

Gabriella Kulcsár Sándorné Alföldi: A headteacher's dilemmas

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Gabriella Alföldi is one of the local contributors of our participatory research projects in Tiszavasvári. She joined our research team in 2024, although she co-authored in 2017 with János Imre Heltai an applied pedagogical article on integration strategies for bilingual children. Raised near the monolingual Roma neighbourhood, she lives near the bilingual neighbourhood where most of our work is based. She was headteacher of the nursery where most children from the bilingual Roma neighbourhood are registered. Her work with nursery staff on Roma inclusion is an achievement acknowledged by professionals and Roma families alike.

1. Dilemma within a dilemma. I have taken on the task of describing the dilemmas that I, as a headteacher, faced in employing Roma pedagogical assistants in the nursery. I completed my writing. Truthfully, and without any embellishment, I described what kinds of doubts and sleep-denying ruminations I had to go through before I managed to make a decision. The decision to employ a Roma worker in the nursery groups was taken at management level, but employee selection was based on criteria agreed on by the teaching staff in collective reflection. I showed my writing to some members of the research team. Confronted with their opinions, I started having second thoughts. The dilemmas gave rise to dilemmas. Was I too harsh? Could my honesty be offensive? How do current workers, former and current leaders, Roma and non-Roma, interpret what happened more than a decade ago? I thought I would ask for second opinion from people whose values I trust as much as possible. So, I got feedback from my family members, former colleagues, and a former headteacher of the nursery. They unanimously deemed my writing to be credible, honest, and decent, but in the course of these conversations, I began to sense where my uncertainties were coming from, which was none other than the positive change between past and present. The nursery employs an increasing number of committed and enthusiastic Roma staff members who are

eager to learn and develop. Through prejudice and painful experiences, we have arrived at a process that is still in motion but which shows definite signs of acceptance and inclusion. This still-fragile process may be stalled by my dilemmas, which are free of any offensive intentions but still potentially misunderstood. I have therefore modified my original writing.

2. I described how Nursery No. 3, which had been providing high-quality education for decades, was transformed into an institution exclusively for Roma children. I have written about the distrusting parents, irregular attendance, poor working conditions, and children who barely speak Hungarian, live in poor social conditions, and are neglected. Perhaps I could have kept silent about the fact that the nursery, which had thus become a segregated area, had been labelled 'gypsy nursery' in the city. It was not considered one of the attractive places to work. I have also described how the staff here were considered, without it being said, as second-class workers. Those who worked here experienced exclusion and otherness in the same way as the people whose children they educated and cared for. I am not hiding it, I am not embellishing it, because that is what happened.

However, it must be acknowledged that the number of Roma children regularly attending nursery has increased as a result of the growing strength of child protection work and legislative changes. It has become necessary to employ staff with special qualifications. The children attending these schools required more preparation, more patience, and a very varied methodological approach from the nursery teachers, and from the nursery nannies, much more attention and social awareness to deal with the growing amounts of increasingly challenging care work. I stressed, however, that this more difficult work did not come with greater moral or professional recognition. At the time, most of the staff were committed to working to create a safe, accepting, and developmentally supportive atmosphere for the children who came here, despite the disadvantages and difficulties. In overcoming difficulties, nursery nannies and nursery teachers helped each other to find their way together, forming a strong and unique community. Together, they rejoiced in their achievements and did their absolute best to maintain the good practices they established. This is where we were when the operational matters of our nursery underwent profound changes.

3. In 2009, there was a change in the governing body responsible for the financial maintenance of the nursery. The Magiszter Foundation provided the opportunity to develop and implement pedagogical and methodological developments and programmes to meet the specific needs of children and their parents. The staff of the nursery successfully showed that the pedagogical work we perform is of the highest professional standards. They gradually cleaned off the stain of “the Gypsy nursery”. I had been headteacher in this nursery since 2013.

The management of the Magiszter Foundation was constantly pushing us to involve Roma workers in childcare activities and that they be allowed to work as pedagogical assistants. In the absence of qualifications, this could be achieved only within the framework of the state-sponsored public work programme. We had the opportunity to discuss this possibility in all-staff meetings, but most of the staff employed at the nursery were reluctant. Why? Because our community was very strongly influenced by the city’s prejudices against Roma people, which is a painful neglect of the past, and they also feared of a reversal of the good results we achieved. A Roma worker could disrupt what has been a well-functioning workplace system. Why? Because they are strangers? Because they are different? Because they live in a different social environment? Because they speak a different language?

As a leader, I was faced with a serious decision. I formulated a lot of questions. How will the old, qualified, experienced staff be affected if parents trust Roma teachers more? What if the workplace environment worsens because of the presence of Roma employees? Do I have the tolerance to resolve possible conflicts fairly and peacefully? What will happen if the old employees leave? Children need peace and security. The results of our work would be lost in a hostile environment. What could be the solution? Only a joint decision can be productive!

So, I showed the names on the job centre’s list to my colleagues at the nursery. Information sharing about the people whose names featured in the list began instantly: who knows about the candidates, whether they had worked somewhere before, what was the nursery teachers’ opinion of the candidate, etc. Finally, a new set of criteria emerged: the new employee should be clean, young, if possible they should have a pedagogical assistant qualification, perhaps a baccalaureate; they should not have a child of their own coming to

the nursery, or a child of their brothers or sisters, they should not be in a group with relatives; they should not have a bad reputation coming from a possible earlier workplace. On this basis, three people employed in the public works scheme started to work in the nursery in the same year as pedagogical assistants, one of them with a baccalaureate, two of them verifiably trustworthy but unqualified. Thanks to them, openness towards Roma colleagues among the nursery staff began to grow.

The real breakthrough came with the Equal Opportunity Programme (Esélyteremtő Program). We were able to employ a “mother tongue” assistant. From then on, the majority began to see that having a Roma colleague was not a disadvantage but a great help. In conclusion, my most touching experience came when the title “Nanny of the Month”, which we created and awarded to a pedagogical assistant each month based on a secret vote, went to a Roma nanny.