Utilizing professional relationships with at-risk children

Utilizando relaciones profesionales con niños y niñas en situación de riesgo

Utilizando relacionamentos profissionais com crianças em perigo

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ABSTRACT: A child can be considered at risk if their basic needs or not met or they are in danger of not having these needs met. Highly abnormal living conditions can directly harm personal development, learning, and integration into society. Working with at-risk children requires various educational approaches whose successful implementation depends greatly on the expertise of the personnel involved. This work aims to evaluate the use of relationship and educators' understanding of it in interventions. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 teaching staff[1] who work with children[2] in various environments and organizations and subsequently analysed using open coding followed by thematic analysis. Interviews were conducted with eight children's home educators, eight counsellors and therapists, and ten elementary school teachers. Significant aspects of the understanding and use of relationship-building were identified which, while differing based on the focus of the contributors, demonstrated that relationship-building was the common denominator in all successful interventions in education and re-education.

RESUMEN: Se puede considerar que un niño o una niña está en situación de riesgo si sus necesidades básicas no están cubiertas o corren el riesgo de no estarlo. Su entorno o condiciones se desvían tanto de la norma que pueden perjudicar directamente su desarrollo, educación e integración en la sociedad. Por lo tanto, se utiliza una serie de procedimientos pedagógicos específicos cuando se trabaja con niños y niñas en situación de riesgo y se hace gran hincapié en la experiencia del personal. Este documento presenta los resultados de un análisis secundario de entrevistas semiestructuradas con 26 miembros del personal educativo que trabajan con estos niños y niñas en diversos entornos y organizaciones. El objetivo del análisis es presentar el uso de la relación y la comprensión que el personal educativo tiene de ella en las intervenciones. Para ello, se utilizaron procedimientos analíticos de codificación abierta y posterior análisis temático. La entrevista se realizó a

ocho educadores y educadoras de un hogar infantil, ocho trabajadores y trabajadoras de orientación y terapia y diez profesores y profesoras de la escuela primaria. Se identificaron aspectos significativos de la comprensión y el uso de la creación de relaciones, que por un lado variaban según el enfoque de los informantes. Por otro lado, surgió el denominador común de la creación de relaciones como condición para el éxito de todas las intervenciones en los procesos educativos y reeducativos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:	RESUMO: Uma criança com insatisfação das necessidades básicas dela ou ameaçada de tal insatisfação pode ser considerada uma criança em perigo. O seu ambiente de vida ou condições de vida encontram-se de tal maneira desviadas do normal que podem imediatamente afetar o seu desenvolvimento, a sua educação e inserção na sociedade. Por isso utiliza-se uma gama de métodos pedagógicos específicos no trabalho com crianças em perigo e há aqui uma grande acentuação da profissionalidade dos empregados e das empregadas. Esta contribuição apresenta a saída de uma análise secundária de entrevistas semiestruturadas com 26 empregados e empregadas pedagógicos que trabalham com essas crianças em diversos ambientes e diversas organizações. É objetivo desta análise apresentar a utilização do relacionamento e seu entendimento por pedagogos e pedagogas no âmbito das intervenções. A este propósito foram aproveitados procedimentos analíticos de codificação aberta e de subsequente análise temática. As entrevistas foram levadas a cabo com oito educadores e educadoras de orfanato, oito consultores e consultoras,terapeutas e dez pedagogos e pedagogas de escola básica. Foram identificados aspetos significativos de entendimento e aproveitamento da edificação de um relacionamento que por um lado divergiam em virtude da orientação dos informantes. Por outro lado mostrou-se como um denominador comum a edificação do relacionamento como condição de todas as intervenções bem sucedidas nos processos educativos e reeducativos.
Princípios de educação; relacionamento que ajuda; criança em perigo; intervenção pedagógica; pesquisa qualitativa	

Introduction

According to Rauh (2005), children are defined as at-risk if under the age of 18 and their natural development is threatened. These are children exposed to neglect and abuse, who grow up in broken homes or in inadequate conditions, are delinquent or drug addicts, are refugees, are addicted to the Internet, grow up in families with many children, live on the streets or are exploited for work (Erol & Savas, 2022).

Children living with psychological stress and a disordered home life are more likely to be suffering from a wide range of emotional-, cognitive– and conative disorders.

Inconsistencies and deficiencies in social interaction are characterised by a strong desire to conform, and difficulty establishing strong interpersonal relationships. Compared to their peers who have formed a quality bond with their significant other, children who are socially insecure have problems establishing and maintaining long-term relationships, are generally less socially oriented, less empathetic, and less popular in the group. These children typically exhibit poor communication skills (i.e., limited vocabulary and lack of spontaneity in speech) and are unable or unwilling to talk about their feelings and express their wishes. They tend to be punishment– and reward-oriented, as reflected in their motivation and tendency to follow established rules (cf. Kubíčková, 2020).

If these children are not provided with help and support, there is a high risk of neuropsychiatric disorders and social problems. Miruktamova and Makhamatov (2020) describe several general rules that should be followed when working with at-risk children; firstly, the authors emphasize the great responsibility of the educator when drawing conclusions about a student; the student's fate is generally in the hands of the educator. Therefore, any appraisal of the situation (for example, about the need to involve additional specialists) should be carefully validated with diagnostic work. It is also necessary for teachers to pay consideration to not only how they communicate with children, but also their parents and colleagues. At the same time, parents and other teachers or workers should receive clear and precise guidance on how to work with a child at risk. Finally, it is necessary to pay special attention to the specifics of the family situation. Working with the family of a child at risk is often a more effective means of psychoprophylaxis than working with a group of pupils and teachers. Compliance with these conditions allows us to help the child and provide the tools to compensate for their difficulties.

At-risk children themselves consider factors such as emotional support, acceptance, authenticity, a safe and structured environment, a strong and trustworthy relationship with the therapist and empowerment in treatment decisions to be essential for positive treatment outcomes (cf. Frauenholtz & Menderhall, 2020; Loughead et al., 2018).

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When working with at-risk children, education and re-education can be broadly defined as any pedagogical or other professional intervention aiming to benefit and develop the child in question (cf. Bučilová Kadlecová *et al.*, 2010).

Given the above-mentioned personality characteristics of at-risk children, the aim of this paper is to present mutual relationships as an important factor in working with at-risk children, in both pedagogical and therapeutic contexts.

Primary interpersonal relationships can be defined as a longer-term connection with an emotional bond and a certain degree of responsibility. One can also speak of secondary interpersonal relationships, which can be characterized as temporary, superficial and non-committal (Hartl & Hartlová, 2015). In professional work with vulnerable children, it is necessary to focus on building a relationship based on trust: only when this is established is it possible to deal with the situations which vulnerable children may find themselves in (Lefevre *et al.*, 2017). Trust is inherently relational; it is generally considered to be a critical factor in fostering the spirit of cooperation necessary for successful pedagogical and therapeutic intervention.

While mutual relationships are described as key to interventions and integral to the professional identity and role of social workers and therapists (Rollins, 2020), building relationships in the school context is rather neglected – much more emphasis is placed on teaching methods and the ability to impart new knowledge and skills. However, these two fields are closely related since the quality of the teacher-student relationship is crucial to the learning process (Downer *et al.*, 2010; Gordon & Burch, 2003).

Several studies discuss the importance of the relationship between teachers and students (e.g., Wubbels *et al.*, 2015; Cornelius-White, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001;). According to theoretical sources, a significant portion of teachers describes the endeavor to establish the best possible relationship with students as a moral duty of educators (Hansen, 1998; 2001). Research has shown that emotional investment in the teacher-student relationships contributes to the long-term engagement of teachers and their interest in the teaching profession and its development (Gu, 2014; Sammons *et al.*, 2007). Frelin (2010) describes that the specificity of the teacher-student relationship is not just about having a positive relationship but one that has an educational impact. According to Firestone and Pennell (1993), a positive teacher-student relationship helps reduce the rate of premature student dropout. In recent years, increased workload due to non-personal tasks, such as increased administrative duties, has diverted teachers from investing in relationships with students, resulting in decreased levels of their engagement and personal interest in educating students (Frelin & Fransson, 2017). Based on research, a model comprising four significant components of the teacher-student relationship was created (Frelin & Fransson, 2017). The authors describe a moral impulse on the teacher's side as the entry into the relationship, initiating a time cycle of relationship formation. During the relationship-building process, teachers address various dilemmas. Resolving these dilemmas further advances them, boosts their self-confidence, opens up opportunities for new activities and rewards, and has a significant impact on their self-esteem. As a condition for engagement and establishing a positive teacher-student relationship, the need for the teacher's enduring belief that they can change students' lives and educational outcomes is evident (cf. Sammons *et al.*, 2007).

Several educational studies have established that strong teacher-student relationships positively influence cognitive and social-emotional outcomes (e.g., Collins *et al.*, 2017; Jones & Doolittle, 2017; McKinnon *et al.*, 2018; Parmenter & Robertson, 2022; Tosto *et al.*, 2016).

Davies (2019) found that when children have limited trust in school staff, they keep their family and other problems to themselves. In such situations, only ad hoc and superficial solutions can be provided. Children who belong to families under the remit of social care workers tend to especially wary in their relationships with other professionals. It should be noted that relationships are dynamic processes that are embedded in the wider interactions that children have with family, peers, and teachers. All of these areas contribute to shaping their relational schema (Wang *et al.*, 2013). It is therefore evident that the family environment will contribute to the quality of relationships with schoolteachers. Davies (2019) further emphasizes that, given that school is children's primary setting for contact with professional adults and may be children's only regular contact with adults outside the family, it is absolutely essential to have trusted adults in school who will be able to establish a relationship with the child (Davies, 2019). This is confirmed by other studies which show that teacher-student closeness acts as a protective factor against depression, externalizing disorders in students with adverse parent-child relationships, and other psychosocial problems (Olivier & Archambault, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2013).

At-risk children are often distrustful and prejudiced against authority figures and exhibit

various forms of risky behaviour thus making it difficult for teachers to form a close relationship with them (Prewett *et al.*, 2018). Murray and Zvoch's 2010 study confirmed that children categorized as 'at-risk' in our definition reported less trusting relationships with teachers, while their teachers described being in conflict with them more frequently compared to their peers. Various training and other programmes are being introduced to support teachers in this area. One of these, for example, is the Chicago School Readiness Project (CSRP). Begun in 2003, this randomized trial provided targeted and timely intervention for preschool children from socially deprived areas and aimed to improve their chances of academic success. It is important to state that the project drew from research into teacher-child relationships, the emotional climate in the classroom, and children's ability to manage and interpret emotions, all of which are critical to academic outcomes (Raver *et al.*, 2007). The program involved two programmes of intervention. In the first, teachers were provided with professional and personal development training in the form of classroom management tactics aimed at improving teacher-child relationships and interactions. The second focused on feedback and ongoing mentoring in these strategies by a mental health professional (Jones *et al.*, 2019). As this is a longitudinal study, researchers are currently following children from the original cohort to determine the project's impact on academic success, participation in tertiary education, and career readiness (Gandhi *et al.*, 2020; McCoy *et al.*, 2019; Watts *et al.*, 2020; Watts *et al.*, 2018).

Prosocial behaviour on the part of teachers is another important mechanism that supports positive and harmonious teacher-student relationships (Bergin, 2018; Luckner & Pianta, 2011; Spivak & Farran, 2012). Close teacher-child relationships are characterized by easy and open communication, a sense of warmth and understanding, and mutual affection (McKinnon *et al.*, 2018). It is also interesting to note that close teacher-student relationships are associated with not only students' mental well-being but also the teachers' (Corbin *et al.*, 2019).

In children's education, however, the question often arises: where is the boundary between a professional and personal relationship? What kind of relationship hurts and hinders rather than helping and healing? The available literature suggests that a positive professional-client relationship (be that child or adult) has a positive impact beyond the scope of specialist knowledge alone (Kopřiva, 2016; Nerantzi *et al.*, 2021). This fact has been rediscovered in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent implementation of online learning, which has complicated the formation and development of teacher-student relationships (Armellini & De Stefani, 2016; Bozkurt *et al.*, 2020).

Regarding the professionals involved, for whom establishing a relationship is an important attribute of their work, there may be two disruptive tendencies at play. The first is a need for excessive control, which prevents the development of the child's autonomy. This is often described, for example, in the teaching profession. The other, described by Kopřiva (2016) in terms of the self-sacrifice of the worker, whose excessive help weakens the child and, in some cases, creates an unhealthy dependence on the worker. One condition for creating a "healing" relationship with a child is understanding the child by attuning to their vision and experience of the world.

However, creating a strong relationship with vulnerable children is not an easy task; these individuals have repeatedly experienced rejection, criticism and moralizing by close relatives or even specialists. Convincing children who have been hurt so many times that we truly have their best interests at heart succeeds with concrete actions that go beyond conventional efforts (cf. Kaim & Romi, 2015). It is essential to maintain contact and not let the child out of sight, even if he gives the impression that he is not interested (cf. Castonguay, 1993).

In contrast, the therapeutic relationship is a central component of every therapeutic process and is considered a fundamental condition of the process. This relationship represents the connection and bond between the client and the therapist, involving feelings, attitudes, and ways of expressing them (Gelso & Carter, 1985). The therapeutic relationship has numerous dimensions and types related to the phase of the therapy process and the focus of the psychotherapeutic approach to which the therapist subscribes. We can speak of attachment, projection, transference, the need for boundaries, creating a safe haven in times of distress, and the emotional availability of the therapist to the client (Obegi, 2008). In the case of the therapist-client relationship, we refer to it more as an 'attachment' rather than a 'commitment,' which is a closer description of the teacher-student relationship. Relationship is a well-researched therapeutic component that has been shown to contribute significantly to treatment outcomes regardless of the specific type of therapy used (e.g., Coyne, 2019; Mallonee *et al.*, 2022; Norcross & Wampold, 2011; O 'Connor *et al.*, 2019; Tschuschke *et al.*, 2021; Tschuschke *et al.*, 2020; Whittingham & Werbart *et al.*, 2018).

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Just as in, for example, social work, building a quality relationship in therapy depends on transparency, mutual trust, respect and interest in the client (cf. Rollins, 2020). An example of a comprehensive approach is Glasser's reality therapy, which was developed to improve success rates in the prevention of delinquency (cf. McWhirter & Al., 2013). The core principles of reality therapy are basic needs, responsibility, and bonding. The aim of this approach is to enable clients to evaluate their behaviour and accept responsibility for it based on the ability to satisfy their basic needs in a realistic way. The basic needs in this concept are the need to love and be loved, and the need to respect oneself and others. To fulfil these needs, it is essential that the client is in a close personal relationship with one or two people. The stated principles lead to three basic components of reality therapy: (1) establish a deep relationship with the client, (2) reject the client's behaviour, which is unrealistic and irresponsible, while still accepting the client and accompanying them through life, and (3) gradually teach the client more responsible and mature ways of satisfying needs in accordance with reality. Through these three basic components, the clients learn to regulate, accept, and value themselves (cf. McWhirter & Al., 2013).

In relationship-based work with at-risk children, relationship can be used as a means to design interventions that increase clients' exposure to relationships that are safe and responsive for them, and thereby promote an emotionally corrective experience.

Finally, in our long-term pedagogical and therapeutic experience there have been debates over the use of some psychotherapeutic approaches in education. Psychotherapy has its opponents as an intervention modality in education and is not yet a component of Czech school legislation. I consider that education can be inspired by psychotherapy, where relationships are the basis of its theory and practice, as described by, for example, Barcalová *et al.* (2022). Among other things, the authors consider it a given that children can flourish only with an authority figure who is truthful, sensitive to their needs, emotional expressions and personality traits, and who is able to accept the child for who they are with understanding and respect.

1. Rationale and Objectives

Multidisciplinary cooperation in some areas of social reality is proving to be necessary. At the end of 2021, researchers from the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Social Studies began collaboration to carry out qualitative research in the areas of social work and education in work with vulnerable children in various settings. Analysis of the results showed that the teacher– or therapist-child relationship was one of the most significant factors. This became the impetus for the secondary analysis presented in this text. The secondary analysis presents the role of the relationship in interventions and its understanding by educators.

2. Methodology

Materials and methods

Primary qualitative research into the work with vulnerable children in various environments and its results was carried out through semi-structured interviews. The interviews had the character of a stimulus interview with the aim of giving maximum space for the contributors' voices. The interview was structured into five areas: (1) aims when working with vulnerable children, (2) interventions used by the specialists involved, (3) techniques and methods, (4) cooperation with other individuals and organizations, and (5) perceived and expected results.

As part of the secondary analysis, the entire transcribed interview was analysed with regard to contributors' statements on the topic of the relationship.

Sample

Semi-structured interviews were managed by 3 academics (authors of the paper) and conducted with 26 specialists who acted as contributors through their work with at-risk children. The sample consisted of 8 counsellors (TP1-TP8); 10 primary school staff (PP1-PP10) comprising 5 educational consultants, 3 social pedagogues, 1 special needs teacher and 1 prevention methodologist; and 8 pedagogues from a children's home (VP1-VP8) comprising 1 director and 7 educators. The youngest contributor was 29 years old, the oldest 69. There were 7 men and 19 women among the teachers. All contributors mentioned have a pedagogical education and in the performance of their profession they use pedagogical procedures depending on the context of the work and the target group. However, some of them also have a therapeutic education, and therapeutic approaches are also used, especially by counsellors, in performing their work.

Procedure

Before interviews were arranged, consent was obtained by telephone or in person with the selected contributor. The interviews typically took place mainly in the contributor's workplace and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Informed consent was also given to make audio recordings of the interviews, at which time they were also informed of the anonymized data collection and the expected publication of interview results. Subsequently, a verbatim transcription of the audio recordings was made. Participation in the research survey was voluntary. Interviews were conducted in accordance with the APA Code of Ethics (2016) and time and attention was paid to establish a sense of safety throughout the interviews; The participants were told at the beginning of the interview what the questions would be about and how the interview would proceed. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask the researchers their own questions, or to refuse to answer the questions. The interview style was simple, conversational, and mainly open-ended questions were used, while also paying attention to cultural differences.

Analysis

The obtained information was transcribed and subjected to data analysis, using Thematic Analysis, which helps capture the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Thematic Analysis is considered more a method than a methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aim of Thematic Analysis is to identify themes (patterns) that are important or interesting and to use these themes to address research or express a particular issue. Although there are several ways to conduct this analysis, we adhered to the six-step framework (Braun & Clarke, op.cit.).

In the first step, we read and re-read all the transcribed interviews to become well-acquainted with our data. During this process, we made initial notes about our first impressions. In the second phase, we performed open coding, meaning we did not have predefined codes but used our own. Coding helped us reduce the data into smaller meaningful units. We did not code every piece of text, only passages related to the information for the purpose of this article. We examined the generated codes and grouped semantically similar ones under preliminary themes in the fourth step. In this step, we reviewed and modified these themes. We considered whether the data associated with each theme aligned and assessed whether the themes worked in the context of the overall data. In the penultimate step, we refined and identified the themes, elaborated on what the themes were about, how they were related, and how they influenced each other, etc. The final step was writing this article.

Thematic analysis allows us to uncover what research contributors consider important and enables the description of the research participant's reality through their own spoken or written expression. This method is close to grounded theory but keeps the story intact and often uses previous theoretical concepts. During analysis and subsequent interpretation of the data, the researcher can focus on similarities or differences in the recurring patterns found (Lochmiller, 2021).

Categories were created as a result of discussion between researchers and were described in relation to the contexts and environment in which the contributors operate. Finally, the researchers identified three themes that were common to all types of educators.

Limitations of the study

The output of this secondary analysis intends to draw attention to the diversity of perspective of the use of relationship by educators in different environments and contexts. The limit of the study is the failure to explore other important factors including contributors' personalities, values, and additional education. These limitations could have been addressed by conducting follow-up interviews with the contributors involved and help clarify some of the information from the primary interviews.

3. Results

Based on the analysis, three topics emerge for discussion. Firstly, what helps to build a relationship with a child in practice? Secondly, what obstacles appear when building a relationship? Finally, manifest and latent expression of the need for a relationship with the child for successful interventions will be considered. In the following text, the individual topics are presented in more detail and reinforced with verbatim transcriptions of the statements of selected contributors.

What helps to build a relationship with a child in practice?

Building a mutual relationship is not a short-term matter; it is a step-by-step process that depends on personal qualities and skills in addition to

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specialist knowledge. If the contributors talked about the need to build a relationship with a child at risk, they reflected on what had worked for them in practice. There was a recognition that this was not restricted to relationship-building with the child, their family and peer group, but also involved cooperation and relationship-building with colleagues and other professionals in their milieu. Interview analysis revealed the varying extent to which contacts with specialists outside the school were made, ranging from superficial (*"I know the name of the person to contact"*) to intense (*"I know what he is good at and where we can support each child and how we can agree on that"*). In a therapeutic environment, multidisciplinary cooperation is perceived as necessary in matters of comprehensive care for boys and girls. at risk In this respect however, significant limits still prevail, specifically the lack of cohesion and continuity of care.

Building a relationship with parents in connection with compulsory school attendance is influenced among other things, by the accepted scope of the work of pedagogues. While teachers are not expected to have contact with parents other than on school premises, social pedagogues visit families in the pupil's extracurricular environment as a regular part of their work (AVSP, 2020). Educators in the school environment describe that their investment in building a relationship with the family helps them become familiar with the normal life of the child in the family. In this way, they have a deeper understanding of the family issues (e.g., housing, domestic conflicts, the overriding economic situation) which have a negative impact on the pupil's performance at school. If the parent-teacher relationship is deepened, the parents allow the educator to advise or help them. One of the social pedagogues described a situation where she helped with the family budget and assisted in planning the children's schedule for leisure activities or homework. Building a relationship, according to educators, involves regular contact and sharing everyday things, not just solving children's problems. Educators described drinking tea or coffee together, talking about politics or ordinary things related to the place where they live as a matter of course. In the case of a social pedagogue, there was also an exceptional case of common dining and invitations to family lunches in a socially excluded neighbourhood. They repeatedly stated that in order to understand the child and establish a trusting relationship, it is important to understand the situation in the family. The importance of the relationship with the children's family also appeared among the contributors from among the educators in children's homes. In the Czech Republic, girls and boys are most often placed in children's homes due to dysfunctional home life. Nevertheless, the aim is to continue to work holistically with the entire family, which, according to contributors, leads to more effective pedagogical work with children. Mutual conversations about the family situation have proven effective in practice, often leading to education on parenting skills and strengthened parent-child and child-teacher relationships. In this situation, the child will feel the unified educational action of parents and teachers, which will strengthen the sense of security, safety and understanding of the situation. If we work with a child at risk, working with his family is a completely natural process, not only as a partner in the search for effective solutions on behalf of the child, but often as a client. If the boy or girl with whom we are trying to be in a professional relationship has specific needs, it is very likely that the parent also has specific needs and must be treated accordingly:

"The fact that the biological parent is involved in their life even though they are not with them is of great importance to those children." (VP3)

Educators also described their experience with the qualities and activities which help them directly in building a relationship with the child. If they showed an interest in the child in the school environment, which the child perceived, it allowed them to deepen their teacher-boy or girl relationship. Again, they communicated, as with the relationship with the children's parents, that it is necessary to nurture this relationship not only when solving problems, but in ordinary everyday activities. It is important to know, for example, when the child's birthday is, how many siblings he has, what is celebrated in the family and what is not. If they did not teach the child, they stated that it is good to be familiar with the teaching and the class to which the child belongs. Spending free time together was considered very important by the pedagogues. Convincing a vulnerable child and his family that our interest is real is a rather difficult task. In addition, it also helps to express that we remember what he tells us about himself, his strengths, his likes, his opinions, that we hear his wishes and try to fulfil them. However, our presence and practical actions seem to be the most effective when a child finds himself in a difficult situation. From a personal perspective, it was taken as a sign that the relationship was developing positively that the child had sufficient trust to express that he doesn't want problems, he just doesn't know how to solve them. Risky behaviour is perceived as a consequence of stress and trauma in the lives

of girls and boys, not a deliberate violation of established norms. They perceived the need for a mutually respectful relationship with patience as key. They appreciated being able to laugh and joke with the child. In a therapeutic relationship with the child at risk, great emphasis is placed on the authenticity and truthfulness of the facilitator. In addition, contributors expressed the need to be open, accommodating and to like their profession.

"They really appreciate it when you make time for them, sit down with them, discuss what troubles them or what makes them happy, listen to them." (VP5)

In the school environment, the topic of personal development of the educators themselves arose only rarely. Two contributors, however, were strongly positively influenced in this respect: after taking part in supervision and therapeutic education which helped them to better navigate their lives, they felt more confident working with vulnerable children. In institutional education, educators are aware of their importance as a role model who can help compensate for children's negative experiences with adults. For this reason, they mentioned the risk of creating assumptions, which, according to them, are an obstacle to building relationships. They try to correct these assumptions mainly through mutual interviews within the organization and at educational events. The importance of personal growth is also reflected in the statements of counsellors in the form of regular interviews and supervisions, which, for example, reveal doubts as a natural part of professional and personal development. The child needs to get to know the specialist; he needs to establish that he can trust this authority figure, he needs to be assured that they are not just another adult trying to manipulate him. It is therefore necessary to move slowly, carefully, and respectfully in the child's living space. When establishing a relationship, it helps how the experts perceive the child's problems, his needs, and the possibilities of intervention. They perceive their clients as injured children; abnormal behaviour is primarily caused by injuries in the family. Problems are attributed to stressful situations and are not the fault of the child. Acceptance of the child and everything that belongs to him is also related to the way the professional thinks about the child: the child's personality is not judged, only the behaviour is deemed inappropriate. Working with a child in crisis also places great demands on the expertise and experience of the intervening professional. The statements of our contributors show that in cooperation with professional procedures, it is essential to give the girls and boys your time and

presence; in short, just to be with the child, to be there for him without expectations. Put aside for a while all the problems associated with the child and aspirations to improve his behaviour and just connect with the child, perceive him here and now with all his needs. The often-mentioned genuine interest in the child, which is a good requisite for a quality relationship, can be demonstrated with help in non-standard situations, when a child is in need.

Particularly effective are the specific actions by which the expert sometimes gets beyond the boundaries of his comfort zone, beyond the boundaries of his office and working hours. It also follows from the practice of therapists that forgiveness plays an important role in establishing and maintaining a relationship. A common symptom of a child at risk is a failure to follow established rules and failure to meet expectations. It is necessary to approach children and their families proactively, to go beyond the established ways of working, to meet them and repeatedly offer opportunities for cooperation. Another phenomenon that a child usually does not encounter is the fact that someone perceives his words as important. This is not a blind trust in everything the boy or girl says, but rather that it is essential to recognise and appreciate his view of the situation.

Regarding the various specialists and organizations involved, mutual cooperation and consistency in the approach to the child and his family is an important supporting factor for quality and, to a certain extent, effective work.

"Acceptance is important, don't judge, try to approach authentically, so with those children it's doubly so, also no, the evaluation, I'd say that's the very last thing a person should do, what a person should do at work with children." (TP8)

What obstacles appear in practice when building a relationship?

Complications when establishing a relationship can generally be encountered in three areas. The first is the client's absence or unavailability. It is often very difficult for children and their families to keep appointments; in the best case they cancel with an apology, in the worst case they don't answer at all. On one hand this could simply be attributed to a reduced awareness of the need for intervention, on the other it could be the cumulative burden of various stress factors meaning that paradoxically, families no longer have the time or energy to constantly deal with the problem. Therapists try to view the client's

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unavailability as an expected phenomenon in relation to their life situation.

Educators considered what helps them develop a relationship with a child, but also what hinders it and what obstacles appear in practice when building a relationship. Parents were more likely to be uncommunicative than the children. The risk prevention methodologist described his experience with a boy with whom he was unable to establish contact. In the ninth grade the family moved and the boy changed schools. In his new class he did not make contact with anyone. Some time passed before the prevention methodologist discovered that the boy's lack of interest was connected, among other things, to the use of drugs, which affected his ability to communicate and establish relationships.

In institutional education, teachers often encounter indifference on the part of children and their families. Educators described it as indifference to any interaction. Given the reasons for placing girls and boys in children's homes (drug addiction, abuse, material and emotional neglect, homelessness, crime, etc.), we can only imagine what experiences children bring with them to institutional education. Children with negative experience of authority figures may show fear of establishing contact with the teacher, at other times indifference, or even increased aggression.

This brings us to another obstacle to establishing a relationship with children, which is their psychological condition and its severity as determined by experts. This could include children with psychiatric diagnoses, their increased aggression, and in some cases also their medication. Children could be withdrawn and uncommunicative due to poor mental health, which, especially in institutional education, manifests, for example, as reduced intellect, emotional flatness, impaired self-awareness of one's own emotions and in the motivation of one's own behaviour.

Boys and girls who reach puberty are much more eager to be accepted by their peers, so establishing a relationship of trust with a teacher turns out to be much more complicated than with children of younger school age. If a child becomes part of a delinquent group during adolescence which fulfils his needs, establishing a relationship with a teacher becomes more complicated, leading to the refusal of help and support from teachers and other professionals, as well as the emergence of a so-called counterculture that supports risky behaviour. A very important predictor when building a relationship with an at-risk child is his history with those close to him during childhood. If a child, especially in the early stages of development, but also in the

following stages of life, experiences repeated non-acceptance or outright rejection by adults, the child creates natural barriers and will be reserved and withdrawn.

The final limiting factor could be the specific educators, therapists or institutions involved. Shortcomings may be identified concerning, for example, individuals' personality or professional competencies, or institutionally regarding the regulatory or organizational framework. In the process of working with at-risk children, there are naturally moments when the expert has insufficient understanding of the needs of the children and is not able to make a decision regarding the appropriate strategy to create a relationship. It is important, however, that in the case of therapists this is an indication that further steps must be taken, such as handing the child over to care, supervision, etc.

Another phenomenon that is expressed explicitly or implicitly in interviews is the lack of time and energy. In the context of work with at-risk children, experts reflect that this target group needs maximum professional commitment, but the reality is often different. The contributors report that as a result of demanding and often very frustrating work, their commitment decreases and passivity increases.

Educators reported that in some cases they are not able to overcome professional stereotypes or their own prejudices and without a more thorough acquaintance with the pupil's situation, they assume bad intentions of the parents or the children themselves. It is not possible to establish a relationship of trust afterwards. In the school environment, establishing a relationship with a child at risk is also complicated for teachers handling large class groups and being overwhelmed by administration and other work duties. A social pedagogue in a primary school with a predominance of Roma pupils reported that if he fails to understand the situation from the child's point of view, it is usually difficult for him to establish a relationship with the child. In the same way, in children's homes, it is necessary to work with the personality of the pedagogue to avoid creating preconceptions and prejudices, which the educators try to correct through further education and joint interviews. Unfortunately, the existence of professional supervision in these organizations, which could significantly help to improve the quality of interventions, is still not standard.

Limits at the institutional level are also related to the interoperability of services. A relatively common phenomenon in the case of at-risk children and their families is the use of several professional and support services at the same

time, so several organizations can enter the lives of families at the same time. It is reasonable to assume that services should be provided in a cohesive manner, although the reality is often very different. Individuals from the various organisations involved, far from cooperating, may not even know of the other's existence. The impacts of a lack of cooperation are of a different nature, it is worth noting, for example, that overwhelming the client with interventions, chaos due to the application of different, sometimes even contradictory approaches results in a loss of trust in professional help.

> *"...they have already experienced so many disappointments with those people...first parents, then teachers for example and others...then it is difficult for them to trust anyone..." (TP6).*

Manifest and latent expression of the need for a relationship with the child for successful interventions

Some primary school educators do not talk about establishing a relationship with the child at all within the framework of educational interventions and only explain what can be achieved from a practical or technical point of view. They state, for example:

> *"They are entitled to free lunches...free after-school clubs", "We can help them arrange that" (PP3), "We have an endowment fund at the elementary school, and we paid for the trip with that..." (PP1)*

> *"Parents only hear that someone can take their benefits..."(PP9)*

Talk of establishing a student-teacher relationship is also absent with another elementary school teacher:

> *"We definitely organize free clubs for these children" (PP4), "We often cooperate with social services" (PP7), "We try to set some rules..." (PP10)*

In some cases, the need to foster a relationship with the child is expressed implicitly. A class teacher and educational consultant discuss what needs working on in the class. He talks about the teacher's responsibility to nurture and encourage positive relationships in the classroom. But he doesn't talk directly about working on his relationship with his children:

> *"It is necessary to work with the class, conduct lessons and various bonding activities so that the child simply feels good in that group and fits in... it is*

definitely necessary to support those relationships in the classroom..." (PP6)

The prevention methodologist describes working with a child at risk. He explains that in order to do his job well and help the child, he needs to know a lot of information about the child. He describes it as feeling like detective work:

> *"You have to be interested in the children, otherwise you won't find out anything. You have to be with them and given time they will open up to you." (PP2)*

The social pedagogue also explains that spending regular time with and taking interest in the child is key. Again, they speak only indirectly about the need to build a relationship.

In primary schools, none of the teachers interviewed mentioned relationship as a condition for effective interventions with at-risk children. Having said that, we can find several examples where there is a recognition that building a teacher-pupil relationship will be important. The social pedagogue states that she is able to work more effectively when she has a good relationship with the child and the family.

On the other hand, relationship is one of the most inflected terms across all interviews with counsellors and therapists. Establishing a relationship with the client is the starting point for any work with him – it is a basic condition for intervention. So initially, a lot of attention is paid to building trust and creating a safe space. Corrective work, neutralizing negative patterns of behaviour and encouraging positive behaviour must wait until the relationship has been established.

> *"That's why the most important thing is relationship and trust; without that it's impossible to start at all..." (TP4)*

Children's homes are different in nature from counselling institutions or schools. Despite the fact that boys and girls can spend much of their childhood there, it is ultimately a dynamic and temporary environment. Children's homes are generally speaking a substitute for domestic life and thus represent the child's 'home base'. It is for this reason that educational caseworkers are aware of the importance of relationship for any further work with the child, and the nature of the relationship is expressed in latent and manifest forms. However, the statements collected also declare the aforementioned fact that first and foremost a relationship must be established:

> *"the most important thing is to establish a relationship; if you don't have a relationship,*

nothing will work, you can't work on anything, build anything." (VP8)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

When working with at-risk children, a number of specialist education and re-education procedures are used. These interventions are carried out with great emphasis on the expertise of the caseworkers involved and the professional contexts in which they take place. Secondary analysis of 26 semi-structured interviews with teaching staff revealed significant understanding and use of relationship as a characteristic of successful interventions when working with vulnerable girls and boys. Relationship was a prevailing manifest or latent theme in individual interviews, while thematic analysis revealed 3 themes. The first of these focused on factors that support relationship-building with an at-risk child.

The contributors agreed that relationship-building is a long process that requires time, effort, and patience. Those involved from adjacent social networks, such as the child's family and other caseworkers or organizations, also play a role in this process (Borg & Drange, 2019; Hesjedal *et al.*, 2013; Schüller *et al.*, 2022). In the Czech Republic, this is one of the newer trends in the school environment. If the school wants to help a child at risk, it must no longer be an isolated but open process (Gurr *et al.*, 2022). Above all, cooperation with the families of at-risk children is key, because the family environment has significant bearing on the success of the education or re-education process (Berger & Font, 2015; Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015; Paccaud *et al.*, 2021). However, efforts to involve the family can represent a considerable paradox in practice, since in most cases the socio-pathological phenomena the child is struggling with stem from the child's adverse domestic situation. Therefore, it is necessary to intervene not only with at-risk children but entire families. The contributors reported that, in addition to the interest of human subjects in the work process, being mindful of their own approach and attitudes helps in building a relationship with a child at risk. It was primarily about demonstrating openness and helpfulness towards the girls and boys; simply being there, not only when providing targeted problem solving – spending free time together, taking an interest in his hobbies and opinions, listening to his thoughts and wishes. Just allowing the child to be heard and knowing that someone is listening and respects his needs is an important element in developing a relationship. However, the aforementioned is predicated on the developed and mature personality of the contributor, capable of reflection and, above all, self-reflection. While this appeared rarely among elementary school teachers, among counsellors and pedagogues from institutional care it was evident that they are aware of the importance of the relationship with oneself, which may be due to the completion of self-experiential psychotherapy training and other courses and seminars focused on personal development (Kross *et al.*, 2023; Mösler *et al.*, 2022). Obstacles in establishing a relationship appeared in the identified topics concerning the child and his unavailability. At-risk children have problems in social interactions, being uncommunicative and lacking other social skills (Kubíčková, 2020; Mmusi & van Breda, 2017). Establishing relationships appears to be problematic, although the issue of trust and distrust in other people is very controversial (Dima & Bucuta, 2020). Furthermore, these boys and girls may often have psychiatric diagnoses, display increased irritability and mood swings, low frustration tolerance, emotional flatness or reduced self-control (Jedlčka *et al.*, 2015). Other factors precluding relationship-building occur at the level of the contributors themselves or the institutions involved, in the form of personal shortcomings including passivity, prejudices or assumptions. Unfortunately, professional oversight, which could significantly help to improve the services provided, is still not provided as standard in these organizations (Brend & Collin-Vézina, 2021). Time pressure and administrative tasks leave caseworkers with less energy to apply the necessary interventions. At the institutional level, the lack of multidisciplinary cooperation may be problematic. However, when working with at-risk children, closely coordinated multidisciplinary collaboration is necessary to provide successful interventions (Hesjedal *et al.*, 2015; Lalaylants, 2013).

Despite the clearly important role that the caseworker-child relationship plays in the provision of interventions, some of the contributors do not explicitly reflect this fact at all. Among elementary school teachers there is, at most, only latent mention of the importance of relationships (if it is mentioned at all), whereas counsellors and pedagogues in institutional care see mutual relationships as the foundation of their work. Without a strong relationship between the specialist and at-risk child, it is not possible to provide successful educational or re-educational interventions. Therefore, greater attention should be paid to this topic in social care education at undergraduate and postgraduate level and in the further professional training of social care workers and other professionals working with at-risk children.

Notes

1. The term teaching staff includes both men and women; more detailed information on specific occupations and gender representation is provided in the sample description.
2. The term children or child includes both boys and girls, hereafter both terms will be used. We also sometimes use the term pupil in the context of the school environment.

Contributions

Contributions	Authors
Conception and design of work	Author 1, Author 2
Documentary search	Author 1, Author 2, Author 3
Data collect	Author 1, Author 2, Author 3
Critical data analysis and interpretation	Author 1
Review and approval of versions	Author 1

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