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Interpersonal Skills of the Early Childhood Education Teacher in Narrations of Pupils of Younger School Age – the Grounded Theory Emergence Process

Umiejętności interpersonalne nauczyciela wczesnej edukacji w narracjach matek uczniów w młodszym wieku szkolnym – proces wyłaniania się teorii ugruntowanej

Abstract

Aim. The article is devoted to exploratory research focused on discovering grounded theory: proposing an innovative idea that, revealed from research material obtained on the basis of interviews with mothers of early school-age students, could outline social needs for interpersonal skills of early childhood education teachers.

Methods and materials. The research is based on a qualitative research strategy. The research process is based on the grounded theory method. The research used a semi-structured interview or a guided interview, semi-structured interview conducted with mothers of students of younger school age.

Results. The construction of the grounded theory in empirical data resulted in the reinforcement of the hypothesis allowing the researcher to sketch a portrait of the *ideal* figure

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of the early childhood education teacher that consists of interpersonal skills presented by him/her. Among the latter, priority skills include the teacher's language skills, the ease of making contact, creation of the right atmosphere in the classroom, giving support to children, and the skilful solving of conflicts in the classroom.

Conclusion. Teachers are expected to meet very high standards. These include both individual characteristics and a variety of skills related to the profession, including interpersonal skills. The nature of this profession justifies that only those who are prepared to face challenges and show enormous potential in working effectively with students should be selected for the job.

*Keywords***:** early childhood education teacher, mothers' expectations, grounded theory, interpersonal skills, early school pedagogy

Abstrakt
Cel. Artykuł został poświęcony badaniom o charakterze rozpoznawczym, które były skupione na odkrywaniu teorii ugruntowanej: zaproponowanie innowacyjnej idei, która ujawniając się z materiału badawczego pozyskanego na podstawie wywiadów z matkami uczniów w młodszym wieku szkolnym, mogłaby wytyczyć potrzeby społeczne wobec umiejętności interpersonalnych nauczyciela wczesnej edukacji.

Metody i materiały. Badania bazują na strategii badawczej o charakterze jakościowym. Proces badawczy opiera się na metodzie teorii ugruntowanej. W badaniach zastosowano wywiad częściowo ustrukturyzowany lub inaczej wywiad oparty na przewodniku – półstrukturalizowany przeprowadzony z matkami uczniów w młodszym wieku szkolnym.

Wyniki. Na podstawie konstruowania teorii ugruntowanej w danych empirycznych umocniła się hipoteza pozwalająca na nakreślenie portretu *idealnej* sylwetki nauczyciela wczesnej edukacji, na którą składają się prezentowane przez niego umiejętności interpersonalne. Priorytetowymi wśród nich są: umiejętności językowe nauczyciela, łatwe nawiązywanie kontaktu, budowanie odpowiedniej atmosfery w klasie, udzielanie wsparcia dzieciom, bycie przyjacielem dziecka, sprawne rozwiązywanie konfliktów w klasie. Jednym z pierwszych i najważniejszych wymagań stawianym przez rodziców nauczycielom jest ich ustawiczne rozwijanie i doskonalenie.

Wnioski. Od nauczycieli oczekuje się spełnienia bardzo wysokich standardów. Obejmują one zarówno cechy indywidualne, jak i różnorodne umiejętności związane z zawodem, w tym interpersonalne. Charakter tego zawodu uzasadnia sprawia, że do pracy powinni być wybierani wyłącznie ci, którzy są przygotowani do stawiania czoła wyzwaniom i wykazują duży potencjał w efektywnej pracy z uczniami.

*Słowa kluczowe***:** nauczyciel wczesnej edukacji, oczekiwania matek, teoria ugruntowana, umiejętności interpersonalne, pedagogika wczesnoszkolna

Introduction

The resulting paper does not have a traditional theoretical framework. Because of the limitation of subknowledge, the framework was *intentionally suspended*, and comparison with the literature was made only during the process of searching for regularities, comparisons, and differences in respondents' opinions for the purpose of becoming familiar with data and the preliminary creation of the grounded theory (*cf.* Konecki, 2000).

The described research process takes place in accordance with the idea of qualitative research, the essential feature of which is the humanistic viewpoint of the other human being. The methodology of qualitative research is based on the philosophical foundations of interactionism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. The phenomenological sources of this research emphasise the importance of experience in the process of learning about reality. In turn, the hermeneutical foundations indicate the key role of striving to understand the studied world as the main goal of knowledge. Symbolic interactionism, providing a foundation for qualitative research, points out that stimuli produced by situations under research depend on the interpretation of the situation of respondents, *i.e.*, the way in which they will perceive the situation concerned.

The use of the qualitative strategy makes it possible to examine the issues of evaluation, values, or experience – the things that are individual for the human being. In the pursuit of the aim of the research, the researcher does not make research hypotheses – they assume the lack of assumptions in the exploration of the phenomenon under research, which makes it easier to discover new aspects of this phenomenon (Pilch & Bauman, 2010).

The basic methodological assumptions of the independent research concerning mothers' expectations towards early childhood education teachers have been developed using the grounded theory method according to Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1990; see Table 1); therefore, the author has decided to formulate the subject-matter, aim, and problems of the research in the preliminary part.

The author's own research was based on exploration. It was aimed at developing the grounded theory: proposing a new conception that, emerging out of empirical data gathered by the researcher, means the construction of the grounded theory, obtained on the basis of interviews with mothers of pupils of younger school age, could sketch mothers' expectations towards the person of the early childhood education teacher in terms of their interpersonal skills. The source of the researcher's interest was the depth of this phenomenon, but at the same time, its diversity. As a result of the work conducted, it was possible to formulate a research hypothesis, which is a theoretical approximation embedded in the context and being an interpretation of a specific process of grounded theory.

The main research problem assumed the form of the following question: What does the picture of the model figure of the teacher in the light of social expectations regarding theirs interpersonal skills (on the example of interviews with mothers of pupils of younger school age) look like?

Methodology

It is worth noting that the presented picture of the grounded theory and its method is not complete and does not fully reflect the richness, possibilities, and diversity of this conception. The method of dealing with selected key issues of the grounded theory method is dictated by practical aspects and limited to sketching the most significant elements from the perspective of the subject area of the research, *i.e.*, the expectations of mothers of pupils of younger school age towards the teacher.

In the simplest terms, the grounded theory is a cohesive system of qualitative methods developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and described in the book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* The grounded theory assumes that actors engaged in social reality understand it best. Thus, it denies the functionalist approach in which the researcher refers to the previously expounded theoretical model at the start of their work because it only results in the self-confirmation of the given conception. The grounded theory method assumes that the theory *emerges* from the data by itself in the course of collection of the research material at further stages, which means that it becomes *grounded* in the field. This approach was used to develop the main conceptual framework of the research work, where the author does not intend to generate a new theory based on existing knowledge about the competencies of early childhood education teachers.

The initially uniform circle of researchers promoting the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss) became divided over the course of time. A group of purists/traditionalists that formed around Glaser opts for a flexible unrestrained approach to research that allows the researcher *to be surprised* during the research, and a group of revisionists gathered around Strauss and Corbin, which promotes a more structured and precise research path (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Therefore, at this stage of scientific work, a more restrictive approach was chosen, in which it was considered advisable to formulate the research problem at the outset (and not wait for its possible emergence).

An alternative to Glaser's and Strauss's classic methodology of the grounded theory and the subsequent modification of this conception by Strauss and Corbin is Kathy Charmaz's approach which shows a shift towards the verificationist rhetoric criticised already in the classic grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009). It represents a clear departure from the positivist narrative that is evident in Glaser's and Strauss's grounded theory

in favour of the constructivist perspective assuming that the theory is not discovered on the basis of empirical data but constructed during the analysis process. This perspective was used to discuss the method of data collection and analysis, where the researcher constructed a grounded theory, created empirical data, and did not collect them as a reflection of objective reality. There is no objective data, independent of the researcher, only that which is constructed.

The research has been conducted using a partly structured interview (Kvale, 2010), or a guide-based semi-structured interview (Urbaniak-Zając & Kos, 2013; Widera-Wysoczańska, 2002), conducted with mothers of pupils of younger school age. According to Clark Moustakas, "there are no predetermined criteria for selecting research participants" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 132). In the grounded theory methodology, in the first stage of collecting empirical material, researchers select several so-called *key cases* for the study, which are an initial source of information. In this study, the key cases were mothers of school-age children, people who have knowledge in the area of the research project, and important data on the topic of interest to the researcher. There is no doubt that mothers are active participants in the group, culture, and community being studied. They are emotionally involved in the problem being studied and demonstrate motivation to participate in the research. Mothers meet the criterion of the best key persons, as those who describe given events using their own language, describe specific events, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings related to them, such that they do not use bookish, slogan-like, or abstract language (Hudelson & World Health Organization, 1994; Patton, 1990). For the purpose of maintaining the anonymity of respondents, they are marked appropriately as M1, M2, *etc.* (the first mother, the second mother; see Krzychała & Zamorska, 2008). The main topic of the *world of life* of mothers of children of younger school age concerned their expectations towards the early childhood education teacher, so the aim of the interviews was to describe and reflect the meanings that they ascribed to the teacher. An interview for a group of 12 persons was planned in the initial stage. Because of the emergence of new topics in the respondents' opinions, the research group was expanded in the course of the research until the moment of theoretical saturation, when further interviews did not contribute any new knowledge. Eventually, the research group consisted of 22 mothers. The interviews were conducted during the period January 2016–June 2017 in the Świętokrzyskie Province.

As has been mentioned previously, the flexible and innovative approach to Glaser's and Strauss's grounded theory method (1967) began to be confronted with Strauss's and Corbin's rigorous and mechanistic approach (1990) after some time. Strauss and Corbin propose a set of steps – strictly specified guidelines the use of which actually enforces the formulation of a certain theory, thus postulating a systematised *line-by-line* procedure leading to certain programmed conclusions. The process of emergence/

construction of the grounded theory on the basis of qualitative research interviews with mothers of pupils of younger school age is presented in tabular form (Table 1).

The analytical procedure begins with the transcription of the recorded material. The material collected as a result of the described sampling procedure included the Dictaphone recording of 22 interviews with mothers of early school-age students. The interview material was prepared for the analytical procedure by transcribing the speech into written text, taking into account the verbal and nonverbal aspects of the mothers' statements.

The first analytical turn on the journey through grounded theory leads to the area of coding. Coding consisted of three stages: preliminary, which involved naming each word, line, or segment of data, followed by focused, in which the most important and frequent preliminary codes were used to sort, synthesise, integrate, and organise copious amounts of data; and theoretical (conceptual) codes.

Table 1

The process of emergence/construction of the grounded theory on the basis of qualitative research interviews with mothers of pupils of younger school age

Research step/stage	Activity	Justification
Start of research	Defining the research topic, proposing the research conception while avoiding the formulation of hypotheses.	Relatively precise determination of the aim and subject-matter of the research and the research problem (although, along with the progress of work, the original research idea may change and undergo modifications).
Selection of (research participants)	Selection of a group, use of homogeneous purposive sampling (in practice, it may be possible to encounter objective difficulties in gathering an adequate number of respondents due to the lack of their time, unwillingness to co-operate, *etc*.).	Finding an appropriate group of study participants who demonstrate a positive attitude towards the researcher and a willingness to actively participate in the research.
Practical research	Dynamic method of obtaining information, iterative data collection, writing notes during research, improving research tools, and improving the interview script.	Analysis improvements that enable valuable adjustments in data interpretation and response to emerging issues.

Research step/stage	Activity	Justification
Data analysis procedure	Transcription. Interpretation of the research participants' statements. Coding of responses. Searching for dependencies, regularities in statements and literature sources.	Becoming acquainted with data and preliminary creation of theories.
Achievement of theoretical saturation or *sufficiency* (if possible).	There is little cognitive value in subsequent conversations, and the information obtained is repetitive.	There is little point in analysing new statements or comparing data with studies already conducted.
Literature confrontation	Comparison to the existing literature.	Strengthening of the universal character of the theory, and improvement of the quality of the definition.
Formulation of hypotheses	Iterative filling of the presented problem with evidence – its precise specification or reinforcement with data. Certain logic between opinions, reasons, interdependencies, and elements confirming and negating the conception of research will be sought.	Strengthening of the research problem and its measurability with data. Outlining of research assumptions. Concretisation of the grounded theory.
Final dilemmas	Attempt to answer the question: what was the function of the applied grounded theory?	Conclusion.

Results

Moving on to the presentation of the discussion of the results of our own research, it is worth recalling that it was attempted not to generate a new theory guided by sensitising concepts that could suggest a certain attitude towards a given topic. Therefore, it was not until the theoretical (conceptual) codes were isolated that it was decided to engage in research polemics. Therefore, during the writing of the report, a literature confrontation was conducted in order to introduce the main focused categories.

The wide range of various social expectations imposes the need to have multi-faceted competences and, above all, the skills of reacting flexibly to the needs of the changing reality for the teacher. According to Henryka Kwiatkowska (2008), the teacher's competence is the person's ability and readiness to perform tasks on the expected level that forms as a result of the integration of knowledge, a large number of small skills

and the skill of valuation. The analysis of interviews with mothers of children of younger school age allowed the researcher to describe codes concentrated in three components: knowledge, skills, and attitudes, creating the category of pedagogical competences desired in early childhood education teachers. Although the names of categories can hardly be called original and are sometimes identical with the textbook discourse, they were reconstructed from the bottom up through the refining of meanings ascribed to their children's education by narrators and used for the presentation of authenticity and, to a large extent, traditionality of methods of thinking about *good* teaching.

A fragment of the process of construction/emergence of the theory, along with literature confrontation concerning the initial code — *interpersonal skills* emerging from the concentrated code — *skills* is presented below. According to the subject literature, the list of skills that teachers should possess still expands and covers, *e.g.*:

– recognition and evaluation of one's own strengths for the purpose of self-improvement and development of one's own knowledge,
– proper communication with the child and the parent,
– use of various methods and techniques to diagnose the level of the pupil's achievements,
– working with the class and individual work with the pupil,
– use of information technology,
– creation and critical analysis of existing curricula,
– recognition of changes around the world and adaptation to them (Arciszewska, 2003).

In the group of women covered by the research, regardless of the typological group determined by age, education, problems with the child, *etc.*, the significance of *interpersonal skills* of the early childhood education teacher was brought up most often. Effectiveness in the teacher's work is not based on the use of power and authority but on the utilisation of pupils' wisdom and the creation of a climate of mutual trust. Therefore, according to many authors (*e.g.*, Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hattie, 2012; Kwaśnica, 2014; Kwiatkowska, 2015; Marzano, Waters, & McNult, 2005; Strykowska-Nowakowska, 2017; Żegnałek, 2012), the significant major and practical skills of the modern teacher refer to communication with pupils and other people, engaging in dialogue with them, expressing respect for the individuality of pupils, and co-operation with pupils, parents, and other educational entities. John Hattie emphasises that a teacher's interpersonal skills include the ability to establish positive relationships with students, which affects their motivation and educational achievements (Hattie, 2012). Linda Darling-Hammon describes interpersonal skills as abilities that allow teachers to communicate effectively, cooperate with students, and build trust, which is essential in the teaching process (Darling-Hammon, 2010). The key role of interpersonal skills of persons teaching and educating children at the first education level

results from the fact that interactions are long-lasting. The teacher has an influence on pupils for a few hours a day over three years. "The responsible and engaged tutor recognises the pupil's individuality and does not forget that the dialogue is the best educational method. He/she also understands the significant function of non-verbal language in communication, *e.g.*, eye contact, the tone of voice, expression, gestures"[1] (Jaśkowska, 2003, p. 472). The skilful conduct of dialogue is a great form of communication through which we reach agreement. A participant of the dialogue is the pupil, around whom the activity of the teacher and the school should focus. Robert J. Marzano, Timothy Waters, and Brian A. McNulty define *interpersonal skills* as a set of competencies that enable teachers to effectively manage the classroom and create an atmosphere conducive to learning through empathy, active listening, and the ability to resolve conflicts (Marzano *et al.*, 2005).

Thus, the teacher's interpersonal skills are reflected in the effectiveness of language behaviours in educational situations, the ability to listen to pupils and understanding the content of their statements, dialogical thinking and its development in pupils, the use of discursive techniques and non-verbal language, the stimulation of linguistic sensitivity in pupils, the improvement of the correctness, legibility, and simplicity of one's language skills (Kwiatkowska, 1995). The teacher's important interpersonal skill is reacting properly in conflict situations between pupils. It is important to listen to both parties' opinions, to bring about the clarification of the dispute in a peaceful manner and the resolution of the conflict. The teacher's role boils down to helping pupils name their feelings and express their emotions verbally, understanding what became the reason for the conflict and finding a way of satisfaction for both parties. The resolution of the conflict does not mean its quick settlement – it is necessary to show patience and objectivity and to understand the parties to the conflict. Children cannot be expected to possess such skills – it is necessary to teach them this consistently and systematically. It is good when parents, supported by teachers, act in the same way. It is worth emphasising that solving conflicts not only benefits the conflicted parties – it also contributes to building good interpersonal relations. The participants are mobilised to seek innovative solutions.

At the beginning of their work in school, every teacher should realise that interpersonal skills are necessary for they in theirs daily contact with pupils and their parents and make the educational process easier, more pleasant, and more effective.

"A good teacher knows how to talk to children, how to speak to them so that they could understand the topic" [M2]. The woman says that:

[…] the teacher should use the Polish language smoothly and flawlessly. I say

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[1] Author's own translation.

it again – flawlessly. For me, as a mother (apart from the fact of being a teacher), it is horrible to hear *poszłem* instead of *poszedłem*, or *wziąść* instead of *wziąć*, and I heard this even from one of the principals some time ago…

I think that the teacher's language has a significant impact here, too – more precisely, it should be adapted to the children's language and the stage of their development so as to be understandable to children and to improve constantly their language skills. This is certainly very difficult. Still remaining in the topic of language, impeccable diction is also important because children adopt the way the teacher speaks. [M17]

The narrators point out another important question – *the teacher's language skills* and their development in children. This is because children show reproductive behaviours; they imitate adults' way of speaking and copy their linguistic habits. The teacher must be an unquestionable authority in this respect. The narrators who pointed out this issue have higher education, and one of them has a pedagogical education. It must be noted, therefore, that educated women pay more attention to the formation of linguistic correctness in children.

M1, M2, and M3 expect the teacher to have *the ability to easily make contact with children,* whereas M4, M7, M13, M14, and M16 expect the teacher *to have experience in building an adequate atmosphere in the classroom and an integrated class team, managing it, and have the ability to listen.*

M4 also thinks that

[…] it is very important to build an atmosphere of safety, mutual respect, and trust, to solve group problems together and to motivate further action, development, and team integration. There is no doubt that the didactic process and the teacher's work in school would not bring expected results without the aforementioned factors. I find it difficult to imagine a teacher – and I would not like such a teacher for my own child – who does not pay attention to the atmosphere during the lessons. It is because of this feeling of safety, respect, and trust that the child is willing to undertake educational activities inside and outside school and to attend classes.

It is, therefore, worth noting that a teacher who *easily makes contact with children* and *can build the proper atmosphere in the classroom* meets the expectations of mothers regarding interpersonal skills. Mothers expect that a teacher will be able to easily establish relationships with children. This means that the teacher should have high social skills, be empathetic, and open to the needs of students. The relationship between the teacher and students plays a key role in the education process – if it is positive, chil-

dren feel safe, motivated, and more willing to engage in learning. An essential element of a teacher's work is creating a friendly atmosphere in the classroom. The expectations of mothers suggest that the teacher should not only impart knowledge, but also take care of the emotional comfort of children. A friendly and supportive environment promotes effective learning, builds a sense of security, and encourages students to cooperate. The opinion of M10 starts the quotations coded as *giving support to children*. Namely:

> the teacher should provide (be a source of) support and consolation when they need it – it is not just about communicating knowledge, which will not have any effect when communicated in an inappropriate manner, because pupils will not be interested and will not want to listen when they find the message unattractive, but about teacher – pupil relations. There is a lot of talk about the "approach to the child" – appropriate messages are needed so that we could understand it and its needs, but also that the child could understand us, and both sides would communicate successfully. I think that careful listening and observing are important. The tutor is a kind of mentor for the pupil, but friendly contacts are also welcome, although obviously without excessive fraternisation. The tutor who cannot communicate with his own pupils is not competent.

One of the key roles of a teacher is to support students, both in the learning process and in emotional and social development. Mothers want educational support for their children, and a teacher should help students acquire knowledge and develop skills. This means adapting teaching methods to the individual needs of children, motivating them to learn, and explaining difficult issues. Educational support also means building students' faith in their own abilities and showing them that mistakes are part of the learning process. Emotional support is very important, because children encounter various difficulties in the education process – stress, fear of being judged, failures at school, or problems in relationships with peers. A teacher should be a person who can notice students' emotions, support them in difficult moments, and create an atmosphere of safety and acceptance. Thanks to this, children feel more at ease and are more willing to engage in learning.

Further narrators talk about being the child's friend [M12, M14, M17, M18]. They add that

> […] it is particularly important in the teacher's work that he/she should maintain a permanent and close bond with those pupils and maintain good contact with them and with their parents. He/she should inspire their trust and credibility, and he/she should listen and talk to them. [M14]

For the good of the child, the teacher should try to be their friend and to give them support during every crisis. I think that the moment when the child can come willingly and confess their problem to a teacher is the latter's great success. This proves that the teacher won the child's trust. [M18]

Therefore, the role of a teacher goes beyond the traditional understanding of education and also includes a close, trusting relationship with the student. Being a *friend* does not mean a literal peer relationship, but an attitude full of understanding, empathy, and openness. The child should feel that the teacher is a person to whom he can turn in difficult situations, both educational and emotional. A friendly teacher is someone who not only imparts knowledge, but also sees the student as a person, their emotions, needs, and problems. Friendship between a teacher and a student does not mean the abolition of authority. On the contrary, the teacher should be a mentor who helps the child find their way in the world, develop their passions and cope with challenges. True authority is not based on distance or severity, but on mutual respect and the ability to inspire.

Narrations of women whose children cause educational difficulties were characterised by pointing out the *skill of solving conflicts between pupils* as an important interpersonal skill of the teacher.

M13 expects that

[…] the teacher will be able to solve existing problems and often difficult situations. This ability seems to be an indisputable and almost necessary matter due to the fact that working with people creates certain issues, including the difficult ones that the teacher should be able to solve every day. He/she should be able to control the group and maintain discipline in it without disturbing the friendly and safe atmosphere.

M19 stresses that

[…] the teacher should be able, and want, to talk to every pupil according to the need and to solve conflicts, quarrels, and disputes between children. It is very important, at least in my opinion, to cope with a group of pupils.

M21 wants the teacher

[…] to be able to solve disputes in the classroom, to be able to look for such solutions in potential conflicts in order to reach a fair agreement. The teacher should be able to win the group's trust. Children spend many hours a day in the classroom,

so a positive atmosphere in the classroom will contribute to better learning results.

In a classroom where children with different characters, values, and ways of thinking meet, conflicts are inevitable. The teacher should be able to calm down disputes and conduct dialogue between the parties in such a way that tensions are not escalated, but rather they reach an agreement. Objectivity and the ability to listen to each side are important here.

Thus, the narrators point out the importance of proper relations between the teacher and the pupil. They repeat that the good atmosphere in the classroom allows the child to learn more effectively. Children feel better when they know they can always rely on the teacher's help and support. School has to be a friendly place for the child, with which it has good associations and which it wants to attend. The teacher and their interpersonal skills play a significant role in achieving this.

The results of other studies conducted in the discussed area show significant similarities. Anna Grabowiec and Agnieszka Bochniarz (2016), examining the need/necessity of developing communication skills of teachers in the educational process, came to the conclusion that success in the teaching profession largely depends on the ability to establish positive relationships not only with students, but also with their parents. Iwona Gawlik conducted research on the expectations of teachers and parents towards early school education teachers. Based on the statements of 54 parents, she found that parents value a friendly attitude towards the student the most (Gawlik, 2021). Similarly, research conducted by Anna Klim-Klimaszewska, the research aim of which was to recognize parents' expectations towards early school education, showed the priority of the teacher's interpersonal skills and the importance of cooperation between parents and teachers in order to ensure a coherent educational system in which the child feels safe both physically and mentally (Klim-Klimaszewska, 2018).

Discussion and Summary

The methodology of the grounded theory used in empirical research allows the analytic process to be initiated and makes it possible to control the validity of theoretical conclusions arising from them. As a result of the conducted analytical methodology of the author's own research, sampling, taking notes, transcription, and coding, within the scope of the process of emergence/construction of the grounded theory on the basis of qualitative research interviews with mothers of pupils of younger school age, a certain hypothesis has consolidated in empirical data that allows us to sketch a portrait of the *ideal* figure of the early childhood education teacher with regard to interpersonal skills presented by them in the light of the society's expectations.

It assumes that the expectations of mothers taking part in the research oscillate around four components of interpersonal skills of the early childhood education teacher arranged according to the level of intensity of the opinion: the teacher's language skills, making contact easily, building the appropriate atmosphere in the classroom, giving support to children, being the child's friend, and solving conflicts in the classroom.

We cannot be surprised that one of the first and most important requirements set for teachers by parents is the development of their interpersonal skills.

> The teacher is one of the helping professions based on direct contact with the other human being and assuming co-operation and emotional exchange [...]. It is perceived as a very responsible profession, or even a *mission*. [...] The teacher is required to be a role model and an object of intergenerational social, moral, and cultural communication. Their personal traits and professional competencies constitute the intellectual capital of the school. The efficiency of his/her actions and, consequently, also the development of pupils depends on them[2]. (Poraj, 2014, p. 143)

The level of requirements set for teachers is very high. They include both personal traits and broadly understood professional competencies, including interpersonal skills. The specifics of the teaching profession justify the need to qualify for this work only such persons who will be ready to take on challenges and who are likely to achieve an elevated level of effectiveness in work with pupils. It is significant for candidates for the profession of the young children's teacher to realise what skills they will need to draw satisfaction from work with pupils. The results of the research may inspire a reflection on the method of recruiting candidates for early childhood education teachers. As a result of the negative selection for the profession during the recruitment process, in which the criterion of enrolment in pedagogical studies is only the result of the matriculation examination, parents can worry that, alongside charismatic and open people with a positive attitude to work with children, this professional group is increasingly often represented by persons who are incompetent to do such work; teaching staffs include both high-quality professionals and persons totally inappropriate to pursue this profession. We can suppose that this is caused by easy access to pedagogical studies but the main reason is that teacher training colleges and universities do not hold recruitment practical examinations. In fact, even a job interview would show the erudition and communication skills of the prospective teacher.

Taking into account the mothers' expectations towards the early childhood education teacher, a proposal was made to include or increase the number of hours

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[2]   Author's own translation.

of some courses for constructed study programs in the field of kindergarten and early school pedagogy, *e.g.*:

- *personal training* – a course aimed at the development of emotional intelligence, mainly with regard to the control of personal emotions, learning the methods of maintaining distance towards oneself and the surrounding world, assertiveness, coping with one's fears, development of the ability to co-operate with educational entities; such classes could also include individual sessions with a psychologist that would help the teacher make a self-diagnosis, develop his/her personality, and verify his/her competence to work as a teacher; laying emphasis on the use of the sense of humour in classes with children – *fun* classes during which the teacher can enter the children's world of fun and play; laughter helps pupils regulate their emotions and cope with fear and stress.
- *co-operation with parents* – a course aimed at getting students acquainted with the specificity, forms, and various conditions of co-operation of the school with parents and the local community;
- *psychodidactics of creativity*/*training* – a course aimed at presenting possibilities of using creative thinking techniques in solving problems and preparing pedagogical creative work for students.

Moreover, teachers should continuously develop, upgrade their education, actively participate in training sessions, courses, webinars, and other forms of professional training, and read professional literature in interpersonal communication.

> An important task is also to improve the quality of education and professional training of teachers and their trainers [...]. High professional competences must be accompanied by the skill of making contact and effective communication with the environment and the skill of dialogue and negotiations in conflict situations[3].
> (Poraj, 2014, p. 144)

It is necessary to remember that the methodology of grounded theory has aroused much controversy since its beginnings; in addition, it occurs in various forms and, therefore, critics point out the excessively flexible application of its rules depending on the needs.

In this context, it is necessary to note that the hypothesis formulated in the course of the research procedure is only a kind of theoretical proposal and should not be generalised onto the entire population (Silverman, 2006). The research process can be an impulse for further research, supporting the development of knowledge and improving the education and upbringing process at the early school education stage,

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[3]   Author's own translation.

and research based on the grounded theory methodology can contribute to positive changes in the world.

The presented conclusions constitute a theoretical analysis of data concerning social expectations towards the early childhood education teacher. They are not the only possible interpretation of this issue. They can be treated only as a research suggestion and a starting point for further research in this area.

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