

# **Kindergarten Teachers' Professional Commitment to Baptist Charity Nursery School**

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## Abstract

### Keywords:

pre-school education, catching up, disadvantaged situation, professional commitment

Today, social inclusion and exclusion are becoming increasingly important issues in society. The concept of social exclusion focuses on the process whereby certain disadvantages and risk factors prevent individuals from successfully integrating. The risk of social exclusion in Ibrány, the location of the research, is significant. Education especially early education is very important in catching up. So, kindergartens in disadvantaged areas play a key role in inclusion. An important question is what motivates teachers and childcare professionals in these areas? What keeps them in the field and how can they motivate children? And what problems they face every day and how they solve them? During the research, interviews were conducted with nine staff members at the Baptist Charity Nursery School, including the head of the nursery, five nursery teachers and three nursery nannies. Most of the children in this nursery are from a multiply disadvantaged background and most of them are also Roma. The kindergarten has a total of 64 children in three groups: small, medium and large. The data was collected in March 2024. The interview texts were analyzed using the content analysis method. The survey provides feedback on how teachers feel about a kindergarten where children from a disadvantaged background are most likely to attend, and the role of pre-school education in overcoming disadvantage which can serve as a lesson for the training of future pre-school teachers.

## 1. Introduction

First, in this study we review the theories of capital that are the sources of social inequality, as those determine the place of the individual in society. Today, territorial inequalities also have a significant impact on social inequalities, influencing the process of social exclusion. Therefore, in the following, the criteria for disadvantaged and cumulatively disadvantaged status under the law are presented, followed by an overview of the spatial distribution of children with disadvantages and cumulative disadvantages. The research is carried out in a nursery school in Ibrány, one of the most disadvantaged districts, which integrates the most disadvantaged children. In the second part of the study, interviews with the staff are presented, in which they report on the problems, tasks and challenges they face. We find out about their relationship with parents, how they motivate children, what keeps them in the field, and how strong their professional commitment is.

## 2. Theoretical foundation

According to the theories of capital we know that there are three main types of capitals. The most important of them is the cultural capital which include three forms. One of them is the embodied state which includes the knowledge and the attitudes in connection

with education. Second is the objectified state which includes the cultural goods like books, pictures, computer facilities or musical instruments. The third one is the institutionalized state which means the diplomas and certificates. The social capital means the status of relationship which could be grouped at strong or weak tie. Strong ties are the links with family members and close relatives, while weak ties are the looser network of social ties. The economical capital contains everything that can be converted into money. The conclusion of this theory is that capitals determine the place of the individual in the social structure. Some families could cumulate the capitals, which determine their children's place in the society. And these capitals can be convertible into each other. Children whose parents can afford to pay computers, internet, books, private teacher and everything what they need to attend high quality of educational system, obtain a high level of education. This is the entry into the labour market for a well-paid job. So that the convertibility of capital contributes to the reproduction of the start-up position (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social status has an important effect on language skills. Bernstein formed two groups of language code. One of those is the restricted code and the other one is



the elaborate code. The elaborated code is used by children of parents with higher social status. They know more words, have a richer vocabulary, understand and use complex sentences, can tell a story out of context. The restricted code is used by children of parents with lower social status. They have a poor vocabulary, using simple sentences and simple phrases, so when they get to school, they are at a disadvantage, they don't understand what the teacher is saying, they get stuck in learning. So, through the language code, social origin determines educational opportunities which ultimately determines one's place in society (Bernstein, 2003).

The human capital theory includes the skills and abilities embodied in human beings, which are innate talents and their development. This theory implies that an individual's skills can be developed and determine his or her value in the labour market and place in society. So, it is worth investing in both education and health at the level of the individual because it pays off. Theodore W. Shultz draws attention to the spill-over effect of capital, which does not stop at the level of the individual but has an impact on society as a whole. Areas where more individuals are highly educated develop faster. The skills thus acquired are accumulated and determine the rate of economic development of an area (Shultz, 1961).

Coleman draws attention to the concept of class norms. The process whereby social capital is not just a network of acquaintances but is complemented by a social dimension. Each child in a class brings with him or her an attitude to learning from home, and these attitudes add up at class level and then feedback to

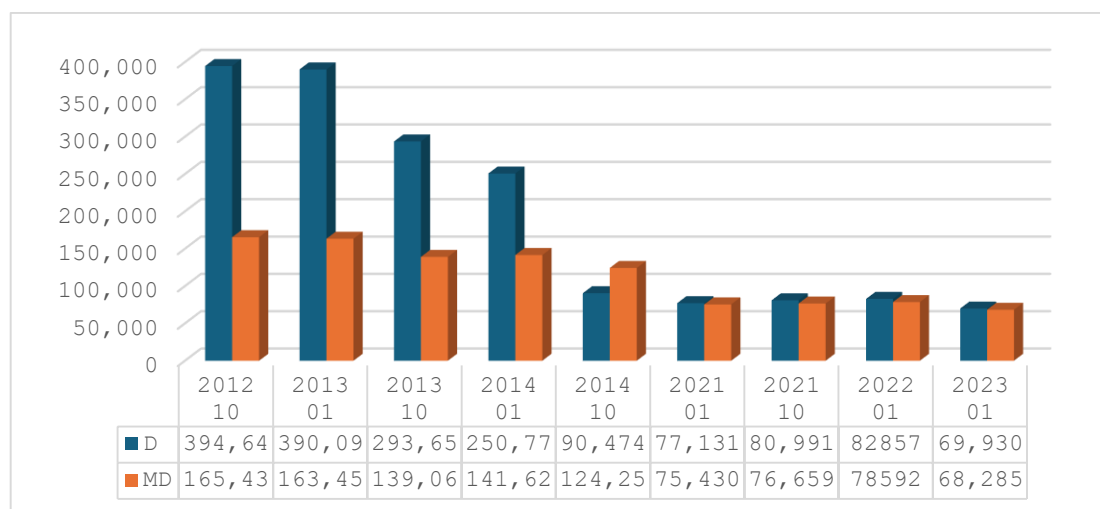
each child and influence his or her attitudes to learning (Coleman, 1990).

The above theories help us to understand the process that determines the educational situation of a municipality. The social status of the people living in a given area determines their vision of the future, their willingness or ability to invest in education, and their attitudes towards education. These attitudes add up at the societal level and determine the life of the institutions operating there. In this research I study an institution in a specifically disadvantaged municipality. I present the life of a kindergarten that integrates the most disadvantaged children of the municipality.

First of all let's see the criteria's of disadvantaged status according to law. In Hungary, in 2013, the criteria for being declared disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged were transferred from the Public Education Act to the Child Protection XXXI Act of 1997 on the protection of children and the administration of guardianship. A child is disadvantaged if he or she is entitled to regular child protection benefit and one of the following conditions applies: the parent has a low level of education (primary education or less), the parent has been registered as a jobseeker for at least 12 months, or unsatisfactory housing of the child. If two of these conditions are met, the child is considered to be a person with multiple disadvantages. On the figure 1 we can see the number of disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children in Hungary. The data show a decreasing trend.

**Figure 1.**

Number of disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children in Hungary (<https://dari.oktatas.hu/kirpub/index>)



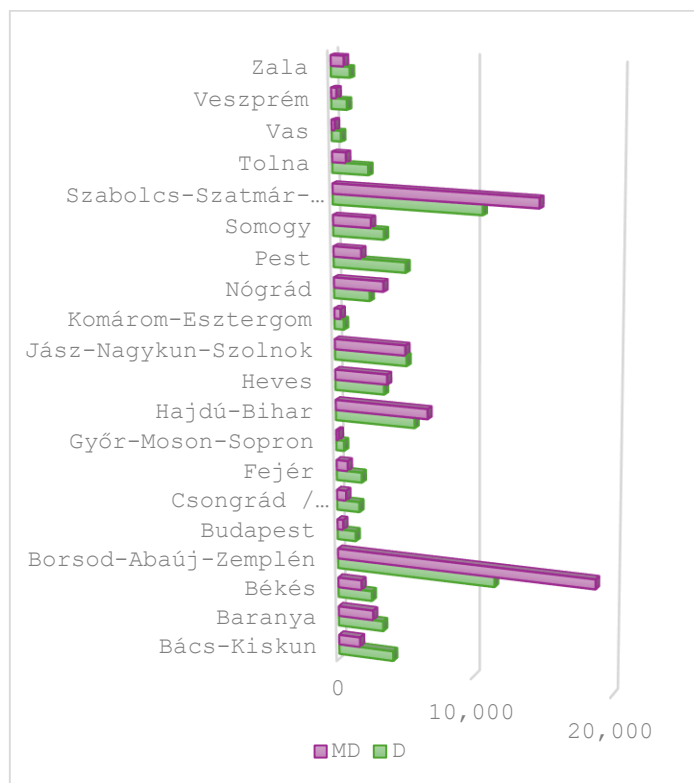
Let's put our focus on the number of disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children by

country (Figure 2). The data show that two counties have the vast majority of disadvantaged children. If we

look at the proportion of children with multiple disadvantages, the differences between counties are even greater. Almost half of the disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged children live in two counties, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg. This leads us to conclude that there are large spatial disparities, which not only means that there are more disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children in these areas, but also that poverty is deeper.

**Figure 2.**

Number of disadvantaged (D) and multiply disadvantaged (MD) children by country 01 2023 (<https://dari.oktatas.hu/kirpub/index>)



**Table 1.**

Number of disadvantaged (D) and multiply disadvantaged (MD) children in Ibrány (<https://dari.oktatas.hu/kirpub/index>)

| Date       | Kindergarten |    | Elementary school |     | Secondary school |    | Total |     |
|------------|--------------|----|-------------------|-----|------------------|----|-------|-----|
|            | D            | MD | D                 | MD  | D                | MD | D     | MD  |
| Okt. 2012. | 162          | 86 | 451               | 188 | 230              | 14 | 843   | 288 |
| Jan. 2016. | 78           | 79 | 58                | 139 | 10               | 49 | 146   | 267 |
| Jan. 2019. | 22           | 89 | 46                | 213 | 32               | 67 | 100   | 369 |
| Jan. 2023. | 18           | 79 | 52                | 207 | 17               | 59 | 87    | 345 |

In line with national trends, the number of disadvantaged children in Ibrány is also decreasing (Table 1). But the number of people with multiple disadvantages is rising against the national trend. So,

we can observe that poverty has become more deeply. From this we can also see that Hungary has very high territorial disparities, therefore Government Decree 290/2014 (XI. 26.) provides for the classification of districts. The districts are ranked according to the complex indicator, and the districts whose complex indicator is below the national average will be the beneficiary districts. Two categories of districts with the lowest complex index are distinguished: districts to be developed, where 15 per cent of the country's cumulative population live, and districts to be developed with the complex program, where 10 per cent of the above population live. The district of Ibrány can be classified in the latter category, with a complex indicator of 28.12, which puts it in 21st place in the ranking, located in the lower fifth. In this territory is possible to make The Sure Start Program to restore the risk of social exclusion. The Sure Start Program includes Sure Start Children's House where the mother goes together with her child for the reason to increase the capacity of the parent how to rise up their children. This program has an important impact on the upbringing of children by the time they start kindergarten. We were able to observe this effect last year in joint research with one of our students, Adél Virág Mikecz. Children who attended Sure Start Program Houses before the age of three socialized more easily in the kindergarten and got better grades in the diary that records their progress (Takács & Mikecz, 2024).

### 3. Research methodology

The risk of social exclusion in Ibrány, the location of the research, is significant. Education, especially early education, is very important in catching up. So, kindergartens in disadvantaged areas play a key role in inclusion. An important question is what motivates teachers and childcare professionals in these areas? What keeps them in the field and how can they motivate children? And what problems do they face every day and how do they solve them? During the research, interviews were conducted with nine staff members at the Baptist Charity Nursery School, including the head of the nursery, five nursery teachers and three nursery nannies. Most of the children in this nursery are from a multiply disadvantaged background and most of them are also Roma. The kindergarten has a total of 64 children in three groups: small, medium and large. The data was collected in March 2024. The interview texts were analyzed using the content analysis method. The coding of the interviewees was based on the abbreviation of the names of the kindergarten groups in Hungarian. This notation

appears at the end of quotations, KCS1 is one of the interviewed kindergarten teachers of the kindergarten small group.

#### 4. Results

I have asked the interviewees about the main problems they face in their work with disadvantaged gypsy children. They have mentioned problems in connection with the contrast between family socialization and institutional socialization, differences in values, children's absence from kindergarten, behavioral problems, excessive use of smart devices, language socialization, speech development, unhealthy diet and lifestyle, lack of knowledge of independent eating and hygiene habits, adoption of habits and rules.

First, let's look at the problem of absenteeism. There is a high number of justified absences because of a high incidence of illness due to an unhealthy lifestyle and diet. But on the other hand, there are high rates of unexcused absences also. Absenteeism is a daily problem for about half of the children. The reasons are overprotective parents who are afraid of what is going to happen with their children in kindergarten. One part of the parents does not trust the institutions. Another reason is the values differences between families and institutions. Some of the parents don't work, so for them it is not important to attend kindergarten, if they fall asleep or it is raining in the morning they miss going in the nursery. This is in connection with irregular lifestyle. At home children have no rules, they go to sleep when they are tired, they use smartphones in the evening, so in the morning it is difficult to wake up for them. Due to irregular lifestyle, at home there are no rules it is difficult to educate children to follow the rules and to accept the system of habits in kindergarten.

The tasks of pre-school education include adoption of rules, teaching standards of behaviors, how to behave with each other, to say hello, to thank, to ask for the toy (not only to take it) and not to fight. In connection with speech development according to Bernstein we can observe a typical restricted code in casual speech. Children are mostly lagging in speech development. This appears in pronunciation, lack of knowledge of words, language style and expression. Nursery teachers teach poems, read stories and talk to the child to promote speech development. The tasks of institutional socialization are to teach how to say hello and thank you for things, to teach both the style of language and the forms of expression. Another task is developing hygiene behaviors to teach using tissues,

toilet, washing hands. And in connection with eating habits to teach holding spoon, eating with cutlery, using napkin. They have also to educate parents how to deal with their children.

In connection with relationship with parents we can observe that kindergarten teachers have better relations with working parents who can provide somewhat better living conditions for their children. People living in extreme poverty regularly do not bring their child's equipment. Kindergarten teachers generally rate the relationship with parents as good. However, only a few parents attend parent-teacher meetings and not all parents provide their child with the necessary equipment for pre-school education. The biggest problem in the relationship with parents is that most of them miss the parent-teacher meetings. Because of this it is difficult to make connections with the parents.

Since the 2018 amendment of the Child Protection Act, every kindergarten and school has a so-called kindergarten and school social worker. They are employees of the Child Welfare Centre at district level. They go to their respective kindergartens and schools according to a timetable. There are 1 000 children for each kindergarten and school social worker. They help to facilitate communication between the family, the educational establishment and the child protection institution. In this kindergarten the contact with child welfare service is good. Social workers visit once a week to discuss each child's problems and report to the child welfare service if necessary. Most often, they must report unjustified absences, as attendance at kindergarten has been compulsory in Hungary since 2015.

#### *Relationship with children*

Every interviewer mentioned that they have good relationships with children. So, the kindergarten teachers rated their relationships with the children very good. They love children and children also love them. This is also very important because these children need emotional support, we can observe this in the fact they often tell the kindergarten teachers that they love them and ask to be held or embraced. One nursery teacher mentioned: "I find that they love me, they are very cuddly, sometimes I have six children sitting on my lap and they fight, pushing each other to see who sits on my lap. I notice that they are clinging to me. We go out in the yard, and they stand in a circle like little chickens and 'pick me up kindergarten teacher' and 'pick me up too' and then they line up and 'pick me up too'. If I say my back hurts, then 'hold my hand



already' so they need contact with the adult. They like to say, 'I love you, auntie'. And it feels so good, I find that they are very accepting, and they love me, and I love them the same way. I can't think of them as Roma children, to me they are just children who want to be loved. Maybe they don't get it at home, and they expect that love from us. They are still in a small group, but I was thinking about letting them go to school. I'm sure I'll cry when they leave because they are growing so much into us. Even though they are bad a lot of the time, I love them very much" (KCS1).

I asked them how difficult it was to get children involved and how they could get them interested. They said that children are happy to participate in the sessions, they like to be given a task for example to plant and water flowers. The difference is in how long each child can pay attention. Many of them can pay attention for a short time. In these cases, kindergarten teachers let them go to play. In many cases children must be encouraged individually to solve problems. Individual work and differentiation are important methods. In connection with motivational methods, they mentioned that children come from a low-stimulus environment, at home they do not have toys or games, they are easily distracted by games, puppetry, musical instruments, story reading and music. They like dancing and singing. And they love it when the teacher plays together with them. Nursery teachers reward children with verbal praise, sticker booklet or a board with a smiley sign. This varies from group to group.

I asked them how much they like working in the nursery and what keeps them on track. Each of them likes to work here, and they don't want to change their workplace. They have a strong professional commitment. The reason why they like to work is this place are children's love, to see children's development, the good collective and the fact that they see as a challenge on the on additional task for example to educate parents and to take a big part for family socialization. That's why they would like to stay in their professional career.

## 5. Conclusions

Kindergarten teachers in the nursery school surveyed provide emotional support for children. They love children, play together and are involved in duties with them. That is why children are so motivated to be involved in sessions. The above results show that this kindergarten, which integrates children from

disadvantaged backgrounds, contributes to overcoming disadvantages and helps children to socially integrate. The nursery teachers who work here play a major role in filling the gaps in family socialization, which they cannot fully fill, but they make a significant contribution to reducing the disadvantages of family background.

## Authors note:

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