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Insights into Teachers' Perceptions of Children
Primary school teachers' views on children as reflected in the
narratives of their careers

PhD Thesis Extract

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1. Rationale for the Choice of Topic and Purpose of the Research

The idea for my choice of topic dates back to my time in the master's program in Education at ELTE PPK [TN: Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Education and Psychology]. During my first year as a student, I had the opportunity to intern at a kindergarten where a teacher, who had taught me 20 years ago, was working. While dressing one child, he sighed and said: *"These kids today... how different you were."* This encounter sparked my interest in the subject of the history of childhood and prompted me to explore how teachers nearing the end of their careers perceive children, and how their views evolve throughout their professional journey.

My Master of Education thesis focused on a related topic – *Hurried Children. Changing perceptions of children through the eyes of teachers*. In this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with five kindergarten teachers and five primary school teachers. Inspired by the insights of a teacher cited below, I decided to further explore this topic and develop it into the subject of my PhD dissertation: *"Thirty years ago, children were like an island of peace, so cosy, so intimate, so unclouded. Children these days are like a bag of fleas, very interested, curious, always in need of stimulation, of attention, of a hold, of an adult's presence. They are a little bit like a perpetual motion machine, and then, when the fruits of our labour come to fruition, when the rhythm is established, they can become an island of peace, and then the days can be just as magical, just as intimate as they used to be. Yet a child now is so different (Molnár 2016:72)."*

The motivation behind selecting the topic "Insights into Teachers' Perceptions of Children" stemmed from my desire to research a topic of broad interest, and to shed new light on it using narrative interview methodology.

The aim of my research is to understand how retiring teachers in today's Hungarian society perceive children and childhood. The single research question formulated for this purpose is: *How do the interviewed Hungarian primary teachers think about children at the end of their professional careers?*

To achieve a comprehensive presentation of the topic *Insights into Teachers' Perceptions of Children. Primary school teachers' views of children as reflected in the narratives of their careers*, I will provide an extensive literature review and analyse the emerging patterns from the interview transcripts using narrative analysis. Understanding and exploring teachers' perceptions of children can provide significant benefits to

pedagogy and serve as a catalyst for rethinking the current Hungarian educational system. It can also contribute to formulating the issues affecting the contemporary domestic education system.

2. The Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical and conceptual frameworks serve to ground and interpret my research. The theoretical framework is linked to my research exploring teachers' views along three dimensions:

In order to understand the perception of children by the teachers interviewed, we must first look at the teacher from a distance and explore and see the political-socio-economic processes that have influenced the way teachers have been operating in recent decades. The first dimension - the *Political-economic-social context and educational history* - concerns the political-economic-social context of the 20 teachers interviewed, including the educational policies of the period and the specificities of teacher education.

The second dimension - *Childhood as a social construct* - relates to the ways in which childhood is interpreted, particularly given that the focus of my research is on teachers' views of children. I will look at normative interpretations of the child such as the model of the naturally developing child and the socialising child, the image of the innocent child, childhood as a cultural moratorium and the death of childhood. Presenting these helps in understanding and interpreting what was said in the interview (*Golnhofer and Szabolcs 2005*).

The new sociological research on childhood brings a new way of looking at children, which also has implications for pedagogy. The theoretical framework of my research is the interpretation of childhood as a social construct, which allows room for plural conceptions of childhood. A child's life is shaped as much by the cultural environment in which he or she lives as by his or her biological traits. This interpretation envisages the child not as a future adult, but as a human being who, although in the early stages of life, is an active social and cultural entity in his or her own right (*Montgomery 2009; Golnhofer and Szabolcs 2005; Szabolcs 2011*). Thus, my understanding of childhood in my research is determined by the new sociological conception of the child (*Golnhofer and Szabolcs 2005*).

The conceptual framework of my research is *Béla Pukánszky's* concept of the child: "*The concept of the child is bound up in the everyday practice of child-rearing. This category is the umbrella term for the theories, opinions and thought constructs concerning children that appear at the level of everyday consciousness and, due to their descriptive nature, lack idealisation and mythicisation. The empirical material of child perception comes from direct relationships between people, from the practice of family and school education (Pukánszky 2005:9).*"

The third dimension of the theoretical framework is *qualitative approaches in teacher research*, to which my empirical research is linked. Within *qualitative approaches in teacher research*, the methodology of narrative inquiry and the role of narrative interviews are presented.

Since ancient times, narrative has depicted people's experiences and aspirations. It captures the essence of human experience through the construction and retelling of personal stories. This approach provides an excellent means to address the complexities of culture and human-centeredness by effectively narrating the events that have had the most profound impact on our lives." (*Webster and Mertova 2007:1*).

Narrative inquiry is concerned with the analysis and critical examination of stories, whether they are told, heard, or read. The original methodological foundations stemmed from literary studies and sociolinguistics, giving rise to a notable narrative approach in research (*Webster and Mertova 2007*). Narrative inquiry, the application of narrative interviews, emerged as a new trend in educational research in the 1990s (*Seidman 2002*). Narrative pedagogical research, with its holistic and human-centered approach, offers insights into aspects of the teaching profession that are challenging to explore through other methods. This includes areas such as teacher learning and development, the organization of teacher experience, and teacher personality traits. Advocates of the narrative research approach contend that a deeper understanding of the teacher's work can be achieved through the exploration of teacher narratives. (*Szabolcs 2014*).

In the field of teacher research, a significant body of literature utilizes the method of individual oral questioning on a small sample size. From the perspective of my research, the examination of pedagogical research that employs narrative interviewing techniques holds particular significance. It provides valuable insights into the multifaceted aspects of narrative analysis methodology, which greatly assisted in analysing interviews conducted with teachers.

3. Research Method, Tools and Design

In my qualitative research, among the various types of qualitative interviews, I employed the method of individual oral interviews, specifically narrative interviews. The interviews took place in 2019. Given that narrative interviews can last up to 2-3 hours, I requested the interviewees to meet me in a tranquil and quiet location at a mutually convenient time where they could allocate sufficient time for the interviews. I conducted the interviews with the teachers at pre-arranged times, typically in two locations: their homes and their classrooms at the end of the school day in the primary school.

After providing the interviewee with information about the research, I said to her: *"Tell me about your career as a teacher."* This formulation is crucial as it enabled the interviewee to develop their unique *"silver thread"* and utilize it to weave their experiences into a cohesive narrative. At the start of the interview, it was necessary for me to clarify to the narrator I would refrain from asking questions during the session and instead focus on taking notes. This approach allowed me to ask follow-up questions later based on the information gathered.

The initial segment of the interview comprises the primary narrative of the teacher's career. The interviewee then proceeded to share her experiences and insights about her career freely. My role was to provide support to the speaker through an encouraging gaze, attentively following their narration without interruption (Kovács n.d.). *"The narrative interview method carries forward the legacy of the Rogersian optimistic view of man and non-directive conversations, preserving its core values of unconditional positive regard, accepting orientation, respect, empathy, and congruence (White 2010:80)."* During the interviews, particularly during the main narrative phase, there were instances when the teachers encountered difficulties and were unable to proceed further. I refrained from asking questions even then allowing the teacher to contemplate their career. We would sit in silence for several minutes. The interviews naturally progressed, with the teachers spontaneously recalling more memories and recounting the narrative of their careers as educators. *"The individual's construction of him- or herself becomes a self-construction within the interview when the interviewee has the freedom and autonomy to share their life story, considering their own thought process (Elekes 2018:46)."*

The main narrative came to a natural self-termination, followed by the second stage, the narrative follow-up. Based on my notes, I formulated narrative-generating questions for the interviewees, such as: "*You mentioned earlier that... Could you please elaborate on this further?*" At this stage, the narrator's words are also considered part of the narrative, and therefore, I refrain from asking specific questions like "*Where? When? With whom? Why?*" to the interviewee. The reason for this is that these questions would elicit factual information and explanations rather than narratives. The purpose of the second stage is to elicit more detailed and extensive narratives from the interviewee regarding specific stages or aspects of their professional career that were not covered in the main narrative (Kovács n.d.). According to Éva Kovács (n.d.), there is no need to be concerned about the interview becoming overly lengthy due to the follow-up questioning. This is because the narratives tend to progress in a circular manner, with interconnected and interwoven stories that unfold gradually.

The 20 interviews had an average duration of approximately one and a half to two hours each. To ensure the secure recording of the audio material, the 20 interviews were captured using two dictaphones. Faced with an apparently substantial and unmanageable amount of data, further work phases were needed in the analysis. As the researcher, I personally transcribed the 20 recorded interviews from the tape recorder, thereby initiating the analysis process. Without taking notes, I listened to all 20 texts in their entirety, gaining an understanding of their comprehensiveness and content. I reviewed the transcribed texts once again, making necessary corrections where needed. Subsequently, the resulting texts were deemed technically prepared for analysis (Szabolcs 2001).

The final transcript of the interviews spanned nearly 200 pages and was subjected to analysis using the content analysis software Atlas.ti.

4. Target Population and Sampling Procedure

The target group of my research is teachers. Within the group of teachers, I conducted narrative interviews with 20 primary school teachers from Pest County who have accumulated several decades of experience in the teaching profession, with an average of 35 years. Seven of the interviewees have been in the profession for more than 40 years.

Access-based sampling in my research can be considered a form of convenience sampling. However, unlike traditional convenience sampling that relies on readily available study sites and individuals, access-based sampling is typically purposive in nature. This research specifically targets primary school teachers as the group of interest. Within this category, the research was conducted using the available sample of teachers I had access to. In addition to access-based sampling, my research incorporated a stratification perspective, specifically focusing on age stratification. In my research, access was augmented with the utilization of a "snowball" method. This involved reaching out to additional participants through existing participants (*Szokolszky 2004*). In summary, the sample type used in my research was stratified convenience sampling.

Out of the 20 teachers included in the sample, 19 of them are employed in state primary schools, while 1 teacher works in a faith school.

5. Research Criteria

An important criterion for my qualitative research is scientific validity. As a limitation of my research, I would highlight the issue of reliability criterion in qualitative methods. *How can reliability be achieved?* In quantitative research, 'reliability' refers to the consistency and stability of measurement tools, whereas in narrative research, attention is focused on the 'reliability' of field notes and interview transcripts" (*Webster and Mertova 2007:4*).

Qualitative research reflects the researcher's prior experience, knowledge and personality, as well as his or her creativity, and therefore cannot be objective. The researcher is part of the study, and it is acceptable to *hear the voice of the researcher*. On this basis, research cannot be objective. Researchers use the term "hermeneutic circle" to transform the notion of objectivity, whereby a reflexive research approach is applied, i.e., the researcher examines and analyses problems over and over again. This circular structure helps understanding (*Sántha 2009:108-110*).

The validity of my research is ensured by triangulation (*Sántha 2009:112*). I found the question of which triangulation typology would be most suitable for my research, particularly when utilizing computer-assisted qualitative data analysis to analyse teacher interviews, both exciting and challenging. Two types of methodological triangulation typologies can be distinguished: triangulation between methods (Between Method or

Across Method) and triangulation within methods (Within Method) (*Sántha* 2017). During my analysis, I employed various techniques within a single method, which enhances the reliability and validity of my research (*Sántha* 2013:84). There are several arguments supporting the use of methodological triangulation, particularly when employing software like Atlas.ti that enables the integration of various qualitative techniques. In addition to working at the text-level (coding), thus using the inductive logic coding system, I also had the opportunity to operate at the conceptual level (networking) (*Sántha* 2017:38). Therefore, it can be said that the software, although with different tools, facilitates the implementation of the methodological combination and contributes to the achievement of methodological triangulation (*Sántha*, 2013: 88.).

6. Qualitative Content Analysis

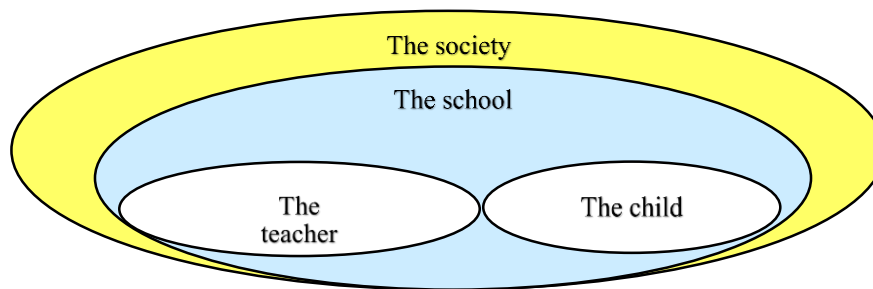
The methodology for narrative analysis of teacher interviews is based on grounded theory. In my dissertation, I align myself with Glaser's approach to the analysis of interview transcripts adopting his analytical strategy and coding logic as guidance (*Kucsera* 2008; *Mitev* 2012; *Mitev* 2015b; *Sántha* 2020):

- It favours creativity. It is receptive to unforeseen and novel interpretations (*Mitev* 2015:102).
- A purely inductive method. Categories are derived from empirical data.
- The analytical strategy relies on the continuous comparison of data. He refers to the technique based on constant comparison as the concept indicator model. An indicator can be a word, a phrase or a sentence. A concept is a symbol that can be associated with indicators, which can take the form of labels or names (*Mitev* 2015b:112).
- The approach utilizes both substantive and theoretical codes. Substantive codes are spontaneous and open codes, whereas theoretical codes are at a higher level of abstraction and are constructed from the substantive codes, forming the foundation of the theory.
- In the coding process, we can talk about open and selective codes. In open coding, the data (in this case, the interview) is thoroughly disassembled. In selective coding, the focus shifts towards the key categories that emerge prominently from the open codes, and all other elements are subordinated to these categories in order to saturate them.

7. Results of the Empirical Research: The views expressed by the interviewed teachers

The primary emphasis of my analysis is on the continuous comparison and theory development, involving the ongoing redefinition of terms, which in turn inform the creation of corresponding categories (Mitev 2015b:114). During the coding process, I encountered a substantial volume of data. Through the substantive coding process, I categorized the concept indicators, which served as the basis for interpreting my findings across four main categories. It is crucial to highlight that these main categories exhibit overlapping characteristics, and the results can be analysed within the context of all four categories (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Four main categories of interview analysis



The first main category is *society*, encompassing the political, economic and social context within which teachers operate. Political, economic and social developments have an impact on schools, teachers, and families.

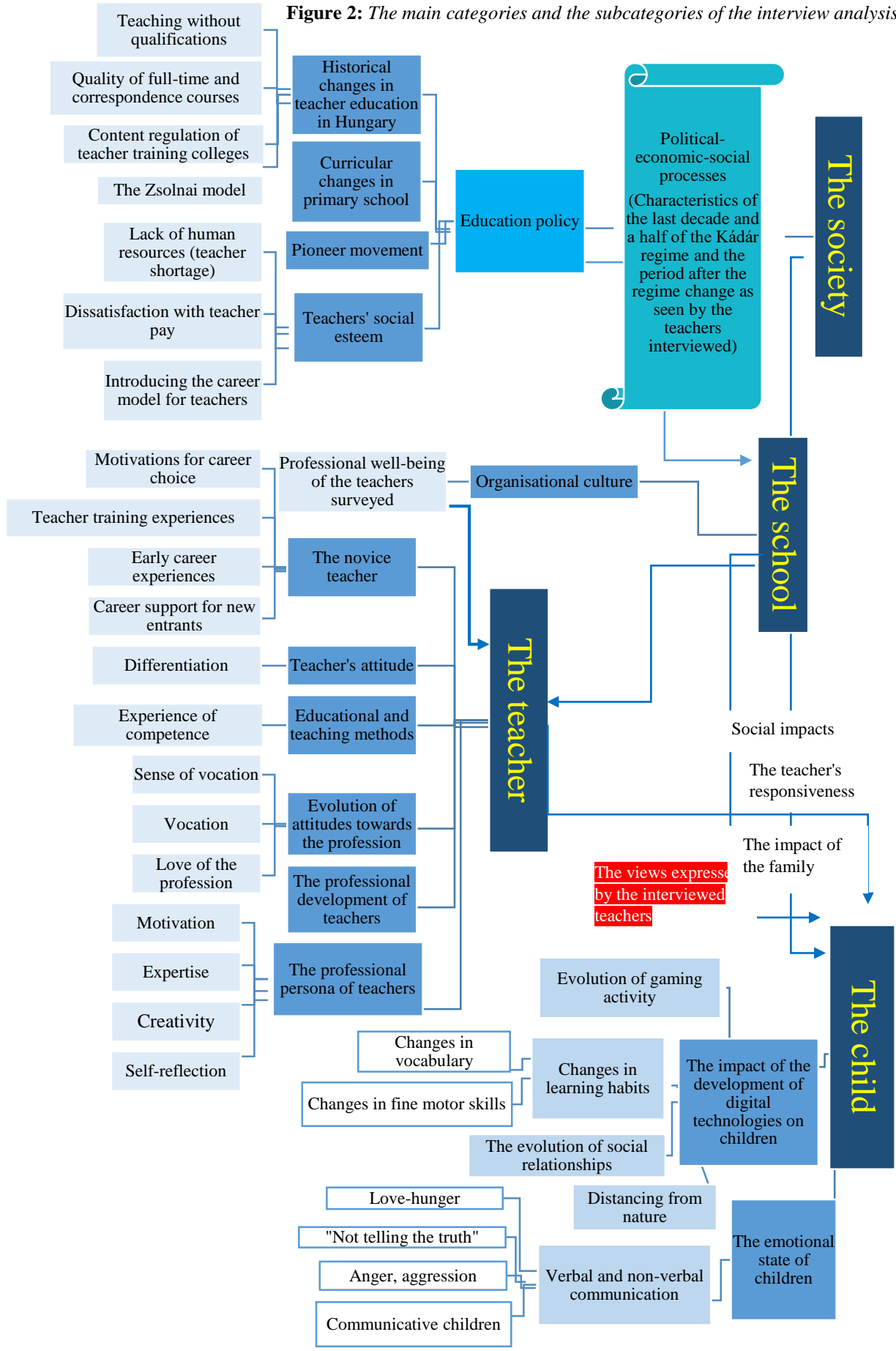
The second main category is the *school*, which includes the social environment of education and the organisational culture of the school, which determines the role, functioning and professional well-being of teachers in the institution at all times.

The third main category is the *teacher*. On the one hand, the teacher's personality, personal identity, professional persona and values influence children. On the other hand, these factors determine the teacher's perception of families and children.

The fourth main category is the *child*. Within this category, I incorporate the perspectives of the interviewed teachers regarding children.

Figure 2 below illustrates the main categories and subcategories of my analysis along Glaser's coding logic.

Figure 2: The main categories and the subcategories of the interview analysis



Thus, the analysis of the interviews with teachers reveals patterns that reflect the school's organizational culture, teachers' professional well-being, the characteristics of the teaching profession, the role of being a teacher, and the professional persona of teachers. These factors inevitably shape and determine teachers' views on children. While my thesis analyses and interprets these patterns in the context of teachers' perceptions of children, it does not aim to provide a detailed account of each pattern.

In my dissertation, I will focus on understanding and interpreting teachers' perception of children through two chapters: '*The Society*' and '*The Child*.' The patterns in the other two main categories, '*The School*' and '*The Teacher*,' serve as tangential sources that assist in interpretative efforts.

'*The Society*' chapter describes the political-socio-economic processes that have influenced the careers of the interviewed teachers. The narrative career histories of all teachers highlight the peculiarities of the period concerning teacher education in Hungary. Notably, József Zsolnai's pedagogical concept has a significant impact on the professional work of the interviewed teachers. Through their narratives, many teachers also align with Zsolnai's anthropological views, his conception of children, and his vision of education. The narratives portray the child as an individual with developmental potential, emphasizing the need for equal opportunities and differentiation, which they perceive as challenging within the current education system. Teachers provide nuanced critiques of various aspects of the education system, such as the primary school curriculum, textbooks, curriculum workload, extra lessons, and their effects on children. The problems of the teaching profession and the experience of teachers' social esteem are strongly emotional. The narratives also reflect the challenges faced by teachers in their daily work, highlighting their professional well-being. Additionally, the stories reveal the diverse aspects of social change and its impact on children and families. The narratives emphasize the child's need for protection from the social environment and its effects, while also stressing the role and responsibility of the family and the teacher in child protection.

Teachers perceive the situation of children in today's society as challenging and view the behaviour of today's children as a reflection of the effects of social change. '*The Child*' chapter explores the impact of these phenomena on children and parents. The narratives frequently refer to the family as the primary socialization level, providing insights into teachers' perceptions of children. The development of digital technology emerges as a central theme in the narratives, influencing children's gaming activities,

learning habits, social relationships, and attitudes toward nature. Teachers note a significant change in children's emotional state. As previously discussed in the theoretical chapter on the social construction of childhood, various conceptions of the child arise, including the overburdened child, the troubled childhood, the communicative child, the love-starved child, and the achievement-oriented child. The narratives also reveal teachers' nurturing attitudes and their responsiveness to children's emotional expressions. Protecting children from the effects of the social environment remains a prominent concern.

All interviewed teachers recognize that technological advancements place new demands on the teaching profession. Despite the challenges faced by older teachers nearing retirement, they all acknowledge the necessity of using digital tools and new methods to engage with children.

The narrative interviews revealed approaches describing the disappearance, death, hurrying, and as a cultural moratorium of childhood (*Buckingham 2000, Vajda 2009, Prout 2005, Winn 1990, Golnhofer and Szabolcs 2005*). In the following, I will list the findings from the interpretations of the significant patterns that nuance the interviewed teachers' constructions of childhood:

1. The interviewed teachers perceive social changes, the proliferation of digital technology, the influence of media and impact of consumer society as contributing factors to the phenomena they observe, namely the disappearance, death, and hurrying of childhood. They highlight how evolving social environments constantly shape the concept of adulthood, impacting both parents' lives and children's experiences.
2. The child is depicted as a dependent creature in need of protection (*Czető 2018*). The narratives emphasize the importance of safeguarding children from social influences and the potential dangers associated with digital device use.
3. Childhood is heavily influenced by mass media and consumer industries.
4. The boundaries between adulthood and childhood have become blurred due to the influence of television and electronic media. With the development and spread of digital technologies, content is becoming accessible to all. Teachers express concerns about the risks of electronic device usage and the diminishing parental control in an advancing technological landscape.

5. Conversely, the narratives also reveal that electronic media provide new opportunities for children.
6. Children's lives are characterized by stress, restlessness, agitation, and aggression.
7. Today's children are seen as being affected by societal pressures, with parental expectations and a results-oriented mindset.
8. Parenting is characterised by a lack of rules and a permissive attitude.
9. Children are expected to engage in adult society at an early age while simultaneously being encouraged to stay away from the responsibilities of adulthood. Teachers describe how childhood is hurried by adult society, resulting in heightened anxiety and the alleviation of duties and responsibilities.
10. Children face pressures from parents, schools, consumer society, and the media. Given their age-specific characteristics, they struggle to cope with a socially stimulating environment filled with potential dangers.
11. Childhood is seen as disappearing, reflected in changes in children's play patterns and the merging of child-adult leisure activities and forms of entertainment.

These findings emerging from the narrative interviews and listed here suggest the loss of the child in relation to adulthood. This conception reflects the permanence and universality of childhood (*Golnhofner and Szabolcs, 2005*). In conclusion, the interviewed teachers generally perceive an ideal childhood rooted in modernity as the normative standard.

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