Saving Little Red Riding Hood: A Qualitative Study of Parental Role Construction for Involvement in Children's Education

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ABSTRACT In the Hoover-Dempsey at al. model (2005), parental role construction for involvement in children's education is defined as socially constructed beliefs and expectations about what parents should do in relation to their children's education. The qualitative exploration of parental role constructions and factors that might shape parents' understanding of their role was conducted in five elementary schools in Zagreb, Croatia. Data was collected via 59 semi-structured interviews with parents of children attending primary and lower secondary education. Reflexive thematic analysis was applied for interview data coding and analysis. Most parents exhibited an active role construction and experienced a strong sense of personal responsibility for their children's educational outcomes and development. Parents' beliefs about necessary and appropriate involvement activities, rights and responsibilities were shaped by immediate and wider social contexts including school, as well as by perception of the child's developmental needs. Parents constructed their role through processes of social comparison with other families in their social networks, and by reflecting on their childhood memories and their own current experiences with others related to schooling. Three modalities of role construction were identified that shape parental decisions regarding the form and intensity of their involvement with their child: proactive support and assistance, on-demand activation and active control.

Key words: parental role construction, involvement in children's education; educational achievement; primary education; lower secondary education.

Sociologija i prostor

1. Introduction

Although there is no uniformly accepted definition, parental involvement could be defined as the participation of parents in activities related to a children's education that are expected to promote their academic and socio-emotional well-being (Park & Holloway, 2018). It is a multifaceted construct whose manifestations change throughout the different phases of a child's education (Punter et al., 2016). Involvement overarches a variety of specific practices closely related to both school and home settings. In school, these practices include communication with the teachers, attendance of school meetings and accompanying children on school trips. Involvement at home is even more complex as it encompasses talking about school experiences, communicating values, expectations and aspirations, monitoring children's everyday activities, providing direct assistance to children in learning, providing stimulating experiences and resources for children, supporting children in making educational and career choices and many more. Numerous studies, largely conducted in developed Western countries, confirmed that parental involvement is positively related to various indicators of academic performance, including school achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Erion, 2006; Patall et al., 2008; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder, 2014), motivation (e.g. Frome & Eccles, 1998; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Grolnick et al., 2009), graduation rates (Fan & Chen, 2001) and class attendance (Jeynes, 2007), children's well-being and other indicators of social and emotional functioning (e.g. Domina, 2005; El Nokali et al., 2010; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

Apart from examining the associations between parental involvement and educational outcomes, one prominent line of theoretical and empirical work has been oriented towards exploring the rationale behind involvement of parents in children's education. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995; 1997; 2005; revised by Walker et al., 2005) model integrates a rich body of knowledge concerning the reasons for parental involvement, the manner in which they are involved, and how such involvement contributes to pupils' learning and achievement. The model postulates that parental decision for involvement is a result of interaction of three sources of motivation: a) motivational beliefs, consisting of parental role construction for involvement and parental self-efficacy for helping the child succeed in school, b) perceived invitation for involvement, including a general invitation from the school, an invitation from specific teachers or an invitation from a specific child, as a contextual motivator for involvement, and c) parents' perception of life context, as described though parents' skills and knowledge, time and energy for involvement and family culture related to involvement.

Parental role construction for involvement, which is in the focus of the present study, is described in the model as parental beliefs about what they should do in relation to their children's education (Walker et al., 2005). In the words of Hoover-Dempsey & Jones (1997, p. 5), parental role construction "establishes the basic range of activities

that parents will construe as important, necessary and permissible for the own actions with and on behalf of their children's education" and as such is assumed to be a key motivator for parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). In the elaboration of the concept, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005a) suggest this role is socially shaped and determined by the perception of expectations of others (family, teachers, other parents). It is composed of the understanding of the range of behaviours that are appropriate in some context, but also reflects the individual's understanding of personal responsibilities for behaviours within the context. The authors made a distinction between active and passive role constructions, but also between parent-centred, school-centred and partnership-centred conceptualisations of the responsibility for the children's educational outcomes, and claimed that partnership-centred role construction that assumed shared responsibility between the parents and the school are particularly beneficial for the children's outcomes. A number of studies examining the elements of the model (e.g., Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Walker, 2002; Walker et al., 2004; 2005; Reed et al., 2000; Anderson & Minke, 2007) confirmed that parental beliefs about their role in their children's education are one of the most important individual predictors of a parental decision about their course of action and actual involvement, and showed that those parents who have an active role construction and hold themselves accountable for children's successes are more involved than parents with less active and school-centred conceptualisations. While most of the research have been quantitative in nature and oriented toward establishing the links between parents' motivational beliefs and actual involvement practices, the qualitative studies and the explorations of factors that might shape parental conceptualisations of their role in children's education are less frequent.

Grounded in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model, the present study is a qualitative exploration of parental role construction in the Croatian education system and society. As in other transitional post-socialist societies, in Croatia there is a growing recognition of the importance of parents' actions toward children and a need for recognising children's needs (Lacković-Grgin, 2015). Parents, regardless of their familial background and life circumstances, perceive their parental role as very significant and feel responsible for their children's outcomes (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011). Although "patronage mentality" which embraces corruptive, non-meritocratic principles of social advancement for members of their family is generally widespread, education is considered the main mechanism for upwards social mobility (Lacković-Grgin, 2015). In child rearing, the dominant practice is that of parental support (Raboteg-Šarić, Franc & Brajša-Žganec, 2004), while education, self-reliance and self-actualisation of children are among the highest priority parenting goals (Kuterovac Jagodić, 2015). Parents in general hold high educational aspirations for children and are investing substantial efforts in achieving them (Jokić et al., 2019; Ristić Dedić & Jokić, 2019). Previous studies examining parental roles and involvement practices demonstrated

that the parents of children in primary and lower secondary educational cycles were highly involved in at-home activities, providing homework assistance and monitoring of children's learning and achievement, while their school-based activities were limited mostly to mandatory attendance to group and individual meetings with lead teachers (Marušić et al., 2006). In another research (Miljević-Riđički & Vizek Vidović, 2010), these meetings were also emphasised as a dominant way of parental interaction with school, as most parents considered the school responsible for children's education and did not want to interfere unless being invited. In recent times, the perspectives of parents as well as teachers regarding parental involvement are gradually changing, and many appeals for the need of establishing better partnership between school and family, and gaining insights on parental perspectives on their role in children's education are emerging (Brajša-Žganec & Slaviček, 2014; Bošnjaković & Galeković, 2022; Macuka et al., 2023).

2. The present study

The present study explores the ways parents construct their parental role in children's education, and examines parents' perspectives on the potential factors shaping their role construction. In the study, we invited parents of typically developing children in two age groups (one in primary and one in lower secondary education cycle), with the aim of examining how role construction varies in relation to children's age. By doing so, the present study acknowledges previous research results demonstrating that parental roles and involvement activities change over time as the child progresses through the formal educational system (e.g. Spera, 2005; Green et al., 2007). In addition, we explore the variations in role construction arising as a result of differing children's school achievement. Although the Hoover-Dempsey model recognizes children's previous school performance and parental expectations within the concept of a perceived invitation from the child, it is our opinion that the vital role played by this factor in motivating parents to become involved is not sufficiently emphasized.

3. Method

The present study employed a qualitative research methodology. It uses a phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that allows for an in-depth investigation of diverse parental perceptions and experiences in the contexts and timeframe in which they occur, and enables the identifications of commonalities and variations in these perspectives.

3.1. Participants

Data was collected with parents[1] of 60 typically developing children in five elementary schools (single structure combining primary and lower secondary cycles) in Zagreb, Croatia. With the aim of achieving maximum variation, the schools were purposively selected based on existing data regarding school-level indicators of average family socio-economic status and patterns of enrolment in upper secondary schools. Among the five participating schools, one was characterized as 'high parental educational status – higher gymnasium (general upper secondary programmes) enrolment', two schools were classified as 'average parental educational status – diverse enrolment in upper secondary education' and two were 'below average parental educational status – higher VET enrolment'. The selection of parents for participation in the study was based on the selection of pupils. In each school, six 4th grade pupils and six 7th grade pupils participated. Pupils were selected by their teachers, in collaboration with the researchers, using pre-established criteria based on gender and previous school attainment. The parents of the selected pupils were invited to participate in the study. No formal criteria were established for the selection of pupils' parent i.e. families decided independently who, out of two parents (if both present) would participate. Informed consent was obtained for all participants. The study received authorisation from the Ministry of Science and Education and approval of the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb (no. 02/2016).

In total, 59 interviews were conducted. 48 participants were mothers, and 11 were fathers. 43 participants were married or living together, 10 were divorced, 3 were married but living separated, and 3 belonged to the "other" category. 53 participants were employed, 4 were unemployed, 1 was retired and for 2 no data about working status were available.

3.2. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with parents were conducted individually in the schools' premises by the research team members. Interview protocol probed parental beliefs, perceptions and practices of involvement in their children's education. The topics discussed in the interviews stemmed from the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model and included the following: parental beliefs and understandings of their role for involvement in education of their children (What is the role of a parent in child's education? Who bears the responsibility for child's development and education? What is your role in education of a specific child?), parental self-efficacy beliefs for helping children succeed in school, perception of invitation for participation from others, parental

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[1] 59 parents participated in the study, as one mother was a parent of two pupil participants – one in 4th grade and one in 7th.

involvement practices and satisfaction with parental role in children's education. The questions were open-ended and allowed for the "natural" development of conversation and further exploration of topics emerging throughout the interview. Interviews were on average 40 minutes in duration.

3.3. Data analysis

The interview data coding and analysis were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were managed by the authors using NVivo software (QRC, 2018). After initial familiarization with the data through multiple readings of transcripts and preparing brief reflexive notes for each transcript, we coded interview data in an iterative process. Initial codes were generated deductively based on interview topics and a pre-existing theoretical frame (e.g. active vs. passive role construction). In the following waves of the search for patterns or themes, more data-driven, inductive coding was adopted to allow for an open exploration of parents' perspectives. The majority of codes were semantic and reflected explicit meanings close to the participants' expressions and their use of language, while some codes were more interpretative and sought the meaning beyond what participants explicitly stated (e.g. code social pressure from friends). With such an approach, we took experiential orientation to qualitative research that focused on the exploration of the truths of participants' contextually situated experiences and understandings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout the coding process, the authors engaged in several reflective discussions to reflect on similarities and differences in our coding approach and understandings of individual interview excerpts. Provisional codes were reviewed and refined based on the examinations of all coded excerpts for each individual code by both authors. After this, the codes were grouped based on the similarity/connectedness and the themes were formed as the patterns of shared meanings. Several provisional thematic maps were prepared in the process. The process of sorting codes into the themes involved revisits to the original transcripts and the examination of consistency of coding within and between participant cases. Three participants' profiles representing modalities of parental roles that differed with regard to the dominant beliefs, perceptions and experiences regarding parental involvement in children's education were identified to encompass the heterogeneity observed between participants' perspectives. At the final stage of data analysis, the themes were refined and named to form one coherent and consistent account of the data set analysed.

The final thematic map that was developed for the purposes of the study is shown in *Figure 1.*

Figure 1.
Thematic map - analytical framework of the study
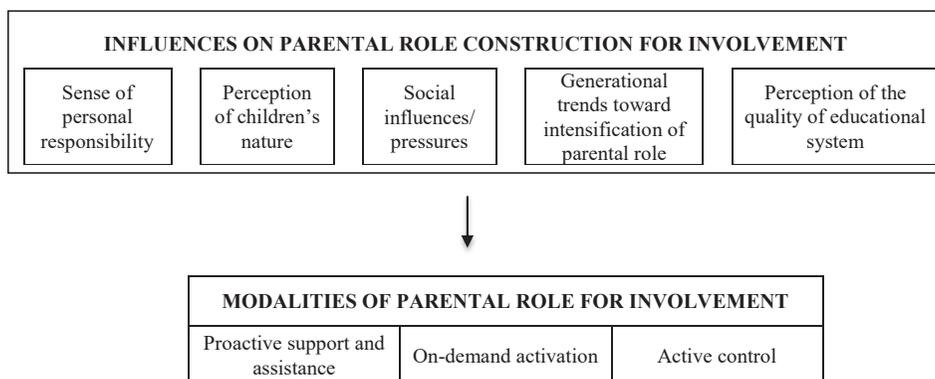
4. Results

4.1. Parents' understanding of their role in children's education

Most parents participating in the present study developed a personal construction of the parental role that includes active participation in their children's education. Supporting children to be successful in school was perceived among parents of children in both the 4th and 7th grades as a natural and very important element of the parenting role that inevitably entails a parent's willingness and, to a certain extent, obligation to be involved. Parents portrayed themselves as the persons who are ready to invest a lot of time and make substantial personal sacrifices for the sake of children's wellbeing and advancement, as this active engagement supported the image of caring and competent parents that they wanted to build in their social surroundings. The following interview excerpt from the parent of a girl in the 7th grade demonstrates a great determination of a father to participate in his child's education and to secure everything needed for her to be successful:

> *Look, whatever she needs from me or wishes for, I don't think there is any limit to what I would do and what I would enable for this to happen. There is no limit at all. Exactly, no limit. She will get whatever she needs, want or can withstand.* (Father of 7th grade high achieving girl)

This strong *sense of personal responsibility* for children's learning and achievement was similarly evident in the notion, expressed by another parent, that an explicit invitation from teachers or school is not necessary for a parent to become involved. Instead of replying to external invitations or requests, the parent chose to be involved because they believe that this is what they should do:

Do you know what every day looks like for me? It's like we're running towards a goal, but we never seem to reach it. She can't leave the home without finishing her school assignments. I mean, she could, but she'd get a bad grade. So, I don't even get to decide what I want for myself in this situation – no one needs to tell me so, I know that I just have to be involved" (Mother of 4th grade lower achieving girl)

In addition to speaking about the internal drive of the parent and her instant readiness to intervene, the above quote also captures the notion that parents' understanding of their role in children's education depended a great deal on their *perception of child's characteristics* and his/her capacities to meet the school demands or fulfil the expectations of the parents. The fact that most parents actively engaged in their children's education suggests that they believed that the children are not the only ones responsible for their learning and achievement, and that the children, especially younger ones and those who are under-achieving, should receive support and assistance at home from parents.

When describing their own roles in children's education, parents spontaneously compared their position to those observed in their immediate social environment, amongst friends or in the school network, as demonstrated in the following interview excerpt of the mother of a boy in 4th grade:

I think parents are crazy nowadays. For instance, my two work colleagues check the e-record ten times a day. Then every day they study with their children...in the seventh grade! I don't know. It seems... a bit too much for me. If you are a child in the seventh grade, just go, sit down, learn it, you don't need your mother to teach you. I hope I will not lose my head later on... (Mother of 4th grade lower achieving boy)

These strong words echoed this mother's sense of disbelief about common parental practices in her social environment, while at the same time expressed the presence of certain *social expectations or even pressures* towards endorsing the parenting style that includes high level of parental involvement in children's education. The words of several parents across both age groups pointed to the omnipresence of the modern-day phenomenon of intensive parenting and over-involvement of parents in day-to-day learning of their children, and contrasted this dominant social expectation to their own perspective and preference. They experienced the pressures of intensive parenting and voiced their desire to return to "more balanced" position in which they would not feel trapped, while they also repeatedly raised concern that such parental practices are noxious and unproductive. In the long run, they believed, 'over-parenting' of children undermined the development of their autonomy and self-regulation, and contributed to raising whole generations of over-dependent young persons that are unable to live a productive and fulfilling life. Interestingly, only a few parents among our participants were ready to "confess making this type of mistake" with their own children and tried

to present themselves during the interview in the light that is not in line with what they perceived as the dominant trend. It is likely that the parents felt that by unmasking such "malpractice" in their own behaviour, they would spoil their image of "good parents" and therefore decided to withhold some information about eventual unfavourable parental practices. Conversely, the following quote reflects one father's frank reflection of the notion of over-involvement:

> *At the beginning, I was, a little bit uncritically, assuming responsibility for some of her own obligations…Well, this year, I left her on her own a bit and it turned out well… Often, we think that they can't do it on their own, when in fact they can. And when we control them too much, they let us. And they think: Dad's gonna do it…Now I'm sorry that I didn't let her fail a couple of times, didn't let her get an F grade. I'm so sorry for that. In four years of schooling, she didn't get a single F or D, maybe just two Cs. So, she doesn't know how it feels. While in fact, she should know.* (Father of 4th grade high achieving girl)

Besides being very open about the use of not-so-desirable parenting methods in the past, his quote captures the notion of change in an individual's role construction over time, resulting from the learning through personal experience. Another type of change in the understanding of parental role observed in participant accounts was related to the idea of *historical or generational change*, where roles from when participants themselves were being raised were compared to those in the present. Specifically, when talking about their own parental roles, participants frequently made reference to their own childhoods, expressing how their parents' involvement in their education was much lower than their own. This observation was dominant in all parent groups, irrespective of child's age group and school performance. However, participants' explanations of the sources of this change varied. The following interview excerpt shows that from this parent's perspective, the change in parental involvement was the result of complex and diverse social and educational processes that included the change in the cultures of childhood and parenthood and the shift in locus of control from the child's to parent's side:

> *In our time, it was quite different. Parents were not so involved…it was assumed to be the child's obligation. Your task was to go to school and learn there, and that was it. I think that today children have become some kind of a project for parents, and that is why parents are getting too involved…* (Mother of 7th grade high achieving girl)

Similarly, another mother described how the responsibility for children's educational outcomes in the past relied much more on children and less on parents, but also raised the issue of increased expectations and pressures that are put on children nowadays:

> *Our parents didn't put any pressure on us, did not expect a 5.0 (GPA) as today… They definitely didn't know which book was for reading that month, or which test would take place tomorrow. Well, obviously, a test is coming up because we would shut ourselves in our room and study... that was our responsibility and our obligation…* (Mother of 4th grade lower achieving boy)

Some other participants also emphasized the present-day imperative for excellence, heightened competitiveness, anxieties of modern world and feelings of uncertainty about future life as the drivers of higher parental involvement, as evidenced in the following interview excerpt:

> *If I analyse it objectively, I would say that my parents were more relaxed than me. I'm more over my daughter ... I'm so worried about her and her future... you have to do this... you have to do that...* (Mother of 4th grade high achieving girl)

Finally, the parents constructed their role for involvement in line with the way they *perceived the quality of the education system and the schools* to support their children's needs and aspirations. Parents believed that they should be involved in their children's education at least partly due to their observation that the educational system is suboptimal and designed in such a way that parental involvement is essential for the child's success. The following interview excerpt from the father of a 4th grade lower achieving boy illustrates this position with the use of a well-suited metaphor:

> *You know the saying that a child is an arrow fired, and that the parents are the wind that directs her a little, don't you? That is maybe working in some virtual world, but in our world, you are supposed to practice with them, you are supposed to do homework with them… I mean, everything!* (Father of 4th grade lower achieving boy)

The above quotation also highlighted the existence of implicit and subtle invitations from teachers and emphasised that the system influenced parents' behaviour by implying that they should be involved. Sometimes the parents also become involved in their attempts to react to the negatives of the system and to ease the education process for their children. The following quote demonstrates how the mother of a 4th grade high achieving boy related her involvement (and anticipation of its rise in the future) with the deficiencies of the current education system:

> *I simply cannot let my child down. I have tried, but you can't! There is so much content in every subject, so much of everything, you simply have to be in control and check if everything is going OK. I guess it will be even worse in the near future, in 5th grade.* (Mother of 4th grade high achieving boy)

4.2. Modalities of parental role for involvement

Based on participants' ideas and beliefs about what constitutes the parental role in the education of their children, we identified three modalities that reflect differing beliefs about the optimal level and type of involvement: 1) proactive support and assistance 2) on-demand activation, and 3) active control.

4.2.1. Proactive support and assistance modality

This modality was a very common position among participants in both pupils' age groups. It represents the beliefs that the role of the parent is to monitor child's needs and actively guide or direct the child in order to promote learning, development and well-being. Verbs used by parents to describe what represented the ideal role in this modality included: *to help, to ease, to stimulate, to encourage, to enable, to advise, to steer, to push when something gets stuck, to teach them how to learn.*

This form of proactive support and assistance is metaphorically described by the father of a boy in the 7th grade:

> *I think children should get some direction from home. That is, let's say, the path from which they should not turn. Hmmm, but the path is broad, and there are many possible routes, branches and turnoffs, and a kid should not be given a chance, as the Little Red Riding Hood from the fairy tale, to wander around too much, to pick up crazy mushrooms on the side.* (Father of 7th grade high achieving boy)

The parents endorsing the proactive modality believed that parents should employ a variety of home-based involvement practices to help children succeed at school, such as initiating daily communication with children about school matters, monitoring of children's learning and achievements, providing assistance with school tasks, praising children's efforts and achievements, communicating their expectations to children and reminding them of the importance of education and getting good grades etc. Depending on children's age, these parents adjusted their expectations on what constitutes the parental role. In higher grades, the parents believed that the children were ready to take greater responsibility and be independent in homework and studying, while direct parental involvement could become irregular and more dependent on the child's invitations. The following excerpt from an interview with a mother of a 4th grade girl illustrates nicely this expectation of growing levels of child's autonomy and her increasing independence in learning:

> *In the first three grades, we studied together, we wanted to teach her how to study… Now she has to be independent. If something is unclear, if she needs some help or wants us to examine her work to feel more secure, that's fine, but it mustn't be every time…* (Mother of 4th high achieving girl)

The exception to this expectation presented the situation of having a child who was experiencing difficulties in meeting the demands of the school programme and satisfying parental aspirations. In such cases, the parents endorsing the proactive modality believed that parental role should still include intensive and regular engagement in everyday learning and homework. Investment of enormous amounts of energy and time is clearly evident in the following statement from a mother of a 7th grade lower achieving boy who tried to juggle between many of her maternal roles:

> *We shouldn't leave him alone. Sometimes, for purely experimental purposes, we did leave him on his own, and the results were always worse than in the situations when we would sit together and help him sort out how to approach things. This can be very exhausting, because I would like to monitor things at school, but at the same time I would also like to cook every day and have some time for myself...So, it's frustrating for me, but I never allow this school part to suffer.* (Mother of 7th lower achieving boy)

4.2.2. On-demand activation modality

This modality represented a rare position, observed mainly among some parents whose educational aspirations for the child are not very high and are aligned with the level of his/her achievement. It refers to the belief that parents should be involved in their children's education, but remain "at the back". This is further explicated in an idea that not participating directly in children's learning activities would contribute to raising autonomous and responsible young persons, and building children's character, although the parents should monitor children's behaviour and communicate the value of education and learning. The parents expressing this position often conveyed the belief that it is good to let children learn from their own mistakes. These parents did not want to engage directly unless invited explicitly by the child or teacher and claimed that the main role of the parent is to enable the conditions for learning and development, and to transmit their familial value system to their child related to education.

This position is illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

> *It may sound extreme, but I apply this with my son. I said: I don't want to solve your problems, write your assignments. I don't want to go through the contents of school subjects once again, that's your task, that's your job. I can sometimes help you a bit, but don't expect me to do what other parents around us are doing, and what their children are used to.* (Father of 7th grade lower achieving boy)

These words of the father of a 7th grade lower achieving boy highlight the idea that the main responsibility for learning and achievement is on the child's side. This idea represents the most distinctive feature of 'on-demand activation' modality of paren-

tal role, together with a belief that it is healthy to give children a chance for making mistakes and to learn from such mistakes and failures, as evidenced in the following interview excerpt:

> *She has to learn from her own mistakes... We let them learn from their mistakes. We started with some small, harmless mistakes…Of course, I wouldn't allow for major mistakes. I wouldn't let her ruin her life, but… small mistakes, oh, my God, why not? If you don't want to study for a test, get an F, I don't care. Get an F, and see how it feels* (Mother of 7th grade lower achieving girl)

4.2.3. Active control modality

This modality represented a contrasting vision of parental role in education, expressed by a few parents. Parents holding this position believed that children could easily become lazy, are in general unsuccessful in self-regulating their own behaviour and lack the future perspective necessary to understand the value of education. Consistent with this argument, these parents viewed their role in the controlling modality as a natural tool to combat these perceived deficiencies. They believed that it is often important to initiate their involvement without waiting for an invitation from the child and engage in activities that enabled them to closely monitor and directly manage their child's learning behaviour. The following two interview excerpts describe crucial elements of the active control modality. The first quote describes the application of an authoritarian parenting style in the domain of a child's learning at home, and highlights the idea that a child should be obedient and follow parents' rules without any discussion or negotiation:

> *We are not helpless, we are parents. And he's a kid. You are here to listen to us, and if something doesn't suit me, for example if we saw in the e-record that something went wrong, you should make it right. Right now! Just sit here and study. Otherwise, there is no mobile phone, no video games, no, no, no. You can't. Just try starting your computer! Just try! …And it works. Well, it worked for me forty years ago and it works now for him.* (Mother of 7th grade lower achieving boy)

The second quote emphasizes the corresponding views of children as immature human beings who should not be held accountable for their own actions:

> *If a parent lets a child decide about everything, then it is also harder for the child, and I think the overall results are worse …As a parent, you should insist on, I don't know: What do you need to learn? When is your test? Have you written your assignment? When does school start tomorrow? When do you finish? That's just a kind of monitoring and directing that is necessary for not letting the kid move down the path of least resistance to a state of being lazy and putting work off* (Mother of 7th grade lower achieving boy)

5. Discussion

The findings confirm that within the context of Croatian families, parental involvement in their children's education is an important part of the parenting role and that parents generally experienced high levels of responsibility for their children's achievements, development and wellbeing. The great majority of parents participating in this study developed an active role construction for involvement, implying a belief that parents should be involved in some way in their children's education. Still, there were apparent discrepancies in the understanding of what constitutes desirable and/or appropriate parental behaviours, rights and responsibilities related to this active role, as well as in their perspectives on children's nature and development. The exploration of parental beliefs and perspectives allowed us to identify three modalities of role construction: proactive support and assistance, on-demand activation and active control. Proactive support and assistance, the dominant form of role construction for involvement in our sample, refers to a belief that parents should strongly support children throughout elementary education by providing assistance, guidance and encouragement, while at the same time, they should enable and stimulate the development of children's autonomy and sense of responsibility for their own learning and progression. This modality was the form of parent-focused form of active role construction (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), as parents who endorsed proactive support and assistance modality felt ultimately responsible for their children's educational outcomes, and have organised their personal life to enable their active involvement.

The findings arising from this study confirm that parents' understanding of their role in children's education was shaped by the level of children's education and previous school achievement, in line with the literature linking changes in parental involvement practices to the developmental needs of children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The parents, especially those endorsing 'proactive support and assistance modality', expected increasing levels of autonomy and independence in learning when children are progressing from primary education to lower secondary education, and therefore believed that they would provide less intense and less regular direct assistance in learning. At the same time, they expected that they would further support them and help them in making educational decisions and plans etc., in line with what was found in the study of Hill et al. (2018) examining parenting practices related to adolescents. However, lower engagement of parents of older children was expected by parents only for the cases in which a child's performance was generally high and/or aligned with parents' expectations. When achievement was below parental expectations, the level of involvement remained high even for the children in the older group.

Beliefs and expectations regarding the role of parents in children's education were socially constructed and contextualized. Parental role constructions were grounded in families' cultures of child-rearing, their past schooling experiences and childhood

memories of their parents' engagement, and shaped by the multiple experiences with involvement in their children's education (in interaction with the child and educational system), but also developed through interactions with friends, teachers and other parents in their social cycles. Parents' frequent mentioning of the phenomenon of over-involvement of other parents in their social network when discussing their own role for involvement suggests ideation about appropriate roles in children's education is formed through the process of social comparison. What others do and talk about the necessary or appropriate parental activities and responsibilities determined what parents found important and adequate in the case of their own children. The idea that the process of social comparison is relevant to role construction and that the parental role is subject to the influence and co-construction by others is consistent with arguments previously put forward in the Hoover-Dempsey and al. model (1995; 2005).

Parental role construction was also viewed as a reaction to the dominant cultural narrative or the expectations of the society and educational system (Ule et al., 2015). Parental roles were not only determined by personal and proximal social environments, but were also influenced by wider social processes, which can be regarded as the structural framework under which parental involvement develops (Ule et al., 2015). The parents in our study recognised that in contemporary Croatian society, the dominant narrative of "the good parent" included the idea that parents are required to be responsible for children's success and be highly involved in children's education as parental involvement is in the child's best interest. Great concerns were raised among parents with relation to their observation on the recent trend of treating children as projects and of parents' over-engagement in children's education. Parents felt pressured by these trends of intensive parenting (Hays, 1996), and although they clearly argued against these increasingly present practices, they could not always resist the urge to act in accordance with the dominant norm. Especially mothers of under-achieving children felt the pressure to abide to the norm of highly involved parenting and even struggled to reconcile their personal needs with the focus on the child's needs. Children are assumed to be the responsibilities of their parents, who are required to assume high levels of economic and emotional investment and obligations, as the children are "economically worthless, but emotionally priceless" (Edwards, 2004). At the same time, parents are being criticised and blamed for damaging next generations by raising "cotton-wool kids", which makes the position of parents especially sensitive (Bristow, 2014). In parallel to these processes, the discourse of individualisation and individual responsibility coupled with the idea that academic success is a result of individual efforts and studying hard is dominating the educational system (Ule et al., 2015). In our study, this discourse was also present, especially in the positions of parents who endorsed 'on-demand activation' and 'active control modality', who claimed that the pupil has the ultimate responsibility for his/her learning and educational outcomes (more than parents, or teachers).

Finally, the results showed that parents' perception of immediate educational context, in particular their perception of the level of demand of the school for the child, and of ability of the school to meet child's individual needs, were related to the ways in which parents viewed their role regarding involvement. Consistent with the arguments posed by Park & Holloway (2018), it might be argued that parental involvement was motivated by a perceived need for such involvement in order to compensate for perceived deficits in school experiences. Parents might view their involvement more important when they feel that the school does not have the capacity to respond adequately to the needs of a specific child.

Overall, the findings of the present study demonstrated substantial variations in parental understandings of their role and showed the complexities of factors influencing and shaping parental role construction. As such, these findings can serve as a guide for devising targeted interventions to improve collaboration between schools and families, build a genuine partnership for fostering a child's learning and development, and encourage constructive and timely involvement of parents. However, the fact that the sample included predominantly mothers and only parents from the biggest and the most developed urban area in Croatia is considered one of the major shortcomings of the present research design. Future research would benefit from the inclusion of more diverse families with regards to their composition, residence, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, as this would allow for an even more nuanced and rich demonstration of contemporary parental perspectives. The application of longitudinal designs that could illuminate how parental role construction changes over time and interacts with social contextual variables would also enrich our understandings of the impact of various social influences and changes in experiences within the complex context of educational system and wider society.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Spašavajući Crvenkapicu: Kvalitativno istraživanje roditeljske konstrukcije uloge za uključenost u obrazovanje djece

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Sažetak

U modelu Hoover-Dempseyja i suradnika (2005), roditeljska konstrukcija uloge za uključenost u obrazovanje djece definira se kao socijalno konstruirana vjerovanja i očekivanja o tome što bi roditelji trebali činiti u obrazovanju svoje djece. Kvalitativno istraživanje roditeljskih konstrukcija uloge i čimbenika koji mogu oblikovati njihovo razumijevanje uloga provedeno je u pet osnovnih škola u Zagrebu, Hrvatska. Podaci su prikupljeni pomoću 59 polustrukturiranih razgovora s roditeljima djece u nižim i višim razredima osnovne škole. Za kodiranje i analizu podataka korištena je refleksivna tematska analiza. Većina roditelja iskazivala je konstrukciju aktivne uloge i imala snažan osjećaj osobne odgovornosti za obrazovne ishode i razvoj djece. Roditeljska očekivanja o nužnim i prikladnim aktivnostima, pravima i odgovornostima oblikovana su neposrednim i širim socijalnim kontekstom, uključujući školu, kao i doživljajem razvojnih potreba djeteta. Roditelji konstruiraju uloge kroz procese socijalne komparacije s drugim obiteljima iz socijalne mreže te kroz reflektiranje na temelju vlastitih sjećanja iz djetinjstva i trenutnih iskustava s drugima povezanim sa školovanjem njihove djece. Identificirana su tri modaliteta konstrukcije uloge koji oblikuju roditeljske odluke o vrsti i intenzitetu njihove uključenosti: proaktivna podrška i pomoć, aktiviranje na zahtjev i aktivna kontrola.

Ključne riječi: roditeljska konstrukcija uloge, roditeljska uključenost u obrazovanje djece, obrazovna postignuća, niži i viši razredi osnovne škole.