, once again, a negative factor serves as a source of resilience in their life course.

"As a Gypsy, I was only able to survive in every class community if I proved myself. So, I was not allowed to study on an intermediate level or to be a student that just gets by with only a pass. Otherwise, the others would have picked on me, they would have walked all over me and would have driven me out of that class. In this way, they saw that I am a good student, I am clever, and they did not know what to do with me. They accepted me." (female, kindergarten teacher, principal)

Among African Americans, a similar phenomenon can be observed. Researchers point out that these parents, due to the lack of opportunities in education they themselves had to face, try to apply ethnic-racial socialization in the hopes of bettering their children's academic results (Brown, 2008; Cose, 1995; Ogbu, 1981; Wang & Huguley, 2012). Ethnic-racial socialization can be seen as a tool and aid, shielding children from experiencing racism and helping them be aware of the stereotypes regarding their minority and the micro-aggressions shown toward it. These experiences can serve as valuable resources in their professional work with children from similar backgrounds. However, cultural socialization may also carry risks. One of its elements, the "promotion of mistrust", can alienate students from the school culture, while the additional pressure of the "twice as good" strategy may jeopardize their physical and mental well-being (Brown, 2008; Cose, 1995; Hughes & Johnson, 2001; Wang & Huguley, 2012).

Without exception, the subjects had consistently tried to make their own way and improve their circumstances. Despite facing numerous difficulties throughout their lives, they remained determined and did not give up. On many occasions, trials and failures had only strengthened their attempts to reach their goals. Throughout their lives, resilient features such as “disadvantages turned into advantages”, or the “bounce back effect” were reflected (Luthar et al., 2000; Sugland et al., 1993).

“I took emotional punches there, but I knew one thing for certain: that I have a goal. I wanted to get a kindergarten teacher’s degree, and then to teach Roma kids. To get there, I need to endure everything. These college years were one great boot camp.” (female, Romani minority educator)

5.2. Professional life course

The study’s subjects spoke of how they had always wanted to teach. They possess powerful internal motivation and believe they can help Roma children who share similar life experiences coming from hard circumstances. The classes and groups that these teachers instruct, and nurture are made up of disadvantaged and/or Roma children. The respondents expressed that they attempt to support these children in studying and in never giving up (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). They firmly believe that overcoming challenges is possible.

“The chestnut, too, is only prickly on the outside, while on the inside it is the shiniest and smoothest. And a true teacher is the one who is brave enough to break open the chestnut. I do not consider a teacher to be someone who only touches the chestnut from the outside and – squinting – criticizes the child and the family. One can only understand that child if one goes down into the child’s family and devotes time to explore the causes. One will discover how much harder the situation is for the child than for his other classmates, a difference that it would not even be possible to measure with a ruler.” (male, violin teacher)

During the interviews, the phenomenon of community empowerment was also observable among the study subjects (Mu, 2024; Varga, 2019). They understand what it means to be at a disadvantage, to grow up in poverty, and how, despite these hindering factors, to graduate and succeed in life. It is precisely this lived experience that drives them to support their students, continuously providing them with encouragement and advice. These motivations are consistent with findings from previous studies, in which teachers described their life mission as helping children who face similar circumstances (Durst et al., 2023; Durst & Bereményi, 2021; Nieto, 2003; Reay, 2017; Sigad, 2023). In our recent research, we gained deeper insight into how Roma teachers utilize their prior experiences in their professional practice. They convey to students the situations they themselves have been through, preparing them, and guiding in participating in everyday life successfully.

“I started to teach them everything, but mostly about what awaits them in the world out there, because I knew very well how hard it is, as a Gypsy and a dependent of the state, to stand one’s ground outside the protection of the foster home. I tried to teach them many things that they could use. And what was very important, I strengthened their confidence, their self-esteem, and I developed in them the kind of skills that are critical for them to make their way in the real world.” (male, primary school teacher, teaching assistant)

Based on the statements of respondents, every child needs to have an equal opportunity to take part in the education opportunities offered, regardless of how talented and successful they are in their studies. They know what their students go through, thus they encourage them to study. They are able to understand their students, since they, too, grew up under similar circumstances. The experiences they have accumulated in life, without exception, contribute meaningfully to their professional practice.

Table 3
Educational approaches in the practice of Roma teachers.

Beneficiary	Method	Details
Students	Facilitating success experiences	Encouraging students to recognize their own progress and latent talents; fostering a sense of competence
	Cooperative learning	Promoting collaboration; emphasizing the value of learning within a community
	Individualized learning support	Differentiated instruction; mentoring; sensitive understanding of students’ challenges without prejudice
	Career guidance	Self-awareness activities; confidence-building; instilling belief in students; presenting diverse role models; showing meaningful future pathways; offering appropriate information for career choices
	Creating a comfortable learning environment	Establishing a welcoming classroom atmosphere; facilitating a supportive and mutually respectful class community
	Setting high expectations	Maintaining rigorous standards; consistency; encouraging students to work for their achievements
	Experience-based learning	Drama-based pedagogy; learning through storytelling; gamified learning activities; projects; leveraging students’ creative ideas; integrating ICT tools effectively
Parents	Elements of culturally responsive teaching	Integrating Roma cultural content (music, dance, food, crafts); incorporating visual, auditory, and tactile elements; experiential learning; encouraging curriculum-related creative expression such as rap lyrics
	Effective family–school partnerships	Respectful approach towards parents; active communication; conducting home visits
Colleagues and support networks	Facilitating parental networks	Deliberate development of connections among parents to support student learning
	Collaborating effectively with support professionals	Respecting teachers’ professional boundaries in addressing disadvantage; making the knowledge and resources of these professionals available to students and families
	Faculty cultural broker role	Helping colleagues understand students’ and families’ perspectives; earning the respect of colleagues towards children; bridging cultural or social gaps; being a positive reference person

Source: Own editing based on analysis of interviews.

“My empathy skills are certainly strong, because I know what it’s like to be a Gypsy, I know what it’s like to be poor, I know what it’s like to be a bullied child.” (male, primary school teacher)

They use their experiences instinctively rather than knowingly. They are excited about their work, about teaching, and instructing. They rejected the concept found in the literature, which holds that obstacles simply roll on through life like snowballs (Masten et al., 2008). After all, they were able to overcome these hardships and rise out of their adverse situation.

“The disadvantages were what, by today, became advantages. This is a snowball and that snowball has to be melted, stopped, or diverted. So, a person’s life is a trial, and the problems are challenges that drive that person to solve them, to be creative, to find his own solutions.” (male, teacher, foster parent)

Resilient teachers are sensitive to the problems of students whose experiences mirror their own. They strive to nurture close relationships with parents as well. They fill the translator, cultural broker role, that is, they can authentically mediate between the majority culture and their original community (Varga, 2019; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). To fulfil this role more effectively, teachers who had not previously spoken a Romani language – or had only encountered it within the family, but no longer actively used it – began learning it.

“I would usually take them to the library to show them what joys they can find there; that they can look for a book in the catalogue, that they might see life from a different perspective, see something positive.” (female, humanities teacher, drama educator)

Teaching socially disadvantaged and/or Roma children is one of the most frequent challenges for teachers (Beltman et al., 2011; Messing et al., 2011; Szalai, 2011). Resilient teachers are – despite that and because of that – motivated during their work and feel self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994; Nieto, 2003). For them the teaching career – teaching itself – is a volunteer activity. Through teaching, their lives also become fuller and filled with meaning. In their opinion, even the smallest successes in teaching should be appreciated. They can find opportunities to learn from and improve in the face of challenges (Beltman et al., 2011; Day, 2007; Mansfield et al., 2016; Nieto, 2003). This carries them forward on this road, and it also strengthens their individual empowerment. In this way, community empowerment will be the source of personal empowerment (Mu, 2024; Varga, 2019), which enhances their professional commitment as well as resilience (Beltman et al., 2011; Day, 2007; Everington, 2014; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

The following table depicts the teaching approaches used by teachers (Table 3). Based on the interviews, it appears that they were able to draw heavily on their own childhood experiences and their close familiarity with their students’ families when developing these practices. It is also evident that these practices extend beyond the classroom, making use of resources embedded in relationships with parents, as well as support provided by fellow educators and professional staff, all of which are mobilised to benefit the students.

New and unique pedagogical approaches, and combinations of these can be identified in the pedagogical work of Roma teachers. These approaches develop in a context-sensitive manner, as a manifestation of the resonance between the life courses of students and teachers, the experiential knowledge gained from these life courses, and the role of cultural brokers. Taken together, exploring these

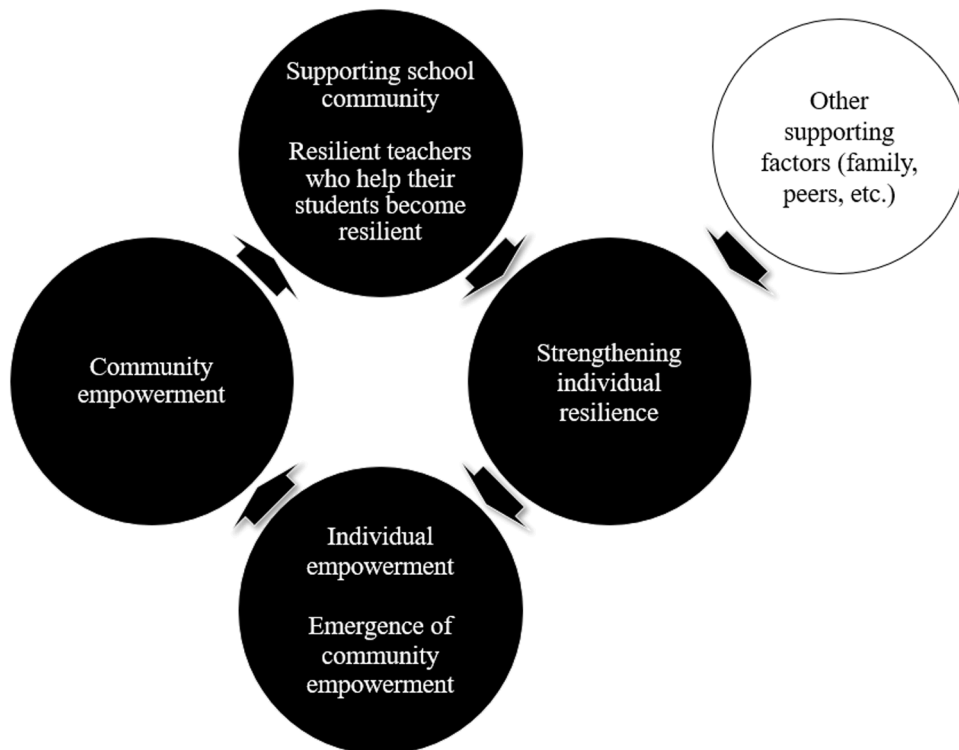


Fig. 1. A possible life cycle and work pattern of resilient teachers. Source: Author’s own editing, based on findings of the research. Theoretical background and definitions were adapted from the following literature: (Varga, 2019).

approaches can contribute to the novelty of the research.

5.3. Life cycle and work pattern of resilient teachers

The analysis revealed entangled dynamics beyond the detailed description of the phenomena under investigation. The development of resilient teachers can be envisioned a cyclical process, illustrated in Fig. 1. A key element of a resilient life is the presence of a supportive school community, with teachers who actively foster resilience in their students. This community strengthens individual resilience – as an appropriate analysis of the figure above shows. The culmination (or mature stage) of this process is individual empowerment. In parallel with this process, community empowerment may also appear (Mu, 2024; Varga, 2019). This means that teachers have the intention and ability to help students overcome disadvantages. Furthermore, if a teacher is characterized by community empowerment, they can be a resilient teacher who – as a member of a supportive school community – helps their students become resilient; the cycle is then repeated and continues, from generation to generation. This dynamic also reflects the influence of teacher role models (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Battaglia & Lebedinski, 2017; Boreczky, 2000; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Everington, 2014; Fejős, 2018; Lampert et al., 2016; Messing et al., 2011; Salinas, 2002; Szalai, 2011; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). The Roma teachers we interviewed not only followed their teachers in becoming responsible intellectuals but were also inspired by role models that demonstrated how to nurture resilience in students. Today, they themselves serve as role models for the next generation.

“I have to help too, because my teachers helped me, because I sat there too. I understand what those sitting in the elementary school in (my home village) must be feeling in many cases now (.....). I have a duty, or a goal in life, to take on this social responsibility, to return to the place where I came from.” (female, humanities teacher, psychologist)

6. Limitations

Due to the non-probability sampling method, the generalizability of the results is restricted. Nevertheless, the study contributes to an area where knowledge is still developing, given the uniqueness of the target group.

Another limitation could be that participation was restricted to those willing to speak openly about their lives and current careers. As a result, it could be assumed that only one type of these life courses could be recognised, probably that with a positive outcome.

A further limitation is that only teachers from Hungary were interviewed during our research. Still, the findings may be relevant in contexts where education faces similar challenges. Another important aspect is that resilient Roma teachers can support not only the school success of children, but the overall success of Roma communities as well, which is a key worldwide issue. It is crucial, while it means that these communities in the given nation would be able to develop and preserve their local cultural values. At the same time, in this study, we examined individual life courses, and its conclusions can only indirectly suggest community- or societal-level impacts. We did not address whether, beyond supporting students at the “school level”, resilient teachers’ critical perspectives or actions against structural inequalities emerge (Mu, 2024; Patakfalvi-Czirják et al., 2018; Reay, 2017; Vicente et al., 2023).

Finally, the diversity within Roma groups did not appear in the interviews as a significant factor in their own lives and in supporting students. However, we consider it important to pursue further research in this area, for instance, on the relationship between Oláh teachers and Romungro students (our research group is currently conducting research in this area).

7. Conclusions

The research contributed to the investigation and practical support of diverse student groups in several areas. On the one hand, it examined the issue of educating diverse students from the perspective of Roma teachers, a rarely researched target group. Instead of focusing on the students, this time the spotlight was on the teachers, who themselves had enriched the diversity of schools as children. Secondly, this study systematically examined the childhood experiences and life knowledge of Roma teachers, which they were able to convert into pedagogical knowledge. Thirdly, this study situated the Roma teachers’ life courses within the European context. The exploration of the context-sensitive pedagogical approaches and classroom practices applied in unique ways and combinations by the interviewed resilient Roma teachers might contribute to the novelty value of the research. This contribution has relevance for strengthening teacher preparation and advancing inclusion-oriented educational policies in the region. Fourthly, it examined the life courses of Roma teachers from a sociological perspective, focusing on a previously underrepresented aspect of the theoretical framework of resilience.

The first research question examined what resources and obstacles characterized the life courses of Roma teachers on their way to obtaining a degree. The results showed that parental support proved to be important in this process, although its paradox was also apparent (as a new result that has been less prominent in previous research): while parents were actively engaged in supporting their children’s learning, their efforts simultaneously revealed the perceived limitations imposed by their socio-environmental context (Bloomer et al., 2014; Luciak & Liegl, 2009; Lukšík, 2019; Rosu, 2021). It was teachers who encouraged the interviewees, first to obtain their secondary school leaving examination, and later to attend higher education. In the lives of most resilient teachers, from elementary school onward, one or more teachers were present as role models, offering support and inspiration to them not only in taking their studies forward, but also in shaping the professional identities they themselves aspired to develop, specifically becoming educators capable of fostering resilience in their own students.

The second research question examined what sort of relationship exists between a personal life course and the professional work of teachers. In the interviews, this relationship clearly stood out. Resilient teachers from the Roma community are empathetic, accepting, and ready to help children from similar backgrounds. These teachers are familiar with their students’ family backgrounds, which

enables them to understand their circumstances. They believe that every child possesses hidden talents that can only be uncovered in a supportive environment. They share their experiences with their students, helping them to overcome disadvantage. These teachers also appear in the translator or cultural broker role, conveying to their students the values they internalised (Varga, 2019; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

The interviews revealed a congruent relationship between resilient life courses and resilient teaching careers, resulting in meaningful and authentic teaching that benefits both students and educators (Beltman et al., 2011; Day, 2007; Everington, 2014; Nieto, 2003; Sleeter, 2001; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). The sense of mission possessed by teachers who overcame difficult circumstances appears as a strong factor that will keep them steady. In obtaining answers to the questions about motivation, the analysis revealed that they had never considered leaving their careers.

Firstly, the valuable insights that pre-service and in-service teachers gain from their own life experiences can significantly inform teacher training programs and school practices. This is worth building upon during pre-service and in-service teacher training, and it is of paramount importance that (to-be) teachers are assisted in authentically embedding this knowledge into their professional identities or educational selves (Beijaard et al., 2004; Bersh, 2018; Everington, 2014; Lee, 2012; Nieto, 2003; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

School actors, on the other hand, can play an important role in creating an atmosphere in educational institutions in which early career teachers' resilient life courses are recognised. Furthermore, it is essential that educational policy does not place expectations on ethnic minority teachers that extend beyond their field of action. After all, school-related problems are rooted in complex social processes, and thus the teacher's competence alone is insufficient to resolve them (Fejős, 2018; Forray & Óhidy, 2019; Messing et al., 2011; Mu, 2021, 2024; Ogbu, 1981; Patakfalvi-Czirják et al., 2018; Vicente et al., 2023). This study argues that the experience of conquering challenges can serve as a valuable source of knowledge in the teaching profession. Such experiential resource can form the basis for low-cost solutions, even in contexts where structural and institutional support is lacking (Doulabi et al., 2025; Versfeld et al., 2025). However, the direct transfer of life experiences is not advisable (Everington, 2014; Mu, 2024; Parkes & FitzGibbon, 1986; Sigad, 2023). Even appropriately reflective processing them and "bringing them into a teachable form" is essential for children to truly benefit from this valuable experience and knowledge.

The analysis of Roma teachers' educational approaches has shown that their beneficiaries includes students, parents, teaching staff, and the entire support network. Learning about the resilient Roma teachers' lives contributes to the empowerment of Roma communities (FRA, 2023; Rutigliano, 2020; Szalai, 2011), relying on the valuable resources possessed by intellectuals within the community. These educators can take on the role of facilitators so that the cultural values inherent in families can also be recognized and used as a resource. Furthermore, we can also learn what societal-scale interventions are needed which can serve as the most ideal framework for this process.

The research offers numerous opportunities for further study. We recommend that future researchers in this field explore the potential of community-level research that goes beyond the individual career paths of teachers. The interview findings could be enriched through detailed case studies. The differences between the work of teachers who remain in their own communities and those who teach elsewhere may also offer important insights for further research. There are also many possible avenues for further research based on gender, age, and school-level differences, as well as on the diversity of Roma groups. Moreover, systematic longitudinal tracking of the careers of Roma teachers could provide further valuable insights. For those involved in teacher training, aligning the structures and content of teacher training and continuing education with the results of this research is also an urgent task.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tímea Ceglédi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kitti Kozma:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation. **Ilona Dóra Dabney-Fekete:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared

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