MOTIVATING ROMA CHILDREN TO LEARN: AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES

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Abstract. *A child's motivation to learn is one of the most important factors in planning, organising, implementing, and achieving the child's learning outcomes. The aim of this article is to reveal the motivation of Roma children to learn, based on the experience of educators working with Roma children. The type of qualitative research was chosen for the study, the research was collected using a semi-structured interview method, and the content analysis method was used to analyse the data. The research was carried out in accordance with the principles of research ethics: confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation in the research. The research question: how do teachers motivate Roma children to learn? The study involved 21 teachers with experience of teaching Roma children.*
The study identified that the motivation of a Roma child to learn is influenced on the one hand by the teacher's efforts to create an educational environment that motivates the child and meets the individual needs of Roma children, and on the other hand by the efforts of teachers to involve parents in the child's educational process by encouraging and assisting parents to create a learning-friendly environment at home.
The study reveals that when creating a motivating educational environment in the classroom, it is important for the teacher to accept the child as they are, to create a warm, respectful, equal relationship with the child, to interest the child, to use various incentives to emphasize the child's success, to differentiate and personalize activities, and to respond to the child's individual needs. When working with Roma children, it is important to do as many tasks as possible in the classroom, to enable them to do their homework at school and to use other pupils in the classroom to help motivate Roma children to learn and to overcome learning difficulties. The results of the study show that teachers' efforts to involve parents in their child's education by encouraging and helping parents to create a learning environment at home is important to help Roma children to understand the meaning of learning, to show the benefits of learning

now and in the child's future perspective. The study reveals that cooperation between parents and teachers, a shared approach to the child's learning, and a common understanding of what is required of the child are important for the child's motivation.

Introduction

According to the data from the population census in Lithuania on 1 January, 2021, 84.6 percent of the population were Lithuanians. The Roma people constitute one of the smallest ethnic groups, making up about 0.08 percent of Lithuania's population. The number of Roma people has been steadily decreasing – in 1989, there were 2718 Roma living in Lithuania, in 2002 – 2571, in 2011 – 2115, and in 2021 – 2251. The majority of Roma people reside in Vilnius city, forming 24.3 percent of the Roma population living in Lithuania (Department of National Minorities under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021).

Since 2015, the Department of National Minorities under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania has been responsible for various national minority issues, including those related to the Roma community. From its first years of operation, the department plans its activities according to annual or strategic plans, which include addressing issues related to the integration of Roma into Lithuanian society. Special attention is given to the inclusion of individuals of Roma ethnicity in the education system: improving the general education of Roma children in pre-school, pre-primary, primary, and non-formal education, as well as enhancing the general education of adult individuals of Roma ethnicity (Vilnius City Municipal Council, 2020).

Prior researchers have found that Roma families experience social, economic, and cultural exclusion, leading to educational challenges for Roma children. Factors such as unfavourable social, economic, and cultural conditions, as well as pre-existing negative attitudes within the community, parents, or caregivers towards education, contribute to these challenges. These barriers predispose children to a lack of motivation for learning and absenteeism. The identified factors, acting as both causes and consequences, result in learning losses, lack of progress, and ultimately, dropout from the education system (Survutaite, 2023).

The inclusion of Roma children in education is a topical issue not only in Lithuania, but also in other European countries. The issue of training and education of Roma is one of the many themes that resonate in our society and this issue is addressed on a global scale (Kováčová, 2015). The main category of causes is represented by the socio-familial factors, namely: the negative attitude of the parents towards the school, especially the Roma people (Pescaru, 2018). Roma pupils enrolled in regular schools are reportedly taught an abridged curriculum and are often automatically passed from grade to grade even if they have not acquired basic literacy in the early years of primary school. This thus leads to high primary school drop-out rates (Macura & Dimitrijević, 2016). Some

teachers suggest that Roma people do not value education and that Roma children have negative attitudes towards school (Peček & Munda, 2015).

The analysis of the research shows that strengthening the motivation of Roma children to learn is important for their inclusion in the education system. Motivation is a prerequisite for a child's engagement in the learning process (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). I. Reece & S. Walker (2007) and R. Berns (2009) stress that motivation to learn is one of the most important components that influence students' educational success. A child's motivation to learn is influenced not only by the educational environment of the school, but also by the family's attitude towards the child's participation in the education system and the cooperation with the school in motivating the child to learn (Astrauskaitė, 2008). Therefore, it is relevant to study and analyse how to motivate Roma children to learn and to help Roma parents and children understand the importance of learning.

Research object of this paper – fostering and supporting the learning motivation of Roma pupils in general education schools. Research question: how do teachers motivate Roma children to learn? Research goal – to reveal the motivation for learning among Roma children, based on the experience of educators working with Roma students.

Research methodology

The type of research chosen for the study is qualitative and the data is collected through semi-structured interviews. The main goal of the qualitative interview process is to obtain data that is as broad and open as possible, reflecting the research participant's perspective, and revealing the purpose of the research (Gaižauskaitė & Valavičienė, 2016). During the interview, the researcher delves into the opinions, attitudes, experiences, motives, feelings, etc. of the research participants. The structure of the semi-structured questionnaire is flexible and allows to manage the interview process by changing the wording of the questions, the sequence of the questions, and by asking additional questions, etc. as needed. The responses of the participants were transcribed on the same day after the interview. Separate coded files were created on the computer for each participant (coding the participants M1, M2, M3....M21), without disclosing personal information.

The method of content analysis was chosen to examine the collected data. The analysed data comprises texts obtained from the interviews. These texts underwent multiple readings to achieve a more thorough comprehension of the respondents' answers, emphasizing crucial aspects that delineate the text into different sections. The information acquired through the semi-structured interviews is organized using pre-prepared questions: statements are categorized into subcategories, and subcategories are then integrated into broader categories.

The research employed a purposive sampling type for participant selection. The criteria for selecting participants were: 1) educational work with Roma children; 2) a minimum of 1 year of educational experience working with Roma children. A total of 21 teachers participated in the study.

The research was carried out in accordance with the principles of research ethics: confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation in the research.

Limitations of the study: the study was carried out within the boundaries of the Vilnius City Municipality, thus, the findings of the study reflect the situation of Roma children's participation in the education system in Vilnius City.

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Research results

After analysing teachers' experiences regarding motivating Roma children to study, two categories were identified: the educational environment created by the teacher that motivates the child to study, and parental involvement in the child's educational process (Figure 1).
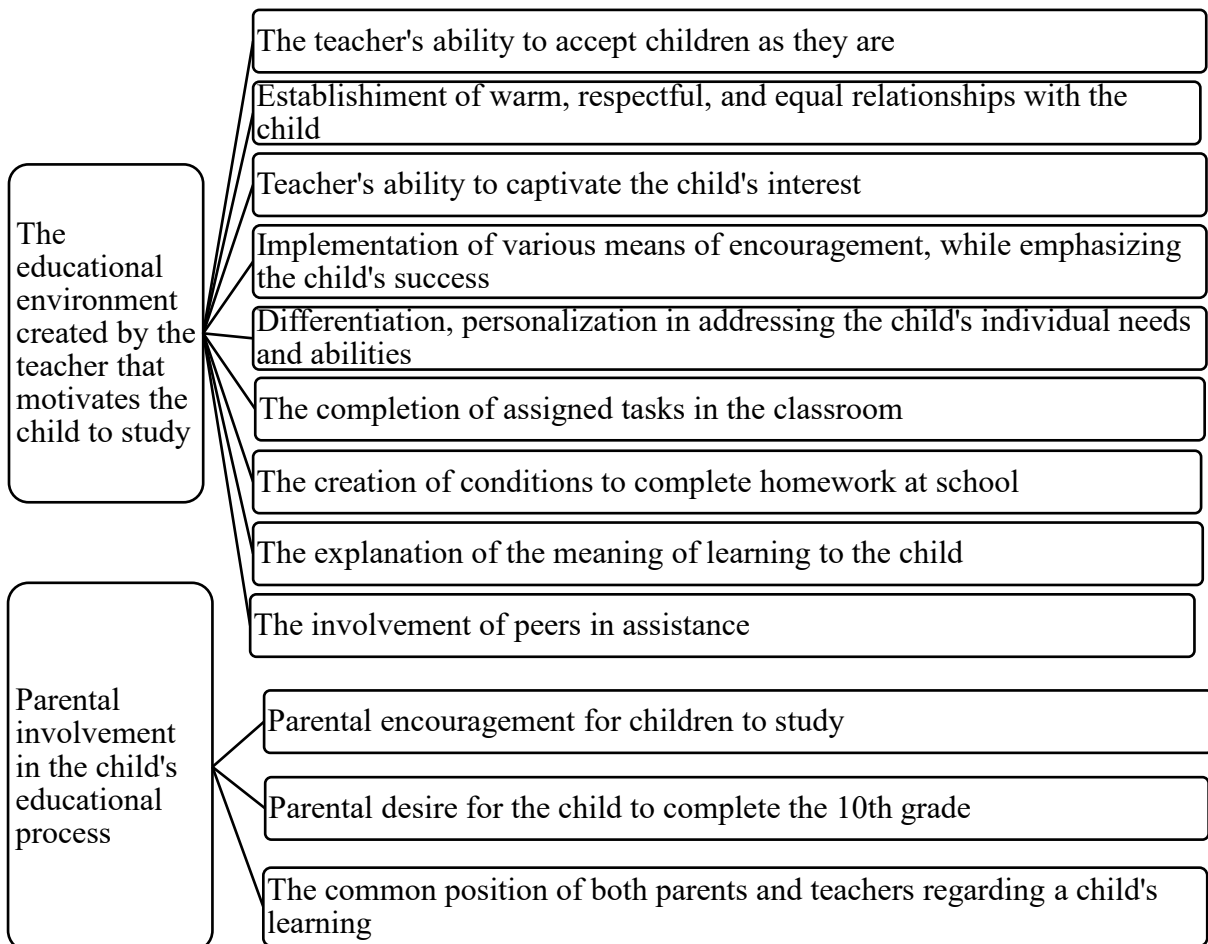
The educational environment created by the teacher that motivates the child to study	The teacher's ability to accept children as they are
	Establishiment of warm, respectful, and equal relationships with the child
	Teacher's ability to captivate the child's interest
	Implementation of various means of encouragement, while emphasizing the child's success
	Differentiation, personalization in addressing the child's individual needs and abilities
	The completion of assigned tasks in the classroom
	The creation of conditions to complete homework at school
	The explanation of the meaning of learning to the child
	The involvement of peers in assistance
Parental involvement in the child's educational process	Parental encouragement for children to study
	Parental desire for the child to complete the 10th grade
	The common position of both parents and teachers regarding a child's learning

Figure 1 **Children's motivation to study** *(created by authors)*

The teacher motivates Roma children to learn by creating a favourable educational environment for them. The study shows that the teacher's ability to accept children as they are is extremely important in motivating them to learn: "the teachers' ability to approach without stigmatization. When children are not singled out, they work calmly" (M1). Additionally, creating warm, respectful, equal relationships with the child is also important. According to the research participants: "like any person, they don't like it when you say you must, you must. Simply, I think, like any person, they don't like a commanding tone. If you talk to them nicely, for example, could you please, we missed you, it's a kind of game, we all like it. We also don't like it when someone says something in a commanding way, demands something. If you say it nicely, it's done right away" (M8), "The teacher has to excite the child so that the child wants to come and is not afraid, because it is the contact between the teacher and the child that is important for that bond" (M16). The teacher's personalized approach to the child, based on constructive interaction and support, is crucial. When organizing the learning process, it is important to know the child well, respond to their needs, and help overcome learning difficulties. The importance of constructive interaction to motivate the child to learn is also emphasized by other authors (Gudžinskienė, 2010). Constructive interaction, based on a positive psychological atmosphere in the educational process, directed towards personal growth, motivates pupils to learn (Wang, Rubie-Davies, & Meissel, 2018).

The research indicates that the teacher's ability to engage the child motivates them to learn. Participants in the study stated: "If he finds the task interesting, he will do it himself" (M1), "I give interesting tasks related to life. He counts money very well... For example, there were negative numbers, and the child couldn't understand. I found a task with cards in the textbook. Since Roma children like to play cards, I used cards to explain the task. The most important thing is to relate it to the child's life experience" (M15), "It depends on the teachers themselves how they engage the child in learning. It is important that the child wants to come to class and feels good" (M16), "It needs to be interesting for the child. Link the task to practice, I always do that. When learning new things, relate them to what the child has learned, use it, involve their experience. For example, this child is good at counting money, so when we learn percentages, I use his knowledge and relate it to money. When I do that, he understands better" (M17). Therefore, the teacher's role is crucial in motivating children. Students willingly engage in the learning process when the learning content matches their interests, when attractive learning methods are found for them, and when they experience learning success. Hence, a teacher's ability to build a relationship with the child, explore various ways by involving the child in the educational process, and the teacher's pedagogical and didactic competencies create motivational systems that enable the child to feel satisfaction in learning and remain an active participant in the learning process, aiming for successful learning outcomes. J. Randi & L. Corno

(2022), A. Tonković, L. Pongračić & M. Lončar (2022) also emphasize the adaptation of educational content by linking it to the interests of learners.

Teachers, in their efforts to motivate children to learn, employ various incentive measures, emphasizing the child's success. This is illustrated by the statements of the research participants: "Let's say a child does a task, and you praise him. I say to him, listen, today you did better than ever, as it turned out well for you, and of course, he apparently thinks, okay, if I did well today, then I can do even better tomorrow, so it motivates him" (M8), "If you encourage them. In my classes I employ the system of an accumulated grade. Children really likes it that they can get that grade, and then it is added, for example, a child has an overall grade of 7, when the accumulated one is added, he sees eight in his school's diary and is very happy, he really likes it" (M16), "Praise is very motivating, then the child smiles, the mood improves. A child also likes it when I address him by name, not by last name" (M16), "Motivating a child is highly dependent on learning success, so it is essential not to forget to praise children not only for completing a task well but also for their efforts. It may be that a child tried very hard, and the result is not as expected, so I still praise" (M17). The motivation to study of Roma children is directly linked to their ability to experience success during the learning process. Therefore, a child's engagement in the learning process relies on the teacher's ability to maintain a close, warm relationship with the child, praising the child for even small learning achievements, providing an opportunity for the child to receive feedback on their learning results throughout the entire learning period. When teachers adopt an interactive communication approach, they involve students in the decision-making process, allow students to choose what and how to learn, encourage pupils to express their suggestions, reassure students, express their belief in students' ability to perform tasks, as well as provide clear feedback (Gabrielavičiūtė, Raižienė, & Garckija, 2022).

The study also shows that teachers motivate children to learn by differentiating and personalising activities and tasks to meet pupils' individual needs and abilities. For instance, according to the participants of the study: "I have differentiated work with my students, and they can choose their own option" (M4), "I adapt the tasks according to his abilities. Then he engages because if I give him a task that is too difficult, he won't do anything, and then nothing happens" (M9), "establish demands based on their abilities [...] this is very important" (M13), "we always try to adapt the tasks so that they are able to complete them, or I bring extra materials, tools so that they can do them" (M14). When creating an inclusive learning environment, it is very important for the teacher to properly assess pupil's abilities and, based on them, to differentiate the tools and adapt the learning materials to the child's individual needs. Other researchers (Randi & Corno, 2022; Tonković, Pongračić, & Lončar, 2022) also emphasize the importance of the creation of learning opportunities as well as the adaptation of the teaching methods and tools.

The study found that Roma children are reluctant to do homework at home, due to this, teachers try to provide opportunities for the children to complete as many assigned tasks as possible in class. The study participants pointed out that "Roma do not do homework, so we need them to complete tasks in class [...] sometimes you need to stand next to him" (M1), "we all know that he does not do homework, so we try to complete as many tasks as possible in class" (M17).

Since teachers are aware that not all Roma families have conditions at home that are suitable for doing homework, thus, teachers create opportunities for the pupils to complete tasks at school. The following statement of the research participant depicts this claim: "conditions have been created in the school for children to do their homework after lessons in the classroom, and children take advantage of it because they don't have the opportunity to study at home..." (M5). Learning outcomes depend not only on the student's interaction at school but also on the students' independent work at home, namely, completing assignments. One of the learning problems for Roma children, identified by participating teachers in this study, is the non-completion of tasks intended to be done at home, which is directly linked to the limited opportunities of Roma children to do their homework at home. Scholars emphasize the importance of teacher's work not only with the student but also with their family in order to ensure that the student is fully engaged in the learning process not only at school but also has the opportunity to complete assignments at home (Pescaru, 2018).

The study showed that children are motivated to study through the explanation of the meaning of learning: "In the future, you will need, for example, if you study, finish school, you can acquire some profession, you can have a better job. All those things, like when you finish school and move on to the next grade because they don't want to stay in the same class. Teachers try to find accessible words for each child when communicating with them" (M21). This suggests that, as teachers aim to motivate the children to study, they look for opportunities to link learning to personal benefits. Teachers connect success in class with students' expectations and future prospects. C. M. Pescaru (2018) and J. Randi & L. Corno (2022) also emphasize the benefits of education by linking it to greater career opportunities.

Teachers also use peer involvement strategies to motivate children. Participants in the study stated: "peer support and peer help to learn is also motivating" (M1), "the Lithuanian language teacher mentioned that his vocabulary is very poor. The teacher and I discussed what to do. The girls who know Lithuanian well help him once a day during break time in my classroom, they only speak to him in Lithuanian. Through the involvement of peers, we try to solve the problem of not knowing Lithuanian "(M3), "the Roma child is helped to understand the material by other children in the class who understand and complete the tasks well" (M14). The study shows that the involvement of the whole class in the learning process, which encourage cooperation and mutual

assistance, is crucial for a child's motivation to study. D. Wiliam & L. Siobhan (2015) highlight the value of teacher-supervised collaborative learning, where classmates assist each other in their learning, provide feedback, emotional support, therefore, create a cooperative classroom atmosphere.

The study found that a crucial factor in motivating Roma children to learn is parental involvement in the child's education process, e.g. the fostering of a supportive learning environment at home. The study results emphasize that parental motivation significantly influences a child's eagerness to study. According to study participants, "we had one girl who completed 10 grades and specialized. In my long teaching career, this is the only instance of a Roma child completing 10 grades. The parents played a crucial role in this achievement – they actively encouraged her to pursue education" (M5), "more wealthy families automatically link their child's future to education, insisting on academic dedication and high grades" (M14), "when conversing with successful Roma individuals, they express a desire for their children to attend school and graduate" (M15). When parents recognize the advantages of education and connect learning with a brighter future for their children, they naturally motivate and encourage their children to excel academically. Parents who have personally experienced the benefits of education are more likely to inspire their children to learn and underscore the importance of education through their own example.

The analysis of survey data indicates that parental aspirations for their children to complete grade 10 serve as a significant motivator for Roma students. As revealed in the study, "Many parents express the desire for their children to complete grade 10, citing legal requirements. At the age of 16, students are permitted to leave school and enter the workforce" (M6), "parents expect their children to graduate at least from the primary school. Some emphasize the importance of just completing the school, others aspire for higher academic achievements" (M17). It is evident that children are influenced by the explicit parental directive to stay in school until the age of 16, in accordance with legal obligations. Additionally, certain parents envision their children completing 10 years of education, pursuing further studies, and attaining specialized skills.

The study reveals that a shared attitude between parents and teachers towards children's learning is important for children's motivation. "Both parents and I share the same position" (M6), "A lot depends on the family. If the family is interested in the child's learning, it's all right, if the family doesn't care, nothing will happen. The school is ready to help, but the family has to make an effort" (M14).

Effective collaboration between schools and parents, along with a shared approach between teachers and parents regarding a child's engagement in the education system, is crucial for fostering the child's motivation to learn. Establishing a relationship of trust and cooperation between the school and the family lays the groundwork for achieving common objectives in the child's

learning journey, ensuring positive learning outcomes in the present and the future. Active engagement of the family entails playing a significant role in decision-making processes at school, especially in matters related to the child's learning path and career choices (Natividad-Sancho, Gairal-Casadó, Sordé Martí, & Yeste, 2023). Simultaneously, the educational attainment level within the family is paramount, as it is within the family that a child's attitudes and values toward learning and education take shape. Parents wield a considerable motivational influence when they can articulate the importance of learning through personal example, backed by their own educational background and its practical application in life and the professional realm. As highlighted by L. Kováčová (2015), education stands as a fundamental prerequisite for the development of every human community and fulfils a profound need for individuals as they prepare for independent living, personal growth, and positive integration into society.

Conclusions

The study highlighted the impact of teacher-created educational environments and parental involvement on the motivation of Roma children to study.

Teachers foster motivation by accepting Roma children as they are and cultivating respectful, equal relationships that contribute to positive psychological well-being in the classroom and fosters personal growth. The teacher's ability to engage students, provide diverse incentives tailored to individual needs, and emphasize not only learning outcomes but also pupil's personal success and recognition plays a crucial role in motivating children to learn. Differentiation and personalization of the learning process are key elements in catering to each child's needs and abilities. In the context of working with Roma children, organizing the educational process to maximize in-class tasks is important, considering that not all children have the means to complete homework at home. As an example, offering opportunities for children to do their homework at school after regular hours becomes a significant aspect of fostering motivation. Teachers also aim to motivate Roma children through the explanation of the meaning of learning, through the discussions on the benefits of education, as well as through the exploration of potential career paths for them. Collaboration and cooperation among students is employed in order to overcome learning difficulties, to foster a sense of unity and to facilitate improved learning outcomes.

Parental involvement in the educational process is critical for motivating Roma children. Parents play a key role in creating a supportive learning environment at home, establishing clear learning objectives linked to the child's future education and career prospects. The shared attitude between parents and

teachers, regarding the child's learning, positively influences the child's motivation to learn.

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