

Communication with Vulnerable Parents to Stimulate Resilience: the Case of Roma Parents and Refugees

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Social work has been concerned with socially disadvantaged groups because of the ethical and value base of the profession. If the purpose of social work is to improve people's lives by helping with social and interpersonal difficulties, promoting human rights and wellbeing, then socially deprived groups are the first ones to tackle.



- What is the most socially disadvantaged parents' group or category in your country?
- What are the indicators of their disadvantage?
- Do you think, a professional needs special competencies (knowledge, skills, value attitudes) in order to develop an open and equal relationship with those parents?
- What are those competencies? Please describe at least three of them and give your arguments why they are needed?



Structure of the presentation

Basic statistics;

Introducing informants;

Interview data:

bringing an emic view on what competencies (knowledge, attitudes and skills) are essential for teachers and social workers working with Roma and refugee families

The situation of Roma in Lithuania

The average disposable income of Roma households in Lithuania is significantly lower than the overall national indicators. The average monthly income per member of Roma household is 78 EUR (national average 326 EUR), and the average income per Roma household is 313 EUR, while the national average is at least twice as big (2015).

According to the 2011 Population Census, the overall unemployment rate among the Roma is 34% (national average 11%).

The situation of Roma in Lithuania

The at-risk-of-poverty rate among Roma is several times higher than that of the general population of Lithuania:

at-risk-of-poverty rate among Roma population is 75% (national average in 2013 was 21%).

The level of material deprivation among Roma is also exceptionally high:

86% of Roma face economic strains or cannot acquire important durable goods due to the lack of financial resources (national average is at 16%).

The situation of Roma in Lithuania

The living conditions of the Roma on average are worse than of other citizens.

Parts of the Roma community in Lithuania face residential segregation.

The lack of access to facilities like hot water (49 per cent, the national average is 25 per cent), flushing toilet, shower (49 per cent, the national average is 24 per cent), gas and electricity remains well below the national average.

The situation of Roma in Lithuania

The educational indicators of Roma children in Lithuania are the lowest in comparison with other ethnic or social groups.

The largest part of country residents without basic education is also within the Roma ethnic group (52%). In comparison, in Lithuanian ethnic group about 17% people do not have basic education.

10,3 % of Roma did not finish primary school or are illiterate.

The situation for Roma women is even worse:

23 % of the Roma women cannot read or write and 19 % never went to school.

Education

Early school drop-outs are often caused by a number of structural reasons:

- unemployment;
- segregated area;
- poor living conditions;
- negative attitudes,
- prejudices and stereotypes;
- teachers do not know how to work with bilingual children;
- illiteracy or low education of parents.







Refugees



- Russia
- Tajikistan
- Turkey
- Syria
- Afghanistan

Under the EU's resettlement quota, Lithuania was to accept 1,105 refugees from Italy and Greece, but only 400 have been resettled, others have already left the country.

Asylum and first time asylum applicants in Lithuania - annual aggregated data

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number	315	430	545	405	645

Residence permits in Lithuania on 31 December each year

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number	35 680	38 833	44 525	52 403	69 348

Lithuanians grow more hostile towards refugees, survey of 2019 shows

The survey conducted in 2019 by the Social Research Centre shows that a growing number of Lithuanians believe that the asylum seekers coming to the country are economic migrants rather than refugees. Almost two thirds, 64 percent, said so in the recent survey, compared to 44 percent in 2015.

Over two thirds of the surveyed Lithuanians – more by one fifth compared to four years ago – also said that refugees can increase crime in the country and cause social problems.



To what extent do you agree or not with the following statements? (% , 2019):

- Refugees may cause social unrest in Lithuania - 60,4%;
- Refugees in Lithuania may increase the level of crime - 66%;
- I would not like that my children would study with refugees' children in the same class - 35,3%;
- Refugees will enrich the cultural life of Lithuania - 26,3%.

“First of all, they need to step into our shoes”

“You can’t work successfully, until you know how Roma live, what conditions they have at home.”

“They (teachers and social workers) come from a totally different world – they are educated, they receive salary every month, they take a shower every day, they have heating and electricity at home, and they don’t understand children or families that live differently.”

“Teachers don’t understand what conditions Roma children have at home.”

“Social workers, even if they see what problems a Roma family has, they come and they go, they don’t try to understand how it is to live in such conditions.”

“First of all, they need to step into our shoes”

The Syrian mother:
„Without understanding what a child went through, you cannot make a good relationship to her, and then you don't have an ability to motivate a child to succeed at school“.

The Tajik mother: „A daughter came from school and asked me: “Why we were chased away from our own country”. I don't know who told her that, but the teacher should be careful about such things. I am trying to keep my daughter away from bad memories, don't want her to be forced to face them at school. A son was very little when all that happened back in Tajikistan, he only remembers policemen, but daughter remembers much more. Children may think that maybe their father is a criminal or a murderer, because policemen came to arrest him. Don't want them to have such doubts“.

„They don't understand our children“

The Syrian mother: „My daughter loves to hug, maybe because she feels insecure after all we went through.

She wants to hug her teacher a lot. A daughter comes, hugs the teacher and says that she loves her. But the teacher doesn't like it. She complains a lot about that to me. She says: “If the daughter learns well, then I will hug her also. If she does her homework, I will love her also”. In every meeting with a translator from Caritas the teacher complains about hugging. At home I said to my daughter: “If you hug anybody, I will kill you (laughs). You can hug only me”.

The Turkish mother: „If a teacher doesn't recognize difficulties a student has, how she can help to overcome them?“

The Tadjik mother : „The daughter often becomes sick, because of the problems in relationship to her teacher at school. She is often sad.“

“They do not understand our situation”

All Roma informants stressed that social workers “do not understand” their situation, they lack imagination and empathy.

Social workers focus on parents’ capacity to meet a child’s needs, failing to assess the wider problems and pressures poor Roma parents are struggling with.

Poverty is taken for granted.

Poverty of Roma families is often regarded as a background condition about which little can be done.

Essentialising culture

Essentialist notion of culture leads to the usual mistake that everyone in a certain culture is the same. It explains the behavior of people in terms of their culture, allowing “culture” to become greater than the people themselves. This is the way of othering and reducing people from minority groups to a prescribed image based mostly on media produced stereotypes:

„They don't see as diverse groups and diverse persons, they see what they want to see. They think that all Roma are the same. If one Rom robbed someone, and it was on the news, they think that all Roma are robbers.“

Poverty is regarded as a part of Roma culture.

„Asocial“ way of living.

„Stealers“: Roma kid accused of stealing his classmate's wallet at school.

Accusing the victim:

„They don't want to work“;

„They don't want to study“;

„They don't even have a word „to work“ in their language“.

Prejudices and negative attitudes

The Turkish mother: „If something happens in the class, she (the teacher) accuses my boy first. He is accused in advance without trying to figure out what really happened.“

Understanding the different worldview

Roma and refugee informants didn't mention this feature. It was mentioned by social workers:

„You have to be aware of your own attitudes and values, your own assumptions and prejudices, and not allow them to rule your behavior with any client, not only with Roma or a refugee.“

Cultural differences

Roma informants didn't really want to talk about cultural differences. They were much more concerned about their present social situation.

Teachers and social workers need to be aware of cultural differences, but it is much more essential to be aware of social inequalities that correspond with cultural diversity.

Refugee mothers have different opinion. According to them, teachers have to pay attention to cultural differences and to be aware of them. For instance, to know different requirements for food caused by different religion of children.

Without knowing culture of refugee students, „a teacher does not know the ways of interacting with children, how to react to their behaviour, it seems strange to her“ (the Turkish mother).

Cultural differences

The Tadjik mother: „Teachers think that Muslims don't eat only pork, they don't know much about Muslim culture. I said that my daughter can't eat meat, and they understood that she can't eat only pork, and didn't ask me to make it clear. They don't know much about the Muslim culture.“

A Turkish mother: Refugee students are not familiar with culture of country of residence, they don't understand many things, often do not react adequately, they face difficulties at school because they don't understand what a teacher wants from them. And teacher repeats all the time: “You have to know this!”, but how?“

Cultural differences

The Syrian mother: „Teachers never asked me about the Syrian culture, never asked to introduce it to the class or to bring some traditional food to the class or to some school event, like Christmas celebration. They don't know anything about Syria and it seems that they are not interested.“

The Turkish mother: „We are trying to adapt, not to stress religious differences, for instance. But the teacher doesn't want to welcome us, she doesn't do anything to make somehow closer relationship with the son or with us, parents. Maybe it is in Lithuanian culture to be so reserved.“

Language issues

Language issues:

teachers are not aware that Lithuanian language is the second language for Roma and refugee kids.

The Syrian mother: „If the daughter understands the lesson, for instance, taught in simple Lithuanian language, it becomes interesting for her to learn, and she gets more motivated and involved. But if she doesn't understand, she is not interested in learning anymore.“

The Turkish mother: „The teacher criticises my son constantly. Sometimes, after long talk to her, she almost convinces me, with all her complains, that my boy is like a student with special needs. But, after a while, I come to myself, and I know that he is ok! It is just difficult for him to adopt and to learn the language.“

Cultural differences

Teachers and social workers need to have basic understanding about Roma culture and especially about norms of Roma customary law:

- not to ask a Roma girl to sit next to Gadjó at school;
- not to ask a teenager Roma girl to join the school trip for several days;
- they need to know how family is valued in Roma culture – if there is a funeral or a wedding, Roma kids will be there, not at school;
- to take care of early arranged marriages, to talk about it with parents;
- to talk about gender roles in Roma communities;
- to respect ethnic identity of a child, but at the same time to show the possibility of developing alternative ways of being a Roma/Romni.

Cultural differences

Position of a grandmother:

„Teachers need to respect our culture unconditionally.“

„How can we speak to them, if they don't respect us?“

Regarding gender roles:

„This is our tradition, it's a very old tradition. If we do not follow our traditions, whom are we going to become? Gadje?“

„At school they have their own rules, everyone needs to obey them. But at home we have our own rules, and this is our right to follow them.“

“When we need help, they don’t come”

“When we need help, social workers don’t come. Or they come, but don’t help.”

“We needed to make a paper work, the social worker advised to ask the older (12 years old) son to help us.”

„They come to Kirtimai settlement only accompanied with the police“.

„They don’t do anything to protect people’s rights“. When the houses were demolished in Kirtimai, they were just standing and watching and doing nothing.“

„Social workers don’t visit Roma families as often as they have to, but when there is an extra case, like a burst of domestic violence, caused by all those tensions and problems parents deal with, social workers come together with the police. That’s why Roma people associate social workers with a punitive or disciplinary institution.“

„When social worker comes, I give her coffee, we drink it together and talk, but this is not what I need. I don’t want to talk, I need her to help me.“

„There was an assistant of a social worker appointed to a lone-parent family. He had to lead children to school. He never did that, and asked the older son to lead the younger ones to school instead.“

“When we need help, they don’t come”

The Tajik mother: „The older daughter became lately very sensible – she reacts inadequately to very unimportant small things. Don’t know why. She always asks: why that person looked at us that way, why they stare at us, why do they say something. She feels being different, distinguished by others, not accepted. I don’t know how to help her, and nobody advices me.“

„I asked the teacher about the elder daughter, why she changed so much, why she overreacts to every word or sight of other people or children, why she cries over every small thing, but the teacher didn’t know. And didn’t know what to do in this regard. The teacher didn’t invite psychologist or any other specialist to talk to my daughter and to find help“.

Lack of collaboration

The Syrian mother: „The teacher always repeats: Sorry, I have 26 children in my class, I cannot just work with your daughter individually. The daughter maybe needs help from a speech therapist, but it was never offered.“

„The teacher said that if my daughter is not doing good at school, this is my, mother's, problem, not hers.“

„A teacher accuses me that I don't help my daughter with the lessons. But how can I? I work, I don't have enough time, and I can't help with Lithuanian, because I don't know the language! With geography lessons – google translator translates very wrong, how can I help her to do the homework?“

The teacher advised that my son can help my daughter to do homework, but he is not a teacher!“

Lack of collaboration

The Syrian mother: „The teacher said me that my daughter doesn't do homework when 3 months passed. So, during 3 months she didn't do her homework, and the teacher didn't warn me. She said: “You didn't ask”. But I ask about my daughter every time I come to school. When husband comes, he also asks.“

„I am not that kind of person who shows initiative, I wait teachers to make the first step, but teachers are not interested in closer communication with me.“

„Caritas came to talk to a teacher, she just complained about my daughter that she doesn't obey, doesn't listen to a teacher, she runs and jumps during the lessons. But she is a small girl, and it's normal for a small girl to run. And the teacher didn't say anything what she is going to do in order to help her.“

The Turkish mother: „Teachers say that my youngest is not talented. But I see his talents. I try to explain; the teacher doesn't listen.“

„A teacher only complains about my son.“

„Teachers never visit us“

Teachers lack an understanding that pedagogical problems shouldn't be studied and approached in isolation from sociocultural environment of a child.

Teachers are not interested in living conditions of their Roma students:

„They never visit us“.

Social workers:

“Collaboration is a two way process. It is easy to accuse parents that they don't want to be involved. But ask yourself, what did you do in order to prompt collaboration. Do you know parents' names, do you know the telephone number, as many Roma often change them.”

Roma mothers don't want teachers to pay a visit, because usually teachers contact them when their child „behave badly“ at school.

Mothers themselves dropped out from school without finishing it and has bad memories about the school as an institution. They don't want to go there.

Teachers blame Roma parents for not coming to school when they are invited to come.

But when they come on their own initiative, teachers blame Roma parents for coming too often or without reason and „disturbing educational process.“

The Tajik mother: “The teacher never asks about the situation at home.” “The teacher never asks about the conditions at home, never came to visit. When I come to school, we talk.”

Communication problems caused by the language barrier

The Syrian mother: „Teachers don't know English, they speak only in Lithuanian, and I don't know Lithuanian. One of them knows French, but I don't know French. When I speak to teachers, my son translates to me. Also, the translator from Caritas helps sometimes.“

In case of the Ukrainian migrant, the student translates from Russian to Lithuanian and vice versa for his mother when mother comes to talk to the teachers – „He learnt Lithuanian quite quick“.

How to establish trustful relationship?

Refugee mothers asked to „respect for parents’ requests, for instance regarding diet of children, because Muslim students are not allowed to eat certain meals.“

The Tajik mother: „I want a teacher to pay attention what mother says, if she indicates the problem, a teacher must take that seriously.“

Trustful relationship

The Turkish mother: „A teacher must be able to communicate empathetically, to establish and maintain trust-based contacts with family“.

The Tadjik mother: „Teachers should make closer contact with the family, come home, try to get to know each other better.“

The Syrian mother: „A teacher must recognize what kind of individual help a student needs and to know where she can get this help, and to offer it to student’s parents.“ „A good teacher communicates with parents not merely in a formal way.“

Trustful relationship

„You have to establish a trustful relationship with Roma parents. This is the most important thing.“

„Treat them as equals.“

„You will not reach anything without establishing a trustful relationship first. Trustful relationship with parents, trustful relationship with children.“

„If parents trust you, children also start to trust you.“

„You shouldn't be judgmental. When you judge someone, you put yourself in a higher position. This is not the way to deal with people, and definitely not the way to deal with the Roma parents.“

„We need consistent cooperation!“

The Tadjik mother: “I talk to a teacher constantly, as much as I can”.

The Turkish mother: “I invited some son’s classmates’ parents to come to our house for a meal, they invited us with a husband to their homes. We have meals at home together. I would like to have such friendly relationship with a teacher of my son”.

The Syrian mother: “I expect a teacher to help more my daughter. We need consistent cooperation with a teacher.”

„We need consistency in work with Roma“

Božena:

„Social workers need to visit Roma families at least once a week and work with it consistently – explain many things or to show short films about how to treat their children, how to treat each other. They need to teach parents how to be good parents.“

Social workers:

“We need consistency in work with Roma. If you have the Roma integration programme, developed by the government, check if it works, and if yes, implement it consistently, in close cooperation of all institutions involved.“



Questions?