



THE QUALITY OF THE PRESCHOOL TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP AS THE FACTOR OF REALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL GOALS

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Abstract: The most common factor mentioned in relation to positive youth development is the quality of relationships with very important adults in their immediate surroundings, including their preschool teachers. The aim of the paper is to try to determine the quality of the preschool teacher-child relationship in our preschool institutions. The study included 225 preschool children ($M = 6.3$ years), 225 preschool teachers and 225 parents from different cities in Serbia. A questionnaire for preschool teachers and parents designed for the purposes of this research and a projective drawing for children was used to collect data. The results of the research show that the quality of the preschool teachers-children relationship is generally good, but that there is some discrepancy between the self-satisfaction of preschool teachers and the dissatisfaction of a certain number of parents. In their drawings and by their choices of objects and colours, children show that they perceive their preschool teachers as good, beautiful and pleasant, but in a disturbing number of cases as alienated, dangerous, unknown and distanced. The results indicate the necessity of planning the activities in the direction of improving the competences of preschool teachers for the development of a harmonious relationship with children in educational work.

Key words: interactions, preschool teacher-child relationship, improvement of educational work.

INTRODUCTION

Social interaction is a process in which two or more persons act so that their experience and behavior are mutually conditioned and interdependent. It is a two-way, mutually active relationship that leads to changes in the behaviors of all participants; the exchange between two partners that reciprocally influence each other. Interaction implies the activity of both participants in the process, reciprocity and complementarity, which means it depends not only on what the participants during it do but also how they do it. For these reasons, interaction can be called a co-relationship (Spitz, 1965).

In the context of social relations, social interaction is a broader term than social behavior, social action or social contact and may involve all of that. In the true sense of the word, it forms the basis of social relations or rather builds social relations and gives them a certain quality. There can be no good, quality relationship without real interaction, the one that implies emotional involvement and genuine human closeness. Interactions make a pattern over time, i.e. they grow into what is usually meant by the term relationship. The terms “relates” and a “dynamic relationship” are used to denote “what a person does to another person taking into account that person” (Deutchsh, 1978: 189)

The very term relation (lat. *Relatio* - relationship) indicates the existence of two independent subjects who share a connection, something they have in common binding them together. A social relationship means relatively long connections between two or more people. Relationships between people can be good or bad, friendly or hostile, horizontal or vertical, symmetrical or asymmetrical, but can also be a relationship of domination (a relationship in which one member dominates over the other and the other submits). There are relationships with various forms of aggression and abuse (Deutchsh, 1949).

One of the most desirable relationships between people is rapport. A harmonious, complementary relationship is recognized by how we feel included, pleasant, undisturbed, understood and accepted in it (Gordon, 1998). There are significant and less significant relationships in life. When it comes to child development, apart from relationships with parents, relationships with educators and teachers are essential. For these reasons, developing a very special relationship between a teacher and a child is inevitable, the relationship that must never be emotionally neutral or emotionally cold. A child needs a relationship of compassion, understanding and support, i.e. a relationship in which a child hears “I am here, I know how you feel, don’t worry, you are not alone.” When a child hears that, (s)he relaxes, (s)he feels safe, their hormones are secreted to an optimal extent and their brain is encouraged to do the best it can. What a child needs is the I-Thou relationship. In the I-Thou relationship there is satisfaction with a human encounter, that encounter is an end in itself. As Buber himself says, “I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being” (Buber, 1976: 76). When a person is in an I-Thou relationship, (s)he feels included, understood, fulfilled, valued, satisfied.

In all situations when a teacher does not pay full attention to a child (s)he is in interaction with, but deals with something else (thinks about the end of working hours, his/her problems and obligations), (s)he puts a child in the object position, in the I-It relationship. When a child feels the need to reach a teacher, when (s)he wants the teacher to really see it, but stays

excluded, when (s)he hopes to be Thou, and is treated as if they do not matter at all - the child faces rejection and the pain of rejection. Abandonment, separation, rejection or at least a threat that this could happen is a true danger for a child. Rejection signals to a child that (s)he is not good enough and that there is a danger they will remain alone. Social rejection in general, and especially by an adult, when it comes to children, is one of the most common causes of anxiety (Ausubel, 1968).

The feeling of exclusion does not depend so much on the number of relationships a child has, but on how much a child feels accepted by only a few important people which certainly include a teacher. What opens the door to the I-Thou relationship is certainly empathy. Empathy allows sensitivity to the needs and feelings of another.

Educational work implies professional skills that drive children to "open their minds" for what comes from adults. Bringing a child into interaction with others, adults and children, providing models for identification and imitation, engaging a child intellectually, emotionally and willingly and a proper interaction that happens in a harmonious relationship with a child are factors that affect the development of all components of a child's personality, lead to a healthy formation of self, help develop cognition and form healthy emotionality and drive a child to perform activities aimed at the world around it (Ivić, 2001).

John Bowlby, a creator of the attachment theory, pointed out the importance of experience in early relationships for a child's personality development (Bowlby, 1969). Although the first significant relationships are usually formed with parents, alternative relationships formed with educators, teachers and other caregivers are also crucial for the development of children and adolescents. The most common factor mentioned in connection with the positive development of young people is the quality of a relationship with an adult. When children start preschool, teachers have an important role in shaping their experience. In addition to the role they play in the development of cognitive skills, they are responsible for regulating the levels of activity, communication and contact with peers. The relationship between children and teachers is considered important at all ages and is related to later academic and social functioning (Hamre et al. 2001).

Positive and low-conflict relationships with educators and teachers from preschool to secondary school are the main factors in children's adaptation to social and academic environments. Bridget Hamre and Robert Pianta (2001) report that relationships between a teacher and a child in kindergarten are very predictive of long-term outcomes of education (in primary and secondary school). In particular, a conflict between teacher and

child seems to be associated with negative feelings, a lack of cooperation in classrooms and poor academic performance (Birch, 1997). In addition, reports of teachers on relational conflict are associated with an increase in the number of children with behavioral problems and a decline of competent behavior over time (Pianta, 2003). In contrast, small children whose relationships with teachers are characterized by closeness show higher levels of overall school adaptation (Birch, 1998). Similarly, Wentzel reports on the correlation between the teacher support and interest in the school in secondary school students and suggests that a relationship between a teacher and a child can be particularly predictive of student functioning during transition periods, such as transition from primary to secondary school (Wentzel & Kathryn, 1998).

What is especially important to point out is that children who are at risk due to academic and behavioral difficulties find positive relationships with teachers particularly important (Pianta et al. 1995),

Research also suggests that a relationship between a teacher and a child plays a significant role in children's social and emotional development (Hamre et al, 2001). In studies of a relationship between a teacher and a child, children who had a secure relationship with their teachers in the pre-school institutions showed good interaction with peers and more positive relationships with primary school teachers. On the other hand, children who had insecure relationships with teachers had more difficulty interacting with peers and participated in multiple conflicts with their teachers. Additionally, studies have shown that constructive styles of teacher interaction with children help children build positive and emotionally secure relationships with adults. Also, children whose teachers showed warmth and respect for them coped better in conflict situations with peers and manifested fewer problems in behavior as well as higher levels of school competencies (Webster-Stratton et al, 2001)

The need for good teachers in modern society is great. Many important humane principles and human achievements are incorporated into modern teacher education, such as respect for children and children's rights regardless of nationality, race or religious affiliation, political affiliation or social status of their parents; promotion of child care, their rights to equal opportunities, upbringing and education under the same conditions, etc. The goals of teachers and their responsibilities are set out in national laws and ethical regulations of many countries (now, Serbian as well, e.g. is the Declaration of Children's Rights). Despite all that, if a teacher does not work on the construction of a harmonious relationship with a child, or if bad interaction results in a bad relationship, consequences can be very destructive in all aspects of a child's personality development. Starting from all the above

mentioned, we consider the effort to examine the quality of the teacher-child relationship a relevant endeavor, especially since this is a topic which is dealt with by a small number of researchers in our surroundings.

METHOD

Objective A general objective of the research is defined as an effort to determine the quality of the teacher-child relationship in our preschool institutions. Specific goals are also defined: to examine the attitudes of teachers towards some aspects of the work they deal with which may have effects on the quality of their relationship with children, to examine how parents evaluate teachers and the teacher-their child relationship, to determine how children experience their teachers and compare the data obtained.

Sample The research sample consisted of 225 teachers, 225 mothers and 225 children with the average age of 6.3 years from preschool institutions in different cities of Serbia (Jagodina, Kragujevac, Despotovac, Rekovac, Velika Plana, Petrovac na Mlavi, Smederevo and Svilajnac).

Instruments To examine how teachers assess the quality of their relationship with children, a questionnaire for teachers was used containing 6 questions: (Am I satisfied with my job?, What are today's children like?, If you could, what kind of children would you choose for your group? How do children feel about you? What do you do to develop a good relationship with children? Rate the quality of your relationship with children on a scale of 1 to 10). To examine how parents assess the quality of the teacher's relationship with their child, a parent questionnaire was used which also contained 6 questions approximately equivalent to the questions posed to the teachers: Am I satisfied with my child's teacher?, What are today's teachers like?, Do you know how your child feels about her/his teacher? What do you do to help your child develop a good relationship with the teacher? Rate your child's teacher on a scale of 1 to 10. Rate the relationship between the teacher and your child on a scale of 1 to 10). To evaluate the experience of the children, a projective drawing was used with the topic *If I had a magic wand I would turn my teacher into...?* and *"Me and my teacher"*

Procedure Data were collected on several occasions in 2017/18/19. The teachers filled out the questionnaires during breaks in their working hours. Parents filled out the questionnaires when they came to pick up their children. It took about 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The children made their thematic drawings during their directed activities in kindergarten.

Analysis procedures Descriptive statistics and the test of significance were used to process the data from the questionnaire, while children's drawings were interpreted using psychological interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first question teachers were asked was about their job satisfaction as that is considered one of the key elements of motivation for work. Job satisfaction is usually defined as the general attitude of an employee towards one's own job (Robbins Coulter 2012). Distribution of teachers' answers to the first question, i.e. statement from the questionnaire is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of teachers' answers to the first question from the questionnaire

Question 1	YES		BOTH YES AND NO		NO	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
I am satisfied with my job.	72	32.00	64	28.44	89	39.55

Research has shown that the professional status of people who teach (from kindergarten teachers to higher education teachers) is relatively low, as is satisfaction with their job. If dissatisfaction with the status persists, it affects job (dis)satisfaction, which further has direct consequences on practical procedures in working with children, which implies adverse effects on children's development, for example: insufficient readiness of children to start school, a negative impact on performance and generally weaker success in the overall further education (Nišević Colic, 2010). Research on school practice shows that teachers' job satisfaction greatly affects the motivation of students, as well as the stability and quality of learning and teaching (Sharma & Jyoti 2006). In the context of teacher-child relationship quality research, we find the obtained results worrying, considering that as much as 39.55% of surveyed teachers are not satisfied with their job. If we add that 28.44% of the teachers are "both yes and no" satisfied with their job, it seems logical to ask ourselves how much the surveyed teachers are actually motivated to invest effort in building harmonious relationships with children.

Considering that attitudes are also important motivating factors that guide individual behavior and that on the basis of knowledge of attitudes we can explain and even predict human behavior, we considered it important to

find out what the attitudes of teachers towards children were. The attitudes of one person also enable knowing the value orientations of that person since values are a more general concept than attitudes, and thereby condition attitudes. Attitudes also imply criteria that people use to select and justify actions and to evaluate other people and events (Ferić, 2007).

Distribution of answers to the question "What are today's children like, in your opinion" is shown in Table 2

Table 2. Distribution of answers to question 2

	f	%
POSITIVE ATTITUDE (good, obedient, cooperative, curious, hardworking, communicative)	123	54.66
NEGATIVE ATTITUDE (Much more aggressive than before, nervous, lacking communication, impossible, spoiled, they have no limits in behavior; they can drive you crazy, rude, lazy)	102	45.33

Most teachers have a positive attitude towards children, as they perceive them as good, hardworking, cooperative, etc. However, given the above, the results obtained are worrying considering that as many as 45% of teachers perceive children as more aggressive than before, nervous, lacking communication, impossible, spoiled, that they have no limits in behavior, that they can drive one crazy, rude. One can hardly expect a good quality relationship in a situation when teachers manifest this attitude towards their own students in the answers. This is corroborated by the answers to the question "If you could choose, what kind of children would you choose for your group?" Most teachers, as much as 68% state that they would choose good, calm, obedient and modest children. A lower percentage of teachers (32%) gave the answers such as "all children are good, I don't care, it doesn't matter" and the like.

To find out how teachers perceive children's emotional attitude towards them, the question was asked, "What do you think, how children feel about you?" The emotional component is, to recall, the central issue of social relationships. Emotions practically determine the quality of interaction. While negative emotions can lead to bad relationships, positive emotions can create good relationships and lead to personal growth and development (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). The best kindergartens and the best schools are happy places. In such happy places, adults understand that happiness is one of the goals of upbringing education (as well as life in general) and that

happiness is both a means and an end. Happy children who grow up understanding what happiness is will gladly use the opportunities provided by upbringing and education and will affect the happiness of the people around them. Of course, in order for children in kindergartens and schools to be happy, their teachers must be happy and satisfied. It is a matter of their relationship (Noddings, 2003: 261). As much as 98% of teachers provided the answers “they love me” or similar. Unfortunately, the reasons for this degree of teachers’ positiveness and certainty that children love them stay beyond the reach of this research.

The question “What do you do to develop a good relationship with children?” was asked to find out how much teachers know of the activities necessary to build a good, harmonious relationship with children. The usual answers were “I treat all children the same, I am just, I teach them and take care of them, I do what every teacher does, I work according to the program”. Building a harmonious relationship with children is a conscious process and an important aspect of the professional competencies of teachers so the absence of qualified answers that would indicate knowledge of this process is surprising.

The distribution of the answers to the question “Rate yourself as a teacher on a scale from 1 to 10” and the question “Rate the quality of your relationship with children on a scale of 1 to 10” is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean values of teachers’ self-assessment on a scale from 1 to 10

	m
Rate yourself as a teacher	9.6
Rate the quality of your relationship with children	9.3

As we can see, the teachers evaluated themselves and their own relationships with children with almost maximum grades. This finding is unexpected as it is inconsistent with teachers’ answers to questions about satisfaction with their job, with their perception of the children they work with and with the knowledge of the activities necessary for building harmonious relationships with children. We assume that their dissatisfaction was caused by external factors as it is obvious that it does not arise in the slightest from their attitude towards their own personality which, based on these assessments, can be classified in the category of maximum self-satisfaction. The reasons for this self-satisfaction are, although very interesting, still an issue that remains beyond the reach of this research.

To form a picture of the teacher-child relationship, parents were asked complementary questions. The distribution of the answers to the first question - statement "I am satisfied with my child's teacher" is shown in Table 3

Table 4. Distribution of parents' answers to the first question-statement

Question 1	YES		BOTH YES AND NO		NO	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
I am satisfied with my child's teacher	93	41.33	64	28.44	68	30.22

The results show that almost half of the parents are satisfied with the teacher of their children. However, the results are worrying since the percentage of parents who are not satisfied is not negligible (as much as 30.22). When the percentage of parents who are "both satisfied and dissatisfied" is added to that, we believe that it is necessary to investigate the causes of this dissatisfaction and take the necessary measures to remedy this attitude. We know that educational work largely relies on the cooperation between parents and a preschool institution and this cooperation cannot be expected to be constructive if parents are generally dissatisfied with their children's teachers. To recall, a family and preschool institution cooperation needs harmonized goals and interests of parents and teachers, but the emphasis is on the process of joint activities, the outcome of which is cooperation as mutual support. When operationalizing the concept of cooperation, one approach is directed to the areas of cooperation, and the other to the quality of the teacher-parent relationship (Pavlović Breneselović, 2010).

To examine a cognitive component of their attitudes toward teachers, the way in which they perceive teachers, the parents were asked "What are today's teachers like, in your opinion?"

Table 5. Distribution of parents' answers to the question "What are today's teachers like, in your opinion"?

	f	%
POSITIVE ATTITUDE (good, well-mannered, hardworking, communicative, trustworthy)	132	58.66
NEGATIVE ATTITUDE (superficial, frivolous, some are insolent, not very interested, don't care about the children because of their problems, if you are "someone" they value your child more, they don't treat all children the same, lazy)	93	41.33

The parents' answers to this question indicate that the largest percentage of parents positively perceive teachers as people of trust, good and hardworking. To recall, for understanding the cooperation of family and kindergarten, it is important to keep in mind the angle of view (perspective) of each actor in the process. Good, partnership relationships between a kindergarten and a family are built through mutual trust and respect, empathy, sensitivity and respect for the perspective of the other party, constant open communication, recognition and respect for the unique contribution and strength of the partners, joint decision-making and willingness to compromise and change (Pavlović Breneselović and Krnjaja, 2017). Given the above, the percentage of parents (as much as 41.33%) who perceive their children's teachers in a way that indicates a negative attitude towards them is worrying. Moreover, this indirectly indicates a negative perception of the teacher-child relationship by the parents.

In an effort to collect data on the quality of the teacher-child relationship, the parents were asked *"Do you know how your child feels about his/her teacher?"* The distribution of answers to this question is shown in Table 6

Table 6. Distribution of parents' answers to the question "Do you know how your child feels about its teacher"

	f	%
POSITIVE FEELINGS (likes her, loves her, adores her)	121	53.77
NEGATIVE FEELINGS (it is ashamed, confused, doesn't really like her, doesn't feel anything special, a little afraid of her)	104	46.22

Parents' answers to this question indicate that the largest percentage of parents believe that their child has positive feelings towards the teacher. The emotional component, to recall, is the most important component of the interpersonal relationship quality. A positive relationship should never be emotionally neutral or emotionally cold, it should include an interchange of positive feelings in which a child feels secure, understood, and accepted (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). For that reason, the percentage of parents who estimate that their child has negative feelings towards the teacher is worried. Feelings such as fear, shame or anxiety in a relationship with a teacher are developmentally destructive and extremely undesirable.

When asked the question *"What do you do to help your child develop a good relationship with the teacher?"*, 43% of parents answered that it is not

their responsibility and that it mostly depends on the teacher. The majority of parents (57%) answered that they teach their child to listen to the teacher, to be good and obedient.

And finally, asked to "Rate your child's teacher on a scale of 1 to 10" and "Rate the quality of the relationship between your child and the teacher on a scale of 1 to 10" the parents gave the average scores shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Mean values of teachers' assessment by parents on a scale from 1 to 10

	m
Rate your child's teacher	5.6
Rate the quality of the relationship between your child and the teacher	6.2

The mean scores the parents gave the teachers are not high. The parents rated their child's teacher with a mean score of 5.6 while giving a slightly higher grade (6.2) to their relationship. This result indicates that the parents are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their child's teacher and barely satisfied with their relationship.

And what did the children say? In this paper, drawing was used as an unavoidable part of the psychodiagnostic assessment of children. In addition, as the most often encountered theme in children's drawings is man, man is the most commonly used theme in projective techniques and research with children (Burkitt, Barrett, & Davis, 2003).

Tasked with "If I had a magic wand, what would I turn my teacher into? (draw)", the children answered as shown in Table 8

Table 8. Distribution of themes of drawing "If I had a magic wand, what would I turn my teacher into"

	f	%
Queen	19	8.44
Fairy	18	8.00
Flower	28	12.44
Butterfly	29	12.88
Sun	25	11.11
Σ	119	52.88

Dragon	16	7.11
Snake	21	9.33
Witch	17	7.55
Wolf, tiger	19	8.44
Frog	16	7.11
Stone	17	7.55
Σ	106	47.11
Σ	225	100

As we can see, just over half of six-year-olds would turn their teacher into a queen, a fairy, a flower, a butterfly, or the sun if they had a magic wand. Unfortunately, a large percentage of children, as much as 47%, would turn their teacher into a dragon, a snake, a frog, a witch, a wolf, a tiger, even a stone. This is a worrying finding since researchers who analyze children's drawings believe that children project their negative attitude towards adults by drawing dangerous animals and characters from fairy tales which they fear (as they project their positive relationship by drawing fairies, queens, flowers and butterflies) (Silk & Thomas, 1986).

Typical representatives of "positive" drawings are shown in Figures 1 and 2

Drawing 1. Drawing by B.M. "If I had a magic wand, what would I turn my teacher into?"



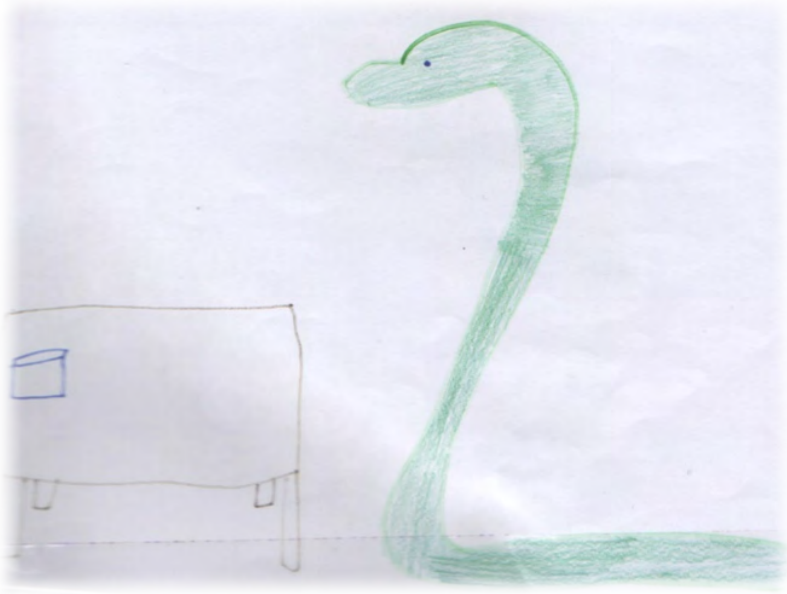
Drawing 2. Drawing by J.R. "If I had a magic wand, what would I turn my teacher into?"



Drawing 3. Drawing by L.B. "If I had a magic wand, what would I turn my teacher into?"



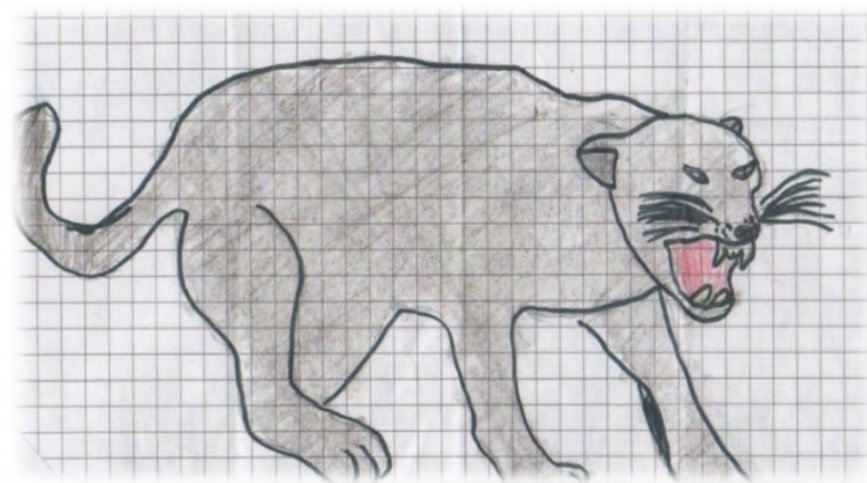
Drawing 4. Drawing P. S. "If I had a magic wand, what would I turn my teacher into?"



Drawing 5. Drawing L. M. "If I had a magic wand, what would I turn my teacher into?"



Drawing 6. Drawing by M. "If I had a magic wand, what would I turn my teacher into?"



Drawings themed "Me and my teacher" mostly indicate distance (as much as 66%). Typical representatives of this type of drawings are drawings 7 and 8.

Drawing 7. Drawing by A.M. on the theme "Me and my teacher"



Drawing 8. Drawing by K.M. on the theme "Me and my teacher"



When the answers of the teachers and the parents are finally compared, a clear difference between their views can be noticed. While teachers are dissatisfied with their job, parents are dissatisfied with teachers. Teachers see children as good, obedient, etc. but also in a large percentage as disobedient, aggressive, spoiled. Parents see teachers as good and hardworking but also in a high percentage as superficial, unmotivated, etc. While teachers think that children love them, a large percentage of parents estimate that children fear them and that they do not really like them. It is clear from the answers that teachers are not knowledgeable of the methods of building a harmonious relationship while a significant percentage of parents strive to teach their children how to behave towards the teacher in order to be on good terms with them. What has proven to be the dominant difference is the difference between teacher self-assessment and the grade they received from the parents. While teachers rate themselves with ten, the parents give them five. The difference is also obvious between the teacher-child relationship assessments made by parents and teachers. Teachers evaluate those relationships with ten and parents with six. If we add the percentage of the children who see the teacher as a dragon, a snake, a witch, a wolf, a tiger, a frog,

a tree - as well as the percentage of drawings showing a striking physical distance between the teacher and the child, we can conclude that the relationship between teachers and children is not good in a worrying number of cases. That certainly points to further research, but also to the necessity of educating teachers in the direction of acquiring skills for the development of a harmonious relationship with children.

CONCLUSION

The most common factor mentioned relative to the positive development of young people is the quality of relationships with significant adults, including teachers. Starting from that finding, the paper aimed to try to determine the quality of the teacher-child relationship in our preschools. The results showed that in a significant percentage of cases this relationship is not at the level that would be desirable for undisturbed educational work. This certainly points to further research but also to the necessity of educating teachers in the direction of acquiring skills for the development of a harmonious relationship with children.

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