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## **Preschool Teachers' Perception of the Effect between the Principal's Support, Quality of Interpersonal Relationships and Loyalty of Employees in Preschool Institutions**

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### **Abstract**

Principal's support is an unquestionable component of preschool institutions, especially in the development of interpersonal relationships, which have to be the foundation for building cooperative culture, learning communities and caring environments where the youngest generations grow and learn. Numerous researchers have examined the issue of the principal's support in attaining the success of preschool institutions, satisfaction of employees and the growth of professional communities. However, there is little research into the significance of the principal's support for quality interpersonal relationships in preschool institutions, especially in Croatia. Therefore, this research focused on the correlation between the support from principals and the quality of interpersonal relationships and employees' loyalty. The aim of the research was to examine the effect between the principal's support, the quality of interpersonal relationships and the loyalty of employees through the perception of pre-school educators in Croatia. The research was conducted on a sample of 332 preschool educators in the Republic of Croatia. The following scales were used: The principal Support Scale, School Loyalty Scale and Faculty Survey, which were modified for this study. Using SEM, a partial mediation model (no recursive model) was confirmed. The effect of the mediation variable loyalty to the institution in the relationship between the principal's support and the quality of interpersonal relationships was proven. The partial mediation model in SEM indicates that the principal's support through employees' loyalty to the kindergarten has a positive effect on the quality of interpersonal relationships.

**Keywords:** principal's support, devotion to kindergarten, quality of interpersonal relationships, preschool educators.

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## **1. Introduction**

The quality of a preschool institution's work greatly depends on interpersonal relationships, mutual synergy of its dynamics and on the support provided by the principal. The key role of the preschool institution's principal is to secure continuous professional education, quality working conditions and develop beneficial interpersonal relationships. Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms (2011) have found that the success of educational institutions is not achieved by employees or principals alone, but is achieved through harmonious and joint functioning of all the stakeholders within institutions. Numerous researchers (Branch et al., 2013, Simkin et al., 2010, Terek et al., 2015) whose research was focused on examining the correlation between interpersonal relationships and students' school achievement found that institutions where principals create a positive working environment are more successful than those where such cooperation is lacking. Hull (2012) stressed that the support from the principal as key in attaining the prosperity of educational institutions. Hull (2012) stressed that encouraging cooperation between all employees, providing constructive feedback, monitoring the work and joint evaluation, and developing incentive atmosphere are key characteristics for the development of quality interpersonal relationships. Institutions with such atmosphere will surely accommodate for full development of each of its stakeholders. Leithwood (1994) suggested that principals with a clear sense of direction have the greatest influence on their employees and in achieving success regarding overall functioning of the institution. If principals encourage mutual understanding of the institution with its goals and activities, this becomes the foundation for creating the sense of purpose or vision. Building a joint vision and achieving a common goal help raise the awareness of employees about the goal and purpose of their functioning and work, which in turn helps them to create their own personal, whereby also, collective identity. Principals who strive for a positive atmosphere develop a supportive organisational structure where all stakeholders have the opportunity to express their opinion, integrate changes and, in doing so, positively influence the culture of the institution. Barnett and McCormick (2004) have found in their research a positive correlation between the principal's leadership style and school culture.

The concept of culture helps people in creating new ways of learning, with the imperative of sustainable reforms (Fullan, 2005). Regarding the success of educational reforms, the same researcher (Fullan, 2007; Fullan, 2010, as cited in Kokanović, 2021) accentuated the significance of cooperative communities and accentuates the principal's role in developing the professional cooperative community. If the principal secures adequate conditions and support for cooperation with external stakeholders, and applies desired strategies for empowering cooperation, the quality of cooperative relationships within the institution will rise accordingly. Positive working environment or atmosphere is a predictor of successful functioning and growth of interpersonal relationships within the preschool institution. Positive atmosphere is characterised by humane relationships and mutual trust of employees within institutions. Brust Nemet and Velki (2016) stated that atmosphere is a significant factor influencing the development of pedagogic qualities and self-confidence of education workers, the quality of their work and interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2007) underlined that negative atmosphere decreases the sense of self-efficacy in preschool teachers, and it is characterised by overload, lack of work recognition, low salaries, poor interpersonal relationships, professional isolation, insecurity and estrangement. In line with the stated, every aware and competent principal strives for the development of positive atmosphere and quality interpersonal relationships in order for the preschool institution to function successfully.

Prosperous preschool institution is characterised by participation of all stakeholders, them taking part in decision-making, sharing responsibilities, collegiate relationships and devoted work and loyalty. Such institutions actively reflect upon and change educational practices in accordance with development and needs of their employees and in such a way become productive and efficient. Already in the nineties of last century, Levine and Lezotte (1990) pointed out that a productive and successful institution is characterised by its employees' devotion and their directedness toward realising a common goal, constructive problem solving, cohesion and cooperation, team work, mutually appreciative communication, joint decision making and recognising achievement and promotion in the work. Fullan and Quinn (2016) stressed that the power of a group can also be misdirected, because coming together without collective reflection can be a big waste of time. People need time to process, think about and integrate different sources of information on their competence (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, collective efficacy of preschool teachers does not happen

overnight, which denotes some limits of this research. Only after high efficacy expectations are developed, through repeated success, can we reduce the (probable) negative effect of preschool teachers' failure (Bandura, 1977). Kindergartens must therefore implement and motivate collective efficacies by prioritising at the very beginning of the school year, if they want to reap the benefits. Not only that the awareness of elasticity is required but coordination is also demanded, and significant efforts need to be invested in order to start a change (Donohoo, 2017).

Loyalty to an institution has found its way into the focus of many studies because it is considered a significant predictor of positive working environment, work ethics and work results (Luchak, Gellatly, 2007; Meyer et al., 2012). Kristof-Brown and Guay (2011) stated that employees who manifest loyalty to their institution are more motivated, more satisfied with their job and more dedicated to work, whereby more efficient. Individuals express their loyalty and devotion to an institution and/or persons alongside who they feel personal growth, development and belonging Meyer and Allen (1991) describe loyalty as a psychological state with at least three separate components, i.e. desire (affective loyalty), need (instrumental loyalty) and obligation to keep job in the organisation (normative loyalty). Meyer and Allen (1991) claim that affective loyalty is manifested as the feeling of dedication and preoccupation with the institution one works at. Instrumental loyalty ensues from the awareness about the consequences of abandoning the workplace, while normative loyalty is founded in the obligation to stay in the workplace. Individuals with pronounced normative loyalty remain faithful to the workplace and their organisations because they feel it is morally the right thing to do.

Despite ubiquitous awareness about the significance of quality interpersonal relationships acting as a predictor of successful functioning of institutions, numerous studies in the world and also in Croatia still show that the lack of support from principals, which mostly results in negative atmosphere, poor interpersonal relationships, whereby also the stagnation and decrease of overall institution's quality. Furthermore, greater number of studies heretofore examined school principals, so this research focused on the principals of preschool institutions in Croatia. In line with this fact, the present research focused on examining preschool teachers' perceptions of the effect of the principal's support on the quality of interpersonal relationships, and determining the mediating role of loyalty to the institution as a mediating variable. Numerous researchers (Admiraal et al., 2016; Vanblaere, Devos, 2016; Walker, Hallinger, 2016) have pointed out to indispensable principal's support when dealing with professional development of employees and cooperative learning. Furthermore, the research on work motivation of preschool teachers stresses that institutions with principals who support their psychological needs positively affect motivation, welfare and efficiency of their employees (Kovjanic et al., 2013, Van den Broeck et al., 2016). The results of research by Ebersold et al. (2019) show that satisfying the need for autonomy amongst employees acts as mediator between the principal's support and autonomy and life satisfaction of employees. Hence, longitudinal analyses of successful restructuring of educational institutions point out that the characteristics of human resources such as openness to professional education, trust and respect, knowledge and skills, supportive leadership and socialisation are more important for the development of professional communities than structural conditions. The need for the improvement of culture, climate and interpersonal relationships in kindergartens is not getting enough attention (Kruse, Louis, 1994; Louis, Kruse, 1995; Newmann, Associates, 1996) Interpersonal relationships of employees is a significant link in creating adequate climate for efficient processes where one cannot forget loyalty, as one of the determinants of propelling desired changes. In short, the increasing number of case studies directs our attention to interesting but unattainable idea of social trust, as an important component of meaningful growth of educational institutions. In line with this, the present research sought to examine the mediating role of loyalty to the institution in the effect between the principal's support and the quality of interpersonal relationships due to lack of research on this construct in the mentioned relationship.

This research sought to answer the following questions:

- Is there a direct effect of the principal's support on the quality of interpersonal relationships?
- Does the employees' loyalty act as a mediation variable in the correlation between the principal's support and interpersonal relationships?

In accordance with the research questions, the following hypotheses were set:

H1: It is assumed that the principal's support has a direct effect on the quality of interpersonal relationships.

H2: Loyalty of employees is expected to act as a mediation variable in the correlation between the principal's support and the quality of interpersonal relationships. The assumption is that employees' loyalty acts as a mediator, that is, the principal's support influences the quality of interpersonal relationships via preschool teachers' loyalty.

## **2. Methodology**

In this research, univariate and multivariate quantitative approach was utilised, which included descriptive and inferential statistics. Data collection was carried out among pre-school teachers through a questionnaire, and was carried out during May and June 2022, in online form. The survey questionnaire was sent electronically to principal's or representatives of educational associations in Croatia, after which a link with the survey questionnaire was sent to educators.

### **Sample**

The research was conducted in Croatia on a random sample of preschool teachers in preschool institutions (N = 332). At its very beginning, the questionnaire provided information on the research aim, and the participants filled it out voluntarily and anonymously. In addition, they could give up on filling out the questionnaire at any given moment. The interview lasted 15 minutes. Most participants were female (N = 329). Distribution of the participants with regard to age was the following: younger than 30 years (N = 58), 31-40 years (N = 108), 41-50 years (N = 111), 51-60 years (N = 40), and older than 60 (N = 15). Considering the participants' years in service, 111 of them had 10 years of experience, 124 had 11-20 years in service, 61 had 21-30 and 36 participants had more than 30 years of work experience. The link with the questionnaires was sent to principals who shared it with preschool teachers and their groups and associations, also via the link.

### **Instrument and Procedures**

The following scales were used to collect the data: Principal's Support Scale; Preschool Loyalty Scale (Meyer et al., 1993) and Faculty Survey (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, 2003). The mentioned scales were adapted to this research.

Principal's Support Scale includes 16 items on four subscales: PS-professional support (*"He/she encourages my professional growth and development."*), ES-emotional support (*"He/she supports my decisions."*), ES-evaluation support (*"He/she gives me suggestions for improving my work."*), IS-instrumental support (*"He/she allows free days for professional education."*). The participants expressed the degree of agreement with the claims on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1-*I completely disagree* to 5-*I completely agree*. The scale's reliability was tested with internal consistency method according to Cronbach's Alpha model ( $\alpha = .776$ ).

Preschool Loyalty Scale includes 24 items on three subscales: AL-affective loyalty (*"Kindergarten I work in has a special meaning for me."*), IL-instrumental loyalty (*"If I left my job in this kindergarten now, many things would change in my life."*), NL-normative loyalty (*"Even if I got a better job offer, I would not leave this kindergarten."*). The participants expressed the degree of agreement with the claims on a Likert scale in range from 1-*I completely disagree* to 5-*I completely agree*. The reliability of the scale was tested via internal consistency method according to the Cronbach's Alpha model ( $\alpha = .756$ ).

Interpersonal Relationships Quality Scale includes 20 items distributed on three subscales: TC-trust in colleagues (*"Preschool teachers in our kindergarten do their work well."*), TPR-trust in the principal (*"Our kindergarten's principal is competent in his/her work."*), TPA-trust in parents (*"Preschool teachers in our kindergarten trust the parents."*). As on other scales, participants expressed the degree of their agreement with the claims in range from 1-*I completely disagree* to 5-*I completely agree*. The scale's reliability was tested via internal consistency method according to the Cronbach's Alpha model ( $\alpha = .927$ ).

## **3. Results**

Multivariate inferential statistics approach, i.e. SEM (structural equation modelling) was used to test the hypotheses. Before testing the hypotheses, descriptive statistics of the scale were presented.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics

		Statistic	Std. Error	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>		95 % Confidence Interval	
				Bias	SD	Lower	Upper
Affective loyalty	N	332		0	0	332	332
	Min	1,75					
	Max	5,00					
	<b>M</b>	<b>3,8581</b>	,03315	,0005	,0334	3,7914	3,9239
	<b>SD</b>	<b>,60402</b>		-,00035	,02544	,55603	,65395
	Skewness	-,627	,134	,009	,123	-,867	-,384
	Kurtosis	,296	,267	-,032	,334	-,349	1,006
Instrumental loyalty	N	332		0	0	332	332
	Min	1,25					
	Max	5,00					
	<b>M</b>	<b>3,1736</b>	,03510	-,0001	,0340	3,1118	3,2443
	<b>SD</b>	<b>,63948</b>		-,00126	,02517	,58939	,68844
	Skewness	-,170	,134	-,001	,119	-,405	,055
	Kurtosis	-,026	,267	-,015	,220	-,438	,400
Normative loyalty	N	332		0	0	332	332
	Min	1,00					
	Max	4,00					
	<b>M</b>	<b>2,8189</b>	,02576	-,0006	,0255	2,7681	2,8663
	<b>SD</b>	<b>,46943</b>		-,00021	,02142	,42762	,51334
	Skewness	-,515	,134	,018	,175	-,828	-,159
	Kurtosis	,854	,267	-,060	,512	-,154	1,789
Interpersonal Relationships Quality	N	332		0	0	332	332
	Min	1,55					
	Max	5,00					
	<b>M</b>	<b>3,4023</b>	,03788	-,0014	,0389	3,3214	3,4733
	<b>SD</b>	<b>,69018</b>		-,00025	,02455	,64192	,73584
	Skewness	-,283	,134	,001	,094	-,459	-,091
	Kurtosis	-,329	,267	,000	,155	-,608	-,002
Professional support	N	332		0	0	332	332
	Min	1,00					
	Max	5,00					
	<b>M</b>	<b>3,8441</b>	,06019	-,0031	,0627	3,7131	3,9563
	<b>SD</b>	<b>1,09671</b>		,00141	,04287	1,01569	1,18163
	Skewness	-,889	,134	,004	,096	-1,085	-,695
	Kurtosis	-,010	,267	-,005	,247	-,474	,505
Emotional support	N	332		0	0	332	332
	Min	1,00					
	Max	5,00					
	<b>M</b>	<b>3,6800</b>	,06410	-,0038	,0661	3,5498	3,8020
	<b>SD</b>	<b>1,16800</b>		,00111	,04370	1,07927	1,25335
	Skewness	-,786	,134	,004	,085	-,949	-,610
	Kurtosis	-,294	,267	-,001	,210	-,690	,156
Evaluation support	N	332		0	0	332	332
	Min	1,00					
	Max	5,00					
	<b>M</b>	<b>3,1845</b>	,06973	-,0019	,0722	3,0475	3,3252
	<b>SD</b>	<b>1,27062</b>		-,00106	,03373	1,20015	1,33053
	Skewness	-,263	,134	,003	,080	-,419	-,102

	Kurtosis	-1,088	,267	,006	,097	-1,247	-,869
Instrumental support	N	332		0	0	332	332
	Min	1,00					
	Max	5,00					
	M	3,4315	,06066	-,0017	,0631	3,3027	3,5550
	SD	1,10530		,00020	,03542	1,03589	1,17711
	Skewness	-,413	,134	,000	,080	-,571	-,260
	Kurtosis	-,633	,267	,002	,136	-,883	-,334
Valid N (listwise)	N	332		0	0	332	332

a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples

In all subscales, mild left skewness of the distribution can be observed, in accordance with the increased values of MCT. Furthermore, sampling distributions vary from mostly mild kurtosis to mild leptokurtosis. All descriptive statistics are given in the bootstrapping (resampling) model which shows low values of standard deviations and bias, implicating reliable statistical parameters, i.e. estimated population values. The greatest arithmetic mean for the Preschool Loyalty Scale was obtained for affective loyalty subscale (M = 3.85; SD = 0.604), whereas the lowest assessments are visible on the normative loyalty subscale (M = 2.81; SD = 0.469). When examining loyalties, Cohen (2009) determined that affective loyalty increases when institutional climate provides employees with a chance to show and confirm their values, while Gellatly et al. (2006) underline loyalty as a positive predictor of work quality and responsibility of employees in relation to the institution. Considering higher assessments on the subscale of affective loyalty, which reflects devotion to the institution and desire for its development, and significantly lower assessments of normative loyalty, which encompasses the obligation to keep working due to existential issues, it can be concluded that institutions in which the research was implemented are on the verge of positive development and increase of their quality. On the Interpersonal Relationships Quality Scale, participants gave moderate assessments (M = 3.40; SD = 0.690), while on the Principal's Support Scale the highest assessments are given on the professional support subscale (M = 3.84; SD = 1.09), and the lowest are ascribed to the principal's support to evaluating their work and institution (M = 3.18; SD = 1.27).

To test the hypothesis, structural equation modelling in the bootstrap model was used. Figure 1 presents the direct effect of the principal's support on the quality of interpersonal relationships.

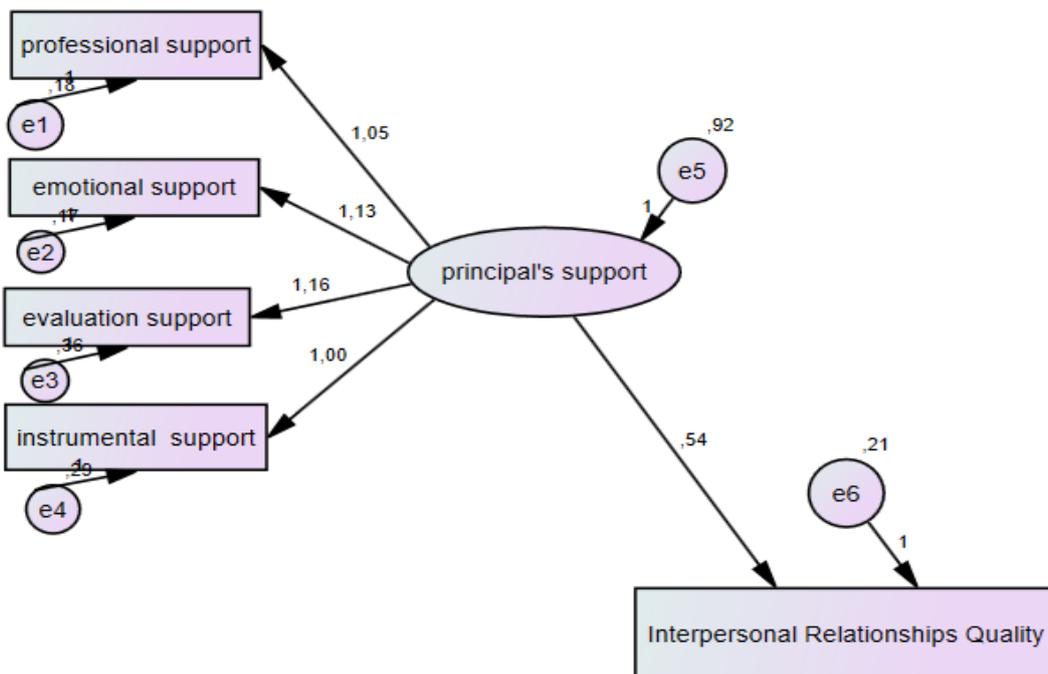


Fig. 1. The model of direct effect – unstandardized regression coefficients

The fit indices of the model of the effect of principal's support on the quality of interpersonal relationships are satisfactory: P CMIN/df = 2.977; NFI = 0.990; RFI = 0.981; IFI = 0.994; TLI = 0.987; CFI = 0.994; RMSEA = 0.077, PCLOSE = 1.33. Beta values and the levels of statistical significance ( $\beta = 0.54$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ) show that greater support from the principal effects better quality of interpersonal relationships. Autocorrelation in the residuals is not determined (Durbin Watson = 1,827) and collinearity also is not present ( $VIF_{\text{professional support}} = 4,930$ ; Tolerance = 0,277;  $VIF_{\text{emotional support}} = 5,410$ ; Tolerance = 0,185;  $VIF_{\text{evaluation support}} = 3,792$ , Tolerance = 0,264;  $VIF_{\text{instrumental support}} = 3,609$ , Tolerance = 0,277. This confirms H1. The correlation matrix is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Correlations matrix

		Professional support	Emotional support	Evaluation support	Instrumental support	Interpersonal Relationship Quality
Professional support	Pearson Correlation	1	,876**	,799**	,793**	,693**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332
Emotional support	Pearson Correlation	,876**	1	,816**	,805**	,688**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000		,000	,000	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332
Evaluation support	Pearson Correlation	,799**	,816**	1	,801**	,664**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000		,000	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332
Instrumental support	Pearson Correlation	,793**	,805**	,801**	1	,657**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000		,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332
Interpersonal Relationship Quality	Pearson Correlation	,693**	,688**	,664**	,657**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	
	N	332	332	332	332	332

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 2 presents the model of the mediating role of loyalty to a kindergarten in the correlation between the principal's support and quality of interpersonal relationships.

The fit indices of the mediation model are: NFI = 0.962; RFI = 0.940; IFI = 0.971; TLI = 0.955; CFI = 0.971; RMSEA = 0.092, PCLOSE = 0.002. Fit indices are satisfactory, except RMSEA, so conclusions on the model's fitness should be given with caution. To test the mediating effect, Monte Carlo bootstrapping was applied (bias-corrected percentile method 2000 samples; confidence interval of 90). It is obviously that partial mediation took place since, after the introduction of the mediating variable, direct influence of exogenous on endogenous variables was still statistically significant ( $p = 0.001$ ), with indirect effect confirmed ( $p = 0.001$ ). Hence, the conclusion arises on the direct effect of the principal's support on the quality of interpersonal relationships, but also on the indirect effect of principal's support by mediation of employees' loyalty. Autocorrelation in the residuals is not determined (Durbin Watson = 1,824) and collinearity also is not present ( $VIF = 1,130-5,739$ ; Tolerance = 0,174-0,885). This confirms H2. The correlation matrix is shown in Table 3.

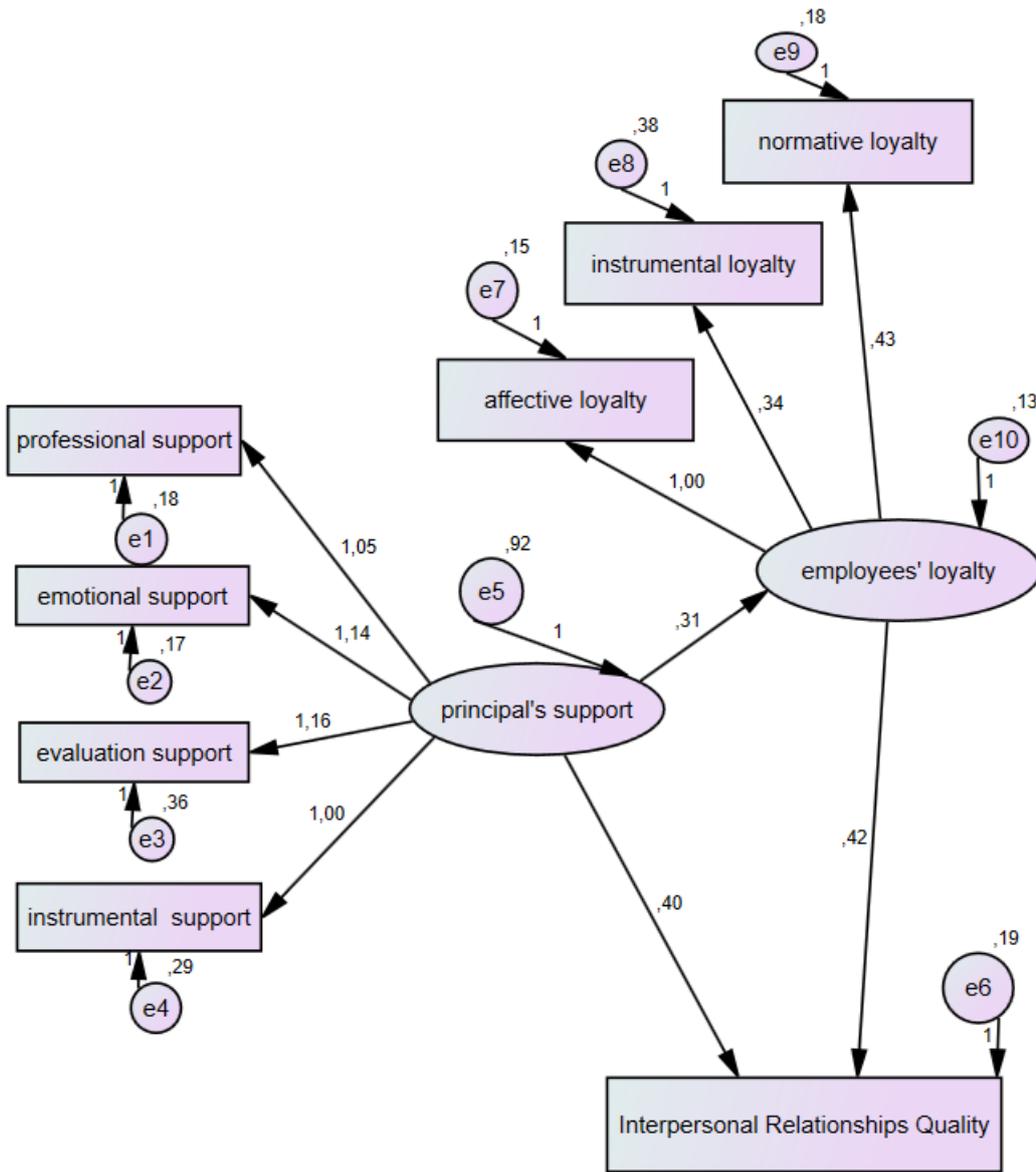


Fig. 2. Mediation model – unstandardised regression coefficients

Table 3. Correlations matrix

		Professional support	Emotional support	Evaluation support	Instrumental support	Affective loyalty	Instrumental loyalty	Normative loyalty	Interpersonal relationship quality
Professional support	Pearson Correlation	1	,876**	,799**	,793**	,439**	,072	,217**	,693**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,000	,000	,000	,188	,000	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332	332
Emotional support	Pearson Correlation	,876**	1	,816**	,805**	,508**	,078	,234**	,688**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000		,000	,000	,000	,158	,000	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332	332
Evaluation support	Pearson Correlation	,799**	,816**	1	,801**	,435**	,107	,330**	,664**
	N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332	332

	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,050	,000	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332
Instrumental support	Pearson Correlation	,793**	,805**	,801**	1	,442**	,098	,252**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000		,000	,073	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332
Affective loyalty	Pearson Correlation	,439**	,508**	,435**	,442**	1	,173**	,310**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000		,002	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332
Instrumental loyalty	Pearson Correlation	,072	,078	,107	,098	,173**	1	,327**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,188	,158	,050	,073	,002		,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332
Normative loyalty	Pearson Correlation	,217**	,234**	,330**	,252**	,310**	,327**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332
Interpersonal relationship quality	Pearson Correlation	,693**	,688**	,664**	,657**	,513**	,103	,258**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,060	,000
	N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

#### 4. Discussion

This research sought to gain insight into the preschool teachers' perception of the effect between the principal's support and the quality of interpersonal relationships and ascertain whether the loyalty of employees acts as a mediation variable in the mentioned correlation. The research results point to efficiency of principal's support in the development of quality interpersonal relationships with the mediation of employees' loyalty to a preschool institution. As a significant predictor of interpersonal relationships, loyalty should be developed and nurtured in individuals in order to strengthen cooperative relations, create healthy synergy in the institution and, finally, empower the overall institution. Similar results were obtained Kelly et al. (2005) in their research on the relationship between leadership styles and school atmosphere, wherein teachers positively assessed leadership and school atmosphere if principals showed consistency in their behaviours toward employees. Sorić et al. (2021) researched principals' burnout and concluded that the principal's support to the autonomy of employees leads to maintaining positive school climate. Their research shows that the greater the support from principals for their employees, the greater the support they themselves receive and, on the other hand, the lesser the burnout. Considering the field of the principal's work and the encompassed work tasks, the support for employees very frequently fails precisely for this reason, which firstly results in burnout and lack of support for employees in principals, and consequently in employees themselves. This is particularly noticeable in large institutions with even more than a hundred employees. This thesis was confirmed by Ozer's research (2013) which found that the principal's workload is significantly greater in large institutions, which consequently influences the climate, work motivation and overall quality. Park, et al. (2019) found in their research that support from principals positively influences learning communities and collective responsibility, which in return effects greater student achievement. Park et al. (2019) suggest that principals should pay more attention to supportive leadership, which can contribute to positive working atmosphere. A research by Adams, et al. (2017) on the principal's support to employees' autonomy and competence development, through students' perception, found great differences between schools where principals support teachers in developing positive atmosphere and care for the needs of their students in comparison to the schools where principals do not provide this type of support. In conclusion, the authors stress that students perceive principals who contribute to positive learning environments more positively, and they consider such environment supportive of autonomy and competence development. It is evident from the aforementioned that research on the principal's support has mostly been focused on schools, so these results can be considered significant for empowering preschool institutions as cooperative communities. On the other hand, a space is opened for future research on the specificities of cultural contexts in which each institution exists, providing a clearer

insight into the way interpersonal relationship function, since they are a complex but significant factor of pre-school institutions.

### **5. Limitations and conclusions**

The results obtained in this research place accent on three significant components together (support, loyalty and quality interpersonal relationships) because they are inextricably linked in the preschool institution's functioning, that is, if any of them is decreased or lacking, the institution will not realize its full potential. The aim was to determine the correlation of the stated constructs, that is, to gain insight, from the preschool teacher's perspective, into the role of the principal's support in the development of quality interpersonal relationships and ascertain the mediation role of employees' loyalty. Structural equation modeling confirmed the direct effect of the principal's support on the quality of interpersonal relationships. Moreover, since statistical significance was still observable after the introduction of employees' loyalty as a mediation variable, it can be claimed that partial mediation took place, which confirms both set hypotheses. The results can be an indicator of what needs to be improved in order to achieve high-quality interpersonal relationships, which are a highly significant segment of the preschool institution's functioning. It can be inferred that complex and multidimensional systems such as preschool institutions require active participation of all key stakeholders, wherein the principal's support is especially important. Although the opinion of preschool teachers is significant, since they are the bearers of preschool institutions, a relatively small sample size can be regarded as a limitation of this study. Furthermore, the application of an exclusively quantitative approach can also be considered a limitation, considering that the entire functioning of a preschool institution is best investigated with a qualitative approach or a mixed approach. It would be desirable, apart from a larger sample, to cover a wider geographical area with the research. The subject of this research should also be examined from the perspective of principals, and within a longer time frame, wherein the development of institutions themselves would be investigated. Understanding the dynamics or leadership based of relationships requires a more in-depth and more quality approach, so this issue opens up a space for new research. In line with the stated, the implementation of qualitative monitoring and data collection methods, an in-depth analysis of all educational segments and opinions of all employees. In order for principals to secure constant support for their employees, they need to receive the same. As stated in this work, through the review of many studies, lack of support from the principal leads to decrease of work motivation, burnout and, with that, the drop in the quality of both interpersonal relationships and the preschool institution's functioning.

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