

Strengthening Teachers' Knowledge of Parental Involvement Through Board Game – An Example from A Hungarian School

Zsófia Kocsis

Department of Educational Studies, MTA-DE-PARTNERS, University of Debrecen.

Email:kocsis.zsofia@arts.unideb.hu

Judit Kelemen

KOSZISZ Saint Stephen Secondary Grammar School. Email: kelemenjudy@gmail.com

Edit Szilágyi

KOSZISZ Saint Stephen Secondary Grammar School. Email: edithszil@gmail.com

Gabriella Pusztai

Department of Educational Studies, MTA-DE-PARTNERS, University of Debrecen. Email:

pusztai.gabriella@arts.unideb.hu

Abstract

There is a growing demand for experiential learning methods in teacher education. While the benefits of parental involvement (PI) are well established, Hungarian teacher training still lacks practical tools to prepare educators for building effective school–family partnerships. This study presents the development and pilot testing of K.Ö.SZ.I. (Communication and Harmony between Parents and School), a cooperative board game designed to raise awareness and foster competencies related to PI. The research was conducted in a North-eastern Hungarian secondary school using a mixed-methods approach: gameplay recordings, and structured observations. Findings show that although teachers value communication with parents to support student achievement, they are more hesitant to involve families in decision-making or community life. The board game fostered reflection, collaboration, and dialogue, surfacing implicit assumptions and promoting critical awareness. Results suggest that playful, structured tools like K.Ö.SZ.I. can enhance teacher professional development and help bridge existing gaps in parent–teacher collaboration training.

Keywords: parental involvement, family–school partnerships, teacher-parent collaboration, board game, board game design, teacher attitudes, teacher education

Introduction

The collaboration between school and family is an increasingly important focus in educational research, yet this area often receives limited attention in teacher education. Our study examines teachers' attitudes toward parental involvement and how these can be developed through conscious, reflective methods, using the example of a secondary school in Eastern Hungary. Teachers participated by testing the board game *K.Ö.SZ.I. - Communication and Harmony Between Parents and School*, developed by our research group. This pedagogical tool simulates school-related scenarios and supports teachers in reflecting more consciously on their own pedagogical practice and communication style.

Our aim was to explore how teachers perceive the possibilities of working with parents, what challenges they face, and how a playful yet professionally grounded method can support them in this process. While the research involved a small sample size, the findings highlight the importance of consciously building relationships with parents. The board game used in the study can serve as a tool in teacher training to strengthen parent-teacher cooperation and develop communication skills.

Literature review

Parental involvement (PI) has been defined in various ways in international literature. Morrison (1978) viewed it as parents' participation in school life, while Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) highlighted the provision of resources. Hill and Taylor (2004) focused on parental actions supporting academic achievement, and LaRocque et al. (2011) described it as investment in children's education. The concept later expanded to include both school- and home-based forms of participation (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Epstein, 2001). Today, PI is often seen as a set of parent- or school-initiated actions that support learning within institutional expectations. One of the most influential models is Epstein's theory of overlapping

spheres, later reformulated as the “School, Family, and Community Partnerships” model (Epstein, 2018). Although widely applied, this model has been criticized for its school-centric orientation and for reflecting middle-class norms, with limited responsiveness to cultural and social diversity (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Hornby & Black, 2018; Reay, 2023). In response, recent literature prefers the term “engagement,” emphasizing mutual relationships, shared responsibilities, and respect for parents’ cultural knowledge (Goodall & Montgomery, 2013; Pushor, 2018; Jeynes, 2018; Kim, 2022).

In Hungarian schools, PI remains limited. OECD data (2019) show that only a quarter of parents initiate contact with teachers, and similarly few teachers reach out to parents. Fewer than 10% of parents participate in school boards well below the OECD average. Even after COVID-19, Hungary's figures remained among the lowest (OECD, 2020, 2023).

Hungarian research has only recently begun addressing PI more thoroughly. Based on PISA and national data, Bacskai et al. (2024) found that while parental participation declines as children age, its impact on academic achievement increases during adolescence. They identified two forms: comprehensive (e.g. helping at home, discussing school events) and occasional (e.g. parent–teacher meetings). Social status strongly influenced participation levels. Csók and Pusztai (2022) stressed the importance of school social workers in building parent–school ties, while Bacskai et al. (2023) noted that in the case of children with special needs, collaboration is shaped by institutional and societal factors. Csák (2023) identified three father involvement profiles: home-focused, school-event participants, and engaged single fathers. Maternal encouragement, strong paternal self-image, and school alignment with paternal interests fostered higher involvement.

Our earlier research also showed that parental engagement varies by educational background. Parents with less schooling valued accessible support and advice, while more educated parents preferred digital tools and structured participation. These differences highlight

the need for schools to adopt differentiated, context-sensitive approaches to family–school–community partnerships (Pusztai et al., 2025).

To engage effectively with parents, both preservice and in-service teachers must develop a diverse set of competencies, including cultural sensitivity, effective communication skills, and digital literacy (Epstein, 2018; Graham-Clay, 2024). Despite this, research continues to highlight a significant shortcoming in teacher education programs: insufficient preparation for working with parents. A review by Willemse et al. (2018), covering studies from North America, Australia, and Europe, pointed to a consistent neglect of this area in preservice training. More recent investigations reinforce this pattern. In both Canada (Antony-Newman, 2025) and England (Jones et al., 2025), teacher education still marginalizes content related to parental engagement and collaboration. This gap is further evidenced by teachers' own accounts: many report feeling unprepared to interact with parents and say that their training offered little to no guidance in this domain (Jones et al., 2025; Monfrance et al., 2024). Yet, empirical studies emphasize that teachers' sense of preparedness and perceived competence in working with families is one of the most important predictors of actual parental involvement (Monfrance et al., 2024). Researches consistently show that PI plays a key role in educational success; nevertheless, it has long remained a marginal topic in Hungarian teacher education. Although teacher training institutions are crucial in shaping future educators' attitudes, current programs place limited emphasis on modern, collaborative parent–teacher relationships, a challenge that extends beyond Hungary and is present at the European level as well (Salamon, 2013). Within university programs, the topic of PI typically appears in theoretical form as part of foundational courses in pedagogy and psychology. While students do have opportunities to engage with parents during mandatory teaching practice, this is not sufficient to prepare them for sensitive, authentic, and effective collaboration with families from diverse social backgrounds (Chrappán, 2025).

In light of these limitations, there is a pressing need for innovative, practice-oriented approaches that move beyond traditional coursework and offer teacher trainees meaningful opportunities to reflect on and rehearse parent–teacher collaboration in contextually rich, low-stakes environments.

Board games are not only effective tools for developing skills, but they also hold significant pedagogical potential in teacher education (Brydges & Dembinski, 2019; Frossard et al., 2012). They foster problem-solving abilities, communication skills, empathy, and cooperation (Eltahir et al., 2021; Radzi et al., 2020), while providing an experiential and engaging learning environment (Karbownik et al., 2016; Viray, 2016). Several educational board games have already been successfully implemented in higher education in Hungary, such as *Mentortársas*, *Rendszerhiba*, and *Szociopoly*, all of which make a meaningful contribution to shaping pre-service teachers’ perspectives and professional dispositions (Csémpesz, 2016).

Board game can help move teacher education beyond a purely theoretical treatment of parent–teacher collaboration by offering reflective practices that promote sensitivity to family diversity. Within a safe and structured setting, students can explore and develop their communication styles and professional attitudes. In this context, the present study introduces and analyses the pilot use of a cooperative board game designed to foster awareness, reflection, and professional growth among teachers regarding parental involvement. By examining gameplay experiences and teacher reflections, the article highlights how such tools can contribute to bridging the gap between theoretical training and the realities of school–family collaboration.

Research aim

This exploratory study aimed to examine the potential of a cooperative board game as a pedagogical tool to enhance strategies related to PI. The research was conducted in a secondary

school located in a socioeconomically disadvantaged region of Eastern Hungary, a setting that poses unique challenges for school–family cooperation. Given the specific institutional and regional context, it was particularly important to investigate how educators interpret the possibilities and limitations of PI in such environments. The study had two main objectives: to explore how playing the board game influences teachers’ thinking, emotional responses, and professional attitudes toward working with parents and to assess the relevance and applicability of the board game as a professional development tool in a disadvantaged secondary school context.

Accordingly, the research addressed the following guiding questions:

How do teachers in a disadvantaged rural secondary school perceive the role and responsibilities of parents in the school life? How do participants evaluate the pedagogical potential of the game for teacher education or in-service professional development?

By focusing on a real school environment and using mixed-methods data collection, the study aimed to provide nuanced insight into how experiential, game-based learning may bridge the gap between theory and practice in teacher preparation for family–school partnerships.

Data Collection

The testing and data collection were conducted in the spring of 2024. Participants included members of the teaching staff at a secondary school. The board game was developed by a member of the research team, who also served as the game facilitator. The facilitator’s responsibilities included explaining the rules, coordinating the gameplay process, and addressing any questions or issues that arose during the session. Throughout the game, the facilitator aimed to minimize intervention in order to allow natural interactions to unfold.

Gameplay took place during a dedicated professional development day, in which teachers participated actively and engaged in reflective discussion. A key consideration in the

research design was to ensure that the game was played in a naturalistic setting characterized by a calm and supportive atmosphere. The session was held in a large classroom to ensure comfort and accessibility.

Methodology and analysis

Multiple data collection tools were employed during the study. Audio recordings were made during gameplay. These recordings provided valuable insight into participants' opinions, emerging dilemmas, and interpretive differences articulated throughout the session. One member of the research team also conducted structured observations based on predefined criteria (see: Appendix 1).

Based on audio recordings, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify the views expressed by the educators as well as recurring themes that emerged. In the qualitative phase, thematic analysis of the audio recordings was conducted following Creswell's (2012) methodology. Our findings are supported by interview excerpts that reflect recurring thoughts and patterns of reasoning articulated by the educators. The analysis also considered communication styles and merging dilemmas.

Observations were carried out in a structured manner, guided by a predefined set of criteria. These observational criteria included participants' emotional responses (e.g., signs of interest, enthusiasm, laughter, or tension), forms of collaboration and communication among educators, levels of engagement (active participation versus passivity), and spontaneous pedagogical or parental remarks and associations during the gameplay. The aim of the observation was not to evaluate individual performance but to document group dynamics, shared experiences, and the attitudes and emotions arising in response to the game. The observational notes were subsequently utilized for qualitative analysis in later stages of the research.

The combined use of the above methods enabled a comprehensive examination of educators' interpretations of PI as well as the effects of the game.

Institutional Overview

The institution is the only secondary grammar school located in a disadvantaged small town in north-eastern Hungary, facing numerous challenges arising from its geographic and socio-economic context. The declining number of children in the region exacerbates the institution's struggle to maintain student enrolment. There is a lack of workplaces, causing a significant portion of the town's residents to commute to neighbouring larger cities for work.

The school building is centrally located within the town, easily accessible from all areas of the settlement. Both students and educators actively participate in the local community's life, representing the institution at various cultural programs and city events. As the institution is run by a religious organisation of the Roman Catholic Church, it is also actively involved in the life of the Catholic Church.

Throughout its history, the school has strived to adapt to societal needs and contemporary challenges, resulting in several profile changes over the decades. Currently, it offers four- and six-year grammar school programs with advanced language tracks (English and German) and an advanced digital culture specialization. Accordingly, the student body ranges from ages 12 to 19. The school places strong emphasis on ensuring conditions for equal opportunities, given the diverse social backgrounds of its students. The majority of students are local children, many of whom come from disadvantaged or multiply disadvantaged backgrounds, including those placed in foster care. Almost every class includes students with special educational needs integrated into mainstream education, as well as students facing adjustment, learning, and behavioural difficulties.

The school operates according to the guiding principles of the Kolping spirit, which emphasizes the importance of nurturing students into responsible, moral, and socially sensitive adults and good parents, equipped with appropriate professional skills and active social engagement.

The staff includes 12 full-time, 1 part-time, and 4 adjunct teachers, all with appropriate qualifications. Two novice teachers are currently employed. Religious education is taught in denominational groups, assisted by a religion teacher and two Catholic priests, one of whom supports the staff spiritually. A special education teacher provides developmental support to students in need. Staff members range in age from 24 to 60.

Sample

Six members of the teaching staff at the institution under review took part in testing the game.

1. Table: Characteristics of teachers taking part in the testing of the board game (N=6)

Gender	Age	Subject	Qualification	Qualification level	Number of years of practice	Form teacher	Number of years at recent school
female	30	elective graduation subject	university	level I.	5	yes	5
female	36	mandatory graduation subject	university, professional examination	level II.	12	no	9
male	38	elective graduation subject	university	level II.	15	yes	8
female	41	mandatory graduation subject	university	teacher II.	12	yes	12
female	49	elective graduation subject	college	teacher II.	25	no	1
female	56	mandatory graduation subject	university professional examination	master	34	yes	2

Source: own compilation

During the sampling process, efforts were made to include teachers of varying ages, professional levels, and years of experience, as well as to ensure that at least one participant held the role of class teacher. The majority of participants were women, reflecting the overall gender distribution of the teaching staff. In terms of subjects taught, three teachers were responsible for compulsory final examination subjects, while the other three taught elective subjects. The youngest teacher was 30 years old and the oldest 56, with the selection deliberately designed to illustrate the presence of different generational cohorts. The average age of the participants was 41.6 years.

The participants also showed diversity in terms of educational background. Five teachers held a university degree, and two of them had also completed advanced professional training (teacher certification). One teacher held a college degree. Regarding their professional classification, two teachers held the Teacher Qualification Level I rank, three were classified as Teacher Qualification Level II, and one held the title of Master Teacher. Teaching experience varied widely: the least experienced teacher had been in the profession for 5 years, while the most experienced had 34 years of service. On average, participants had 17 years of professional experience.

Three of the respondents also served as class teachers, which is particularly relevant for interpreting their relationships with parents and their perspectives on the board game.

Years spent at the current institution also varied: some participants were in their first year at the school, while others had been teaching there for up to 12 years. This distinction may be relevant in several respects: it could influence participants' sense of attachment and commitment to the institution, which may, in turn, affect their responses; moreover, long-serving teachers are likely to have deeper knowledge of the school's parent community, making their insights particularly valuable. This variability contributes to a more nuanced evaluation of

the game and may reveal how differences in experience shape teachers' approaches to parent engagement.

Another aspect examined was whether the teacher taught a compulsory or elective graduation subject. Teachers of compulsory subjects tend to have more frequent contact with parents, as these subjects are generally considered more important by both parents and students. In sum, the sample was heterogeneous, which is advantageous for piloting the game and interpreting the results. The diversity in experience, subject specialization, and age was expected to yield a range of reactions to the parent engagement game and foster varied reflections during gameplay. Teachers with class teacher responsibilities were expected to respond with greater sensitivity to issues related to parental cooperation.

Good practices for PI in the school

Various methods are employed to maintain communication with parents. Both class teachers and subject teachers primarily interact with mothers. Parent-teacher meetings are typically held during the first week of the academic year, after the distribution of mid-year reports, and, if necessary, at the end of the school year. On these days, open office hours are also organized. In addition, every teacher holds weekly consultation hours for one-on-one discussions; however, these are less frequently used by parents due to their work commitments. Instead, parents tend to contact teachers at other times, typically only when invited due to their child's behavioural or academic difficulties.

In-person meetings are held in a designated room known as the "blue salon," which provides a calm environment for discussing individual student development. Teachers remain available for communication beyond regular working hours, including weekends and school holidays. While class teachers are the most actively involved in parent communication, teachers with a high teaching load also show openness to parental contact.

In addition to face-to-face meetings, communication with parents occurs through various written forms, including official messages via the KRÉTA system (the Hungarian school administrative platform) and informal channels like phone calls, SMS, and Messenger. Each class teacher manages a Messenger group to share important updates with parents. For students at risk of dropping out, contact with families is continuous and formally maintained.

The school welcomes all parent initiatives that support students and enhance educational work. A Parent Association meets at least once per semester, led by the principal. The staff acknowledges the link between parent-teacher communication and student performance, offering guidance to support parenting and out-of-school learning. Parents often seek teachers' advice on educational and personal matters.

Many parents face challenges in their private lives, and a significant number of students come from unstable family backgrounds. As a result, class teachers often assume responsibilities that would traditionally fall to parents. They offer ongoing support and advice to both parents and students. It is not uncommon for parents to delegate aspects of child-rearing to teachers. Teachers, especially class teachers, are frequently asked to assist in decision-making processes, particularly concerning career guidance, as many parents feel they lack the competence to participate meaningfully in their child's educational or future career decisions.

A common issue is the mismatch between institutional expectations and family norms. In such cases, parents may acknowledge and understand teachers' concerns but feel powerless to address the situation. Expressions like "I can't manage my child" are frequently heard.

As a faith-based institution, religious life is considered an important dimension that could help strengthen the bond between parents and teachers. The teaching staff is committed to Christian pedagogical values, and parents are regularly invited to attend religious services held during school and church celebrations. These invitations are rarely accepted, despite the belief among staff that the school's religious ethos could serve as a meaningful foundation for

fostering communication between teachers and parents. Since participation in the religious community is not mandatory for parents, many choose not to engage in such shared events, and consequently, their children may not benefit from these opportunities.

Home visits are also practiced within the institution. For the purpose of conducting environmental assessments or discussing specific issues concerning the student, class teachers or the designated youth protection officer may visit the family to gain deeper insight into the student's background. Experience shows, however, that parents generally prefer to be invited to the school rather than be visited at home.

Board game description: K.Ö.SZ.I – Communication and Harmony between Parents and School

The development of the board game under analysis, K.Ö.SZ.I (an acronym in Hungarian for "Communication and Harmony between Parents and School"), was carried out by members of the MTA-DE-PARTNERS (Hungarian Academy of Sciences-University of Debrecen- Parent-Teacher Cooperation Research Group) research group. The developers aimed to provide teacher training students, practicing educators, and other helping professionals with the opportunity to engage with common school-based scenarios in a playful yet pedagogically meaningful way (Kocsis et al., 2025). K.Ö.SZ.I thus offers participants a chance to explore strategies for effective parent-teacher communication while also reflecting on their own communication styles and practices.

It is a cooperative board game, meaning that participants either win or lose together. The game is thematic, as it focuses specifically on the topic of PI. It is considered advanced, as successful play requires deliberate strategic thinking and collective decision-making. The game is also symmetric, meaning that all characters have equal opportunities to contribute to the group's success (Kocsis et al., 2024).

The game is designed for 4 to 7 players, who must collaboratively address the challenges of PI over the course of 10 rounds, representing an academic year. Throughout the game, players must improve three key values: student achievement, school prestige, and connection (i.e., parental communication). These values are tracked on a scale from 1 to 10, and the game can be played at different difficulty levels depending on the initial values set (Kocsis et al., 2024).

The game includes three decks of cards, each playing a crucial role: parent cards, action and best practice cards, and situation cards.

At the beginning of the game, each player draws a character card, which represents a school staff member. One principal character must always be included in the game. Players keep their character cards throughout the game. Each character has four skills: *communication*, *connection*, *expertise*, and *innovation*. These attributes vary across characters and together form what is referred to as the Köszí Index.

After all players have introduced their characters, they each draw a parent card, which influences their character's abilities. A blue parent card has a positive effect, a red one has a negative impact, while an orange parent card represents individuals in parental roles (e.g., grandparents, older siblings) who are not biological parents.

Next, the principal draws the first challenge card, which describes the issue or situation for that month. Each challenge affects one or more of the school's values, which must be updated on the game board.

To solve the situation, players consult a solution table that includes nine potential responses. Together, players must decide which solution to pursue. Each option requires a different combination of point values in communication, connection, expertise, and innovation, which players must collectively contribute. To do so, they may use the abilities from up to three character cards and their corresponding parent cards.

If a parent card is used during a round, the player must draw a new one at the end of the round, this effectively reflects real-life educational work, where teachers often need to cooperate with different parents for different situations. Once used, a solution cannot be selected again for two rounds, which is tracked using a marker token.

At the end of each round, players draw from the action and best practice card decks. Action Cards introduce unexpected events that negatively affect one of the key indicators (student achievement, school prestige, or connection). In contrast, best practice cards have a positive impact on these same values and are particularly valuable as they are based on real-life examples of effective educational practices from both domestic and international contexts.

Players also draw quiz cards at the end of each round. These contain various types of questions, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, or short open-ended questions. Players must answer them collectively. If they answer correctly, they may choose to increase the value of one school indicator by one point. The correct answers are listed on the quiz cards.

Results

Experiences from Board Game Testing

The participating teachers all responded positively to the game; their enthusiasm, interest, and motivation remained high throughout the entire 70-minute gameplay. The atmosphere was cheerful, with much laughter, and the session was characterized by collaboration and a shared search for solutions.

One of the most important insights was that the quality of cooperation and the collective interpretation of problems significantly influenced the outcome of the game. Due to its cooperative nature, participants had to find solutions to various situations together, all while paying close attention to the abilities of their own characters and their assigned parents. This

dynamic closely mirrored real-life situations where teachers must work together to solve shared challenges.

The teacher characters had varying strengths across the game's four key competence areas: communication, connection, expertise, and innovation. These competencies were intentionally chosen to reflect the essential skills needed in the teaching profession.

At the beginning, there was some uncertainty in interpreting the rules, roles, and potential for cooperation. Participants often experimented with how to "combine" their character competencies and carefully considered the available solutions, much like they would in real-life scenarios. They discussed collectively which teacher and parent would be most useful in a given situation, and how different characters influenced each other. This initial uncertainty quickly diminished, and as the game progressed, cooperation and joint decision-making became increasingly smooth and effective.

During gameplay discussions, it became evident that some participants assumed leadership roles. Interestingly, the youngest and oldest teachers were the most proactive, often interpreting tasks and coordinating decisions, while others responded and contributed to collective resolutions. A male participant often observed quietly before contributing thoughtfully at key moments. This dynamic resembled real school settings, where some teachers take more dominant roles while others offer quiet support.

Because successful gameplay required collaborative thinking, information sharing, and mutual awareness of character abilities, players had to continuously cooperate and develop strategies. This aspect of the game encouraged teamwork and the engagement of less active participants. Phrases such as *"How much innovation do you have?"*, *"If you join, we'll meet the communication requirement"*, *"Then you use your character"* were frequently heard, illustrating how the game promotes coordination, mutual support, and shared decision-making. In this sense, the game effectively modelled the real school environment, where collaboration

among faculty members is key to student success and PI. The game table functioned as a sort of "micro-faculty", where power relations, communication styles, and decision-making mechanisms became visible and analysable.

Players found the parent cards particularly engaging, as they reflected the variety of parental attitudes found in real life, some supportive, some challenging. This feature effectively demonstrated how diverse parental attitudes can influence a teacher's work. Because players had to include their assigned parent in each problem-solving effort, the game subtly emphasized how parents are always present (sometimes invisibly) in pedagogical decisions. They may serve as facilitators or barriers, meaning that a teacher's work is shaped not only by their own professional abilities but also significantly by the parental background of the students and the quality of parent-teacher cooperation.

One of the quiz questions was: *"Among the three types of parental involvement, executive, supportive, and encouraging, most parents fall into the supportive category. True or false?"* The group discussion revealed that more parents tend to offer support than take direct action, with one participant noting: *"I think more parents offered to help than actually carried out a task immediately."* Based on their professional experiences, the participants observed that parental cooperation often remains at the level of intent, and actual active participation is limited: *"I also think encouragement is more common. They're quite passive—at least, that's been my experience."* This suggests that formal types of PI (e.g., attending parent association meetings) do not necessarily equate to active engagement. As one participant remarked: *"Usually it's the PTA members who take action—but even they don't always."* These reflections revealed that teachers often perceive most parents as passive participants in school life.

One of the players remarked that the game could be considered a form of professional development, as it enables experiential learning. Unlike traditional, lecture-based training, this game relies on active participation. Due to the structure of the game, which introduces new

challenges each month, participants were continuously prompted to reflect on their decisions and adjust their strategies accordingly.

Results of the Audio Recording

The analysis of the recorded utterances during the game shows that participants operated on two levels: the experiential (subjective) and the professional (reflective) level. The experiential feedback reflected direct, personal reactions: participants often responded with humour to various situations and character cards.

Difficulties in PI

Based on the teachers' feedback during the game, parents' participation in school life is often limited or entirely absent. Most problems stem from a lack of personal presence, which can be attributed to several factors. One is the lack of time and family circumstances: *"...if, for example, the parent is raising [the child] alone and doesn't have time to come, that's already a limiting factor—they can't reconcile it with work or other obstacles."* This was mostly mentioned in relation to the involvement of fathers. Other problems are disinterest or lack of motivation: *"It's not that they couldn't come to the parent-teacher meeting—they simply didn't want to."* Participants also pointed out the inefficiency of parent-teacher meetings and communication via Messenger: *"They don't even come to parent meetings. Often, they don't even read what we write."* Since most parents are primarily concerned with their own child and less interested in issues affecting the class as a whole, these traditional methods are often ineffective. These observations highlight the need for new approaches to parent-teacher communication.

Forms of Engagement and Alternative Solutions

The discussions revealed various attempts and suggestions for engaging parents, facilitated by the opportunities the game offered. Based on their practical experience, participants listed tools they found either effective or ineffective. They spoke positively about organizing joint programs: *“Let’s start with a joint program, and then we’ll be able to communicate with them better.”* ...sending newsletters: *“A newsletter on how to help with learning, how we can make things better together so the child learns more effectively.”* ...and workshops or lectures that support the development of parental competencies: *“Hold a workshop on how to better communicate with teenagers.”* Volunteering was seen negatively because participants felt parents wouldn’t show up, and home visits were considered problematic due to their controversial reception and organizational difficulties. Overall, informal, community-based events and informative content were seen as the most effective for activating parents. However, it is important for teachers to realistically assess the availability and motivation of parents. Several teachers stated that these would be the most effective methods in their opinion, but they were unsure whether parents would be open to them.

Effects of Cultural and Social Differences

The school studied includes Roma children, some of whom are in foster care, making collaboration with their caregivers a key issue. One of the true-false statements addressed what participants had also experienced: a series of mutual misconceptions hinders the relationship between Roma parents and teachers. One of the most striking comments was: *“I think they misunderstand me, and they think I misunderstand them—so it’s mutual.”* This remark points to the fact that mutual prejudices and cultural differences significantly hinder parental engagement, especially in the case of disadvantaged children and their families. Differences in social status and value systems can also serve as barriers to involvement.

As the proportion of disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children is high in the institution, the social and cultural positions of the children and the teachers differ significantly. The parents of these children can participate in their children's lives in very different ways, and in many cases their capacity to fulfil parental responsibilities is limited. For example, there may be no separate space for studying, the parent's work leaves little time for the child, or in some cases there is a general lack of interest. It can be concluded that a reflective pedagogical attitude and the development of intercultural sensitivity are essential for effective cooperation.

Factors Influencing the Quality of the Parent-Teacher Relationship

Another quiz question addressed the factors influencing the relationship between parents and teachers in a mentoring role. Several participants stated that, in their view, the teacher's gender, age, and subject area are important, but the success of the relationship is also determined by the teacher's personality, communication skills, openness, empathy, the role of homeroom teacher, the type of institution, the maintaining authority, the student body composition, and the micro- and macro-environment. Teachers also noted that the older the child, the more impersonal and infrequent the communication becomes a point reiterated multiple times during the game. Since the institution is located in a small town, there are more opportunities for informal encounters between teachers and parents, but these are not consciously organized communication situations. Relationships develop in informal contexts for example, teachers and parents may meet while shopping, attending church, or at local events. While this may foster informal dialogue, it lacks the structure and goal-orientation needed to serve educational purposes. Personal familiarity can also lead to excessive informality, which can create further challenges in the parent-teacher relationship.

Discussion

The present study set out to explore whether a cooperative board game can serve as an effective tool for strengthening teachers' attitudes and competencies related to parental involvement (PI). The findings support the assumption that structured, playful, and reflective methods can foster deeper awareness and more nuanced understandings of teacher–parent collaboration. In line with experiential and cooperative pedagogical frameworks (Illeris, 2010), the board game encouraged both individual reflection and collective problem-solving, revealing patterns of teacher thinking and interaction that often remain implicit in conventional training environments.

Game-based reflections confirmed a tendency to view parents (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds) as either indifferent or incapable of meaningful collaboration. These attitudes reflect broader tensions within Hungarian educational culture, where institutional expectations often conflict with the lived realities of families facing socioeconomic hardship (Pusztai et al., 2025). The prevalence of stereotypes, especially concerning Roma parents, points to the urgent need for teacher training programs to address intercultural sensitivity and social justice more explicitly.

The board game created a safe and engaging environment for teachers to experiment with strategies, share perspectives, and negotiate meaning around complex school–family scenarios. The cooperative structure of the game, requiring players to work together to address challenges, mirrored the collaborative nature of effective PI, and thus served not only as a simulation but also as a model for school-level cooperation. The analysis of gameplay dynamics revealed differentiated participation: while some teachers assumed leadership roles, others offered supportive contributions, reflecting real-world faculty interactions.

The Parent Cards, which introduced diverse parental profiles, were particularly effective in highlighting how different family situations and attitudes affect teacher decision-making. This element emphasized a key insight from the literature: that PI is shaped not only by

institutional initiatives but also by the social and emotional contexts of families (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Goodall & Montgomery, 2013). Teachers were required to respond to both supportive and challenging parents, a feature that promoted empathy and a more realistic understanding of the relational nature of educational work.

Participants consistently described the game as a form of meaningful professional learning. Compared to traditional workshops, the game's scenario-based and participatory structure offered a more engaging and personally relevant experience. This supports earlier research on the lasting impact of school-based, practice-oriented professional development. Furthermore, the game allowed teachers to explore how their own communication styles, expectations, and biases shaped their interpretation of parental behaviour. This type of critical reflection is essential for developing responsive and equity-oriented practices in school–family partnerships.

The informal yet structured nature of gameplay also helped reveal the implicit norms and discourses that govern faculty discussions on PI. During reflective discussions, participants voiced doubts about the effectiveness of traditional communication methods and shared alternative approaches, such as workshops or newsletters. These exchanges suggest that board game pedagogy may not only support individual attitude change but also serve as a catalyst for institutional innovation.

The study confirms the potential of board games as tools for teacher development in areas that require emotional, social, and reflective competencies. The K.Ö.SZ.I. game encouraged participants to re-evaluate their assumptions about PI.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. This study is limited by its scope: it involved a single school staff and one gameplay session, thus generalizations cannot be made. The sample size was small, and participation was voluntary, which may have introduced bias toward more reflective or open-minded teachers. Moreover, the study focused exclusively on

educators' perspectives; parental voices were not included, limiting the scope of interpretation. Finally, while the game encouraged critical reflection, its impact on long-term professional change remains to be assessed in future research through longitudinal studies and expanded trials across diverse educational contexts.

Acknowledgements

The research on which this paper is based has been implemented by the MTA-DE-Parent–Teacher Cooperation Research Group and with the support provided by the Research Program for Public Education Development of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

References

- Bacsikai, K. (2020). Egy szakmai közösség: a pedagógusok. [The Professional Community of Teachers] In. Pusztai (Ed.) *Nevelésszociológia*, pp. 303-330., Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó
- Bacsikai, K., Bencze, Á., Dorogi, A., D., Hegedűs, G., Major E., Rétháti Cs., & Pusztai, G. (2024). Implementing Parental Involvement to Improve Student Achievement in Hungary Schools: Patterns of Hidden Resources. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research (EJER)*, (109).
- Baquedano-Lopez, P.; Alexander, R. A.; Hernandez, S. J. . (2013). Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools: What Teacher Educators Need to Know. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 149–182. [doi:10.3102/0091732x12459718](https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x12459718)
- Brydges, S. & Dembinski, H. E. (2019). Catalyze! Lowering the Activation Barriers to Undergraduate Students' Success in Chemistry: A Board Game for Teaching Assistants, *Journal of Chemical Education*, 96(3), 511–517. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.8b00544>

- Chrappán, M. (2025). Pedagógushallgatók felkészítése a képzésben a szülőkkel való kapcsolattartásra. [Preparing teacher students for parent-teacher communication during their training] In Pusztai G., Ceglédi T., Bacskai K. & Papp, H. (Eds.), *Teachers' and parents' collaboration for students* (pp. 20-22). CHERD-Hungary. CHERD Műhelytanulmányok sorozat.
- Csák, Z. (2023). Types of Fathers' Home-based and School-based Involvement in a Hungarian Interview Study. *Central European Journal of Educational Research*, 5(1), 95-103. <https://doi.org/10.37441/cejer/2023/5/1/12047>
- Csempesz, P. (2016). Mentortársas és Rendszerhiba. [Mentor Community and System Failure] *Tani-tani Online*, 2016. december 14. https://www.tani-tani.info/mentortarsas_es_rendszerhiba
- Csók, C. & Pusztai, G. (2022). Parents' and Teachers' Expectations of School Social Workers. *Social Sciences*, 11(10), 487. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11100487>
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research (4th ed.). Pearson
- Eltahir, M.E., Alsalihi, N.R., Al-Qatawneh, S., AlQudah, H.A. & Jaradat, M. (2021). The Impact of Game-Based Learning (GBL) on Students' Motivation, Engagement and Academic Performance on an Arabic Language Grammar Course in Higher Education. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26,3251–3278.
- Epstein, J. L. (2018). School, family, and community partnerships in teachers' professional work. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 44, 397–406
- Fan, X. & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13, 1–22.
- Frossard, F., Barajas, M. & Trifonova, A. (2012). A Learner-Centred Game-Design Approach: Impacts on teachers' creativity. *Digital Education Review*, 21(1), 13-22

- Goodall, J., & Montgomery, C. (2013). Parental involvement to parental engagement: a continuum. *Educational Review*, 66(4), 399–410.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.781576>
- Graham-Clay, S. (2024). Communicating With Parents 2.0: Strategies for Teachers. *School Community Journal*, 34(1), 9-60.
- Grolnick, W. S., & Slowiaczek, M.L. (1994). Parents' Involvement in Children's Schooling. A Multidimensional Conceptualization and Motivational Model. *Child Development*, 65, 237–252.
- Hill, N. E., & Taylor, L. C. (2004). Parental School Involvement and Children's Academic Achievement: Pragmatics and Issues. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13, 161–164.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V. , & Sandler, H. M. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? *Review of Educational Research*, 67. 1. 3–42.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543067001003>
- Hornby, G., & Blackwell, I. (2018). Barriers to parental involvement in education: An update. *Educational review*, 70(1), 109-119.
- Illeris, K. (2010). Towards a Contemporary and Comprehensive Theory of Learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22(4), 396-406.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370304837>
- Jeynes, W. H. (2018). A practical model for school leaders to encourage parental involvement and parental engagement. *School leadership & management*, 38(2), 147-163.
- Jones, C., Sideropoulos, V., & Palikara, O. (2025). Do teachers have the knowledge and skills to facilitate effective parental engagement? Findings from a national survey in England. *Educational Review*, Advance online publication.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2025.2506802>

- Karbownik, MS., Wiktorowska-Owczarek, A., Kowalczyk, E., Kwarta, P., Mokros, Ł. & Pietras T. (2016). Board game versus lecture-based seminar in the teaching of pharmacology of antimicrobial drugs: a randomized controlled trial. *FEMS Microbiology Letters*, 363(7), fnw045. <https://doi.org/10.1093/femsle/fnw045>
- Kim, S. (2022). Fifty years of parental involvement and achievement research: A second-order meta-analysis. *Educational Research Review*, 37, 100463.
- Kocsis, Zs., Bodnár, D., Csák, Z., & Pusztai, G. Designing a board game to expand knowledge about parental involvement in teacher education. *Education Sciences* (revised manuscript submitted)
- Kocsis, Zs., Bodnár, D., Csák, Z., Sávai-Átyin, R., & Pusztai, G. (2024). Expanding Knowledge about Parental Involvement through Board Game. *PRATICA-Revista Multimédia de Investigação em Inovação Pedagógica e Práticas de e-Learning*, 7(2), 70-80.
- LaRocque, M., Kleiman, I. & Sharon M. D. (2011). Parental Involvement: The Missing Link in School Achievement. *Preventing School Failure*, 55, 115–122.
- Monfrance, M., Haelermans, C., Leenders, H., de Jong, J., & Coppens, K. (2024). *Parental engagement in primary education: Differences in teacher perceptions and parent–teacher communication explained. Teachers and Teaching*. Advance online publication. <http://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2024.2397581>
- Morrison, G. S. (1978). *Parent Involvement in the Home, School and Community*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill.
- OECD (2019). *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Student’s Lives*. OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2020.) *Parental Involvement in School Activities*, in *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students’ Lives*. Paris: OECD.

- OECD (2023). PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education. Paris: OECD.
- Pushor, D. (2018). Using participatory action research to create systematic parent engagement. *Journal of Family Diversity in Education*, 3(2), 17-37.
- Radzi, S.H.M., Ying, T.Y., Abidin, M.Z.Z., Ahmad, P.A. (2020). The effectiveness of board game towards soft skills development for higher education. *Ilkogretim Online - Elementary Education Online*, 19(2), 94–106
- Reay, D. (2023). *Class work: Mothers' involvement in their children's primary schooling*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003419662>
- Salamon, E. (2013). A szülők bevonása, mint az iskolai siker kulcsa. [Engaging Parents as a Key Factor in School Success] <https://osztalyfonok.hu/1246/>
- Viray, J.S. (2016). Engaging Students through Board Games: Measuring Its Effectiveness on Academic Performance. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 6(10), 5-7.
- Willemse, T. M., Thompson, I., Vanderlinde, R., & Mutton, T. (2018). Family-school partnerships: a challenge for teacher education. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 44(3), 252–257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2018.1465545>

Appendix 1

Predefined Observation Criteria

Participation and motivation: What levels of engagement and enthusiasm do participants display? Are there any noticeable changes in participation during gameplay?

Collaboration and group dynamics: How are roles distributed (e.g., leader, initiator, passive participant)? Is there a dominant player, and how do others respond? What facilitates or hinders cooperation?

Rule interpretation and role understanding: How quickly do participants grasp the rules? What strategies emerge for coordinating character and parent roles?

Decision-making and problem-solving: How are decisions made: consensually or competitively? Do participants engage in reflective thinking during choices?

Reflection and experience sharing: To what extent do participants connect game scenarios to their teaching practice? Do they offer critical reflections on the game mechanics or realism?

Perceptions of parental roles: How do participants interpret the different parent types? What real-life experiences do they share regarding parent-teacher cooperation?

Impact on learning and professional development: Do participants perceive the game as a learning tool or a form of professional development? What feedback do they offer regarding the game's educational value?