

Teachers' Perceptions of Their Relationships with Students with Special Educational Needs Included in Preschool Classrooms

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Abstract: *Accommodating young children with special educational needs may be a great challenge for preschool teachers. It is assumed that teacher-child relationship is generally important, but in the case of children with special educational needs supplementary concerns have been raised. Investigating the teacher-child relationship at risk can contribute to the quality of inclusive early childhood education because, for these children, a positive relationship with their teachers seem to play a particularly important role for their social inclusion and also for the learning outcomes. This study examined the perceptions of 83 preschool teachers who had in their classroom children with special educational needs. We analysed preschool teachers' perceived conflict, closeness and dependency reported in their interactions with the students with special educational needs. The relationship between demographic factors and teacher-child relationship was also analysed. Results show that teachers have a conflictual and distant relationship with their students with special educational needs, younger children and boys being the most at risk groups. Teachers with a greater teaching experience have more positive and effective relationships with their students with disabilities. Significant correlations were found between teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive practices and their perceived relationship with the students with special educational needs.*

Keywords: inclusive education, special educational needs, teacher-child relationship, teacher self-efficacy, preschool teachers.

Introduction

Over the last decades, inclusive education became an important challenge for educators as they are expected to assume new roles¹ and to educate all students in regular classrooms, regardless of their disability. This can be a challenge especially in case of preschool teachers². Inclusion involves a deep recognition of both the differences and similarities between all children³ and practitioners need to find a way to reduce exclusion and find resources to support play, learning and participation⁴ for young children with disabilities and it is recommended that in inclusive classrooms, students with diverse abilities play and learn together.

Inclusion should begin at the earliest age possible. Although the principles of inclusion are the same regardless of age, there are, however, a

¹ E. Avramidis, P. Bayliss & R. Burden "A Survey into Mainstream Teachers' Attitudes Towards the Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs in the Ordinary School in one Local Education Authority", *Educational Psychology*, XX (2000), no. 2, p. 191-211.

² Samuel L. Odom, Virginia Buysse, Elena Soukakou, "Inclusion for Young Children with Disabilities: A Quarter Century of Research Perspectives", *Journal of Early Intervention*, XXXIII (2011), no. 4, p. 344-356.

³ T. Booth, M. Ainscow, and D. Kingston, *Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning, Participation and Play in Early Years and Childcare*, Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2006.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

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number of issues that differentiate inclusion at preschool level from the inclusion of older students⁵. The role of adults, and especially of teachers is essential in working with children with special educational needs because they can promote intervention strategies for sustaining adequate social interaction and positive attitudes⁶. Concerns about children with disabilities included in preschool settings have been raised because they were seen as having developmental delays, lacking some abilities necessary for success. Preschool teachers need to find specific strategies in order to differentiate instruction and carefully plan individual learning experiences to meet the children's individual needs. According to Odom and Wolery⁷, adults mediate children's experiences to promote learning, they do not just teach or instruct, but their actions are planned, goal directed and systematically practiced.

Starting with preschool, the teachers are becoming important figures in children's lives. A positive teacher-student relationship may advantage vulnerable children⁸ and early intervention has an important role on cognitive development and school readiness for children at risk⁹. Students with special educational needs are at risk of poor school outcomes, so a good relationship with the teacher may positively influence their developmental and academic trajectory.

Teacher-child relationship in preschool is important because it provides social support, and emotional security. Children's ability to form relationships with their teachers in preschool also predicts later academic and behavioural adjustments in school. Studies show that early teacher-child relationships are predictors¹⁰ of academic and behavioural outcomes later in school. For example, the consistency of perceived teacher-child relationships between preschool and kindergarten was examined in a three-year

⁵ Samuel L. Odom et al., "Preschool Inclusion in the United States: A Review of Research from an Ecological Systems Perspective", in *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, IV (2004), no. 1, p. 17-49.

⁶ Samuel L. Odom, Karen E. Diamond, „Inclusion of young Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Education: The Research Base", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, XIII (1998), no. 1, p. 3-25.

⁷ Samuel L. Odom and Mark Wolery, "A Unified Theory of Practice in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education: Evidence-Based Practices," *The Journal of Special Education XXXVII*, no. 3 (2003): 164-173, p. 168.

⁸ Birch, S. H., & Ladd, G. "The teacher-child relationship and children's early school adjustment", *Journal of School Psychology*, XXXV (1997), no. 1, p. 61-79.

⁹ Craig T. Ramey and Sharon L. Ramey, "Early Learning and School Readiness: Can Early Intervention Make a Difference?", *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* L (2004), no. 4, p. 471-491.

¹⁰ Bridget K. Hamre and Robert C. Pianta, "Early Teacher-Child Relationships and the Trajectory of Children's School Outcomes Through Eighth Grade", *Child Development*, LXXII (2001), p.625-638.

longitudinal study¹¹ and results suggest that perceptions were stable across the transition from one school setting to another. The authors¹² consider that children enter formal school with a working model of teacher–child relationships and with established patterns of engaging teachers. It is believed that some variance in teacher-student relationship can be attributed to fairly stable features that children bring in their relationship with teachers¹³.

The relationships established between teacher and student can also be reflected as acceptance or rejection in peer relationships¹⁴ thus influencing the social aspects of inclusion. Teachers may play an important role in promoting children’s acceptance of peers with disabilities. Therefore, it is important to consider how social relationships and social contexts relate to the adjustment and functioning of students with special educational needs¹⁵.

Student characteristics have also impact on teacher instruction and teacher-child relationship¹⁶. In a meta-analysis conducted on 19 studies, Nurmi¹⁷ found that teachers reported more conflict and dependency and less closeness in teacher-child relationships when interacting with students showing high levels of internal or external behaviour problems.

Methodology

The main aim of our study was to explore the relationship of the preschool teachers with their students with special educational needs by answering the following research questions: 1. To what degree preschool teachers perceive their relationship with the students with special educational needs as being marked by conflict, closeness or dependency? 2. To what extent the demographic factors influence the teacher-student relationship? 3. Does teacher perceived self-efficacy for inclusive practices correlate with the relationship with students with special educational needs?

¹¹ C. Howes, L. C. Phillipsen, and E. Peisner-Feinberg, “The Consistency of Perceived Teacher–Child Relationships Between Preschool and Kindergarten”, in *Journal of School Psychology*, XXXVIII (2000), p. 113-132.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 129.

¹³ El. W. Saft, and R. C. Pianta, “Teachers’ perceptions of their relationships with students: Effects of child age, gender, and ethnicity of teachers and children,” in *School Psychology Quarterly*, XVI (2001), p. 126.

¹⁴ C. Howes, Claire E. Hamilton and C. C. Matheson, “Children’s relationships with peers: differential associations with aspects of the teacher-child relationship”, in *Child Development*, LXV (1994), no. 1, p. 253–263.

¹⁵ C. Murray and M. T. Grennberg, “Examining the importance of social relationships and social contexts in the lives of children with high-incidence disabilities”, in *The Journal of Special Education*, XXIX (2006), no. 4, p. 220–233.

¹⁶ J. E. Nurmi, “Students’ Characteristics and Teacher–Child Relationships in Instruction: A Meta-Analysis”, in *Educational Research Review*, VII (2012), no. 3, p. 177–197.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 192.

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Participants

Preschool regular education teachers intending to participate in an inclusive education course were asked to volunteer for the study. Each teacher that reported having a child with special educational needs in the classroom was invited to volunteer for the study (n = 87). Demographic information of the sample are shown in Table 1. As male teachers in preschool settings are very few, only female teachers were included in the study.

Table 1. Demographic information of the sample

Demographic factors	Respondent Subgroups	n
Age	20-29	27
	30-39	36
	40-50	24
Teaching experience	0-9 years	43
	10-19 years	25
	More than 20 years	19
Preschool grade level	First year	23
	Second year	25
	Third year	39

Teachers reported having more boys (n = 51) than girls (n = 36) with special educational needs in their classrooms. The children were from 3 years to 6 years old, 4 of them were repeating the third year of preschool before going to school.

Measuring instruments

The relationship between preschool teachers and their students with special educational needs was measured using the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale¹⁸ (STRS). It is a self-report measure of teacher-perceived relationships with an individual student, which relies on teacher perceptions and feelings about the child behaviour in the classroom and especially in relation with the teacher¹⁹.

The STRS items are rated on a 5-point Likert-like scale and assess the student behaviour with the teacher and the teacher's beliefs about student's feelings towards the teacher. STRS has three subscales: Conflict, Closeness and Dependency and a total score. The Conflict subscale measures the degree to which a teacher perceives the relationship to a particular student as negative or conflictual. The Closeness subscale measures the degree to which a teacher

¹⁸ R. C. Pianta, *The Student-Teacher Relationship Scale*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 1993.

¹⁹ R. C. Pianta, „STRS, *Student-Teacher Relationship Scale, Professional Manual*”, Lutz, Psychological Assessment Resources, 2001.

experiences affection, warmth and open communication with a particular student. The Dependency subscale measures the degree to which a teacher perceives a particular student as being overly dependent. The Total score measures the degree to which a teacher perceives the relationship with a particular student as positive and effective. The measure has been used in a large number of studies to measure the quality of teacher-student relationship, but less studies are focused on children with special educational needs.

In this study we used STRS to assess teacher-perceived conflict, closeness and dependency in the relationship with the students with special educational needs. The STRS was completed separately by the teachers for each child with special educational needs included in their class.

The perceived self-efficacy of preschool teachers was assessed using The Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices scale (TEIP)²⁰. According to the authors²¹, this scale is developed from a sociocultural perspective of diversity rather than a medical model of disability, and includes 18 items that measure three factors required for effective teaching in inclusive classrooms, namely: Efficacy to use inclusive instructions (EII), Efficacy in collaboration (EC) and Efficacy in managing disruptive behaviours (EMB).

The initial findings indicate that the scale has strong validity and reliability. The alpha coefficients of the three factors were 0.93, 0.85 and 0.85, respectively²².

According to the authors of TEIP, in order to understand how effective a teacher is in teaching an individual student, the scale can be used by taking into account the learning needs of a particular student when responding to each item²³. In the present study we asked the preschool teachers to evaluate each of the statements having in mind both their relationship with the whole class, and their particular relationship with the students with special educational needs.

To obtain a measure of the scales' reliability, internal consistency coefficients were calculated for STRS and TEIP. Our data results show a good internal consistency for the three STRS subscales: Conflict 0.850, Closeness 0.740, Dependency 0.586 and also for the three subscales of TEIP: EII 0.893, EMB 0.904, and EC 0.853.

²⁰ U. Sharma, T. Loreman, and C. Forlin, „Measuring Teacher Efficacy to Implement Inclusive Practices”, in *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, XII (2011), no. 1, p. 12-21.

²¹ *Ibidem.*,

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

Results and discussion

Concerns for teacher-student relationship in the case of students with special educational needs

According to Pianta²⁴ all STRS scale and subscale percentiles should be considered when interpreting results. Percentiles above 75 for Conflict and Dependency subscales indicate high levels of concern on the teacher's part. Percentiles below 25 at Closeness subscale and the Total scale indicate significantly low levels of positive qualities and relationship attribute. Of particular concern is the case when the teacher's relationship with a specific student is characterized by a high level of Conflict (at or above the 75th percentile) and a low level of Closeness (at or above the 25th percentile)²⁵. In our study scores are above the 75th percentile for Conflict, and below the 25th percentile in Closeness and Total Score for the total number of children, but also separate for boys and girls.

The only subscale in which the scores are slightly below the 75th percentile threshold is Dependency. According to Pianta²⁶ Dependency scores can be interpreted as suggesting a negative dimension, but for younger students (below 2nd grade) higher Dependency scores may not be a cause for alarm, which could be the case of children with special educational needs.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for STRS Scale and Subscales for preschool children

Scale / subscale	Preschool children (n = 87)		Boys (n = 51)		Girls (n = 36)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Conflict	29.655	9.202	31.431	8.681	27.138	9.451
Closeness	37.046	6.763	34.921	7.453	40.055	4.140
Dependency	12.436	3.750	12.686	4.071	12.083	3.263
Total Score	96.954	15.082	92.803	14.668	102.833	13.818

The results show that teacher relationship with students with special educational needs are at a high concern level for all the subscales and also for the general score of STRS. Although all the children have scores that place them in the 75th percentile which can be considered an alarm sign, the situation is of more concern for the boys with special educational needs. They have a higher level of conflict and a more distant relationship with the preschool teacher than girls with special educational needs.

Child gender and teacher-student relationship

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the degree of teacher-student Conflict according to the gender of the children with

²⁴ R. C. Pianta, „STRS, *Student-Teacher Relationship Scale, Professional Manual*”, p. 12.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

special educational needs. There was a significant difference in the scores for boys ($M=31.43$, $SD=8.68$) and girls ($M=27.13$, $SD=9.45$). Teachers have more conflictual relationships with the boys with special educational needs than they have with the girls with special educational needs: $t(85)=2.18$, $p<.05$. The effect size for Conflict Cohen's d is 0.47, which is a medium effect.

Analysing Closeness according to the gender of the children with special educational needs, there was found a significant difference in the scores for boys ($M=34.92$, $SD=7.45$) and girls ($M=40.05$, $SD=4.14$). Teachers have closer relationships with the girls with special educational needs than they have with the boys with special educational needs $t(85)=3.74$, $p<.001$. Cohen's effect size value ($d = 0.85$) suggested a large effect.

The overall teacher-student relationship is also influenced by the gender of the children with special educational needs. There was a significant difference in the scores for boys ($M=92.80$, $SD=14.66$) and girls ($M=102.83$, $SD=13.81$). Teachers have a higher Total score in relationship with girls with special educational needs than they have with boys with special educational needs $t(85) = 3.21$, $p < .005$. Effect size for Total score ($d = 0.70$) indicates a large effect.

Efficacy in managing behaviour seems to be perceived different by preschool teachers according to the gender of the children with special educational needs. There was a significant difference in the scores for boys ($M=4.45$, $SD=0.72$) and girls ($M=4.85$, $SD=0.75$). Teachers have a higher efficacy in managing behaviour with girls with special educational needs than they have with boys with special educational needs $t(85)=2.51$, $p=0.014$. Teachers also perceive they have a greater efficacy in communication when it comes to girls ($M=5.28$, $SD=0.32$) compared with the boys ($M=4.87$, $SD=0.78$) $t(85) = 2.97$, $p = 0.004$.

Demographic factors influencing preschool teachers' perceptions

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of preschool teachers' teaching experience on their relationship with students with special educational needs. Participants were divided into three groups: Group 1: 1-10 years of teaching experience; Group 2: 11-20 years of teaching experience and Group 3: 21-30 years of teaching experience. There were statistically significant differences in two of the subscales for the three age groups: Conflict [$F(2, 84) = 7.560$, $p = 0.027$], Closeness [$F(2, 84) = 8.724$, $p < 0.001$] and for the Total Score [$F(2, 84) = 9.832$, $p < 0.001$].

Table 3. Means and SD for Conflict, Closeness and Total Score of STRS according to the teaching experience of preschool teachers

Teaching experience	Group	n	Conflict		Closeness		Total Score	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
0 - 10 years	1	43	32.16	8.59	34.32	6.58	91.90	13.22
11 - 20 years	2	25	30.36	9.21	38.80	5.75	96.72	14.58
21 - 30 years	3	19	23.05	7.57	40.89	5.95	108.68	13.75

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Conflict in group 3 (21-30 years) (Table 3) was significantly lower than the means of the other two groups: Group 1 (0-10 years) and Group 2 (11-20 years). Between Group 1 and Group 2 there is no significant difference. Our results suggest that teachers' teaching experience has an influence on the degree of conflict. However, it seems that teaching experience must be high, more than 20 years, in order to have a significant effect. Less experienced teachers have a more tensioned relationship with their students with special educational needs, while those with greater experience have a less conflictual relationship.

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Closeness in Group 1 (0-10 years) (Table 3) was significantly lower than the means of the other two groups: Group 2 (11-20 years) and group 3 (21-30 years). Between Group 2 and Group 3 there is no significant difference. It seems that less experienced teachers (less than 10 years of teaching experience) have a colder and a more distant relationship with their students with special educational needs, than those with greater experience. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Total score in group 3 (21-30 years) (Table 3) was significantly lower than the means of the other two groups: Group 1 (0-10 years) and Group 2 (11-20 years). Between Group 1 and Group 2 there is no significant difference. Preschool teachers with greater teaching experience have a better overall relationship with their students with special educational needs.

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of teachers' preschool class level on their relationship with the children with special educational needs. In the Romanian educational system there are three years of preschool and the participants were grouped according to their grade level of teaching in preschool: Group 1: teachers working with 3-4 years old children in their first year of preschool; Group 2: teachers working with 4-5 years old children in their second year of preschool; Group 3: teachers working with 5-6 years old children in their third year of preschool. There were statistically significant differences at the $p=0.05$ level only in the Closeness subscale ($F(2, 84) = 5.40, p = .006$). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey test indicated that the mean score for Group 3 ($M = 39.53, SD = 5.67$) was significantly higher than the mean of

Group 1 ($M= 34.56$, $SD = 6.67$) and Group 2 ($M= 35.44$, $SD = 7.28$). Between Group 1 and Group 2 there is no significant difference. Teachers seem to have a closer relationship with their 5-6 years old children with special educational needs that are in their third year of preschool than have their colleagues working with smaller children with special educational needs (children in their first or second year of preschool).

A Kruskal-Wallis H was conducted in order to explore the impact of children's age on the relationship with their preschool teachers. Children were grouped according to their age into four groups: Group 1: children aged 3 years ($n=12$); Group 2: children aged 4 years ($n=23$); Group 3: children aged 5 years ($n=38$) and Group 4: children aged 6 years ($n=14$). There were statistically significant differences in two of the subscales and the Total STRS Score and also in the TEIP subscales for the four age groups.

Results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in Conflict score between groups according to children's age, $\chi^2(3) = 10.442$, $p = 0.015$. Dunn's pairwise tests were carried out for the six pairs of groups. There was strong evidence ($p = 0.009$, adjusted using the Bonferroni correction) of a difference between Group 1 (Mean Rank = 62.25) and Group 4 (Mean Rank = 30.68), preschool teachers have a significant higher Conflict with children aged 3 years, than with children aged 6 years. There was no evidence of a difference between the other pairs.

A statistically significant difference was found in Closeness score between groups according to children's age, $\chi^2(3) = 10.390$, $p = 0.016$. Dunn's pairwise tests were carried out for the six pairs of groups. There was strong evidence ($p = 0.009$, adjusted using the Bonferroni correction) of a difference between Group 1 (Mean Rank = 26.12) and Group 4 (Mean Rank = 57.50), preschool teachers have a significant lower Closeness with children aged 3 years, than with children aged 6 years. There was no evidence of a difference between the other pairs.

The Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that the distribution of Dependency scores are the same across all four age categories, so we retained the null hypothesis ($p = 0.624$).

The Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in Total score between groups according to children's age, $\chi^2(3) = 11.489$, $p = 0.009$. Dunn's pairwise tests were carried out. There was strong evidence ($p = 0.005$, adjusted using the Bonferroni correction) of a difference between Group 1 (Mean Rank = 26.38) and Group 4 (Mean Rank = 59.79), preschool teachers have a significant lower Total score with children aged 3 years, than with children aged 6 years. There was no evidence of a difference between the other pairs.

We can conclude that preschool teachers perceive their relationships as being more conflictual, more distant and less positive with their 3 years old students with special educational needs compared with their 6 years old

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students with special educational needs. Dependency does not seem to be influenced by the children's age.

The Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there was a statistically significant difference between groups according to children's age in EII $\chi^2(3) = 15.353$, $p = 0.002$; EMB $\chi^2(3) = 14.714$, $p = 0.002$ and EC $\chi^2(3) = 15.353$, $p = 0.002$ Dunn's pairwise tests were carried out.

For the EII subscale there was strong evidence ($p = 0.014$, adjusted using the Bonferroni correction) of a difference between Group 1 (Mean Rank = 20.88) and Group 4 (Group 4 Mean) and between Group 1 and Group 4 (Mean Rank = 50.89, $p = 0.001$, adjusted using the Bonferroni correction). There was no evidence of a difference between the other pairs. Preschool teachers that work with very young children with special educational needs (3 years old) children perceive a very low efficacy of their work in implementing inclusive instruction compared to preschool teachers that work with older children with special educational needs.

For the EMB subscale there was strong evidence ($p < 0.05$, adjusted using the Bonferroni correction) of a difference between Group 1 (Mean Rank = 20.50) and all the other groups: Group 2 (Mean Rank = 52.59, $p=0.002$), Group 3 (Mean Rank = 43.16, $p = 0.039$) and Group 4 (Mean Rank = 52.32, $p = 0.008$). There was no evidence of a difference between the other pairs. Preschool teachers that work with very young children with special educational needs (3 years old) perceive they have a significant lower efficacy in managing disruptive behaviour, than those working with older children.

For the EC subscale there was strong evidence ($p < 0.05$, adjusted using the Bonferroni correction) of a difference between Group 1 (Mean Rank = 20.50) and all the other groups: Group 2 (Mean Rank = 51.43, $p = 0.002$), Group 3 (Mean Rank = 42.83, $p = 0.030$) and Group 4 (Mean Rank = 55.93, $p = 0.001$). There was no evidence of a difference between the other pairs. Preschool teachers that work with very young children with special educational needs (3 years old) perceive they have a significant lower efficacy in collaboration, compared with those working with older children.

Teacher student-relationship and teachers' perceived self-efficacy in inclusive practices

Another aim of our research was to analyse the interactions between preschool teachers' perceptions of their relationship with students with special educational needs and their self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms. Correlations were computed between preschool teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive practices and their relationship with the students with special educational needs. Table 4 shows the correlations among the subscales of TEIP and STRS.

Table 4. Correlations between Preschool Teachers' Self-efficacy in Inclusive Practices and their Relationship with the Students with Special Educational Needs

TEIP	STRS			
	Conflict	Closeness	Dependency	Total score
EII	-.424**	.259*	-.240*	.434**
EMB	-.564**	.431**	-.220*	.592**
EC	-.344**	.496**	-.130	.465**

*p<.05 (2-tailed); **p<.01(2-tailed)

Teacher-student Conflict has moderate to large negative correlations with all the subscales of TEIP. A higher conflict between the preschool teachers and their students with special educational needs correlates with a lower Efficacy in using Inclusive Practices, a lower Efficacy in Managing Behaviour and a lower Efficacy in Collaboration. Teacher-student Closeness has a moderate to large positive correlation with all the subscales of TEIP. A closer relationship between the preschool teachers and their students with special educational needs correlates with a higher Efficacy in using Inclusive Practices, a higher Efficacy in Managing Behaviour and a higher Efficacy in Collaboration. A perceived child dependency on the preschool teacher has a low negative correlation with two of the TEIP scales, in this case teachers are less effective in using inclusive practices and in managing behaviour. Between the Total Score of STRS and the subscales of TEIP there are strong positive correlations, an overall positive and effective relationship with the student with special educational needs correlates with efficacy in using inclusive practices. The results are similar to other studies that sustain the importance of specialised instruction, adequate support and collaboration²⁷ in the context of preschool inclusion.

Some limitations must be taken into account as the self-report nature of the measure and the sample size; only 87 preschool teachers, which restricts the conclusions that can be drawn. Another limitation is a possible self-selection bias because all of the participants volunteered to complete the survey, the selection of preschool teachers was made according to their self-report about having in their classrooms children with special educational needs and it is possible that teachers having a poorer relationship with their students with special educational needs did not want to take part in this study.

The number of boys with special educational needs reported by the preschool teachers was greater than the number of girls. All children, boys and girls have scores that place them in the 75th percentile²⁸ for the Conflict

²⁷ Samuel L. Odom, Virginia Buysse, Elena Soukakou, "Inclusion for Young Children with Disabilities: A Quarter Century of Research Perspectives", *Journal of Early Intervention*, XXXIII (2011), no. 4, p 344-356.

²⁸ R. C. Pianta, „STRS, Student-Teacher Relationship Scale, Professional Manual", Lutz: Psychological Assessment Resources, 2001.

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scale and in the 25th percentile²⁹ for Closeness and Total score, which can be considered an alarm sign for the preschool children with special educational needs.

There are evidence indicating gender differences in terms of quality of the relationship that children with special educational needs have with their teachers. Boys with special educational needs have in general a poorer relationship (more conflictual and more distant) with their preschool teachers, than girls with special educational needs. These results are consistent with the results of other research³⁰ on children with typical development. Teachers reported greater closeness and more dependency in their relationships with girls than with boys³¹.

Three years old children with special educational needs are the most vulnerable category of preschool children. Teacher perceived relationship with them as especially challenging and difficult, they do not seem effective in developing a good relationship with them and do not seem to be effective in managing their behaviour or in using inclusive instruction practices. On the other hand, the most favoured are those that are 6 years old. Although children with a typical development usually are at school at that age, in the case of children with special educational needs it is possible that some of them begun preschool with a year delay or that they repeated³² the last year of preschool. It was not found evidence that teachers perceived a difference in the dependency of older preschool children with special educational needs.

Conclusions

The study contributes to the better understanding of the preschool teacher's perceptions of their relationships with the students with special educational needs in the context of inclusive education. Teachers' efficacy in inclusive practices correlates with their perceived relationship with students with special educational needs.

The results raise some concerns because the relationship is seen by most of the teachers as being tensed, conflictual and distant. Boys and very young children (three years old), in their first year of preschool seem to be especially vulnerable and at risk of developing dysfunctional relationships.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ E. M. Jerome, Bridget K. Hamre, Robert C. Pianta, "Teacher-Child Relationships from Kindergarten to Sixth Grade: Early Childhood Predictors of Teacher-perceived Conflict and Closeness", *Social Development*, XVIII (2009), no. 4, p. 915-945.

³¹ C. Howes, L. C. Phillipsen, and E. Peisner-Feinberg, "The Consistency of Perceived Teacher-Child Relationships Between Preschool and Kindergarten," *Journal of School Psychology*, XXXVIII (2000), p. 113-132.

³² In the Romanian educational system, it may be recommended if it is considered that the children do not meet the minimum requirements for entering school.

These relational patterns can be perpetuated over the school years³³. The children with whom teachers report maladjusted relation with considerable conflict and little warmth represent a group with needs for intervention³⁴. It is important that the quality of teacher-student relationship to be taken into account as an indicator of inclusion, as supportive teacher behaviors are a defining characteristic of positive teacher-child relationships³⁵. Inclusive preschools settings should take into account the risk that children with disabilities experience social, emotional and behavioral difficulties and try to promote supportive practices that foster positive relationships between teachers and their students with special educational needs.

³³ C. Howes, L. C. Phillipsen, and E. Peisner-Feinberg, "The Consistency of Perceived Teacher-Child Relationships Between Preschool and Kindergarten", in *Journal of School Psychology*, XXXVIII (2000), p. 113-132.

³⁴ R. C. Pianta, "Patterns of relationships between children and kindergarten teachers," *Journal of School Psychology*, XXXII (1994), no. 1, p. 15-31.

³⁵ J. T. Thijs, Helma M. Y. Koomen and Aryan van der Leij, "Teacher-child relationships and pedagogical practices: considering the teacher's perspective," *School Psychology Review*, XXXVII (2008), no. 2, p. 244-60.

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