

RELATIONS BETWEEN TEACHER AND A CHILD WITH DISABILITY: EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS FROM PRESCHOOL FACILITIES IN SERBIA AND CROATIA

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Abstract

Relationship between teacher and a child with disability stands out as one of the most important factors of preschool inclusive practice and care quality. Despite that, there is a small number of studies that have dealt with this topic. Still, recent studies that focused on teachers' perspective and experiences in inclusive practice indicated high level of professional stress, low sense of competence and motivation for work with the children with disabilities and generally negative attitudes towards inclusion in preschool, which can lead to lower capacities for developing high quality relationship with the child.

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of *teacher domain* variables (work experience with children with disabilities, perceived contribution of basic education and continuous professional training seminars for work with children with disabilities, self-assessed motivation and competence in work with children with disabilities) on teacher-child relationship quality, measured by two dimensions (closeness and conflict) of Student-teacher relationship scale - SF [1]. The sample included 64 preschool teachers from Serbia and Croatia (32 from each country, paired in age and the overall work experience). This research is a part of a wider study on the capacities of early education system to provide quality experiences for children from different vulnerable groups.

Both teachers from Serbia and Croatia gave average estimations of their motivation and competence for work with child with disability and their assessment of contribution of formal education and training seminars to the quality of their current work in inclusive setting.

When it comes to relationship quality, both groups had higher average scores on closeness than on conflict dimension. Teachers from Serbia had statistically higher average score on conflict dimension than teachers from Croatia ($t=2.078$, $df(49)$, $p<.05$). In Serbian teachers' subsample, regression analysis model (predictors included previously mentioned teacher domain variables) for closeness dimension was significant ($R=.802$, $R^2=.67$, $F=4.51$, $p<.05$). The perceived contribution of formal education (initial professional training) to the work with children with disabilities had significant effects on closeness dimension ($\beta=.633$, $p<.05$), indicating that teachers who perceive their initial training as more useful for current practice, have higher levels of closeness with children they work with. The proposed model is not significant when it comes to the antagonism in the teacher child relations, indicating that variables such as assessment of the initial education, continuous professional development, experience in the work with children with disabilities, self-assessed motivation and competence for inclusive practice, do not explain the negative exchange, ambivalent and rejecting relation with the child, and other characteristics of antagonism in teacher-child relations. In Croatian teachers subsample regression model for closeness, as well for antagonism, were not significant, which indicates that relationship quality in this subsample is not described by this set of variables. These results open the question of further investigation of predictors that could potentially contribute to the teacher-child with disability relationship quality, in order to improve the quality of preschool inclusive practice.

Keywords: inclusion, early childhood education, teacher-child relations, children with disability.

1 INTRODUCTION

The teacher-child relationship is one of the key factors contributing to the quality of inclusive early childhood education, but it is also the foundation of inclusion goals- enabling children to have high quality experiences of exploring and learning in accepting and stimulative social surrounding. This process in kindergartens is an important aspect through which the quality of educational services in early education is evaluated ([2], [3]).

There are different ways in which the quality of relationships can be defined. Some authors analyze it through the experience of security and the development of secure attachment between the child and the teacher [4]. Contemporary pedagogical concepts emphasize that the role of an adults is in guiding the child's experience, fostering the development of skills and supporting various ways of establishing relationships with others [5]. In order to do this, the teacher should develop a relationship based on the continuity of attention, care, support, joint decision-making and encouraging the participation of the child in the selection of type and characteristics of the activity. In addition, a high quality relationship implies sensitivity for an individualized approach to the child, an ability to see the reality from the child's perspective, respect for the child, and continuous reflexive practice in child care [6]. Closeness and the experience of safety with a sensitive and responsive caretaker, are recognized as the key elements of a high quality relationship. Child development of skills and cultural competencies will depend on the way in which the teacher, as an important figure in the network of child's social relations, supports the specific needs of the child (in context of their individual development and characteristics, gender role, ethnicity and other factors) and has the capacities to lead the child through the educational process. Apart from the security experience, other key elements of a high quality relationship, from the perspective of the child, are the experience of continuity of attention, care, support and encouragement by the adult, as well as the possibility of joint decision-making, participation of the child in the activities that he/she undertakes. From an adult's perspective, a high quality relationship implies a sensitivity to the individualized approach to the child, the ability to perceive the situation from the child's perspective (compliance), but also the skills to reflect critically on the practice of childcare, as well as respect and support the child [6].

Factors that can contribute to the quality of relationships are different and they may be related to teachers, the child himself and the circumstances (such as perceived support [7], characteristics of the group, number of children in the group and adult-child relationship). Among the factors that are from teacher's domain, different personality characteristics [8], professional stress [9] are recognized, but above all education and training which contributes to competence and motivation for work, a set of attitudes and beliefs about the child and the importance of its involvement in peer learning ([10], [11]).

The effects of high quality relationships are related to the child's opportunities for supported exploring and learning, but also social inclusion and readiness for further stay in the mainstream education system [12]. Research on a sample of children with disabilities, for example, have shown that children with a high level of closeness and a low level of conflict with educators, are at a lower risk of relocation to the special education institutions [12].

There is a lack of research on the quality of teacher-child relationship, in our region. When it comes to research, the quality of inclusion is monitored predominantly from the perspective of the attitudes of the teachers. In Serbia, the decade of monitoring changes in attitudes, points to little or no progress, and attitudes are still predominantly ambivalent to negative ([13], [14]) and linked to the experience of fear and concern [15] and the low estimated efficiency of initial education when it comes to willingness to work in an inclusive context [16]. In Croatia, there is not enough research on the attitudes of educators, but there is also not enough research generally in terms of quality and factors contributing to the inclusion of children with disabilities. The existing ones indicate that the attitudes of the educators related to the importance of inclusion are positive, but the experience of educators related to the competence for work is still quite low and significantly related to the assessment of the (low) available support and participation in the professional development in the field of inclusive education [17]. Compared with teachers in schools, preschool teachers show greater motivation, but also sensitivity to work with children with disabilities and readiness for professional development in this field. They experience their work with children with disabilities as high in quality, and in this assessment, they rely mostly on the continuity of reflexive practice [18].

Therefore, the aim of this paper was to describe the relationship between the preschool teacher and the child with disabilities in preschool institutions from Serbia and Croatia, and to identify possible effects that motivation and perceived competence for working with children with disabilities, assessment of the efficiency of initial education and professional development in the field of inclusion may have on the quality of relationships.

2 METHODOLOGY

The sample consisted of 64 preschool teachers - 32 teachers from preschool institutions on the territory of Serbia, and 32 teachers from preschool institutions on the territory of Croatia. Teachers did not differ significantly in relation to the length of their overall work experience ($t = -.863$, $df (58)$, $p >$

.05), nor in relation to how many times in previous experiences they had the opportunity to work with a child with disabilities ($\chi^2 = 5.279$, $df(3)$, $p > .05$).

The teacher-child with disability relationship quality was operationalized and measured by the Student-teacher Relationship Scale - SV [1] Data were collected through the self-assessment of teachers, about the aspects of a relationship grouped in two dimensions: antagonism (negative feelings towards the child, experience of conflict, rejection in relation to the child) and closeness (acceptance, positive feelings and exchange, open communication). In the research, as potential factors that contribute to the quality of the relation between the assessed variables from the so-called teacher domain- sense of competence for work with a child with disabilities, the motivation for work with a child with disabilities, and the assessment of the contribution of initial education and training seminars in the field of inclusion, on readiness to work in an inclusive context. All these variables were evaluated with one-item measures, on a scale of 1 (generally) to 5 (fully).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive statistics

3.1.1 Teacher-child relationship quality

The average assessments of closeness, as a dimension of the quality of the child-teacher relationship, in preschool teachers from Serbia sub-sample and in preschool teachers from Croatia sub-sample were somewhat higher than the theoretical average. No statistically significant differences were found in the average assessments of closeness between teachers from Serbia and Croatia (Table 1.).

Table 1. Differences in teacher-child relationship quality between teachers from Serbia and Croatia: closeness dimension.

	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Serbia	24	3.690	1.056	-.520	50	>.05
Croatia	28	3.831	.900			

The assessment of closeness does not correlate significantly with the length of work experience, in sub-sample of teachers from Serbia ($r_{\text{closeness}} = -.068$, $p > .05$), nor in sub-sample of teachers from Croatia ($r_{\text{closeness}} = -.075$, $p > .05$).

When it comes to antagonism dimension, the average estimates in both sub-samples were slightly below the theoretical average. It was found that the estimations of antagonism are significantly lower than the estimates of closeness dimension, in the case of teachers from Serbia ($t = 3.451$, $df(23)$, $p < .01$), and also in the case of teachers from Croatia ($t = 7.346$, $df(26)$, $p < .01$). Table 2. gives an overview of the results of the t test, which indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in the assessment of antagonism among preschool teachers from Serbia and Croatia, in favour of higher assessments in case of teachers from Serbia.

Table 2. Differences in teacher-child relationship quality between teachers from Serbia and Croatia: antagonism dimension.

	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Serbia	24	2.567	.814	2.078	49	<.05
Croatia	27	2.115	.739			

The assessment of antagonism does not correlate statistically with the length of the work experience, in the case of teachers from Serbia sub-sample ($r_{\text{antagonism}} = .383$, $p > .05$) nor among the teachers from Croatia ($r_{\text{antagonism}} = .033$, $p > .05$).

Determined results about higher score on the closeness dimension and a lower score on the antagonism dimension imply a relatively high-quality relationship in the relationship between the teacher and the child with disability. The results for Serbia, however, point to an ambivalent

relationship, significantly saturated with antagonism, which is in line with other research related to the attitudes and experiences of teachers in working with children with disabilities ([13], [19], [20], [21]).

3.1.2 Assessments of variables from teachers domain

The average assessment of the motivation for working with a child with disabilities in the sub-sample of teachers from Serbia was 3.09 out of 5 (SD = 1.376), and in the sub-sample of teachers from Croatia - 3.30 (SD = 1.088). This difference was not statistically significant ($t = - .652$, $df (60)$, $p < .05$).

The average assessment of the competence for work with a child with disabilities in the sub-sample of teachers from Serbia was 2.78 out of 5 (SD = 1.237), and in the sub-sample of teachers from Croatia 3.00 (SD = .983). The difference was also not statistically significant ($t = - .768$, $df (60)$, $p > .05$).

The average assessment of the contribution of basic education for working with a child with developmental disorders among teachers in Serbia was 2.53 out of 5 (SD = 1.279), and in the case of teachers in Croatia 2.55 (1.207). This difference was not statistically significant ($t = - .047$, $df (59)$, $p > .05$).

The average assessment of the contribution of training seminars, in sub-sample of teachers from Serbia was 3.48 out of 5 (SD = 1.078), and from Croatia - 3.56 (SD = 1.199). Even according to this variable, the teachers were not significantly different ($t = - .218$, $df (37)$, $p > .05$).

In the whole sample, none of the variables from the teacher domain correlated significantly with the length of the work experience ($r_{\text{motivation}} = .305$, $p > .05$; $r_{\text{competence}} = -.079$, $p > .05$, $r_{\text{b.education}} = .078$, $p > .05$; $r_{\text{seminars}} = .752$, $p > .05$). The motivation and perceived competence for working with children with disabilities ($r = .732$, $p < .01$) were significantly positively related to each other, as well as assessments of the contribution of basic education and training seminars for readiness to work with this group of children. ($r = .677$, $p < .01$).

3.2 Contribution of variables from teachers domain on teacher-child with disabilities relationship quality

In order to examine the effects of the predictors from teachers domain (length of work experience, motivation, perceived competence, contribution of initial education and training seminars for readiness to work with a child with disabilities), on the quality of relationship with the child, regression analyses were conducted on the sub-samples of preschool teachers from Serbia and Croatia, for each of the dimensions of relationship quality as criterion variables.

3.2.1 Effects on closeness dimension

When it comes to a sub-sample of teachers from Serbia, the regression model in whole was statistically significant. With this set of predictors, about 67% of the variance of closeness in teacher-child relationship was explained (Table 3.). The contribution of basic education for readiness to work with a child with developmental disabilities was the only predictor that had a statistically significant independent effect ($\beta = .633$, $p < .05$) (Table 4.).

Table 3. Significance of regression model – Serbia sub-sample.

	R	R Square	F	p
Model	.820	.672	4.511	p<.05

Table 4. Contribution of predictors - Serbia.

	B	SE B	β	p
Length of work experience	-.022	.028	-.162	>.05
Motivation for work	.463	.261	.464	>.05
Sense of competence	.235	.294	.206	>.05
Contribution of basic education	.521	.231	.633	<.05
Contribution of training seminars	-.432	.278	-.413	>.05

Regarding the sub-sample of teachers from Croatia, the regression model was not statistically significant (Table 5.).

Table 5. *Significance of regression model – Croatia sub-sample.*

	R	R Square	F	p
Model	.665	.442	1.268	>.05

3.2.2 Effects on antagonism dimension

The overall model, in the case of a sub-sample of teachers from the territory of Serbia and Croatia, was not statistically significant for antagonism dimension (Tables 6. and 7.).

Table 6. *Significance of regression model – Serbia sub-sample.*

	R	R Square	F	p
Model	.642	.412	1.540	>.05

Table 7. *Significance of regression model – Croatia sub-sample*

	R	R Square	F	p
Model	.759	.575	1.897	>.05

The results indicate that the variables from the teacher's domain have a significant effect on closeness in the teacher-child relationship, but only for teachers from Serbia. Thereby, the estimated contribution of initial education is significant, which points to the importance of careful monitoring of basic education of preschool teachers in Serbia. Previous research has shown that the teachers do not consider their initial education to be useful for the work in an inclusive setting [16]. Although many efforts are being introduced in this direction through various projects aimed at improving the quality of initial preschool teacher training, current attempts of introducing contents related to work with children with disabilities are still saturated with concepts based on a medical model [22].

The results simultaneously raise the issue of further consideration of potential factors that contribute to the closeness in teacher-child relationship in Croatia, as well as the antagonism in relationship with the child in both countries. Having in mind the importance of building the close and warm relationship with the children [23], preschool teachers should be provided with the basic and special education that shape their competences in that direction. Therefore, the main implication regarding the results from Croatia is to consider possible changes in the contemporary study programs as well.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Monitoring the quality of inclusive early education and care should include continuous monitoring of the quality of relationships early education setting in whole, and, primarily on the teacher-child relationship (Starting strong IV). However, in Serbia, as well as in Croatia, this is still not entirely so. In Serbia, National Standards for the ECEC quality [24] include an external evaluation of this aspect of the work of the institution, but based on an unstructured observation carried out by an educational inspector on the basis of the criteria described in the Standards [24]. The process of working with the child, and the development of relationships, was left for analysis among practitioners in peer monitoring and reflexive practice. No research data is present, however, on the quality or efficacy of self- reflective practice, or peer monitoring of the teacher child relations.

In that sense, research data that introduces this topic are very important for guidance for improving practice. The main results of this research indicate that in Croatian sub-sample there is a relatively high teacher-child relationship quality, and for Serbian sub-sample, that the relationship is more saturated with antagonism. Closeness as a dimension is dominantly explained by the predictors from the teacher domain, in case of teaches from Serbia. The question of antagonism in relationship, in both countries, stays open for further research.

In future research, attention should be paid to recognizing the effects of other variables (professional stress, teacher's characteristics, perceived support, characteristics of the group, number of children in the group etc.), but also to the introduction of measures of teacher-child relationship quality that are not based on self-assessment, but on standardized observation protocols (e.g. [2], [3]).

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