

## **Analysing the Development of Relationship between Teachers and Pupils with Multiple Disabilities**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents a research study aimed at analysing the development of long-term relationship between teachers and pupils with multiple disabilities (particularly those of severe extent). The aim is to determine whether it is possible to identify phases in the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with multiple disabilities, and to analyse the characteristics of these phases. The phases of acceptance, interaction and potential of the pupil's personality were identified through a retrospective analysis and hermeneutic circle of data from previous research of the authors. These phases were further analysed by content analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with teachers, and the products of education process and observations. The analysis provided data on the obstacles to the acceptance (on the part of teachers), the supporting factors of the acceptance process, the interaction content, the positive characteristics of the pupils, and the possibilities of their development through authentic interactions.*

**Keywords:** interaction, relationship, teacher, multiple disability, acceptance, personality.

### **1. Introduction**

The relationship between teachers and pupils is considered as the fundamental base of the education process from which other interventional procedures, including education, are derived. The development of this relationship is a dynamic process. In its dynamics, we can observe changes in the quality of the interaction, relationship cohesion and other related variables. The quality of the relationship is not significant only in terms of education but it also determines the quality of any professional intervention comprising recurrent interactions.

This paper presents a model to describe the evolution of the relationship between teachers and persons with multiple disabilities (hereinafter referred to as MD) and the method of its construction. Although using pedagogical terminology (teacher, pupil), the resulting theory is (taking into account the specificities of the intervention context) applicable interdisciplinary.

In this paper, we build on previously published research findings of the research team of the authors, which represent construction of the theoretical model to describe the interaction situations (the so-called vertical concept of interaction), and construction of the model to analyse the relationships between the interaction process and education.

The previous research was repeatedly dealing with the question whether it is possible to study the development of interactions between teachers and pupils also in the long run (horizontal concept of interaction) and whether it is possible to distinguish certain phases in the development of this relationship. This question is based on the assumption that the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD is not static but dynamically evolving (Kopřiva, 1997). Nevertheless, theories on this subject found in the literature mostly belonged to areas other than education. For example, great attention is paid to the development of the relationship between patients and therapists in the context of psychological counselling (Dougherty, 2008), psychotherapy (Yalom, 2007) or expressive therapies (Bruscia, 1998). Pursuant to empirical experience of teaching practice, however, these theories are not appropriate for clarifying the development of the relationship in the educational context in persons with MD because special education intervention takes place in a different context, with different objectives, with a different type of service recipients, etc. The absence of publication outputs on this topic regarding persons with severe MD justified the initiation of this research project.

### 1.1 Background of the research project

Due to the nature of the examined topic, the expected nature of the data and the need to analyse dynamic relationship processes (Hendl, 2008), the **qualitative methodology** was chosen. At the beginning of the research, we determined the following **research question**: *Which phases are characteristic to describe the dynamics of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD during the education process?* For this research, it was important not only to identify certain phases but also to ascertain what occurs within the various phases of the relationship development.

During the research, it was therefore necessary to identify the phenomena essential for the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD (based on which it is possible to identify certain phases of the relationship development) and to obtain data to describe these phenomena and explain their effects in the education process. Depending on these tasks, the research was divided into two parts. The first part focused on conceptualisation of the fundamental phenomena and theoretical bases. This part was based on a combination of retrospective analysis of case studies, hermeneutical analysis of data from the aforementioned studies and the subsequent deepening of knowledge about the identified phenomena through studying special sources. In the second part, we applied content analysis of the data obtained during semi-structured interviews, analysis of the education process products and observation of education.

## 2 Conceptualization of the fundamental phenomena of the research

In the initial phase of the research, it was necessary to conceptualize the fundamental phenomena to describe the dynamics of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD. In previous research we found very weak ability of teachers to reflect on the long-term development of their relationship with pupils with MD. This experience indicated that the identification of these phenomena would not be possible through commonly used methods of preliminary research (e.g. participative interviews or focus groups). An alternative for solving this problem was found in a retrospective analysis of case studies and the hermeneutical circle.

### 2.1 Retrospective analysis of case studies and hermeneutical circle

The first of the sources was a **retrospective analysis of ten case studies** from the practice of research team members. In these case studies, we searched key moments important for the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD and instances leading to major awareness of teachers. This method places demands on the ability of introspection of the cases. A complicating factor was the fact that we also examined situations that took place a long time ago (e.g. several years). To better map the timeline, all available materials and records of pupils were used. This analysis brought only a modest material for the analysis of the relationship development (e.g. identification of the phenomenon of acceptance in some cases); it was therefore necessary to look for other options.

The examined topic was further clarified through the methodical approach of **hermeneutic circle**. As a research method, hermeneutics is a method of data interpretation based on circular interpretation motion. It begins with the first basic knowledge of the text and the theme forming the background for the analysis of its individual parts.

Results of the analysis of these parts then help to better (more fully) understand the full text retrospectively (Hendl, 2008, p. 71). For the analysis we used previously collected data from the study of interaction and education processes in pupils with MD (Kantor, 2013). In total, the data included 45 semi-structured interviews with teachers, content analysis of 30 individual education plans and 30 verbal evaluations of pupils, and a transcription of 4 recordings from all-day observations of education of pupils with MD.

In this case, the hermeneutic analysis was conducted in two ways. First, we individually browsed the data whereas the insights and gradual awareness were recorded in the text (similar to “bracketing” the thoughts of the researcher). Insights and growing awareness of the content hidden behind the data were continuously consulted in the research team. These discussions were indispensable for the development of the theory as they helped conceptualise important phenomena. Important insights gained during these discussions were also recorded.

The combination of these methods resulted in the identification of three major phenomena characterizing the dynamics of the relationship development. At the beginning of the relationship development, it is the phenomenon of acceptance taking place mutually between teachers and pupils with MD. Acceptance is a prerequisite for differentiation of the content and character of individual interactions that can be described as outputs of the next phase of development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD. Learning about pupil’s interactions in different situations allows us to develop a growing understanding of the pupils’ personalities, which is reflected in the development of attitudes of teachers toward pupils (in the process of developing the relationship, the pupil’s personality gets richer with more clearly defined characteristics). Because these three phenomena occur in chronological order and are conditional on each other during the relationship development, they can be considered as phases of the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils. The method for identifying these three phenomena is shown in Tab. 1.

**Tab. 1 Method for identifying the three phenomena important for relationship development**

Phenomena	Method of identification
Acceptance	Support for the identification was found in the data itself (the teachers described the acceptance difficulties and how to overcome them).
Differentiation of interactions	The phenomenon was derived from logical analysis of the data – researchers asked about the aspects allowing the teacher to come to deeper understanding of the pupil’s personality after establishing a relationship with the pupil.
Knowledge of the pupil’s personality	This phenomenon was derived from an analysis of the outcomes of the education process. Outputs relevant to the recognition of the pupil’s personality were noticeably related to the development of the interaction process.

## 2.2 Analysis of specialized sources

The phenomena identified through retrospective analysis of case studies and hermeneutic circle could be examined based on the analysis of the sources in the literature. In specialized literature, the **phenomenon of acceptance** was closely addressed by titles aimed at the description of the pupil and strategies assisting and facilitating this process. In many cases, these titles did not have any direct relation to the examined issues but offered a description of certain important factors. For example, they pursued the importance of structuring the education programme and intervention strategies that help create contact between teachers and pupils (Čadilová and Žampachová, 2008). We also studied the psychological literature on the qualities of a good relationship in helping professions (Kopřiva, 1997) and in the ability of acceptance by the client (Rogers, 1997, etc.).

In the process of acceptance between teachers and pupils with MD, we assume the presence of various problems that may complicate this process. We also assume the existence of strategies that can encourage the process of acceptance in pupils with MD and their teachers or help remove some obstacles. Aesthetic handicaps in pupils were mentioned as a problem on the part of teachers (Vymětal, 2003). The literature also describes the difficulties on the part of pupils. For example, Vítková (2006) states that pupils with severe disability are more often than not strongly fixated on the primary caregiver, which may complicate the creation of relationships with teachers.

Regarding the **development of interactions between teachers and pupils with MD**, we found rather marginal references in the literature focusing on the education of pupils with MD (Downing, 2008 or Best, Heller and Bigge, 2010) and on communication in this group of persons (Hřebeňárová, 2013; Kamstra, Putten, Post and Vlaskamp, 2015 or Wilkens et al., 2014). Hermeneutical analysis indicated a relationship between the content of interactions and saturation of the diverse needs of pupils.

Therefore, we also studied the titles dealing with human need sat psychosocial level. The research team discussed the possibility regarding the application of individual conclusions in pupils with MD. It was found that we have only limited awareness of the content of individual interactions between teachers and pupils.

In relation to the **process of learning the personality of pupils with MD**, we analysed how the personality of pupils with MD is described in the literature. Individual topics were divided into several groups. They represented the characteristics of pupils obtained from analysis of sources concerning legislative purposes, path physiological specifics, the positive potential of pupils (Kantor, Ludíková, 2014), the psychosocial needs of pupils, the socio-cultural needs and resources based on the life stories of pupils and their families (Chvátalová, 2012). Only the characteristics regarding positive potential of pupils, socio-cultural needs and life stories of pupils provided valuable material for this part. As stated by McFerran and Rickson (2014), many professions engaged in persons with disabilities currently show a significant shift towards positive characteristics of pupils, even in case of multiple and severe disabilities. For special education, this means reconceptualization of the existing theories and the development of theories based on positive paradigm.

In this part of the research, also contributions on the **positive attitude of teachers to pupils** were inspiring. Given the serious limitations of these pupils in communication and mental functions, the relationship development can be examined on lying terms of teachers. Ayinde (2013) describes some of the useful components of unconditional positive regard for students – respect, acceptance, valuing, prizing, caring and nurturing. With respect to the focus of the research, it may be challenging to examine the positive characteristics which teachers attribute to pupils with MD, how teachers appreciate these pupils and how they express their respect towards them. When analysing the theoretical bases, we also used some other sources that were acquitted in previous studies of the interaction process. For example, these sources included the theory of form and counter-form in the interaction process (Pesso, Pesso-Boyden, Vrtbovska, 2009), the theory of the dynamics of the relationship development, the influence of transmission and counter-transmission mechanisms in the relationship process (Bruscia, 2012), etc. The synthesis of applied procedures allowed us to identify the fundamental phenomena and the theoretical bases of the research.

### **3 Methodology for analysing the relationship between teachers and pupils with multiple disabilities**

Based on the results described in the previous section, we conceptualized a methodology for deeper analysis of the different phases of the relationship development and their description. The aim of the research was to analyse the three stages of the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD. During data analysis, we determined the partial objectives of the research concerning the following questions: 1. What obstacles can come up in the acceptance of pupils by teachers? 2. What helps teachers and pupils in the mutual process of acceptance with regard to the necessity of adaptation of pupils in the school environment? 3. What are the types of interactions between teachers and pupils with MD, taking place in the education process? 4. How do teachers appreciate pupils with MD? 5. What positive characteristics in pupils with MD are perceived by teachers?

The research was conducted on 18 teachers who teach pupils with MD. Regarding the level of disability, it mainly related to pupils with severe functional impairments including physical, mental and communication disability of severe degree. For inclusion of teachers in the study sample, we determined the requirement of at least two years of experience with pupils with MD, a degree in special education (at least bachelor's degree) and the ability to adequately reflect their work. Teachers were chosen based on targeted selection, using contacts from the previous research of the authors. In all cases, these teachers teach according to the curriculum assigned to special elementary schools.

#### **3.1 Data collection methods**

For data collection, we used a combination of semi-structured interviews, analysis of the products of the education process and observations of the interaction between teachers and pupils with MD. The basic structure of the **interviews** followed the contents of the three phenomena described in the previous chapter:

- Description of the process of acceptance (difficulties of teachers in accepting pupils with MD, what helps teachers and pupils in this process ...).
- Content analysis of interactions between teachers and pupils.
- Perception of the personality of pupils with MD on the part of teachers (which positive qualities are assigned by teachers to pupils with MD, how teachers appreciate such pupils...).

**Analysis of the products** of the education process significantly contributed to the creation of the data and its triangulation in the reflexion of validity of the research findings. Teachers were only partly able to describe the content of their interactions with pupils. Therefore, we analysed the products of the education process having a certain relation to these interactions. For example, in teachers who work with creative approaches, we analysed the content of songs that they compose for their pupils, the content of improvisations in their play, creative products which they draw, the stories that they invent for them, etc. In some cases, these products had a predicative value regarding the content or quality of mutual interactions and could be analysed.

**Interactions** between teachers and pupils **were observed** during four-day stays of the researcher in classrooms where pupils with MD were educated. Observations were recorded only in the form of written notes. The intent of these participative observations was to gain insight into the education of various teachers in various classes. The form of recording was chosen due to the natural flow of interactions. In order to ensure least interference with the interactions between teachers and pupils, the researcher was actively involved in the education process. Furthermore, we obtained 40-minute videos of individual teaching of pupils with MD from two classes. These videos were recorded by the teachers themselves.

All data was converted into written form. In this phase of transcription, the data was modified for as simple an analysis as possible (stylistic finish of the sentences, etc.).

### **3.2 Methods of data analysis**

The data was analysed using interpretive content analysis that, based on predetermined selection criteria, allowed the selection of data relating to the topics and its further processing. The data was first sorted according to the respective individual phases of the relationship development (see previous section) and then clustered into categories according to the thematic content (Miovský, 2006). The categories pertaining to the relationship development process were further analysed into subcategories. This included the following spheres of categories:

- Phase of acceptance: obstacles to acceptance on the part of teachers, the supporting factors in the process of acceptance on the part of teachers / pupils.
- Phase of interactions: content analysis of interactions (groups of categories relating to the care, activation, relationship, personality of pupils, welcome, farewell and other social phrases, commenting and information).
- Phase of potential: positive characteristics of the pupil's personality, possibilities of appreciating pupils and authentic interaction as a tool to support their personality.

In the individual categories, we also searched for examples and stories of pupils from practice that were mentioned by teachers during semi-structured interviews and that document the findings of the data analysis. Results of the analysis are summarized in a visual diagram that shows the progress of the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD depending on the major categories.

## **4 Description of different phases of the relationship development**

This section describes the different phases of the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD based on the analysis of data collected during the research.

### **4.1 Phase of acceptance**

Relationship development begins with the first contact between teachers and pupils with MD. This first phase, the duration of which may vary, can be named as acceptance. It is a process that takes place on the part of the teachers as well as pupils. Obstacles (barriers) hindering this phase of relationship development may also exist on both sides. Of course, within the research, it is only possible to detect obstacles on the part of teachers. Specific examples of described barriers include aesthetic impairments of pupils (physical appearance and deformities), hyper salivation and odour (associated with incontinence, excessive sweating...), incontinence in pupils (especially in connection with change of diapers, toilets and hygienic activities related to incontinence), unpleasant vocal symptoms of pupils, other unpleasant manifestations (e.g. broken nails), obesity (associated with difficult movements of pupils) and feelings of regret.

It can be assumed that the obstacles on the part of the pupils, related to the process of acceptance, are connected with adaptation problems; in pupils with MD, however, they are very difficult to analyse. Within this process, it was also possible to identify the supporting factors. The results of the analysis of supporting factors in the phase of acceptance are shown in Tab. 2.

**Tab. 2 Supporting factors in the phase of acceptance**

	<b>Pupils with MD</b>
<b>Pupils with MD</b>	Using the individual preferences of pupils, humour and creative resources Popular communication topics (e.g. family), including photos Good structure of the education programme and the use of various rituals Positive attitude of teachers toward pupils Good social climate The presence of a primary caregiver Gradual extension of stay in school Adaptation half-hour after coming to school (without any requirements imposed on pupils)
<b>Teachers</b>	Habit Supervision or other forms of formal as well as informal support Teaching assistant Information about pupils Transfer of the pupil or teacher to another class (in exceptional cases)

An example of coping with obstacles of acceptance of pupils from the perspective of teachers is the following excerpt from an interview: *“You must have empathy for people. It is difficult but you must not mind the pupil; I know teachers who prefer to stay a metre away and the pupil feels it. ... I was originally an educator of healthy high school students and my neighbour worked in this school. I visited the school to look around two years prior to starting work here. What I saw at that time...I still get goose bumps just by thinking of it. A child without one leg, it was terrible. I believed I could never do it. In two years, suddenly, I had to change my job. My responsibility was a child in first grade and I could not do night hours. It took me six months to come around to changing the diaper. At less than 10 years age they still were children but not children for changing diapers. So I started to get used to them. When I got home, I had to take a shower first and wash it all off. Now I have no problem to go in the same clothes to exercise in the evening. I do not mind it any longer, I don't feel it. I have no problem to stroke the pupil or give the pupil a kiss. It is true that we, as employees, can be pretty barbarized but we have not become cynics. We do not mind it any longer. We don't care about wet diapers – we simply take our snacks and eat. It's already normal. If I had seen something like that before...”*

Now, the process of acceptance of the teacher by a pupil with MD will be presented based on a modified and shortened interview (the sample refers to a pupil with mental retardation and severe physical impairment): *He communicated through selecting pictures by sight, but it took a long time. Initially, he could do it only with his mother – he communicated with her only by blinking his eyes and she understood, not me. ... When communicating, I mainly stuck to the theme of family as he has wonderful family support. I started with asking about his home and presented that I would like to meet his family. We talked a lot about the family, about habits in families and here at school. Then he started to talk more. At the beginning, the initial trust was missing. For five years he had only been with his mother. I was just a foreign woman who always sent his mother away for a while...*

*At the beginning, the mother stayed with us – this was quite disturbing because she spoke for him perceiving me as a teacher. She continuously urged T.: “Quick, quick, quick!” Then I found out that when she was not present (I told her to take coffee or tea in the adjoining room, or rest her feet and do nothing for a moment), T. began to communicate. He was bored; instead of waiting without any activity, he started to respond to me. ... In such moments, the communication always related to the family – for instance, using photos from some events. His mom is very friendly; she always brings me photos on a flash disk, showing what they did. They also took pictures of their Christmas dinner, their new dog when they purchased it or of the asphalt road built in front of their house. And I would ask him what is happening in those pictures– before, I intentionally confused it. And nonsense – he is such a tease! Then I began to gammon children's cranks... Thanks to this, he always relaxed and got into the game. It really worked when I told some stupid things, when I made fun of myself and him... but not of his mother. For example, when I put on a red nose for clowns...but when I tried the same on his mother, he began to cry.*

Reaching mutual acceptance between the teacher and the pupil opens more opportunities for the development of the interaction process. Teachers evaluate the degree of their acceptance by pupils based on communication reactions (mainly nonverbal) and on the general behaviour of the pupils.

## 4.2 Phase of interactions

Further development of the relationship, herein designated as a phase of interactions, leads to deeper exploration of interactive situations and development of the relationship that allows teachers to:

- Initiate further interventions according to educational opportunities and needs of pupils;
- Approach the essential personality characteristics of pupils and their potentials which are at first usually hidden behind “a wall of visual impairments and limitations”.

A really deep understanding of the personality of pupils and their traits is possible only over time because the severity of their disabilities as well as the inability to verbally communicate with these pupils and integrate them in a common way is a strong barrier to relationship development.

Within the research, we analysed the interactions between teachers and pupils with MD at verbal and nonverbal levels. To investigate the interactions at verbal level, we used the analysis of videos of interactions from two classes and semi-structured interviews. The analysis of interactions at nonverbal level was based on the analysis of products of the education process. Given that teachers of pupils with MD often work through nonverbal means of communication, the content of interactions could be analysed based on the analysis of musical improvisations, tactile communication, lyrics to songs composed for pupils, art products created for pupils, dramatizations, etc. In every interaction on the part of the teachers toward the pupils, both verbal and nonverbal, certain purpose and message is reflected. Based on the content analysis of these messages, we can observe how the mutual relationship between teachers and pupils is changing.

After conversion into written form, the obtained data was coded and categorized using a methodical process of content analysis. The aim of this analysis was to create categories for describing the contents of interactions at verbal as well as nonverbal level, based on which it would be possible to ascertain how the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD develops. Tab. 3 shows the topics appearing in communication as evidenced by these findings. In the analysis, the categories of statements were divided into several groups according to their relation to the interaction process.

**Tab. 3 Topics in communication between teachers and pupils with severe multiple disabilities**

<b>Group:</b>	<b>Category:</b>	<b>Examples of statements:</b>
Care	Provision of care	"This song is for you." "I would be glad if you felt happy." "You can relax, you're safe." "Now I have a new melody for you."
Activation	Teaching reactions	"Wake up!" "I support your response."
	Humour	Commenting on the situation at home when the older brother disobeys.
Relationship	Expressing the relationship	"I love you." "I care about you." "I'm glad you're here." "I'm here for you." "I'm glad that I can spend time with you."
Pupil's personality	Appreciation	"You're already a big girl." "Good." "I look forward to working together." "You're beautiful."
	Respect	"I respect how you feel." "I appreciate you."
Social phrases	Welcome	"Good morning."
	Farewell	"We'll meet again tomorrow." "Have a good time."
	Other social phrases	"How are you?"
Commenting	Shared emotions	"I rejoice with you." "I'm here with you." "We're good together."
	Positive feelings of the teacher	"Today I'm fine." "I'm in a good mood." "I'm glad that I can spend time with you."
	Negative feelings of the teacher	"I am helpless because I do not know what you want." "I do not know what that means." "Today I don't have the energy for you ..."
	Instructions (commenting learning)	"We learn." "Do you understand?" "This is a task for you."
Information	Information	"What did you do at home during the weekend?" "What do you need?"

An example of products of the education process can be a song composed for a pupil with MD in the first class shortly after she started to attend school (a collective of older pupils). The pupil's name was Danielka. The teacher composed a song through which he tried to encourage her personality and self-confidence among older schoolmates (see Fig. 1). The translation of the song is as follows: *Danielka, Danielka, soon will be a big girl. From Monday till Monday, our Danielka grows. We sing together, we play together, we rejoice together.*

### 4.3 Phase of potential

The result of repeated interactions between teachers and pupils with MD is the true and deeper understanding of the pupils' personality. Research data suggests that long-term relationships allow teachers to gain very good knowledge of the personality characteristics of pupils despite extensive functional deficits in these pupils. In the research, teachers reflected on the positive and negative characteristics of the pupils, their hidden motivations, desires and needs, and their understanding of the outside world. This knowledge of each pupil is always affected by considerable degree of subjectivity. Nevertheless, the state when teachers think upon the positive image of their pupils is considered highly desirable for pedagogical practice because it supports the involvement of teachers in the education of pupils, their ability to recognize the education potential of pupils and implement meaningful and deeply satisfying interactions that are good in preventing burnouts in teachers.

The analysis of interviews allowed us to identify the positive characteristics perceived by teachers in the pupils. Teachers were asked about the positive statements which they could make about their pupils. The interviews show that pupils with severe MD, despite severe malfunctions, can behave in a way that indicates valuable emotional life and positive qualities. Tab. 4 includes categories with examples of statements. In terms of the theme of this chapter, the last category (positive characteristics) is particularly relevant.

**Tab. 4 Personal characteristics of pupils from the perspective of teachers**

Category	Statements
Motivation	Overcomes himself/herself. The desire for reward. Going for his/her goals. Passion. Comforting beloved persons with a gift. Learning new things, etc.
Negative characteristics	Misunderstood tasks, destroyed work. Impatience. Ostentation, being the centre of attention. Stubbornness. Fast fatigue, etc.
Cooperation	Looking forward to working with their teacher. Pursuing his/her goals. Striving for a good job. Looking forward to new information. Cooperative efforts. Collaborating with the promise of rewards, etc.
Capabilities	Painting. Music – a tool. Understanding spoken words. Quick adaptation to changes. Performing tasks. Trying to maintain order. Ball games. Seeking to acquire new information, etc.
Positive characteristics	Pupil is: Honest. Courageous. Open. Smiling. Takes pleasure in little things. Hardy. Snuggling. Patient. Helpful. Joyful. Has positive thinking. Tough. Inspiring. Strives for accuracy. Dear. Decent. Wishing. Tolerant. Grateful. Brave. Sensitive. Spontaneous. Authentic. Perceptive. Inquisitive. Proud. Thankful (for little things), etc.

According to the qualitative analysis of interviews and observations of interactions, the ability to recognize the positive potential of the pupil's personality can reflect in the pedagogic practice of the teachers, at least, in two ways:

- Teachers are able to appreciate the pupils and support the positive characteristics of their personality in the education process.
- Teachers can also support these characteristics through genuine interactions with pupils.

#### 4.3.1 Appreciation of pupils as means of personal growth

Appreciation of pupils with MD (especially of severe degrees) collides with low competency in most common cases because teachers particularly appreciate achievements of pupils throughout the education. During interviews, the teachers were invited to describe situations in which they appreciate pupils. They offered alternatives that can be applied in different situations. Examples include the following:

- Pupils can be praised for anything, e.g. for eating a snack.
- They can be praised although something went wrong, e.g. for their effort.

- Appreciation can also be expressed in such a way that teachers treat the pupils with respect and dignity.
- Teachers appreciate the pupils by living the joy of their success or any positive situations.
- In some cases, the teachers appreciate behaviour that the surroundings would evaluate rather negatively. For example, low adaptability can be seen as a manifestation of strong personality of the pupil who is his own man.

From the other statements, it was clear that teachers strongly tend to look for any positive characteristics in the personality of pupils. It can be expected that this will help them find situations and stimuli which they can appreciate.

#### 4.3.2 Authentic interactions as tool for supporting pupil's personality

The personality of pupils can also be developed through authentic interactions between teachers and pupils. In fact, it is the pupil as well as the teacher who learns and develops, as evidenced by the following interview with a teacher: *“In my class there is an adolescent girl named Ester with low function autism. Autistic people are generally considered to have problems expressing emotions. Ester was sometimes aggressive towards me. I searched for reasons of Ester’s aggression, what sparks it? After several episodes of aggressive incidents, I realized that it happens in the following type of situation. I once came to the classroom in the morning and felt unhappy. I tried to laugh with the students and mask my emotions despite the way I really felt. Ester was aggressive that morning again. I realized Ester was very sensitive to my real emotions and my hiding and masking them was confusing to her. I tried to be authentic in my communication and the next time I was sad I told Ester I was unhappy and why. Ester reacted in an unexpected way. She embraced me and tried to console me.”*

Teachers consider the possibility of personal development as an important contribution to their work. The semi-structured interviews show that the education of pupils with MD:

- allows teachers to be themselves (because of strong authenticity and spontaneity of pupils, they do not have to dissemble and to control their emotions);
- supports the development of their own creativity and playfulness (finding innovative ways of teaching these pupils);
- supports their patience, humility and other personally valuable characteristics, and
- Teachers feel good when they are with pupils.

The results of this long-term relational process are the actual valuable outputs of education of pupils with MD. In this paper, due to methodological limitations; we are primarily dealing with the outputs on the part of teachers. Outputs on the part of pupils in this area are difficult to detect and analyse. However, we believe that these outputs, in a certain way, also occur on the part of pupils with MD although they will not be so differentiated due to impaired mental functions of the pupils.

## 5 Discussion

The study identified three phases of the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD – the phases of acceptance, interactions and the potential of pupils’ personality. For each phase, it provided characteristics based on analysis of important categories. In the phase of acceptance, we presented barriers to acceptance on the part of teachers, the factors supporting the acceptance of teachers by pupils and factors supporting the acceptance of pupils by teachers. In the phase of interactions, we analysed the content of individual interactions. Basic groups related to care, activation, relationship, pupil’s personality, welcome, farewell and other social phrases, commenting and providing information. In the phase of potential, we analysed the positive personality traits of pupils, the ways of appreciating pupils and the importance of authentic interactions from the perspective of teachers. Data synthesis enabled us to create a visual diagram to describe the phases of the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD, as shown in Fig. 2.

The resulting theory describes the process of the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD based on the statements of teachers because the data from pupils with MD cannot be obtained directly. Researchers have tried to include the personality of pupils as well as the potential impact of interactions on their personality by:

- Including pupils with MD and their responses in to observations during data collection (however, these reactions usually only refer to emotional satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and do not allow us to penetrate deeper into the thoughts, feelings and motivations of pupils).

- Emphasizing the stories of pupils with MD and teachers, in which teachers focused on the impact of social experience of pupils and their personality.

Nevertheless, the resulting theory reveals that it is constructed on the basis of the experience and perceptions of teachers, not pupils. This fact obviously limits the validity of the entire research. On the other hand, it is also necessary to consider the fact that the resulting theory is primarily designed for teachers with the aim of helping them teach better and create meaningful relationships with pupils, and providing topics for reflection on relationship development. From this perspective, the theory provides suggestive stimuli for teaching practice.

### **5.1 Reflection on research validity**

The validity of the research was examined in several ways, which involved triangulation of data sources, reflection on data saturation and reflection on the roles of researchers, their impartiality and criticism.

**Triangulation of data sources** was carried out by comparing the data from various sources to verify congruence. Data with low congruence was excluded from the analysis.

**Data saturation** is "one of the key procedures in which we deliberately collect more and more data on the examined phenomenon until the new data provides new insights, expands the interpretation basis and complements the already formed construction with something new" (Miovský, 2009, p. 266-267). During the research, we worked with data where the quantity (e.g. the number of semi-structured interviews) corresponds with the general qualitative studies. Nevertheless, it is possible that additional data could reveal new insights into the issues examined. Lower data saturation in some spheres was also caused by methodological problems, which are described in various sections of the study (low ability to reflect the content of interactions by teachers, inability to gain the statements of pupils, etc.).

A substantial part of the research, which could affect the results obtained, was the way of movement of researchers in the field and their personal relationship to the issue in question. In this respect, we used reflection based on a scheme of **four roles of the researcher**, which are described by Švaříček and Šedová (2007) as roles of an alien, a visitor, a native and the informed. When collecting data, the researchers mainly acted in the role of the informed or a visitor, depending on previous knowledge of the respective institution and their relationships with teachers. These roles enable easier access to data (particularly to videos of interactions between teachers and pupils, and products of the education process). They also helped create the trust of teachers necessary for the implementation of semi-structured interviews. Certain risks were posed by past experience with institutions and teachers, which could affect the process of creating research data, as well as by the work experience of some team members with pupils with MD (criteria of impartiality and criticism). These risks were eliminated through discussions on research progress and on the resulting data within the research team. The researchers admit that they primarily focused on the positive aspects of relationship development in the course of data collection and analysis as they consider them relevant with regard to the objectives of the research.

### **5.2 Applicability of research findings**

During the study, we envisaged the use of research results at the following levels:

- Completion of the theory of interactions between teachers and pupils with MD with regard to already existing models, allowing us to consider the interactions with pupils with MD as a self-contained process that takes place not only at a particular moment but also over a long period of time.
- Implementation of selected parts of the theory into teaching practice as particular tools for supporting teachers as well as pupils with MD. The diagram of the relationship development can be a model applicable in supervising the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD or in other forms of professional support for teachers (e.g. due to the fact that the model includes different supporting factors).
- Training of undergraduate students of special education – it is important for the students what idea about the competence of pupils they acquire. Given that the model presents the pupils with MD as competent beings (despite extensive functional limitations), it reinforces the perception of their educational opportunities.

## 6 Conclusions

The paper analysed the development of the relationship between teachers and pupils with MD. Based on the identification of several important phenomena, relationship development was divided into the phases of acceptance, interactions and the potential of the pupil's personality. These phases were further analysed and characterized. The analysis provided data on the obstacles to acceptance (on the part of teachers), the supporting factors of the process of acceptance, the content of emerging interactions, the positive characteristics of the pupils, and the possibilities of their validation and development through authentic interactions. Research findings were discussed in relation to the development of special education theory and the implementation of the conclusions into teaching practice and training of students in undergraduate education programmes of special pedagogy.

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- Grant support: IGA\_PdF\_2016\_013 (Faktory ovlivňující kvalitu života osob se speciálními potřebami)

### Song for Danielka

Da - ni - el - ka, Da - ni - el - ka bu - de br - zy hol - ka vel - ká.  
 Od pon - děl - ka, do pon - děl - ka ros - te na - še Da - ni - el - ka.  
 Spo - leč - ně z pí - vá - me, spo - leč - ně hra - je - me, spo - leč - ně ra - du - jem se.  
 Da - ni - el - ka, Da - ni - el - ka bu - de br - zy hol - ka vel - ká.

Fig. 1 Song for Danielka – notation

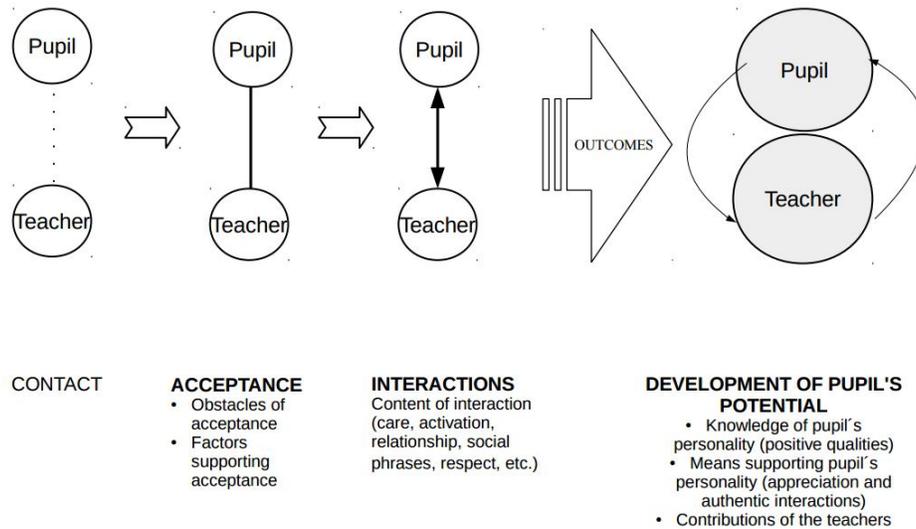


Fig. 2 Diagram of the teacher –pupil's relationship development (with important categories of analysis)