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Privatisation and its racialised others: Roma voices on segregated education and blame in Hungary

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Intersections. EEJSP
11(2): 119–135.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v11i2.1364
https://intersections.tk.hu

Abstract

This article explores how increasingly privatised primary education is experienced by Roma parents in a Hungarian small town, Akácos. Through the investigation of the town's primary schooling system, this piece opens up space for an inquiry into the ways the boundaries of public and private are being redrawn by local and national education policy. As these rearrangements occur, the meanings of 'deficits' and racialisation shift, cementing education segregation into the social fabric of the town. Applying the lens of critical race theory and its focus on counter-storytelling in relation to deficit positionings, a fourfold local interpretation of the effects of privatisation arises in the context of education. Roma parents experience declining educational resources and the privatisation of schools into church-run institutions as additional material burdens, 'loving' segregation, the privatisation of pedagogic added value and the privatisation of blame, materialising in racial othering. Through this, the article sheds light on the complex interplay between the social production of deficits and processes of educational privatisation through the voices of Roma parents in a specific locality.

Keywords: privatisation, Roma, inclusive education, deficit, segregation

1 Introduction

> 'You know, it was all me. They [the majority municipality] screwed me over with the benefits, and this was my revenge. I set the Gypsy children upon them'.
>
> Ferenc, Roma Self-Government Representative

This quote refers to the primary school desegregation program conducted in Akácos, a mid-size town on the Great Hungarian Plain, which eventually led to the closure of one of the two segregated Roma schools, momentarily disturbing the local schooling status

quo. The closure of the state-run 'ghetto' school,[1] Nárcisz, was the result of a strategic litigation process carried out by a human rights NGO targeting several highly segregated primary schools across the country. However, the way Ferenc, the local Roma self-government representative, frames his agency, referring to a report he made on the school segregation situation in Akácos a while ago, can shed some light on the local discourses around structural racism that perpetuate the educational system and the deficit positionings of Roma children. In his narrative, the Roma students of Nárcisz appear as a threat to the other schools that are obliged to enroll them. He is referring to the fact that in the context of an underfunded education system, caught between the structures of local race[2]-based hierarchies, Roma children increasingly appear in educational contexts as 'problems' (Neumann, 2022). As such, their containment within the walls of the two segregated schools in Akácos becomes a self-evident process in the midst of the privatisation of education, exacerbated by the closure of Nárcisz.

The Hungarian education system is so highly selective that by 2000, 18.1 per cent of Roma students attended classes that only other Roma were attending (Havas & Liskó, 2005). After a short decrease in the intensity of this phenomenon due to the desegregation policies of the late 2000s, the proportion further increased over the last decade (Ercse, 2018), as did the segregation index of disadvantaged children (Hajdu et al, 2024). This process is enmeshed with the social position of Roma that limits their access to education, housing, health care and the labour market, which processes showcase that being a Hungarian Roma involves having a unique racialised class position (Kovai & Puskás, 2023), which is especially visible in rural areas where local, national and structural social processes of marginalisation have created an advanced level of housing segregation. Local Roma often reside on the margins of towns or small villages with less developed infrastructure (Virág, 2017; Keller & Virág, 2019). This article presents this marginal social position and the individualisation of poverty and how they are perpetuated by local education institutions.

Based on months of ethnographic fieldwork in Akácos in 2022 and 2023, this article presents how the complex interplay of national and local processes of privatisation constructs the discourses around education segregation and deficit positionings, as experienced and interpreted by my Roma informants. Using the case of the school closure as a lens on the lives of Roma parents in the midst of the diversion of resources from public education, this article presents four systemic effects of privatisation. First, material, in the form of the small contributions of money required for field trips, transportation, or material resources such as printing paper or soap that became more prominent with the closure of Nárcisz. Second, the 'religious privatisation' of the local schooling system, which cemented racial segregation while also easing the burdens of material privatisation for Roma parents. Third, as the privatisation of institutional care due to severe teacher short-

[1] Literature on Roma inclusive education (Fejes and Szűcs, 2018) calls schools with a Roma ratio between 30 and 50 percent as segregating schools and schools with a Roma ratio of more than 50 percent as 'ghetto' schools based on the seminal works of Havas and Liskó (2005) on school segregation. I use quotation marks on this matter, as ghettos are historically and socially constructed spaces of specific configurations.

[2] Even though I am aware of the conceptual differences, in this article, I am using race, racialisation and ethnicity interchangeably as it falls outside of the scope of this paper to address these.

ages that Roma parents have no means of compensating for, which became apparent from the experiences in ethnically mixed schools. And last, as the privatisation of blame for educational underachievement and marginalisation materialising in racial othering. Through this, I show how education policy, in redrawing the boundaries of private and public and negotiated by local actors, becomes an engine for the deficit positionings of Roma children and curtails the possibility of integrated education. Furthermore, this paper sheds light on the lived experience of segregation and deficit positionings by amplifying the voices of Roma parents amidst these processes to create counter-narratives to the individualisation of poverty and the privatisation of education and structural racism.

The structure of this article is as follows: I situate my empirical research within critical race theory's insights about deficit positionings and counter-narratives and the literature on education policy in Hungary to create a frame for understanding the complex process of racialisation and privatisation that shapes the experiences of Roma children within the Hungarian educational system. After presenting the methodology of the study, I introduce my field location, Akácos, and the local schooling situation of Roma children by focusing on the closure of Nárcisz, which collided with the exacerbating local experiences of privatisation. The discussion concentrates on my findings about how Roma parents make sense of the structural racism that is perpetuated in the Hungarian education system and how the privatisation of education is experienced by them in four major ways.

2 Education and Racialisation in Hungary

To explore how the individualisation of poverty is experienced by Roma parents in the context of schooling, it is essential to understand how education as a social institution is engaged with the reproduction of racial hierarchies. Critical race theory's focus on cultural deficit (Smit, 2012; Ercse, 2020; Kende, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) and counter-storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) can shed light on how race as a social construct acts as a force that excludes certain groups of people from collective educational resources, consequently contesting their citizenship claims and marginalising them in the labour market. The creation of cultural deficits represents racially othered children as lacking abilities and good behaviour due to their cultural differences and marginalisation. Schools are often tools for nation-building (Neumann, 2023) and engines of the production of these cultural 'deficits' through constructing unrealistic majoritarian standards of attainment, which are not achievable by everyone.

Roma students in Eastern Europe are often targeted by 'deficit discourses' that posit them as lacking, or lagging behind as a collective, juxtaposing them with 'ideal' students. The most extreme case of this is the pathologisation of cultural differences, which materialises in the severe overrepresentation of Roma in special needs education and mild mental retardation diagnoses. According to Kegye and Kende, the proportion of socioeconomically disadvantaged children in remedial schools in Hungary is 18 percent greater than in mainstream schools (2024, p. 42). Amongst them, Roma are severely overrepresented (Kegye & Kende, 2024), which phenomenon is a detrimental abuse of human rights as it harms the dignity, access to education and safety from ethnic discrimination of the students affected by this practice. Furthermore, deficit positionings also often entail lowered

expectations for culturally different children, who might struggle with national curriculums constructed around majoritarian cultural codes that exclude multicultural elements such as art, literature or histories that could build a more inclusive educational environment. Racial othering is also a characteristic of deficit positioning that often materialises in personal interactions through drawing a line between 'us' and 'the racially other'. It entails the dehumanisation, stereotyping and exclusion of Roma youth that normalises racial hierarchies in different localities within Eastern Europe (Creţan et al, 2021; Feischmidt, 2014; Lambrev et al., 2018).

Deficit positionings that perpetuate educational systems are often the driving force behind education segregation. As shown by various authors (Neumann, 2017; Szalai, 2010; Szombati, 2018), schools, especially those in more peripheral rural localities, are always embedded into the local systems of relations. In the midst of welfare state retrenchment in the aftermath of the transition period, this has led to a dual welfare regime and the sharp symbolic divide between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor (Szalai, 2010) often expressed in racialised discourses. Schools have become the very zone of demarcation of this symbolic divide, legitimising the subaltern position of Roma by translating marginality into educational attainment through the process of segregation. Segregated schools often lack resources, directly affecting the quality of education that can be accessed within these institutions. Furthermore, segregated schools also deprive racialised minorities of social capital, which is often the only way of acquiring a stable job in a rural area.

These processes, however, take place in an education policy context that has been characterised by the religious privatisation of schools (Ercse, 2018; Ercse & Radó, 2019; Neumann, 2024), with 17.5 percent of primary schools being church-run in 2022 (Hajdu et al., 2024). Churches have also taken over non-Roma, ethnically mixed and segregated schools (see the precedent in Kegye, 2018) in Hungary. As a consequence, their influence on education segregation is becoming increasingly prominent (Neumann, 2024). Their policy on Roma entails 'loving' segregation – segregation with the purpose of catching-up and civilising, curtailing the possibility of inclusive education in Hungary (Neumann, 2024). Neumann and Mészáros call this a neoconservative turn with étatist and neoliberal elements within the Hungarian education system (2019). This education policy has degraded the quality of public education (Hajdu et al., 2024) and increased financialisation (Geva, 2021) for the upper strata of society who use expensive private schools or extremely competitive elite state schools benefitting those who can afford a shadow education. Those who cannot afford to access such institutions may benefit from the churchification (religious privatisation) of state schools (Fodor, 2022) into institutions that are free to select – even amongst six-year-olds – and receive more funding to attract teachers amidst a staffing shortage (Ercse, 2018). Furthermore, 'church-run institutions operate according to more abundant and reliable infrastructural conditions, and in contrast to state-run schools, they do not risk government disinvestment and austerity measures' (Neumann, 2024).

Both of these processes, however, incentivise parents to fill in the gaps of social reproduction by private means by becoming responsible, involved parents who spend time, energy and money on developing and cultivating their children (Szőke & Kovai, 2022). Thus, privatisation in this neoconservative and neoliberal education policy era entails both the outsourcing of educational institutions to private churches and making the

responsibility for pedagogical added value the private sphere of families. Consequently, education increasingly appears as a site for the reproduction of racialised class positions in the Hungarian context, which some authors would call a 'caste-like' system of relations (Zolnay, 2018). In this way, education translates the complex and intertwined process of marginalisation into individual or cultural failure. As a result, it contributes to the outsourcing – privatisation – of structural social issues into the private sphere of families and individual students.

3 Methodology

This article is the product of months of mixed methods ethnographic research I conducted as an MA student, and then its continuation as a junior researcher. I used four different data sources. I analysed strategic local documents and statistics about Akácos to fully understand local relations and their embeddedness in broader structures. These documents were the Local Equal Opportunity Plan, the School Desegregation Program, development plans, the municipality website and labour statistics. I conducted nine interviews with the principals of the most affected schools, the Roma minority self-government representative, the mayor, and the activists initiating the desegregation litigation process. Based on these interviews, I developed a case study on the school closure and its embeddedness in the local school system and institutional setup. Furthermore, I conducted semi-structured interviews at the Roma settlement with 15 Roma mothers, sometimes involving their children and spouses. Last, I carried out participant observation, involving informal conversations or spontaneous interviews in the streets. Some took place in majoritarian spaces, such as the local spa and café, but most in the small shop at the edge of the Roma settlement, in the streets, people's homes and the local Roma after-school centre at Nárcisz Primary School.

I used an area-based sampling method to approach the parents living in the district of the closing school in the eastern Roma settlement. I knocked on doors and, in some cases, used snowball sampling. Only a few participants allowed me to do voice recording; I used AI to transcribe the tapes in these cases and used my notes in unrecorded interviews. I also wrote field notes. These texts were then coded and analysed. My approach followed the principles of counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), which entails enlarging the voices of marginalised people to challenge dominant narratives around deficit positioning within education through exploring their struggles and narratives around systemic racism. However, I am aware of the limitations – namely, that the viewpoints of non-Roma actors locally – apart from the principals – only appear as they are experienced by my informants. Thus, the dominant local narratives on Roma in this paper stem from the reflections of Roma parents, who might have less agency in shaping these.

It is important to note that local Roma cannot be seen as a homogeneous group as many of them have already moved out of the segregated residential area or got into 'better' schools, thus the gates of social mobility might have opened to some of them (Kovai & Szőke, 2021). However, in my approach, I chose to speak to those locked into the marginal space of the settlement in Akácos most affected by the social policies of education segregation. My interviewees were all women aged between 22 and 48. Five of them lived in the

few streets in the core of the eastern settlement, and ten were in the surrounding streets, which are considered less stigmatised but still part of the settlement. The financial situations and levels of marginalisation of these women varied based on the level of labour market participation of their households. Only two had no other income apart from the public works scheme or state subsidies. Their educational level was low; only three of them had finished secondary education. However, all these women shared a common attribute: they all wanted the best possible education in a safe environment and a better life for their children.

4 Akácos

Akácos is a mid-sized town on the Great Plain of Hungary. It is experiencing a stable and constant population decline, mainly due to low birth rates, high mortality, and outmigration. According to the Local Equal Opportunity Program (LEOP, 2020), the whole region is suffering from a shortage of capital investment due to low levels of infrastructural development. Thus, agricultural production is significantly higher than the national average in the region. Due to the low rate of capital investment, Akácos is struggling with relatively high levels of unemployment and low wages, signalled by the relatively high rate of participants enrolled in the public works scheme (many participants in the program are Roma, according to the LEOP).

Akácos has three historical Roma settlements on the margins of town. In this article, I only discuss the two major zones, the eastern and the western ones, located on opposite sides of town, both with their own segregated schools situated in the neighbourhood. Whereas Nárcisz, the school associated with the eastern settlement, was phased out from 2018 onwards and closed in 2023 due to the human rights abuses the schooling system imposed on Roma children through their unlawful segregation, Hóvirág, the school connected to the western settlement, was given to a small church in 2010 to save it from closing and to divert more resources towards the students in line with the paradigm of 'loving' segregation. Newly enrolling children from Nárcisz school's catchment area were diverted to the state-run Jácint or Tulipán schools or went to the church-run Hóvirág from 2018 onwards, while the upper four grades from Nárcisz were transferred to Jácint, the closest school to the eastern settlement. Local actors had been careful to try to distribute the children equally amongst Jácint and Tulipán; however, due to the distance of Tulipán from the settlement, transportation became a problem for many, and some transferred to Hóvirág. However, due to the high level of church privatisation, the school district's ability to implement school desegregation through catchment areas was significantly limited.

Akácos' schooling politics fit with the national trends of churchification (see details in Table 1). With the closure of Nárcisz, of the five primary schools, only two remained state-run, struggling with teacher shortages, overwork and institutional constraints. Thus, Akácos' primary schooling system shows a high level of privatisation under church ownership and simultaneously, exceedingly high levels of ethnic segregation. Principals of church-run institutions have a vast amount of discretionary power over school enrolments, and consequently, may construct their school's composition to pacify local classification struggles related to eroded middle class reproduction (Szőke et al., 2024). For instance, according to their operational documents, Nefelejcs and Százszorszép are not

obliged to accept any special needs children and can very easily deter Roma parents, as they often do, according to my informants. The fact that the proportion of Roma in these schools aligns with their ranking on standardised competence tests showcases how segregation and the production of educational deficits go hand in hand locally.

Table 1 Introduction to the primary schools in Akácos

Name of School	Type of School, Year of Transfer from State	School Roma Proportion in 2019 (%)[a]	Number of Students 2022[b] (rounded)	Ranking[c] (Nat avg.: 1475)
Nefelejcs Primary School	church, 1996	0*	420	1. (1544.5)
Százszorszép Primary School	church, 2015	15*	370	2. (1483)
Tulipán Primary School	State	less than 20*	210	3. (1396)
Jácint Primary School	State	between 30 and 50*	220	4. (1324)
Hóvirág Primary School	church, 2010	more than 95	270	5. (1275)
Nárcisz Primary School	State	more than 95	n.d.	6. (n.d.)

Source: LEOP, DAP, Work Plans, NABC. Made by: Fanni Puskás

[a] As ethnic data is rather scarce in the DAP document, data marked with a star is the number of severely disadvantaged (HHH) children, which in Akácos correlates strongly with ethnic background, though the actual number of Roma in the schools might be higher.

[b] Based on data from the schools' Work Plan 2021/22

[c] Based on the data of the National Assessment of Basic Competences, 8th grade values of the mean of math and literacy skills, calculated by the author accessed from the FIT reports of 2022. More on how 'objective' measuring systems called standardized testing can drive education segregation can be read in Knoester and Au (2017).

According to projections, the closure of Nárcisz is not likely to affect the between-school segregation level in Akácos, as two church-run 'elite' primary schools can very easily select and deter 'problem' students from joining, and the better-performing state school is relatively far away from the settlement. Therefore, students from Nárcisz are very likely to go to either Hóvirág, the other Roma settlement's church-run 'ghetto' school, or Jácint, the other state-run school, which is at risk of segregation.[3] According to experts, the closure of Nárcisz was endorsed by local elites because it is unlikely to change the local schooling status quo (segregation, that is), and due to the declining number of school-aged children,

[3] The proportion of Roma is between 30 and 50 percent.

having this many primary schools became unnecessary and costly. However, due to demographic decline and outmigration, some 'striving' Roma (Eredics, 2022) students got into non-Roma institutions locally (mostly Százszorszép, or Tulipán) – these were typically those from better-off families; for instance, the Catholic church-run Százszorszép has a share of Roma of 15 percent, as prescribed by the Desegregation Action Plan. Nevertheless, 'problem students' – deemed thus according to the logic of local education– rarely get into these schools for various reasons related to privatisation, as interpreted by my informants from the eastern settlement.

5 Findings: Privatisation and Deficits

5.1 The privatisation of material burdens

With or without strategic litigation, the closure of Nárcisz Primary was inevitable as both educational resources and the number of school-aged children drastically decreased in Akácos over the last decade, colliding with when the religious privatisation of three of the six schools occurred (by 2015). Nárcisz was already struggling to fill its classes as everyone who could had fled the school already as it became fully segregated due to the religious privatisation of schools in the town. However, why exactly it was this school, with the most deprived catchment area, that had to be closed was contested by my informants in many ways. 'What will happen with all our pictures on the walls? And what about our memories? I feel like they want to erase us'. 'Why do they have to close our school? We were happy with it. They should close one of the Hungarian schools'. My informants were very reflexive about the stigma around Nárcisz primary. Thus, some of them felt that the school closure was a punishment for being a 'bad school', in a 'bad neighbourhood', and their being 'bad Gypsies'. Irén said 'When I was a kid, you know it wasn't so bad. No police, no ambulance coming to school regularly'. Painfully reflecting on the decline of Nárcisz, the school she had avoided sending her children to as it had become fully segregated. As Irén narrated it, '…but I went to Nárcisz, I felt very happy with Nárcisz. I loved my teachers so much, we were like family in Nárcisz, you know. I grew up in a bad family situation, you know, so for me it was like home. I really liked going to school. But when I had to stay home, I felt awful'.

From their narratives of their childhood memories connected to Nárcisz primary, it appears that the school used to be of intrinsic value to the local community. The respondents remembered the teachers as prominent figures in their lives who wanted to help them, as school was a safe environment to engage with things from outside of the Roma settlement: art, music, literature, and even interactions with non-Roma students. However, most of them were aware of the stigma attached to the school and around the whole neighbourhood as it had become fully segregated by the 2010s. People who had successfully escaped Nárcisz through changing addresses in bureaucratic ways to register in a different catchment area told horror stories about Nárcisz, referring to it as a 'zoo', a container of 'cannibals' and drug addicts, where visits by police and ambulances were a daily nuisance. However, parents who stayed because they had to due to a lack of social, cultural and financial capital (someone who would share their address within a different catchment,

means of transportation, acceptable clothing for children, money for class trips, being able to succeed in entrance exams) did their best to create value out of their constraints. 'I mean, how bad can it be? XY [an internationally famous Roma professional] also graduated from here! And now they want to close it?'

In reality, the closure to most parents at Nárcisz caused time-management, financial and emotional burdens as it was not complemented by local initiatives to help with the transfer or create inclusive schools for Roma children. First, the students were now directed towards schools that are hard to reach on foot. As the settlement is located on the margins of town and lacks the infrastructure to provide frequent and cheap local public transport, getting children to school and then home every day became an issue, especially during wintertime when it is unsafe for children to ride bikes. Many parents had to rearrange their time schedules, making the dual-earner household norm almost impossible, as they had to juggle paid employment and childcare. Furthermore, from their perspective, non-Roma schools demand a lot of financial contributions from the parents in a context of declining educational resources. In state-run schools, this included providing toilet paper, soap and printing paper. In church-run schools, it involved paying for school trips and such. 'How am I supposed to buy a sanitary pack for the school when I struggle to buy these for my own home?' – cried Erzsi, a mother of three, referring to the inflation crisis beginning in 2022 that hit the Roma settlement especially hard. 'I have to choose between heating my house or feeding my kids in the winter. I have no money for toilet paper at school'. Even though Nárcisz also expected some contributions, they put more effort into applying for funds and teachers were very understanding if someone failed to contribute. Last, adapting to a new environment in a majoritarian school setting after attending a school where teachers and administration were familiar with the specific life conditions that marginalisation creates can take its emotional toll on both students and parents.

5.2 Religious privatisation and 'loving' segregation

As inclusive education literature stresses (Rapos et al., 2011; Mészáros & Neumann, 2021), it should be schools that adapt to the different needs of students and not students of marginalised backgrounds who should have to put in extra effort to reach the same standards as middle-class white students. However, this takes significant resources. As Nárcisz could not accept any new students from 2018 on, parents who could not escape Nárcisz were suddenly faced with 'free' school choice, a privilege only the local middle classes had access to before. They either had to follow the desegregation program and go to the state-funded Jácint (or the far-away Tulipán) or enroll into the other settlement's ghetto school, Hóvirág, run by a small Catholic order. Many parents choose the segregated school because, as a church-run institution, it has significantly more resources than the state-run ones to build an adaptive school that can operate in difference-conscious ways, in contrast to the state-run integrated schools that struggle with teacher shortages and centralised curricula, bound to a difference-blind approach.

In contrast, Hóvirág's educational programme is built around the most progressive tenets of inclusive education. One of the most prominent values of their pedagogical programme is seeing children as part of the social environments that they come from.

As Hóvirág's principal put it, '… so that we not only teach [Roma students] but in reality give them a fair and equal education based on their needs,' thereby trying to reengineer the welfare state by allocating more resources towards the needy. Run by a Catholic order, they have the means to channel extra resources towards helping the marginalised poor. For instance, they have connections with charities and food banks so they can give away food, clothes and cleaning supplies to families. They put significant effort into applying for funds to finance school trips, cleaning supplies, and other things to unburden Roma families. Their after-school talent programme accommodates many Roma youth who can receive scholarships for participation. Most importantly, as stressed by the principal, in contrast to all the other schools within the region, they are the only ones who do not struggle with a teacher shortage because of the better labour conditions they can offer. The school is dynamically growing, as more and more Roma parents want to enroll their children in Hóvirág. Accordingly, they have made additions to the school building: a new wing with five new classrooms and a completely new schoolyard and gym room. A teaching assistant supervises the transportation of the children from the eastern settlement to and from school; furthermore, children are entitled to free season tickets for the bus.

However, resources are only one part of the inclusivity programme. They also put significant effort into community engagement with Roma parents. Apart from constructing a Roma minority program where children can learn about their own culture in a positive, non-stigmatising way, the brothers of the order frequently make home visits and arrange communal cooking sessions. Teachers are very much aware of the importance of parent-school engagement in the case of marginalised families, so they make an extra effort to ensure good communication with parents so that they feel that they are equal partners in this relation – something that my informants said had been lacking in the non-segregated schools. The feeling of 'being able to discuss issues', as one of the parents put it, was also apparent in the closed Nárcisz. As it was only Roma children who went there, teachers were very familiar with the potential issues they might have, such as limited childcare capacity during times of seasonal agricultural work, housing poverty, menstruation poverty, and so on. Parents felt heard and accommodated in both segregated institutions, but in the state-run Nárcisz, in limited ways.

However, in the local context of Akácos, these two schools' adaptation to marginalised families' needs comes at a dire cost. Transforming the schools into inclusive spaces for Roma in a town where ethnic boundary-making is so prominent exacerbates segregation. The case of Nárcisz, which lacks the extra resources to address marginalisation, left the school as an emptying space, a space even 'striving' Roma families wanted to avoid. It became branded the vessel for 'bad Gypsies', one of the lowest performing schools in terms of national standardised testing. On the other hand, Hóvirág appeared as the 'elite Gypsy school', the vessel for the 'needy' who need to be developed and civilised. Even though the latter is making significant effort to attract non-Roma children too, their efforts to adapt to the needs of marginalised children made them visible as a space for Roma only locally, curtailing the possibility that the school will ever become an integrated one; a safe environment for the local middle-classes.

5.3 The privatisation of institutional care

For a surprisingly high number of Roma women I talked to, schooling had become a safety-related issue, especially for children in state-run institutions. They were constantly worried about them being hurt by other children because, in their experience, they were often left unsupervised. A mother I talked to shared a story about when her son had suffered an eye injury during playtime, and it took the school several hours to let her know about the incident. Several other women shared fears of exposure to cigarettes and drug abuse, referring to Nárcisz as a space where children normalised such things and 'rummage around freely'. The recurring phrase 'police, ambulance, every day' when referring to Nárcisz seems to echo these fears. A narrative that appears as the vilification of Roma children from the outside, however, is interpreted by most Roma parents as the lack of adequate supervision and parental engagement. Teachers' narratives also matched this diagnosis. As the principal of Nárcisz reflected, the shortage of teachers is a pressing issue in the state-funded schools in Akácos, which entails a significant amount of extra work for those who remain. Under these circumstances, the quality of education in these institutions can significantly suffer, producing overwhelmed and frustrated teachers with no time left for conflict resolution and community building, let alone providing good quality teaching.

In Nárcisz, this meant limited means for addressing the fact that marginalised children often need more educational resources to meet universalised educational standards that are not tailored to them. Parents in Nárcisz felt that their children were not performing well, even if they managed to get average grades. '[Getting] a grade B in Nárcisz means nothing in Jácint,' said Éva, mother of three. 'This is a weak school. A Gypsy school'. Furthermore, reflections on the quality of teaching also appeared in reference to the state-run integrated schools, such as Jácint or Tulipán, where the local narratives were centred around the notion of 'young' teachers. 'Everyone says it [Tulipán] is a good school, well, I don't think so. The headteacher is very young. She is not so patient'. In reality, the teaching body locally is increasingly ageing, in line with the national trend. Thus, the presence of young teachers usually means prosperity in the context of schools. However, in Roma parents' narratives, the presence of youth represents a form of scarcity, a shortage of empathy, communication, and experience to deal with marginalised children. Something more due to the shortage of teachers than their age.

For many of my informants, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns had made the role of family in educational attainment rather apparent. As mothers narrated this period, 'Oh, it was horrible. Studying at home, because I could not help them properly as they needed it. Mathematics, she said her brother helped her. Brr… It was terrible, of course, and the homework did not work out either. It is good for the kid to sit in class and hear the teacher explain. My daughter got a grade two [D] from history, and now she has a four [B]. Ever since there has been no virus and she can go to school,' said Mária. Anna said: 'I tried to help her [with studying], but I was too stupid to do maths. I can't even write essays, no one in Jácint helped us'. Aware of the fact that marginalisation and educational underachievement have accumulated over generations is something that most schools cannot deal with in extreme circumstances of decreasing pedagogic added value.

At the same time, they were also aware that when childcare becomes privatised (within the family sphere), their children do not have a fighting chance at succeeding in education.

5.4 The privatisation of blame

In non-Roma schools, apart from the issue that the schools adapt to the needs of students instead of the other way around, Roma parents' narratives on education also focused on the stigma and bullying their children had to endure. Many Roma in Akácos shared the experience of being unwanted in majoritarian spaces. For instance, the nightclubs, restaurants, the centre of the town, and even the 'elite' schools located in the centre are a clear contrast with the Roma settlements on the town's peripheries. 'They don't like the Gypsies there. They are racists'. was something that I heard from many people I talked to in the eastern settlement. 'Gypsies don't feel nice [good] at that school' said one of my informants when I asked her why she did not even consider applying to the Catholic-run 'elite school' in town. 'I don't know, like I said, last time I was talking to my friend and she told me this story about the math teacher literally calling the whole family stupid in front of the kid. […] He was explaining something in class. The teacher said "Come," somehow he scratched his head, and [added], "son, it must be your mother being this stupid. Like that. Or maybe you learned it from your mother because all of you are stupid at home"' said Mária, 27, a mother of two, perfectly aware that local 'elite' schools often put ('privatise') the blame for underachievement on parents and family resources.

The fear of stigmatising whole families, thus the individualisation of poverty, was apparent with parents who succeeded in getting their children into 'elite' schools, only to end up moving them to Hóvirág after they were bullied and severely underperforming. Their stories are cautionary tales for other parents who would try their luck in the 'elite' majoritarian schools. In local narratives, they appear as double failures because they have failed their 'community' by trying to advance in individualised ways. However, they have also failed because their new environments rejected them despite all their efforts to fit in. But what do you need to succeed at a local 'elite' school as a Roma child? A story told by one of the principals lingered in my mind for a long time after I left my field location. One of the Roma parents tried to enrol her daughter in Nefelejcs. However, it is a well-known fact that they do not accept Roma. Even the vice-principal stated this proudly before our interview. 'I don't understand why you would want to interview me. We do not have disadvantaged children here'. One Roma mother, however, did not accept this. Understanding the mechanisms of discrimination well, she hired non-Roma 'parents' to take her daughter to pre-admission and admission sessions. She only appeared as her real parent at the official enrolment event, where she legally needed to represent her, waving the acceptance letter. According to the anecdotes, her daughter did not last long there.

Whether the story is true or not, the narratives around this show that to succeed in the local educational context, you need non-Roma parents, the ability to pass as non-Roma, and knowledge about how the system works. Many Roma parents reflected on racial markers as the factor delimiting their children's access to education. 'Well, maybe she would get along with the chameleon [lower-class] Hungarians. She has a pretty white face. I don't know. But maybe they would take one good look at her and beat her up' – said Ágnes, a mother of four, referring to one of her daughters. Bullying was one of the most apparent

and talked about fears of Roma parents in the context of integrated schools. Other kids talking down to their children, humiliating them because of their clothes, ways of speaking, and their racial markers were the most common reasons why some parents chose segregated schools. In Hóvirág or Nárcisz, children can be '…amongst their own, relatives, cousins. They will not hurt one another', said Ferenc. Even though – as reflected by Ildi, a mother of two – in majoritarian schools, her children would get to have non-Roma friends (and this is probably the only way to land a stable job locally), she was having doubts about enrolling them into the 'elite' school. In her narrative, Hóvirág appeared as a safe space, '…where children go around looking like you [pointing towards me]. With a wide smile on their faces, not having to worry about a thing. Here [at Százszorszép Primary], there is more intrigue between the students, parents and even teachers'.

6 Conclusion

The article sheds light on how education segregation is embedded into local and national processes of privatisation that create the 'problem student' (Neumann, 2022) – in the context of Akácos, marginalised Roma students. Roma parents, well aware of the fact that their children are being labelled problematic, instead of the privatisation of education, perceived four main ways in which the education system was redrawing the boundaries of private and public and severely limiting their citizenship rights. This became rather apparent with the closure of Nárcisz, as now three out of five of the primary schools in Akácos are run by churches, the school closure posed additional burdens for families in the eastern settlement, and the closure of the school suddenly made these students visible, and 'problems' to be erased. Thus, first, the closure of Nárcisz burdened them with additional travel costs and the requirement of financially contributing to the other schools, as well as a loss of community within the school. Second, privatisation appeared in their lives in the form of the church-run Hóvirág. As they were suddenly faced with the option of 'free' school choice, they were 'free' to choose between 'loving' segregation and a difference-blind state-run integrated school with a teacher shortage on the path to becoming segregated. Third, they experienced the privatisation of institutional care stemming from teacher shortages in the form of declining school safety and the academic achievement of their children. And last, they were also aware of the privatisation of blame related to all of these factors, materialising in racial othering and discrimination.

Thus, through amplifying the voice of Roma parents affected by segregation with the method of counter-storytelling, this article has shown how deficit positionings – the driving force behind segregation – are deeply embedded into the various forms of privatisation locally. Following insights from critical race theory, I have showcased how 'deficits' are not inherent but in fact are produced by institutional change that has redrawn the boundaries of private and public embedded into local and national policy making. However, the local types of privatisation also create tension, which is especially visible in the case of Hóvirág. The school could ease the load on Roma families in terms of material resources and institutional care, taking on burdens from the private sphere, but it could only do so in a church-run institutional context in a segregated environment, decreasing the life chances of the children attending it. In contrast, attending a state-run school – involving following the desegregation program – imposes additional burdens (material, pedagogical and emotional), to be compensated by private means. One constant factor is the

privatisation of blame that is apparent in the long-lasting perception of Roma as deficient in the context of education. Thus, the parallel processes of church privatisation and the privatisation of institutional care set a high price for integrated education for Roma parents – and of this, they are painfully aware.

As childcare and education become increasingly privatised in a town like Akácos, it may lead to the cementing of social inequalities as boundaries based on private resources are being drawn more sharply. On the other hand, for marginalised Roma parents, demands for accessible, inclusive and safe schools also arose, but only for their children to be incorporated into the local schooling status quo: segregated education. However, as structural processes lead to emptying in many localities, social mobility for Roma through the channels of education may have opened up to many 'striving' families (Kovai & Szőke, 2021). As local elite schools struggle to fill their seats with non-Roma students, they might be more open to accepting students with a Roma background who show potential in local educational contexts. How religious privatisation and the decline of educational resources will affect their educational chances remains a question that requires investigation.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Hungarian National Research, Development and Innovation Office under Grant FK 138 422 and Central European University's MA Research Grant 2022.

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