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Parental volunteering in schools: perspectives from a Central and Eastern European region

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ABSTRACT

This study makes a novel contribution by quantitatively comparing maternal and paternal volunteering in schools—an often-overlooked dimension of parental involvement in Central and Eastern Europe. Drawing on a large-scale questionnaire survey conducted among parents of primary and secondary school students in the cross-border region of Hungary, Romania, and Ukraine, the analysis employs linear regression models to identify factors influencing parental volunteering. The results show that among interviewed parents, fathers' volunteering rates were comparable to those of mothers, whereas among non-interviewed (partner) parents, mothers were significantly more often reported as school volunteers. Consistent with the dominant status model of volunteering, additional individual characteristics were also found to be associated with engagement. Volunteering was more common in primary schools and in institutions maintained by churches or foundations. The findings underscore the critical role of schools in promoting parental involvement, particularly among fathers. Encouraging father-inclusive volunteering practices, especially in underperforming or state-run schools, could help advance educational equity, strengthen social cohesion, and support children's development. These insights are especially pertinent in the post-pandemic context of rebuilding trust and community around educational institutions.

IMPACT STATEMENT

This study offers a novel contribution to the literature by quantitatively comparing maternal and paternal volunteering in schools—a relatively underexplored dimension of parental involvement in Central and Eastern Europe. By disaggregating data by interview status and examining contextual and institutional variables, the research reveals how paternal involvement is shaped not merely by individual willingness but by broader structural and cultural conditions. Scientifically, this underscores the need for more nuanced, gender-sensitive analyses of school–family partnerships. From a policy perspective, the findings emphasize the role of schools as active agents in mobilizing parental engagement, particularly among fathers. Encouraging father-friendly volunteering practices—especially in underperforming or state-run schools—could enhance educational equity, strengthen social cohesion, and support children's development. These insights are especially timely in the post-pandemic context of rebuilding trust and community around schools.

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1. Introduction

In this research, we use quantitative methods to investigate fathers' and mothers' volunteering at school as a form of school-based parental involvement based on a large-sample ($N = 1002$) survey of parents in Hungary (including multiple regions) and regions with Hungarian minority (Transylvania in Romania and Transcarpathia in Ukraine). Based on Epstein (2010), parental volunteering includes, among other things,

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helping teachers and students in class and at school events. Although parental volunteering at school is a fundamental form of parental involvement (Gibbs et al., 2021), little is known about it in the Central and Eastern European context (Kocsis et al., 2022). In the post-communist countries only after the political changes in 1990s did volunteering become free, and there was no research evidence about it until that time. Furthermore, there is a research gap in the international literature (Kocsis et al., 2022), as differences between mothers' and fathers' school volunteering is rarely discussed. To examine this question in the Central and Eastern European context is especially exiting as the literature (Spéder, 2011) suggests that changes in fathers' roles is not so dynamic then in western countries.

Recently, there are several studies on school-based involvement in Hungary (Bacsikai et al., 2024; Csók & Pusztai, 2022; Hrabéczy et al., 2023; Kovács et al., 2022, 2024; Pusztai et al., 2024a; Pusztai & Fényes, 2022) and there are exploratory qualitative research focusing on paternal home-based (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021; Takács, 2020) and school-based (Csák, 2023) involvement, but they do not specifically focus on volunteering of parents at school. According to the PISA 2018 survey, parents' volunteering was a dimension of parental involvement in which Central and Eastern Europe did not lag behind other OECD member countries (OECD, 2019). Since that survey, we do not have recent data on parents' volunteering at schools in the region, which is why it is particularly important to examine this phenomenon using quantitative methods.

This study illustrates the extent of parental volunteering at schools, but the main research question asked about the factors influencing parental volunteering and potential differences exist between the volunteering of mothers and fathers. With the possibilities of the questionnaire in mind, we used bivariate analysis to compare mothers' and fathers' volunteering at schools. In addition to relationship to child, control variables in our multivariate regression models included parents' further socio-demographic characteristics, the type of school and its provider, and the child's gender. The aim of the study was to investigate the effect of these background factors on parents' volunteering at schools, as well. We use the results to formulate recommendations for father's greater involvement and volunteering at schools.

2. Theoretical section

The focus of our research is on the factors influencing parental volunteering. In the theoretical section, we briefly discuss the definitional challenges of parental volunteering, the most common forms of parental volunteering, and the positive effects of parental volunteering based on the literature. We then examine our main research questions based on previous findings: the effect of the parent's relationship to the child (mother or father) on parental volunteering, and the effect of other factors influencing parental volunteering.

2.1. Definitional issues of parental volunteering and its impacts

In the literature, parental involvement have long been studied. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) define parental involvement as parents' activities at home and at school which are related to their children's learning. Epstein (2010) distinguishes two types of parental involvement, namely home-based and school-based involvement. A key form of school-based parental involvement is volunteering. Volunteering is usually defined in the literature as voluntary, freely chosen helping activities that take place without compensation or remuneration (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). Partly in contrast to this, the systematic review by Kocsis et al. (2022) on parental volunteering found that it was uncommon for parents to initiate volunteering themselves; instead, it was mostly the school and teachers who initiated parental involvement. In terms of the types of voluntary activities, the majority were related to schoolwork or activities outside the classroom, including, for example, those related to health, sports, IT, culture, and community.

Several studies highlight that parental volunteering at school has a positive impact on a child's academic performance (Froiland & Davison, 2014; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Muller, 1998; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014; Xu et al., 2010). Researchers suggest that this is partly because the presence of parents at school demonstrates the importance of education to children, and partly because good relationships with

teachers, through better parent-teacher communication, can lead to more effective teaching and learning. Brent (2000) and Lemmer (2023) described its positive impact on teachers, as well, by reducing teacher overload and stress levels. Lemmer (2023) showed that in the examined schools, parental involvement reduced the incidence of skipping school or arriving late and increased community spirit. This effect is also present in multicultural schools where interactive group sessions based on parent volunteering are used (Khalifaoui et al., 2023). Myers (2022) pointed out the economic benefits of parents' volunteering as a significant resource for schools, as parents' certain voluntary activities may substitute for the involvement of other full-time professionals.

Since parental volunteering is a dependent variable and not an explanatory one in our analysis, we will now discuss the possible factors that can affect parental volunteering.

2.2. The effect of the relationship to the child (mother or father) on parental volunteering

In most developed countries, mothers' school-based involvement is generally higher than that of fathers (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2022; Crouter et al., 1993; Gubbins & Otero, 2020; Kim, 2018; Kim & Hill, 2015; Muller, 1998). Conversely, in less-developed countries, a higher level of fathers' school-based involvement can be observed (Kalaycı & Oz, 2018; Unal & Unal, 2010; Stanikzai, 2013). The changes in fathers' school-based involvement are not linear.

Due to the acceptance of traditional gender roles in the past and in the countries of the Global South, even today, fathers were more involved in school matters than mothers. Currently, the school-based involvement of mothers is greater than that of fathers in developed countries, while in the future, equal participation is expected due to the greater involvement of fathers in child rearing.

Few studies in the literature assess fathers' and mothers' volunteering at schools specifically. Kilger's study (2020) featured Swedish fathers aged 35–61 in the dual position as a father and coach. In addition to the positive return to volunteering (for example, a closer relationship with teachers and their own children), Kilger also discussed the conflicting interests between fathers' roles as a coach and parent. Bayley et al. (2009) examined fathers who participated in parenting programmes in the UK, focusing on barriers and good practice. Malluhi and Alomran (2019) presented a case study of a father in Abu Dhabi who offered 2 h of exercise per week to overweight students. Finally, Coco et al. (2007) reported about voluntary projects in Australia which predominantly involved women (parents, teachers, project coordinators), which is consistent with findings from research on parental involvement showing that mothers are much more active than fathers are.

Findings show that in developed countries fathers' involvement lagged behind that of mothers but had similar effects on children's academic performance (Kim & Hill, 2015; Lazović et al., 2022; Nord et al., 1998; Pribesh et al., 2020; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Nord et al. (1998) also found that children could significantly benefit from the involvement of both parents in school-related tasks. According to Kim (2018), the reason for fathers' lower involvement is a different perception of parenting. The literature also draws attention to mothers' gatekeeper role (see Brooks & Hodkinson, 2022; Lee, 2019; Miller et al., 2022; Norman, 2017), suggesting that mothers' attitudes may deter fathers from school-based involvement, which mothers may treat as their exclusive domain. Furthermore, schools do not focus enough on 'father-friendly', experience-oriented, hands-on, movement-based activities which fathers would prefer to participate in Csák (2023). Fathers' involvement may also be hindered by their insufficient belief in themselves and their abilities, as well as by their individual motivations and perceptions (Gubbins & Otero, 2020; Kim, 2018; Lamb, 2010; Pleck, 2012; Warrington, 2013). Workplace conditions also affect fathers' involvement, who may experience problems with work-life balance (Burgess & Davies, 2020; Fagan & Norman, 2016; Grau-Grau & Cooper, 2020; Jordan, 2009). Flexible working, for example, provides opportunities for fathers to participate in voluntary work at school (Barnett et al., 2020; Decusati Porter & Johnson, 2004).

In the Central and Eastern European region, research on fathers focuses on gender roles (Spéder, 2011) and on home-based involvement (Fényes et al., 2020; Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021; Takács, 2020). Overall, little is known about differences between fathers and mothers in terms of school-based involvement. However, the fact that mothers respond to most parent questionnaires at school suggests that the majority of school-related tasks fall within mothers' responsibilities. Findings from qualitative interviews with fathers of young children (Csák, 2023) show that fathers are more involved at home than at school. At school, they

mainly participate in informal events (such as sports or cooking outdoors). Only a few fathers attend parent-teacher conferences or teacher consultations, and even they are usually joined by the mothers.

2.3. Other factors affecting parents' volunteering at school

In addition to relationship to child, further socio-demographic and other (institutional) background variables also influence parents' volunteering at school. Brent's (2000) study of volunteers at schools found that most volunteers were aged between 36 and 55, living in suburban or rural areas. Furthermore, several studies show that school-based parental involvement is much more common among people of favourable social status (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Bogenschneider, 1997; Gibbs et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2018; Gutman & Eccles, 1999; Pepe & Addimando, 2014; Pribesh et al., 2020; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014; Yotyodying & Wild, 2019). One of the main reasons for this is that disadvantaged parents differ from those at the school in terms of communication and worldview, resulting in a distance between teachers and parents (Behtoui & Strömberg, 2020; Elbers & de Haan, 2014; Lai, 2020; Warrington, 2013; Yotyodying & Wild, 2019). In accordance with the dominant status model of volunteering (see Smith, 1994), findings show that mothers with high educational attainment are more likely to volunteer in school than their less educated counterparts (Barnett et al., 2020). Decusati Porter and Johnson (2004) also find that highly educated parents are more likely to feel involved at school and in voluntary projects. Wilson (2000) points out that religiosity also makes volunteering more likely.

Examining the effect of parents' marital status, Brent (2000) found that the majority of school volunteers were married. Consistent with this, divorced mothers were found to have lower school-based involvement than married or cohabiting mothers (Pribesh et al., 2020). However, single fathers were more likely to be involved than married fathers (Nord et al., 1998). One possible explanation for this is that fathers generally tend to have lower school-based involvement, but after divorce, they take on the role of being in contact with the school, which may previously have been solely the mother's responsibility. Gee (2011) also points out that when parents have more children attending the same school, they are more likely to volunteer because it 'pays off' for them.

Parental volunteering may also differ based on the child's gender. Some studies found that parents of daughters were more likely to be involved at school (Carter & Wojtkiewicz, 2000), but Nord et al. (1998) showed higher involvement among fathers of sons, whereas Kim and Hill (2015) found no difference in paternal involvement by the child's gender.

There may be differences in parental volunteering across different educational institutions. Walsh (2010) points out that smaller schools are more effective in involving parents in various tasks. In such schools (for example, schools run by foundations), the greater demand for parents' volunteering may presumably be due to the lack of financial resources (Gubbins & Otero, 2020; OECD, 2019). Coleman (1988) showed that church-run institutions were somewhat more successful in strengthening the school community and involving parents in volunteering at school.

Finally, the type of school (primary or secondary) could be an important factor influencing parental volunteering. School-based parental involvement decreases with the child's age (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Lee, 2019; Nord et al., 1998), so parental involvement is more common in primary schools than in secondary schools (Kocsis et al., 2022). This can be due to parental presence in school becomes 'undesirable' as adolescents strive for autonomy (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Kim & Hill, 2015).

3. Research questions and hypotheses

The aim of this study is to investigate differences in the volunteering of mothers and fathers at schools before and after the inclusion of additional control variables, and to explore other factors influencing parents' voluntary participation. We formulate the following research questions and related hypotheses:

RQ1: How do relationship to the child (mother or father) effects parental volunteering at school?

H1: Mothers are more likely to volunteer at school than fathers, as the literature suggests that mothers are generally more active in school-related tasks (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2022; Crouter et al., 1993; Kim, 2018; Kim & Hill, 2015; Muller, 1998). However, it is conceivable that mothers and

fathers differ in background variables (such as education, age, religiosity) and once these control variables are included, mothers' greater volunteering at school is no longer detectable.

RQ2: How do parents' socio-demographic factors and the child's gender influence parental volunteering at school?

H2: Consistent with the dominant status model of volunteering (Smith, 1994), parents with high educational attainment, favourable financial status, and living in larger settlements are more likely to volunteer at school (Barnett et al., 2020; Decusati Porter & Johnson, 2004).

H3: Religiosity also supports volunteering (Wilson, 2000).

H4: The effect of marital status is ambiguous, with married mothers and divorced fathers possibly having higher involvement (Nord et al., 1998; Pribesh et al., 2020).

H5: We hypothesise that having more children also increases parents' volunteering, especially if the children attend the same school (Gee, 2011).

H6: Furthermore, parental involvement is expected to be higher among parents of girls compared to parents of boys (Carter & Wojtkiewicz, 2000).

RQ3: How do school-level characteristics (e.g. type and provider) affect parental volunteering?

H7: Parental involvement, and thus parents' volunteering, is expected to be more common in primary schools (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Lee, 2019; Nord et al., 1998).

H8: Parental volunteering will be more common in schools run by a church or foundation (Coleman, 1988; Walsh, 2010).

4. Research methodology

4.1. Research design and sampling

We rely on data from a 2022/2023 (winter) large-sample quantitative, cross-sectional questionnaire research ($N=1002$), where parents of children at upper primary and secondary schools were surveyed. The authors are members of the research team that carried out the survey. The survey was conducted in three disadvantaged counties of Eastern Hungary, making up 62.2% of the sample, and among Hungarian-speaking parents in neighbouring countries, from Transylvania (Romania) (25%) and Transcarpathia (Ukraine) (12.5%). Quota sampling was carried out in order to ensure representativeness for the regions, the type of school (general or secondary institution), and the school maintenance rates typical of the region. Quota sampling is a widely used non-probability sampling technique that ensures the sample reflects key characteristics of the population in a structured way (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In our study, stratification and classification of schools were applied to determine relevant parent groups, ensuring representation across key school types and social contexts. This aligns with theoretical approaches that emphasize the importance of capturing diverse educational experiences when studying parental perspectives (Lareau & Cox, 2011). Furthermore, strategic quota sampling is particularly useful in educational research when probability sampling is not feasible due to practical constraints. By structuring the sample based on school stratification, we ensured that different segments of parents were adequately represented, thus enhancing the validity of our findings regarding parental perceptions.

The interviewers conducted the survey mostly on a paper basis or online questionnaires combined with audio recording. In order to increase the number of samples, the interviewees also had permission to fill out an online survey on their own mobile device due to the pandemic. Interviewers were instructed to interview the child's primary caregivers, who has the most information about the child's issues. In the absence of a biological parent, this can be a foster parent or guardian. Parents with multiple children were asked to complete the questionnaire for only one child.

4.2. Examined variables

As the main aim of this study is to compare the volunteering of fathers and mothers, we first created a binary variable based on the questionnaire (1: mother or stepmother, $N=850$, 85.3%; and 2: father or stepfather, $N=131$, 13.2%). We treated other relationships to the child as missing data (15 respondents, the child's legal representative may be the caretaker, guardian, sister, brother, grandmother, grandfather). We also collected data on the volunteering of other (non-interviewed) parents, and we created a binary variable (1: mother or stepmother, $N=103$, 16%; 2: father or stepfather, $N=536$, 84%). Similar to interviewed parents, other responses were treated as missing data, of which 25 responses indicated some other relationship to the child (beyond father or mother), and 338 responses either indicated the lack of other parent or provided no information about him/her.

The dependent variables of our analysis were two questions related to interviewed and other (non-interviewed) parents' volunteering at school: 'in the past 12 months, have you volunteered at your child's school' and 'in the past 12 months, has the other parent volunteered at your child's school'. The variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale to show the degree of agreement with the question (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: partly agree, partly disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree). The mean of these variables ranged about 2.4 (for interviewed parent: $M=2.5$, $SD=1.36$, $N=996$, for other parent: $M=2.3$, $SD=1.26$, $N=644$), indicating that volunteering among parents was moderately common.

The detailed data showed as well, that interviewed parents were generally more involved at school as in 22 (including volunteering) of the 24 indicators of parents' school involvement in the questionnaire, the interviewed parents had significant advantage over other (non-interviewed) parents.

4.3. Methods

First, we compared the volunteering of fathers and mothers using bivariate analysis, and continued the analysis with two regression models, with the dependent variable showing interviewed parents' volunteering in the first model and other (non-interviewed) parents' volunteering in the second. [Table 1](#) presents descriptive statistics for the explanatory variables.

5. Results

5.1. Differences between mothers' and fathers' volunteering at school

As we have seen in [Table 1](#), 85.3% of the interviewed parents were mothers or stepmothers and 13.2% were fathers or stepfathers. In terms of volunteering in school, bivariate methods¹ did not reveal a significant difference between them, which could be encouraging as interviewed fathers did not lag behind mothers. However, the respondents also reported on the involvement of the other parent, which also provides important information, although only in the words of the interviewed parent. Among other (non-interviewed) parents, only 16% were mothers or stepmothers and 84% of them were fathers or stepfathers. In this case, the bivariate analysis (see [Table 2](#)) showed a significant advantage of mothers or stepmothers in school volunteering.

5.2. Factors influencing interviewed parents' volunteering at school in a multivariate model

Linear regression was used to examine the factors influencing interviewed parents' volunteering ([Table 3](#)). The main question of the analysis was whether differences between interviewed mothers' and fathers' volunteering could be detected after including other control variables. In addition to relationship to child, control variables in the model included parents' other socio-demographic characteristics, school provider, the type of school, and the child's gender. Background variables were included in the regression in multiple steps, depending on whether they related to the parent, school, or child (the detailed results can be found in [Appendix Table A1](#)).

The results show that the effect of the relationship to the child (mother or father) was not significant at any step in the regression model, meaning that the participation of interviewed mothers and fathers

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the explanatory variables in the regression.^{a,b}

Relationship to child	Interviewed parent: mother or stepmother 85.3%; father or stepfather 13.2% Other (non-interviewed) parent: mother or stepmother 16%; father or stepfather 84%
Age	$M = 44.22$, $SD = 6.85$
Marital status	Married 76.7%; cohabiting 8.8%; divorced 7.7%; other (reference) 6.8%
Number of children	$M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.24$
Subjective financial situation (1–4 scale)	[4] We have everything we need and can afford significant expenditures (43.3%); [3] We have everything we need but cannot afford significant expenditures (51.1%); [2] Sometimes, we cannot even afford everyday expenditures (3.4%); [1] Often, we cannot even afford everyday expenditures (2.1%).
Settlement type of place of residence	Capital or county seat 23.2%; town 46.7%; village (reference) 30.1%
Religiosity	Follows the teachings of a church 34.1%; religious in their own way 47.1%; does not know or not religious (reference) 18.8%
Parents' years of education	Interviewed parent: $M = 12.84$, $SD = 2.7$ Other, non-interviewed parent: $M = 12.28$, $SD = 2.59$
Type of school	1: Upper primary school 41%; 0: secondary school 59%
School provider	1: Church, foundation or private 23.7%; 0: School district, vocational training centre, local government, higher education institution, minority self-government or other 76.3%
Child's gender	1: Male 44.9%; 0: female 55.1%
Country/region	1: Hungary 62.2%, 0: Transylvania or Transcarpathia 37.8%

^aIn the regression, marital status was included as three dummy variables: married (1,0), cohabiting (1,0), divorced (1,0), with unmarried, single, widowed, or other marital status as the reference category. The settlement type of the place of residence was included as two dummy variables: capital city or county seat (1,0) and town (1,0), with village as the reference category. Religiosity was included as two dummy variables: follows the teachings of a church (1,0) or religious in their own way (1,0), with people who did not know or were not religious as the reference category. Finally, the years of education completed by interviewed or non-interviewed parents was a continuous variable taking the following values: primary school or less [6], vocational secondary school or vocational training (without secondary school-leaving certificate) [11], vocational secondary school or vocational training (with secondary school-leaving certificate) [12], secondary grammar school [12], college or university [15], doctorate [20].

^bIf information was available separately for non-interviewed parents, it is presented in the table and was included in the regression.

Table 2. Differences in non-interviewed mothers' and fathers' volunteering (mean of 5-point Likert scale).

		Mean	Standard deviation	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i>	Sign.	<i>N</i>
'In the past 12 months, has the other parent volunteered at your child's school?'	Non-interviewed mother	2.87	1.38	19,172.5	0.000	617
	Non-interviewed father	2.21	1.2			

Table 3. Linear regression results with interviewed parents' volunteering as the dependent variable (only the significant effects).

	2. Step Beta (sig)	3. Step Beta (sig)	4. Step Beta (sig)	5. Step Beta (sig)
Place of residence: capital or county seat	0.063 [#]	–	–	–
Place of residence: town	0.121 ^{**}	0.105 ^{**}	0.103 ^{**}	0.077 [#]
Religiosity: follows the teachings of a church	0.100 [*]	–	–	0.124 [*]
Interviewed parent's years of education	–	–	0.062 [#]	0.088 [*]
School type: upper primary school	–	0.201 ^{***}	–	0.211 ^{***}
School provider: church or foundation	–	0.117 ^{***}	0.118 ^{***}	0.078 [*]
Country: Hungary	–	–	–	0.115 ^{***}
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	0.010	0.052	0.053	0.068

*** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$, # $p \leq 0.1$.

in voluntary activities did not differ significantly. This result did not change after including further background variables. In accordance with the dominant status model of volunteering (Smith, 1994), the incidence of volunteering was increased by urban residence, religiosity according to the teachings of a church, and higher educational attainment, as the regression betas are significant and positive for these explanatory variables. In addition, institutional effects were also identified. In accordance with the literature, parental involvement was more common in primary schools and schools run by a church or foundation. Although the sample was not representative of certain countries, volunteering was found to be more common among respondents from Hungary compared to those from Transylvania (Romania) and Transcarpathia (Ukraine).²

Table 4. Linear regression results with non-interviewed parent's volunteering as the dependent variable (only the significant effects).

	1. Step Beta (sig)	2. Step Beta (sig)	3. Step Beta (sig)	4. Step Beta (sig)	5. Step Beta (sig)
Other parent's relationship to child: father	−0.199 ^{***}	−0.211 ^{***}	−0.209 ^{***}	−0.213 ^{***}	−0.213 ^{***}
School type: upper primary school			0.105 [*]	0.107 ^{**}	0.107 ^{**}
School provider: church or foundation			0.093 [*]	0.089 [*]	0.088 [*]
Child's gender: male				−0.75 [#]	−0.75 [#]
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	0.036	0.034	0.051	0.054	0.053

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, # $p < 0.1$.

Table 5. Barriers to school-based involvement by interviewed parent's relationship to child.

		Mean	Standard deviation	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>
Appointments were not organised at a convenient time.	Interviewed mother	2.11	1.1	45,146.5	<0.001	977
	Interviewed father	2.49	1.17			
Could not get away from work.	Interviewed mother	2.3	1.21	43,402.5	<0.001	976
	Interviewed father	2.79	1.26			

5.3. Factors influencing other parents' volunteering at school in a multivariate model

We then used linear regression to examine the factors which influence other (non-interviewed) parents' volunteering (Table 4). The explanatory variables were mostly similar to those for interviewed parents, but we included non-interviewed parent's relationship to child and educational attainment, and we did not have data on non-interviewed parents' age and religiosity (the detailed results can be found in Appendix Table A2).

As to the main question of our research, non-interviewed mothers volunteered significantly more than non-interviewed fathers did (the regression beta is significant and negative), and this effect was even slightly stronger after the inclusion of further explanatory factors. The results also reveal the strong effect of institutional variables. Consistent with the literature, volunteering was more common among parents of children attending primary school or a school run by a church or foundation. Volunteering was also more frequent among parents of girls.

Although we did not formulate a specific related research question, we also sought to investigate the factors which might prevent parents from getting involved at school. However, we only had data from parents who completed the questionnaire, and as discussed above, there were no significant differences in volunteering of interviewed mothers and fathers, even after including control variables. In two of the eleven potential barriers, the Mann–Whitney *U* test showed interviewed fathers' significant advantage (Table 5). Consistent with traditional gender roles, interviewed fathers were more likely to cite work commitments as a significant barrier (appointments were not organised at a convenient time; could not get away from work) on a 1–5 point scale (1: not hindered at all, 2: not hindered, 3: neither hindered nor not hindered, 4: hindered, 5: completely hindered).

6. Discussion

The central aim of this paper was to examine differences in the volunteering of mothers and fathers at schools in a Central and Eastern European region and to identify other factors (such as characteristics of parents, children, and schools) that affect parental volunteering. In the theoretical section, we discussed the definitional issues of parental volunteering, the most common forms of parental volunteering, and the numerous positive effects that parental volunteering can have according to the literature. In our questionnaire, volunteering was self-reported by the respondents, so we do not know which activities they classified as volunteering, nor whether they were asked by the school or teachers, or whether they offered to volunteer themselves. These questions were explored in a previous qualitative interview study in which teachers were interviewed about parental volunteering (Pusztai et al., 2024b). In this study, we also do not examine the effects of parental volunteering on children's academic performance, which could be the subject of further analysis.

In the next part of the theoretical section, we focused on our main research question: What influences the degree of parental volunteering, with particular attention to the parent's relationship with the child (mother or father)? According to the results of previous research, fathers are less involved in school-related tasks than mothers in developed countries. However, few studies specifically compare the volunteering of mothers and fathers at school as a form of parental involvement, which is a novelty of our quantitative research. Based on previous research, we also examined the effects of parents' socio-demographic characteristics, the child's gender, and the characteristics of the school (primary or secondary) and the school's maintainer on parental volunteering. In the empirical part of our paper, we examined three research questions and tested our hypotheses.

In relation to our first (main) research question, both bivariate analysis and regression results showed that among interviewed parents, neither mothers nor fathers had an advantage in terms of volunteering. In contrast, analysis of the data on other (non-interviewed) parents clearly showed mothers' advantage, consistent with the claim in the literature (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2022; Crouter et al., 1993; Kim, 2018; Kim & Hill, 2015; Muller, 1998). Encouragingly, we observed that interviewed fathers caught up with mothers in terms of voluntary tasks at school (this result will be discussed later on in the conclusion). Overall, our first hypothesis was only partially confirmed.

As to the effect of further background variables (our second research question), the results showed that additional individual characteristics were important determinants of volunteering only for interviewed parents. In accordance with our second hypothesis about the dominant status model of volunteering (Smith, 1994) and the literature on parents' volunteering (Barnett et al., 2020; Decusati Porter & Johnson, 2004), high educational attainment and living in an urban area increased the incidence of interviewed parents' volunteering in school, just like following the teachings of a church (see Wilson, 2000, and our third hypothesis).

Contrary to the literature, volunteering of non-interviewed parents was not influenced by other individual characteristics, the reason for which may be that volunteering is less common among them in general. However, the greater involvement among parents of girls (see Carter & Wojtkiewicz, 2000 and our sixth hypothesis) was observed. The effect of marital status is contradictory in the literature (Nord et al., 1998; Pribesh et al., 2020), and based on our results, it was not a significant differentiating factor in accordance with our fourth hypothesis. Contrary to our fifth hypothesis and the literature (Gee, 2011), the number of children had no discernible effect in the regressions, as well.

Based on our results, there was a strong effect of variables at the institutional level (third research question). This showed that primary schools and schools run by a foundation or church had a higher incidence of volunteering among parents, consistent with our seventh and eighth hypotheses and the literature (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Coleman, 1988; Lee, 2019; Nord et al., 1998; Walsh, 2010). This suggests that, as Kocsis et al. (2022) showed, parents tend to volunteer at the request of the school, which is presumably more common in schools run by a church and foundation. The reason why parental involvement was greater in primary schools than in secondary schools may be that, as discussed in the theoretical section, children in higher years require less parental presence at school, which could also be true for parents' volunteering.

7. Conclusion and recommendation

In the post-COVID-19 period, the role of families—and especially fathers—in educational processes has gained renewed relevance. The pandemic emphasized the importance of home-school partnerships and exposed both the potential and limitations of parental involvement in supporting children's learning. Our study contributes to this evolving discourse by drawing attention to an underutilized resource in Hungary and the broader Central and Eastern European region: fathers' involvement in school life.

A growing body of international research highlights the positive effects of paternal involvement on children's academic outcomes (Khalfaoui et al., 2023; Kim & Hill, 2015; Lazović et al., 2022; Pribesh et al., 2020; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). However, this potential remains largely untapped in Hungary (Csák, 2023). Our findings suggest that this is not due to a lack of willingness among fathers, but rather due to structural and cultural factors influencing school-family relations. Among the interviewed parents, who were typically the child's primary caregivers and better informed about their educational progress,

fathers' participation in school volunteering did not significantly lag behind that of mothers. In contrast, the gap was more apparent among non-interviewed parents. This suggests that shifting family dynamics and changing paternal roles may create new opportunities for school-based father involvement, especially when fathers are actively engaged in their child's everyday life.

Importantly, our research reinforces earlier findings that schools are key actors in mobilizing and sustaining paternal involvement (Kocsis et al., 2022). We observed that schools maintained by churches or foundations tended to involve parents, particularly fathers, more effectively than state-run schools. These institutions could serve as models of leadership in inclusive parent engagement, especially in a time when rebuilding community trust and school cohesion is critical. Supporting fathers' self-initiated involvement—not just responding to school-led invitations—may be key to creating more sustainable and autonomous forms of engagement.

From a policy and leadership perspective, increasing fathers' presence in schools can have multiple system-level benefits. It allows teachers to gain deeper insights into the child's home environment, enabling more effective teaching and mentoring. It strengthens the school's democratic functioning by including more diverse voices in decision-making. It can also enhance the school climate and foster stronger school-family ties, particularly when fathers participate in informal events and community-building activities. For disadvantaged fathers, volunteering at school may serve as an empowering experience, one that improves relationships with teachers and promotes the value of education in the family. Fathers themselves express a desire to be more involved in their children's lives (Spéder, 2011). Harnessing this desire through well-designed school leadership strategies and inclusive parental engagement policies could increase fathers' satisfaction and contribute to more resilient and responsive school communities in the post-pandemic era.

8. Limitations and further research plans

One of the limitations of the research was that surveying parents was a difficult task. We tried to ensure representativeness for some variables applying quota sampling, but we used the snowball method to reach parents. Moreover, although the survey was conducted in three countries, it was a regional research and included only Hungarian-speaking parents, so it was not representative of entire countries. A further limitation is that our regression models had relatively weak explanatory power. This can be explained by the fact that our main objective was not to provide a comprehensive model of parents' volunteering, but only to explore the effect of one key variable, with the inclusion of some control variables. The questionnaire did not allow for the inclusion of variables, such as the openness of the school to organise or even provide opportunities for volunteering, parents' tendency for altruism, their motivations for volunteering, and their awareness of the importance of volunteering at school.

The novelty of our research is that we also have information about the other (non-interviewed) parent reported by the interviewed parent, but it would be useful in the future to interview both parents and reveal their gender role attitudes, as well. A further research task could be to examine the types of volunteering in schools and the proportion of autonomous (self-initiated) and controlled (solicited) volunteering by quantitative methods. A qualitative research question could be to explore the exact reasons why parents' volunteering is less common in secondary schools than in primary schools, and to test whether the main obstacle is, in fact, adolescents' desire for autonomy.

Notes

1. Normality test showed that none of the variables were normally distributed, therefore we conducted a non-parametric Mann-Whitney *U* test.
2. Wang and Fahey (2011) points out, that parents who come from a culture where teachers play the main role in children's education are not used to volunteering at schools and classrooms. This might be true in Transylvania and especially in Transcarpathia. These parents are involved in their children's learning at home but see school activities as the responsibility and competence of teachers.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained through the standard institutional process. This involved submitting a detailed research plan, completing a form outlining the study's methodology and ethical considerations, and awaiting the ethics committee's review. Following their assessment, approval was granted, ensuring compliance with ethical research standards.

Author contributions

Hajnalka Fényes: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, validation, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing. Zsolt Csák: data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, validation, visualization. Gabriella Pusztai: funding acquisition, project administration, resources, supervision, writing—review and editing.

Disclosure statement

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About the authors

The authors are members of a research group that has been active since 2001. Its long-term goal is to identify and develop factors and pedagogical practices that support resilient learning as well as teaching and learning achievement at both individual and institutional levels. The core of the research team, which operates under the Public Education Research Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, is the human resources of the CHERD-Hungary Research Centre at the University of Debrecen, which is joined by senior and junior researchers, doctoral students, research teachers, and new generations of teacher and education research trainees. CHERD is not only a research centre, but also a distinctive and unique way of working, with multi-generational weekly research lab meetings that support the development of all our researchers.



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Appendix A

Table A1. Linear regression results with interviewed parents' volunteering as the dependent variable.

	Beta (sig)	Beta (sig)	Beta (sig)	Beta (sig)	Beta (sig)
Interviewed parent's relationship to child: father	−0.007	0.001	−0.007	−0.003	−0.004
Interviewed parent's age	−0.033	−0.055	−0.005	−0.007	−0.032
Marital status: married	−0.005	−0.030	−0.038	−0.039	−0.036
Marital status: cohabiting	−0.019	−0.035	−0.040	−0.038	−0.049
Marital status: divorced	−0.054	−0.076	−0.072	−0.073	−0.075
Number of children		−0.024	−0.040	−0.040	−0.058
Subjective financial situation		0.000	−0.006	−0.007	−0.005
Place of residence: capital or county seat		0.063[#]	0.046	0.044	0.036
Place of residence: town		0.121^{**}	0.105^{**}	0.103^{**}	0.077[#]
Religiosity: follows the teachings of a church		0.100[*]	0.059	0.056	0.124 [*]
Religiosity: religious in their own way		0.057	0.035	0.030	0.066
Interviewed parent's years of education		0.044	0.052	0.062[#]	0.088[*]
School type: upper primary school			0.201^{***}	0.201^{***}	0.211^{***}
School provider: church or foundation			0.117^{***}	0.118^{***}	0.078[*]
Child's gender: male				−0.047	−0.043
Country: Hungary					0.115^{***}
Adjusted R-squared	−0.001	0.010	0.052	0.053	0.068

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, # $p < 0.1$.

Table A2. Linear regression results with non-interviewed parent's volunteering as the dependent variable.

	Beta(sig)	Beta(sig)	Beta(sig)	Beta(sig)	Beta(sig)
Other parent's relationship to child: father	−0.199^{***}	−0.211^{***}	−0.209^{***}	−0.213^{***}	−0.213^{***}
Interviewed parent's marital status: married	−0.006	0.014	−0.001	−0.005	−0.005
Interviewed parent's marital status: cohabiting	0.001	0.014	0.001	−0.003	−0.003
Interviewed parent's marital status: divorced	−0.069	−0.057	−0.065	−0.069	−0.069
Number of children		0.065	0.055	0.054	0.054
Subjective financial situation		0.037	0.031	0.026	0.026
Place of residence: capital or county seat		−0.033	−0.031	−0.035	−0.036
Place of residence: town		−0.037	−0.032	−0.032	−0.033
Other parent's years of education		−0.004	0.002	0.010	0.010
School type: upper primary school			0.105[*]	0.107^{**}	0.107^{**}
School provider: church or foundation			0.093[*]	0.089[*]	0.088[*]
Child's gender: male				−0.75 [#]	−0.75 [#]
Country: Hungary					0.003
Adjusted R-squared	0.036	0.034	0.051	0.054	0.053

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, # $p < 0.1$.