

# The Impact Of Teachers' Attachment Styles On Their Relationship With Students In Additional Professional Support Roles

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**Abstract** – This research paper examines the influence of attachment styles among teachers providing additional professional support in Slovenian schools on their perceptions of relationships with students. The quantitative study utilized the Experience in Close Relationships (ECR-12) and the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) questionnaires, involving a sample of 207 teachers offering such assistance. Regression analysis was applied to analyze the data. The findings confirm that teachers' attachment styles significantly impact how they perceive their relationships with students. Specifically, the results show that higher levels of teacher anxiety are associated with perceptions of increased conflict and dependency in these relationships.

**Index Terms** - attachment, teacher-student relationship, students, teacher, additional professional assistance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of relationships between students and teachers within the theoretical framework of attachment assumes that the teacher is an important person in the student's life and vice versa. Like the parent-child relationship, the teacher acts as the student's safe base, which affects the student's learning, especially in the beginning grades of primary school (Hamilton and Howes, 1992; Hamre, Stuhlman and Pianta, 2003; Schuengel, 2012; Koomen and Verschueren, 2012, in Milatz, 2015). At school, students get to know and form relationships with their teachers both at the class level (from the first to the fifth grade) and at the subject level (from the sixth to the ninth grade). During the entire primary school education, both at class and subject level, some students also meet and establish relationships with teachers for additional professional help. Remedial teachers spend a lot of time with individual students with special needs and can have deeper relationships with them.

During school, children change the location and people they hang out with. Their mental abilities also change, which contributes to how they behave in relationships. Between the ages of five and seven, children of all cultures begin to spend much of the day away from their attachment objects. As a result, they are exposed to contexts, people, interpersonal strategies and dangers that they have not experienced at home. Some characteristics of children in middle childhood are: (1) concrete thinking, which allows children to think about the reasons for outcomes in certain situations: understanding why someone behaved the way they did is key to regulating one's own behavior, which is a key task during schooling. Schoolchildren also become capable of (2) taking multiple perspectives in their minds. This is key to (3) negotiation and compromise, and (4) deception, which requires complex processing and manipulation of what others expect and what the child does. Neighborhood relationships and friendships and school expose children to (5) new threats against which they must defend themselves (including peer pressure and violence). Schoolchildren also develop (6) new attachments to best friends and peers. They can also develop an attachment to their teachers.

Based on the findings of Bowlby and M. Ainsworth's (1979) attachment and research in the field of partner relationships, a complex model of attachment was formed that describes the relationships between teachers and students. Students are separated from their teachers every day after class. Securely attached students, who see teachers as reliable and consistent at school, learn that separations are not permanent and can thus look forward to meeting teachers again. Teachers are a safe base for them. Students who are insecurely attached, however, may spend a lot of time at school either avoiding the teacher as an object of attachment or trying to bond with him in any way possible. Such a child seeks corrective emotional experience in school, in relationships with peers and teachers (Riley, 2011). Thus, teachers encounter concepts of attachment at school: the effect of a safe base, the search for closeness, even separation protest. For teachers, knowledge of the attachment domain can provide information about relationship building processes. They can also recognize their role as a "safe base" for students. Lack of a secure base encourages aggressive behaviour in students (Sroufe, 2005, in Riley, 2011). Knowledge of the attachment domain is a good source of explanations for positive and negative behavioural

patterns of both students and teachers (Riley, 2011).

As already mentioned, attachment theory is one of the most important theories for understanding the functioning of an individual. Due to the nature of their work, teachers of additional professional help can constantly observe the behaviour of their students and thereby transfer the knowledge of theory into practice. The school space is also special because of the relationships that are established between teachers and students. As a teacher, it is necessary not only to recognize when we are talking about attachment, but also to distinguish between when we are talking about secure and when we are talking about insecure attachment of a child or student (Riley, 2011). Secure attachment is based on the caregiver's ability to attend to the child's needs and thereby help the child develop an internal working model that will promote self-esteem. Children develop insecure attachment when the caregiver is unpredictable or rejected, as this leaves the child's needs unmet. The relationship between a guardian and a child in a school context is comparable to the relationship between a teacher and a student.

Kesner (1994; 1997, in Du Plessis, 2009) found that there is a relationship between teachers' attachment experiences and teachers' relationships with students. C. Howes and S. Ritchie (1999, in Krstić, 2015) talk about teacher relationships with students with a secure attachment style and teacher relationships with students with an ambivalent attachment style. A safe teacher-student relationship is characterized by trust and harmony. In such a relationship, the teacher perceives that the student feels safe with him and would seek his help in case of problems, and that he, as a teacher, would be able to comfort him. In the relationship, which is related to the teacher's ambivalent attachment style, the teacher and the student are very or too connected: the teacher perceives the student as a person who is constantly looking for help or confirmation and reacts negatively to separation from him.

Research shows that a secure teacher-student relationship increases the chances of a student's higher academic success and higher learning motivation compared to an unsafe teacher-student relationship (Bergin and Bergin, 2009, in Krstić, 2015). Relationships between teachers and students that were labelled as safe reflected higher levels of acceptance, emotional closeness, and lower levels of conflict, dependence, and rejection compared to relationships that were labelled as unsafe (Granot, 2014). In their research, B. Hamre and Pianta (2001) discovered that the student's relationships with teachers, in which there was a high degree of conflict and dependence, is an important factor in predicting the child's further school success. They found that the possibility of the appearance of emotional and behavioural problems in children who have established a relationship with teachers in which there was a low degree of conflict and dependence is reduced. K. Hauser-McLean, Kosty and Murray (2016) showed with their research that among younger children, the teacher's emotional support and conflict in the teacher-student relationship are important factors in student achievement. Students who have relationships with teachers in which there is an adequate degree of closeness have higher academic success, more optimism, greater willingness to work and less orientation towards decisions to obtain the status of a child with special needs. Students who are excessively connected to teachers are dependent on the teacher and may have a negative attitude towards school, lower academic performance, weak social competence, and may be aggressive. (Birch and Ladd, 1977; Hamre and Pianta, 2001; in Bergin and Bergin, 2009). An insecurely attached student (ambivalent or avoidant) at school risks the development of learning, developmental and social-emotional problems (Sabol and Pianta, 2012, in Taggart, 2016). Students with avoidant behaviour are more likely to engage in conflictual relationships and those with ambivalent behaviour are more dependent on others and anxious (Taggart, 2016). Children who experience negative stress (distress) and fear in relationships with loved ones find it difficult to engage in open communication regarding emotions and thoughts. They deny their attachment needs and consequently have less organized relationships. They show little progress in social and emotional competence. Self-control, control of others and the environment is their most important task (Howe and Farnley, 1999).

J. Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) state that attachment theory addresses the social-emotional development of an individual and identifies various factors that influence both academic success and social competence of an individual. C. Bergin and Bergin (2009) thus connect the child's sense of belonging and connection to school with attachment, as feelings of belonging and connection strengthen the child's feelings of security and promote the child's further development. Some authors also talk about the so-called school attachment or children's attachment to school (school attachment). M. Hallinan (2008) believes that understanding school attachment is an important part of a systemic view of the child's learning process. Identifying factors that influence students' feelings about school is important for two reasons. First, children who like school gain many social advantages. They are engaged in school activities, which offer them opportunities to develop social skills, new friendships, learn respect for elders and peers, and are encouraged to behave cooperatively. These social skills are the foundation of a student's social development. Second, liking school is important because it affects academic success. Students who like school have higher academic achievements.

There is a belief that students love school because of the enjoyment of learning or interacting with friends at

school. The research by M. Hallinan (2008) identified another, repeatedly ignored factor or influence on students' feelings towards school - teachers. Certain characteristics of a teacher have a significant impact on a student's feelings towards school. The research examined how much teachers support their students socially and emotionally and what expectations (academic) they have for their students. The results showed that teachers who support students by expressing concern for them and respect for them and praise them, in this way satisfy the students' needs for belonging and respect and thus increase their attachment to school. Regarding teachers' expectations of student success, the survey did not provide clear results. A teacher's level of support for his students greatly affects their attachment to school. Therefore, teachers play an important role in the daily life of children. By offering social and emotional support, teachers increase students' attachment to school, which can improve their academic and social achievements (Hallinan, 2008).

The results of the research indicate that relationships at school can be a protective or threatening factor in a child's development and progress. Therefore, it is important that teachers pay enough attention to their relationships with students. The attitude is both a tool for the teacher to perform his prescribed work and a tool for helping and growing the student in later life. The relationships that are established in the school environment are also transferred to the wider environment. To be successful in their work, teachers must reflect warmth, respect and trust in their relationship with students, which may be easier for teachers to do in the lower grades of primary school, when the learning aspect is not yet as much in the foreground as the educational and relational aspects (Beishuizen et al., 2001, in Bergin and Bergin, 2009).

## II. METHODOLOGY

### (1) Research Aim and Hypotheses

The aim of the research is to determine whether the attachment style of additional professional help teachers affects the perception of their relationships with students.

The following hypothesis with the corresponding sub-hypotheses is put forward:

H1: Teachers' attachment styles affect their relationships with students.

H<sub>1,1</sub>: With the increasing level of anxiety in teachers, the level of dependence in relationships with students increases.

H<sub>1,2</sub>: With the increasing level of avoidance among teachers, the level of dependency in relationships with students increases.

H<sub>1,3</sub>: As the level of anxiety in teachers increases, the level of conflict in relationships with students increases.

H<sub>1,4</sub>: With the increasing level of avoidance in teachers, the level of conflict in relations with students increases.

H<sub>1,5</sub>: As the level of anxiety in teachers increases, the level of closeness in relationships with students decreases.

H<sub>1,6</sub>: As the level of avoidance among teachers increases, the level of closeness in relationships with students decreases.

### (2) Sample

The sampling method is random, 207 fully completed online questionnaires of teachers of various educational profiles in primary schools across Slovenia were obtained.

The sample includes 200 (96.6%) completed questionnaires from women and 7 (3.4%) questionnaires from men. Most teachers are special and rehabilitation pedagogues by education, followed by pedagogues, social pedagogues, inclusive pedagogues, defectologists and psychologists. There are 27 people in the sample who have a different profile from the above (13.0%): four speech therapists, three speech therapists and deaf pedagogues, two social and special and rehabilitation pedagogues, 14 classroom teachers, three subject teachers and one food technician (works as a companion of a physically challenged child). Most persons (70) come from the Central Slovenia region (33.8%) and live in cities (98 persons or 47.3%).

### (3) Instruments

The Experience in Close Relationships (ECR-12) questionnaire (Brassard, Johnson, Lafontaine, Lussier, Shaver and Valois, 2015) and the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) questionnaire (Pianta, 2001) were used. ECR-12 questionnaire with its 12 items, in which the individual defines his level of agreement on a 7-point scale (7 - completely agree, 6 - partially agree, 5 - agree, 4 - neither agree nor disagree, 3 - partly disagree, 2 - disagree and 1 - completely disagree) with the mentioned items, measures two dimensions of attachment - the level of anxiety and avoidance in relationships, on the basis of which an individual can be classified as secure, preoccupied, rejecting- avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles. The definition of the dominant

attachment style depends on the number of points collected in the anxiety and avoidance dimensions. The anxiety dimension is measured by the average of the scores for items 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 (items 1, 3, 5, 7, and 11 are reverse scored). The avoidance dimension is measured by the average of scores for items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12. The anxiety dimension refers to the individual's experience of rejection or abandonment, while the avoidance dimension refers to the individual's avoidance of intimacy and interdependence in relationships (Brassard, Johnson, Lafontaine, Lussier, Shaver, & Valois, 2015).

STRS over 28 items, where the teacher defines his level of agreement on a 5-point scale (5 - completely agree, 4 - agree, 3 - neither agree nor disagree, 2 - disagree and 1 - completely agree do not agree), measures the teacher's perception of the relationship with the students, more specifically the degree of expression of the three dimensions of the relationship in the relationship between teachers and students (conflict, closeness and dependence). The conflict dimension is measured by the sum of rated items 2, 11, 13, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25 and 26 (item 19 is reverse scored). The closeness dimension is measured by the sum of the assessed items 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 12, 15, 21, 27 and 28 (item 4 is reverse scored). The dependency dimension is measured by the sum of the assessed items 6, 8, 10, 14 and 17. The conflict dimension measures the teacher's level of perception of a negative or conflictual relationship with the student. A high level of conflict means that the teacher perceives the student as angry, unpredictable and himself as ineffective in the relationship with this student or perceives this relationship as difficult. The closeness dimension measures the teacher's level of perception of warmth, attention and open communication in the relationship with the student.

A high degree of closeness means that the teacher perceives himself in a supporting role to the student, who sees the teacher as an important source of information. The dependency dimension measures the degree to which the teacher perceives the student as overly dependent on the teacher. A high level of dependence means that the student reacts violently to separation from the teacher and often asks for help from the teacher, even when it is not needed (Pianta, 2001).

#### (4) Data collection and Analysis

The Experience in Close Relationships (ECR-12) questionnaire (Brassard, Johnson, Lafontaine, Lussier, Shaver and Valois, 2015) and the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale questionnaire (Pianta, 2001) were published on social network groups (where approximately 1,800 teachers of additional professional assistance from Slovenia are members). The questionnaires in their original language (English) already have guaranteed validity and reliability, as well as objectivity and sensitivity, but due to the translations of the questionnaires, it was necessary to recheck the measurement characteristics with factor analysis. The questionnaires, after their own translation, were given to both the professor of English and the expert in the field of psychology for review. This also ensures their substantive validity.

Data was processed in the statistical program SPSS IBM Statistics 27. Before processing the quantitative data, a factor analysis was first performed to check the measurement characteristics of the questionnaires used. This was followed by a multiple regression analysis to determine the influence of the independent variables (anxiety and avoidance in the ECR-12 questionnaire) on each of the dependent variables (closeness, conflict and dependence) in the STRS questionnaire). Factor analysis showed the relevance of most items of the ECR-12 questionnaire. The only exception was the first statement of the questionnaire (*»Rad/a sem odvisen od drugih«*), which may have been placed in a different factor compared to the original questionnaire due to a different understanding of this statement by the teachers. In the case of the STRS questionnaire, the items were mostly appropriate, but the factor analysis indicated several potential problems with the teacher's understanding of the questionnaire's statements, since one statement was added for each factor (*»Kadar se otroci neprimerno obnašajo, se pozitivno odzovejo na moj pogled ali ton glasu.«* (conflict); *»Otroci mi poskušajo ustreči.«* (closeness); *»Otroci so užaljeni ali osramočeni, kadar jih popravim.«* (dependence)), proved to be very little relevant.

### III. RESULTS

Teachers were classified into a specific attachment style based on the median values for both the anxiety dimension and the avoidance dimension. Compared to the mean and mode, the median is not distorted by the possible deviations of the data (Manikandan, 2011). Levels of anxiety and avoidance in securely attached teachers are lower than the median of both dimensions. The level of anxiety is lower than the median value of the anxiety dimension and the level of avoidance is higher than the median value of the avoidance dimension in teachers with a dismissive-avoidant attachment. The levels of anxiety and avoidance in fearful-avoidant teachers are higher than the median of both dimensions. In preoccupied teachers, the level of anxiety is higher than the median of the dimension anxiety and the level of avoidance is lower than the median of the dimension

avoidance. The median (Me) for the anxiety variable has a value of 3.8333. The median (Me) for the avoidance variable has a value of 3.3333. Persons with dominant insecure attachment styles are approximately equal in number, while there are the least number of persons with a dominant secure attachment style. The reason for this may be the result of difficulties in translating or understanding the statements by the participants. The original questionnaires were designed in the American and Italian areas, which have different cultural characteristics compared to the Slovenian area. It is interesting that in our sample there are the least securely attached teachers. A possible explanation for such a phenomenon could be the nature of the teacher's profession, since it is a helping profession - i.e. a profession where the teacher is expected to understand the students, be able to put himself in their role, be empathetic and help them to the best of his ability. Riley (2009) in his research on the attachment styles of primary and secondary school teachers found that some teachers may enter the teaching profession with the intention of gaining opportunities and experiences to improve their attachment styles. The author arrived at this explanation based on the finding that teachers who had just started their professional careers were less securely attached (they experienced higher levels of anxiety and avoidance) than teachers with many years of experience. At the same time, primary school teachers were more securely attached than secondary school teachers. In her research, L. Kopal Možina (2007) also came to similar conclusions regarding attachment styles, who discovered for her sample that there were no securely attached persons among the persons providing psychosocial assistance. It should also be noted that some authors do not even recommend classifying people into a specific attachment style category (Shaver, 2018), as each person has certain characteristics of all attachment styles.

The mean of the perception of the degree of dependence of teachers of additional professional help is 11.32 and the standard deviation is 2.244. The results indicate that the degree of perceived dependency of teachers in their relationship with their students is low. The mean of the perception of the level of conflict of the additional professional help teachers is 24.39 and the standard deviation is 4.514. The results indicate that teachers perceive a medium-high level of conflict in their relationships with students. The mean of the perception of the degree of closeness of teachers to additional professional help is 40.29 and the standard deviation is 3.401. The results suggest that teachers perceive a high degree of closeness in their relationships with students.

The central hypothesis assumed that teachers' attachment styles influence their perceptions of their relationship with students, and it had several sub-hypotheses.

The first sub-hypothesis assumed that with the increasing level of anxiety in teachers, their perception of the level of dependence in relationships with students increases. We confirmed the sub-hypothesis, as the variable anxiety had a statistically significant effect on the variable addiction. The regression coefficient between the variables anxiety and addiction was positive ( $\beta = 0.196$ ). This confirmed that the higher the level of anxiety in teachers, the greater their perception of dependency in their relationships with students.

The second sub-hypothesis assumed that with the increasing level of avoidance among teachers, their perception of the level of dependence in relationships with students increases. We rejected the sub-hypothesis, as the avoidance variable did not have a statistically significant effect on the dependency variable. The regression coefficient between the variables avoidance and dependence was positive ( $\beta = 0.012$ ).

The third sub-hypothesis assumed that with the increasing level of anxiety in teachers, their perception of the level of conflict in relations with students increases. We confirmed the sub-hypothesis, as the anxiety variable had a statistically significant effect on the conflict variable. The regression coefficient between the variables anxiety and conflict was positive ( $\beta = 0.254$ ). This confirmed that the higher the level of anxiety in teachers, the more conflict they perceive in their relationships with students.

The fourth sub-hypothesis assumed that with the increasing level of avoidance among teachers, their perception of the level of conflict in relations with students increases. We rejected the sub-hypothesis, as the avoidance variable did not have a statistically significant effect on the conflict variable. The regression coefficient between the variables avoidance and conflict was positive ( $\beta = 0.050$ ).

The fifth sub-hypothesis assumed that as the level of anxiety in teachers increases, their perception of the level of closeness in their relationships with students decreases. We rejected the sub-hypothesis, as the anxiety variable did not have a statistically significant effect on the closeness variable. The regression coefficient between the variables anxiety and closeness was negative ( $\beta = -0.041$ ).

The sixth sub-hypothesis assumed that with the increasing level of avoidance among teachers, their perception of the level of closeness in relationships with students decreases. We rejected the sub-hypothesis, as the avoidance variable did not have a statistically significant effect on the closeness variable. The regression coefficient between the variables avoidance and closeness was negative ( $\beta = -0.107$ ).

#### IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Only the models describing the influence of the independent variable anxiety of the ECR-12 questionnaire on the dependent variable conflict and dependence of the STRS questionnaire proved to be statistically significant. The results of the research therefore showed that only the level of anxiety of teachers had a statistically significant effect on their perception of the level of conflict and dependence in relationships with students. Teachers' level of avoidance was not found to be statistically significant in predicting perceptions of any of the three dimensions of the teacher-student relationship. Also, the anxiety variable did not predict closeness perception. The reasons for the obtained results may be of an individual nature or related to the individual characteristics of the participants (e.g. the criterion of the individual's perception of addiction). It should also be considered that most of the sample was represented by women, which is also one of the limitations of the research. Shaver (1997, in Kopal Možina, 2008) discovered in his research that preoccupied and fearfully avoidantly attached individuals experience a higher level of anxiety than secure and dismissively attached individuals. At the same time, the author discovered that preoccupied attached individuals perceive and seek closeness in relationships, while fearful-avoidant individuals do not. The reasons for the obtained results may also be partially found in the selection of questionnaires. Namely, two questionnaires were used, which do not yet have an official Slovenian translation in the Slovenian territory, and thus also guaranteed measurement characteristics. In addition, L. Kopal Možina (2008) warns that it is difficult to measure patterns/aspects of attachment that are unconscious with self-assessment questionnaires. The results are not generalizable also due to cultural differences, as research participants in the Slovenian area may interpret the statements of the questionnaires differently than research participants with the original questionnaires (e.g. the individual's perception of dependence, inappropriate behaviour, conformity to others, etc.). The generalizability of the results is also affected by the size of the sample, which in our case, compared to the number of teachers in the online group, is relatively small. Nevertheless, the results of the research are important, as they represent a step forward in the research of attachment and relationships between teachers and students. At the same time, the results of the factor analysis of the questionnaires can be the first step towards the creation of the official Slovenian version of the ECR-12 and STRS questionnaires.

When thinking about the research, many ideas for further research can be obtained. Given that the STRS questionnaire only measures teachers' perceptions of their relationship with students, and the opinions of students are therefore not included, investigating the opinions of both teachers and students could be an opportunity for further research. In addition to the mentioned possibility of further research, there are many others:

- researching the connection between the dominant attachment style of teachers and the reasons for choosing a profession;
- action research on changing the teacher's insecure attachment style;
- researching the dominant attachment styles of class teachers, professors at secondary schools and universities;
- researching the impact of teachers' attachment styles and their relationships with students on the achievement of individualized student program goals.

In addition to the mentioned opportunities for research, it is also worth mentioning different ways of research. In the future, the above-mentioned topics could be investigated either only with questionnaires (e.g. with a shorter version of the STRS questionnaire, other questionnaires on determining the dominant attachment style, etc.), or only with interviews. An Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) could be conducted, or a larger number of interviewees could simply be included in the sample. The results could also be obtained through observation or conversations within focus groups of teachers and/or students.

The topic of the research covered the relationship between teachers and their students. The pedagogue's profession represents working with people, and the core of his activity is therefore the relationship. Social pedagogues are especially aware of the importance of attitude and its impact on an individual's life, as we also work as teachers in schools. A relationship is like a living thing, and it can change. Through relationships, we can achieve change and through communication we can deliver important messages. In a relationship, we can be an example to someone and assert our own authority. That is why it is important to take advantage of the power that teaching work brings and thus strive for better or more successful relationships. As a result, we can make a significant contribution to the feelings of success and satisfaction of both students and teachers. Feelings of satisfaction and success are usually mutual, as relationships are a reciprocal process of giving and receiving. Knowledge of attachment theory and its connection with the teacher-student relationship helps to recognize the usefulness of attachment when working with people. Research by M. Foley, R. Munford and M. Nash (2009) showed that theoretical knowledge in the field of attachment can also be used thoughtfully and successfully by social workers in their work, while at the same time reflecting on their own experiences of

attachment. The findings of this research are also an important source of information for pedagogues and other professionals who work with people.

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