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## Perceived Quality Educational Practice for Children at Risk of Social Exclusion and Its Relation to Teachers' Training

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### Abstract

The benefits of high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as a prerequisite and opportunity for development, especially for children and families at risk of social exclusion, are widely recognized. High-quality educational practices for children at risk of social exclusion (RSE) should be flexible and aligned with their individual needs. This study uses a national stratified random sample of 1,142 Croatian preschool teachers to examine how they perceive the quality of educational practices regarding children at RSE. Preschool teachers perceive conditions and opportunities for quality education of children at RSE in ECEC by providing activities that promote diversity, building partnerships with parents, and children's development and learning. Perceived conditions and opportunities for children with RSE were related to teachers' formal education level: their master's degree and prior participation in training on developmentally appropriate practices for children with RSE. Only one-fifth of the teachers had recently participated in in-service training on children with RSE, indicating the need for high-quality teacher in-service training to acquire skills to support this group of children and their parents. Teacher in-service training can improve the perception of better conditions and opportunities for quality pedagogical practice that addresses the individual needs of each child at risk of social exclusion.

**Keywords:** ECEC, children at risk, preschool teachers, quality education, teacher training, inclusion.

### 1. Introduction

Social exclusion is a complex concept that encompasses the previous notions of poverty, disadvantage, and marginalization and refers to social inequalities in the availability of education,

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economic, sociocultural, health, and other social resources (e.g., [Levitas et al., 2007](#)). European social policy emphasizes the importance and opportunities of investing in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) to reduce social inequality and exclusion ([European Commission, 2014](#); [European Commission, 2019](#)).

The quality ECEC provides an opportunity for early equality in educational opportunities and minimization of all forms of exclusion associated with discrimination, cultural segregation, and poverty ([Bove, Sharmahd, 2020](#)), as a potential equaliser of opportunities ([Peleman et al., 2020](#)).

While ECEC plays a significant role in the development of all children, its importance is even greater for children at risk of social exclusion ([Council of the European Commission, 2019](#)). The children at risk of social exclusion are the most vulnerable social groups that may encounter barriers to resources, as transgenerational transmission of positions of social exclusion. Ensuring equal educational opportunities at an early age may span the gap in intergenerational inequality and the socioeconomic position of parents and their children and prevents adult social exclusion. (e.g., [Backman, Nilsson, 2011](#)).

Child participation in quality ECEC has a significant impact on children's well-being and development (e.g., [Loeb et al., 2004](#), [Bartolo et al., 2016](#)), cognitive development, and academic performance ([Pianta et al., 2009](#)), socio-emotional development ([Barnett, 2011](#)), with long-lasting benefits for quality of life in adulthood (e.g., [Camilli et al., 2010](#); [Heckman et al., 2013](#)). The cognitive and socio-emotional development of children participating in ECEC (e.g., [Loeb et al., 2004](#)) is higher among the most disadvantaged children than among "average" children ([European Commission, 2014: 14](#)).

Quality of service is related to better developmental outcomes for children and constitutes an important policy tool to address social inequality and promote social justice (e.g., [Jensen, 2009](#); [Bartolo et al., 2016](#)). Only high-quality, affordable, accessible, and inclusive ECEC services are related to those benefits, which are a necessary start for children from all backgrounds ([Murray, 2012: 569](#)). While low-quality services negatively impact children and society (Review of Research on the Effects of Early Childhood Education and Care on Child Development, 2015), high-quality provision is the focus of the legislation, reforms, and research.

The quality ECEC provision is a child-centered and tailored to the individual needs of each child (e.g. [ISSA, 2010](#), [Antulić Majcen, Drvodelić, 2021](#); [Skočić Mihić, Sekušak Galešev, 2016](#); [Skočić Mihić et al., 2016](#)). The high-quality educational environment enables every child to full participation in learning activities, following its interest in a safe and enriching environment with a range of possibilities for developing child potential.

The central aspect of high-quality ECEC is the quality of teaching, instructional practice and teacher behavior, teacher-child interaction, and relationships (e.g., [Hamre et al., 2007](#); [Cadima et al., 2018](#)). The quality of interactions between staff and children is related to teachers' competencies. Complex knowledge of child development in the early years and pedagogy, as well as an understanding of a unique opportunity and the factors that contribute to child development, are closely related to the quality of teacher preparation. Quality pedagogy and excellence are inextricably linked to teachers' competencies to respond to higher levels of social diversity. International Step by Step Association (2010) defined the competence profile of teachers of the 21st Century in areas of (1) Interactions, (2) Family and Community, (3) Inclusion, Diversity, and Values of Democracy, (4) Assessment and Planning, (5) Teaching Strategies, (6) Learning Environment, and (7) Professional Development.

Teachers' competencies in creating a nurturing and supportive environment for the development of children at RSE and their parents in all mentioned areas are critical (e.g., [Bagdi, Vacca, 2005](#)). For those children and families facing barriers in social inclusion, ECEC services should provide an integrated approach to the child and family, building a partnership with parents based on trust and mutual respect ([Magnuson et al., 2006](#)).

Teachers' professional development and devotion to the profession are closely related to the quality of pedagogical practice ([Melhuish, 2004](#); [Nasiopoulou et al., 2021](#); [Peeters, Sharmahd, 2014](#)). Teachers' in-service training is fundamental to developing positive attitudes, complex knowledge, and skills to respond to children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is a significant predictor of a higher perception of the importance of the quality of inclusive pedagogical practice regarding children at RSE ([Visković, 2021](#)).

Croatia is becoming a multicultural society with increasing diversity in ECEC, although there is very little literature and research on this topic (Višnjić-Jevtić et al., 2021). Recently, theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted within the MORENEC project, focusing on the quality of pedagogical practice concerning the educational needs of children at RSE in Croatian ECEC (e.g., Bouillet, Domović, 2021, Višnjić-Jevtić et al., 2021; Visković, 2021; Antulić Majcen, Drvodelić, 2021).

Knowledge about how the diversity of children and their families is recognized and respected in Croatian ECEC and how their educational needs are addressed is limited (Bouillet, Domović, 2021), as is the paucity of research on teachers' perceptions of the quality of inclusive educational practice (e.g. Shevlin, et al., 2013; Visković, 2021).

Operationalization of the concept of quality in ECEC services is complex, dynamic, and multidimensional. It is based on integrating interdependent factors that contribute to children's development and learning. Quality is not an internationally agreed concept with uniform measurement. There are different approaches to measurement. The frequently used one refers to structural quality, process quality, and outcome quality (Donabedian, 1980; according to Sheriman, 2007; European Commission, 2014). Council of the European Union (2019) identified five broader areas of quality: access, staff, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding. The principles of high-quality ECEC provision refer to (1) promotion of children's development and learning due to raising their educational chances; (2) parents' participation as partners, and (3) child-centred services that acknowledge child perspective and their active involvement (Council of the European Union, 2019).

In this article, the operationalization of the concept of quality of ECEC services for children at RSE refers to (1) process determinants of quality of educational practice in seven areas (International Step..., 2010) and (2) principles for quality ECEC provision (Council of the European Union, 2019). The first research question started from the concept that perceptions of the opportunities and conditions for ensuring quality educational practice for children at RSE cover different areas of teachers' professional responsibilities that promote children's development and learning, respect for diversity, and social inclusion in groups, and partnership with parents. In line with this, higher perceptions of opportunities and conditions for ensuring quality educational practice for children at RSE would correlate with teachers' professional development (e.g. Visković, 2021), socio-demographic data and characteristics of the working environment.

Thus, this study aimed to examine teachers' perceptions of the conditions and opportunities in ensuring quality preschool educational practices for children in RSE, as well as the correlation with independent variables: (1) teachers' sociodemographic data (age, years of work experience), formal education level, number of children in classes, and participation in special programs/curricula), and (2) type of in-service training on children in RSE.

The following hypotheses were formulated:

H1. There is a positive correlation between all three dimensions of perceived condition and opportunities in providing quality education to children at RSE.

H.2. Higher level of perceived condition and opportunities in providing quality education to children at RSE correlate with teachers' sociodemographic features and pre-service training.

H.3. Higher level of perceived condition and opportunities in providing quality education to children at RSE correlate with teachers' in-service training regarding children at RSE.

## **2. Method**

### **Sample**

The representative national stratified sample contain 1142 preschool teachers (female = 1037; male = 11) from 66 Croatian ECEC. It represents 10,4 % of all 635 ECEC institutions in Croatia<sup>1</sup>. The random samples of the institution were taken in equal proportions forming a total sample according to the following four criteria: geographic location and the type of settlements, the founder, and the size<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> According to data provided by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics. Available at: <https://dzs.gov.hr/en>.

<sup>2</sup> (a) regions of the Republic of Croatia (proportion of six region) [2], (b) the founder of ECEC (ratio of 82.6 % public, 14.8 % private, and 2.6 % religious), (c) the type of settlements (81 % cities and 19 % municipalities), and (d) the size of the facility (50.6 % small, 40.1 % medium, and 9.3 % large).

The average age of preschool teachers was 41.08 years (SD = 10.90; range = 22–68), with an average working experience of 14.98 years (SD = 11.45; range = 0–43). A high percentage of the classrooms were in public ECEC settings (78 %).

More than half of the teachers (52 %) had a completed two- or three-year study program, 23 % had a bachelor's degree, 20 % had a master's degree, and 4 % had a high school degree. Group size varied, with an average of 20.26 children in an educational group (SD = 5.15). The majority of teachers (78.2 %) had not participated in any in-service training regarding children at RSE in the previous year, while 10.2 % had participated once, 7.9 % two or three times, and only 2.0 % four or more times.

#### Instrument

*The Quality Education Practice Regarding Children at RSE Scale* was constructed by the project team members: Sandra Antulić Majcen, Dejana Bouillet, Vlatka Domović, Maja Drvodelić, Marina Panić, Monika Pažur, Ksenija Romstein, Sanja Skočić Mihić, Esmeralda Sunko, Ivana Visković and Adrijana Višnjić Jevtić. The scale examines how teachers perceive ECEC institutions' conditions and opportunities to provide educational activities and interventions on 22 items.

Theoretical framework is based on ISSA ([International Step..., 2010](#)) standards of quality educational practice and activities for children at RSE in dimension of respect for diversity (e.g., 'Implementing specific activities focused on embracing diversity in the ECEC classroom'), building partnerships with parents (e.g., 'Involving family members of children with at in decision making related to the ECEC classroom, such as curriculum development, activities, assessments, etc.'), and children's development and learning (e.g., 'Guiding children at RSE in assessing the behavior and work of children, preschool teachers, and other adults'). Each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale with the following response options: 1 (none), 2 (to a small degree), 3 (somewhat) and 4 (completely).

The independent variables were teachers' age, work experience, degree, and participation in continuous professional training for children at RSE.

#### Procedure

The study protocol, as part of the project Models of Response to Educational Needs of Children at Risk of Social Exclusion in ECEC Institutions, was approved by the Ministry of Education. The initial approval for participation was obtained from the administrative director of the selected kindergarten. All participants provided consent to participate in the study, and anonymity was guaranteed. Data were collected through both online and paper questionnaire formats.

#### Data analysis

To determine the construct validity of the scale, exploratory principal component analysis and oblimin rotation were performed. The scree plot and Kaiser-Guttman criteria were used to identify the latent dimensions of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient of each subscale was calculated to establish reliability. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) are presented for the items and subscales. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed to test the normality of the distribution. Spearman's Rho coefficient was calculated to establish correlations between the subscales and independent continuous variables. P value of <.05 was considered to be statistically significant.

### 3. Results

#### *Descriptive data and factor structure*

Demographic data and factor structure of the instrument are presented in [Table 1](#).

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(a) Regions: Nord Croatia (Međimurska, Varaždinska, Krapinsko-zagorska i Koprivničko-križevačka County), Middle Croatia (Zagrebačka, Karlovačka, Sisačko-moslavačka i Bjelovarsko-bilogorska County), Istra I Primorje (Istarska, Primorsko-goranska, Ličko-senjska County), Dalmacija (Zadarska, Šibensko-kninska, Splitsko-dalmatinska i Dubrovačko-neretvanska County), East Croatia (Virovitičko-podravska, Požeško-slavonska, Osječko-baranjska, Brodsko-posavska i Vukovarsko-srijemska County), and City of Zagreb.



**Table 1.** Basic statistical data and saturation factors

| Conditions and opportunities for ECEC quality in my institution for children at RSE for ...   | $\beta$ | $h^2$ | Range  | M (SD)       |
|---|---------|-------|--------|--------------|
| <i>Respecting diversity</i>   |         |       | 2.20–5 | 4.32(0.50)   |
| ... conducting specific activities directed toward accepting diversity in ECEC classroom  | .801    | .579  | 1–5    | 4.34 (.731)  |
| ... making opportunities for learning diversity acceptance among children   | .789    | .616  | 2–5    | 4.54 (.611)  |
| ... conducting activities directed toward gaining an insight into effects of biases on emotions of members of socially vulnerable groups                        | .706    | .552  | 1–5    | 4.10 (.838)  |
| ... active work on development of group culture and togetherness of all children in the ECEC classroom  | .680    | .505  | 1–5    | 4.47 (.680)  |
| ... conducting dialogue with children about various conditions of growing up in families (single parent families, poverty in the family, etc.)                  | .607    | .447  | 1–5    | 4.28 (.822)  |
| ... classroom arrangement with illustration on diversity of children (identity, race, physical appearance, developmental disabilities, etc.)                    | .540    | .360  | 1–5    | 4.18 (.883)  |
| ... addressing the unsubstantiality of attitudes based on prejudice and biases towards cultural, gender, and other minorities (e.g., with own example)          | .537    | .440  | 1–5    | 4.19 (.881)  |
| ... encouraging children at RSE to express own opinions   | .360    | .324  | 1–5    | 4.56 (.596)  |
| ... equal respect of religious customs, co-existing in the society  | .358    | .331  | 1–5    | 4.22 (.941)  |
| ... encouraging initiatives, autonomy and independency of children, regardless of their developmental, health, family, social, cultural and other specificities | .349    | .347  | 1–5    | 4.33 (.709)  |
| <i>Building partnerships with parents</i>   |         |       | 1–5    | 3.57 (0.78)  |
| ... including family members of children at RSE in decision making regarding ECEC classroom (development of the curriculum, activities, assessments, etc.)      | .759    | .634  | 1–5    | 3.12 (1.095) |
| ... making opportunities for connecting families with different backgrounds, cultures, and views  | .742    | .622  | 1–5    | 3.50 (1.056) |
| ... involving family members of children at RSE in curricular activities in the ECEC classroom  | .724    | .584  | 1–5    | 3.53 (1.048) |
| ... integration of different family identities and cultures in the curriculum of ECEC classroom   | .719    | .644  | 1–5    | 3.82 (.958)  |
| ... usage of language and activities devoid of gender and other biases  | .495    | .483  | 1–5    | 3.91 (1.008) |
| <i>Children's development and learning</i>  |         |       | 1.17–5 | 3.87(0.66)   |
| ... directing children at RSE in the assessment of behavior and work of others (children, preschool teachers, and other adults)                                 | -.793   | .654  | 1–5    | 3.46 (.986)  |
| ... introducing children at RSE with educational goals and encouraging children to think about process of own learning  | -.711   | .674  | 1–5    | 3.95 (.838)  |
| ... encouraging children at RSE to document own learning process  | -.692   | .576  | 1–5    | 3.49 (.980)  |
| ... encouraging the higher mental processes and problem-solving skills of children at RSE   | -.607   | .644  | 1–5    | 3.96 (.806)  |
| ... applying strategies that facilitate self-regulation behavior of children at RSE   | -.521   | .573  | 1–5    | 4.07 (.754)  |
| ... offering children at RSE choices and support in understanding consequences of the choices made  | -.468   | .552  | 1–5    | 4.25 (.716)  |

The factor analysis yielded three factors: respect for diversity, building partnerships with parents, and children's development and learning (eigenvalues=8.156, 1.685, and 1.30), explaining 53 % of the variance (38.84 %, 8.92 %, and 6.19 %, respectively). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .924. Factor loadings on respecting the diversity dimension were between 0.801 and 0.349; on parental partnership dimension between 0.759 and 0.495, and on enhancing development and learning in children at RSE between -0.793 and -0.468. The metric characteristics indicated an adequate degree of reliability for each dimension (Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.848, 0.810, and 0.859, respectively). Descriptive data showed good discriminative features for all dimensions. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed to assess the normality of the distribution, and it was found that the empirical distribution deviated from the normal distribution for all three subscales ( $z_1 = 3.374$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ;  $z_2 = 2.065$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ; and  $z_3 = 2.175$ ,  $p = 0.00$ , respectively). Therefore, Spearman's coefficient was calculated to determine the correlation.

Regarding the diversity dimension, preschool teachers reported that in their kindergartens, they mostly had conditions and opportunities for practice that support diversity and children at RSE. In addition, they mostly agreed that they had adequate conditions and opportunities for pedagogical practice toward children at RSE in the children's development and learning dimension. Similarly, they reported that conditions and opportunities were adequate for building partnerships with parents. Interestingly, the lowest assessments concerned conditions and opportunities for the involvement of family members of children at RSE in decision making regarding curriculum, activities, and assessments. Evidently, preschool teachers assess comparatively lower levels of conditions and opportunities for pedagogical practice in the aspects of partnerships with parents of children at RSE and encouraging the development and learning of children at RSE.

*Correlations between sociodemographic variables and the dimensions of teachers' attitudes*

After identifying the dimensions of preschool teachers' attitudes toward conditions and opportunities of ECEC quality practice for children at RSE, correlations among the dimensions and with sociodemographic variables were calculated (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Intercorrelations among the dimensions and sociodemographic variables

|                    |   | <i>Respecting diversity</i> | <i>Parental partnership</i> | <i>Enhancing development</i> |
|--------------------|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Factors            | <i>Respecting diversity</i>               | 1.000                       | <b>.600***</b>              | <b>.684***</b>               |
|                    | <i>Parental partnership</i>               |                             | 1.000                       | <b>.598***</b>               |
|                    | <i>Enhancing development and learning</i> |                             |                             | 1.000                        |
| Preschool teachers | Age                                       | -.043                       | <b>-.102**</b>              | <b>-.075*</b>                |
|                    | Working experience                        | -.036                       | <b>-.095**</b>              | <b>-.087**</b>               |
|                    | Formal level of education                 | -.058                       | <b>-.123**</b>              | <b>-.062*</b>                |
| Institution        | Number of children in ECEC classroom      | <b>-.075*</b>               | .027                        | <b>.063*</b>                 |
|                    | Special programs/curriculum               | .046                        | <b>.083**</b>               | <b>.054*</b>                 |

Legend: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; N, number of preschool teachers

The results indicated that the correlations were high and statistically significant ( $\rho = .600$ ;  $\rho = .684$ ;  $\rho = .598$ ;  $p < .001$ ) for all domains. Preschool teachers with fewer years of work experience and lower levels of formal education perceive higher levels of conditions and



opportunities for ECEC practice to promote parental participation and enhance the development and learning of children at RSE.

To identify the correlation between preschool teachers' assessments of conditions and opportunities for quality ECEC practice and in-service training regarding children at RSE, Spearman's Rho coefficient and Kendall's Tau correlation for binary variables were calculated.

**Table 3.** Correlation of preschool teachers' assessments on in-service training regarding children at RSE

| In-service training on the topic of children at RSE | N (%)       | Respecting diversity | Parental partnership | Enhancing development |
|---|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Participation in training last year <sup>S</sup>    | 230 (20.1%) | .056                 | <b>.093**</b>        | .044                  |
| Once <sup>K</sup>                                   | 117 (10.2%) |                      |                      |                       |
| Two to three  | 90 (7.9%)   |                      |                      |                       |
| Four or more  | 23 (2%)     |                      |                      |                       |
| PD: exchange examples of good                       | 680 (59.5%) | .057                 | <b>.085**</b>        | <b>.092**</b>         |
| PD: reflection on own practice <sup>K</sup>         | 470 (41.2%) | .048                 | <b>.121**</b>        | <b>.140**</b>         |
| PD: specific programs <sup>K</sup>                  | 282 (24.7%) | .048                 | <b>.068*</b>         | .035                  |
| PD: literature use <sup>K</sup>                     | 774 (67.8%) | <b>.124**</b>        | <b>.099**</b>        | <b>.110**</b>         |
| PD: research data use <sup>K</sup>                  | 149 (13%)   | <b>.082**</b>        | <b>.156**</b>        | <b>.115**</b>         |
| PD: participating in learning                       | 166 (2.8%)  | .010                 | <b>.093**</b>        | <b>.114**</b>         |

Legend: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; N, number of preschool teachers; S, Spearman's Rho coefficient; K, Kendall's Tau for dichotomous variable; PD, Professional development

As can be seen from [Table 3](#), only a fifth of preschool teachers reported that they had participated in in-service training related to children at RSE within the past year. Approximately 70 % of preschool teachers reported using professional literature, while 60 % relied on exchanges of good practice. Less than half of the preschool teachers reflected on their own practice, while a quarter participated in specific training, and less than 15 % used research and scientific data and relied on the learning community. Further, very low, albeit positive, correlations were found between all types of professional development and two dimensions: parental partnership and children's development and learning (except training in specific programs).

#### 4. Discussion

Given that RSE has scarcely been researched in Croatian ECEC, especially from teacher's perspective, the findings of this study explicitly indicate teachers' perception conditions and possibilities to respond to the needs of children at RSE and their parents in accordance to theoretical framework and quality standards. Teachers recognize the conditions and opportunities for quality pedagogical practice for children with RSE in organizing group activities toward accepting diversity in the ECEC classroom, enhancing the development and learning of the child with RSE, and building partnerships with families. The first two dimensions cover quality pedagogical practice by (1) group activities that promote and respect diversity, (2) arranging a learning environment suitable for every child with RSE, while the third one parental involvement. The conditions and opportunities for parental involvement of children in RSE from the teacher's perspective are lower than in the previous two. Opportunities for family involvement in curricular activities or decision-making related to the curriculum development, activities, and assessments in ECEC classroom, as well as creating opportunities for connecting families with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and views, are presented but should be observed at higher levels in the context of quality educational practice. Similar, moderate self-perceived competencies to build a partnership with parents using counseling skills are found (e.g., [Skočić Mihić et al., 2015](#), [Skočić Mihić et al., 2019](#)).

As expected, teachers perceive quality ECEC to be associated with different process-related and structural factors, as described here: 'overall welcoming atmosphere, inclusive social environment, child-centered approach, child-friendly physical environment, materials for all children, opportunities for communication for all, inclusive teaching and learning environment and family-friendly environment' (European Agency..., 2017: 3). In quality pedagogical practice and ECEC, an interdisciplinary approach involving highly qualified professionals with all stakeholders in the child's immediate environment is required (Antulić Majcen, Drvodelić, 2021).

Further, the results point to educational institutions' obligation to provide an inclusive environment to shapes children's experiences toward the development of their full potential.

Quality ECEC practice has predictive value for children at RSE. Preschool teachers are of great importance, while their attitudes and knowledge of RSE are crucial to ECEC quality. They should facilitate developmental, cultural, language, and other diversity amongst children and portray them through educational approaches (Bouillet, Domović, 2021). As designers of ECEC instructional processes, preschool teachers may directly reduce the potential for further social exclusion of children at RSE and ensure fairer conditions for the well-being of all students, regardless of their individual capabilities and socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., Miškolci et al., 2021).

Inclusive ECEC is based on adults' responsiveness toward children's needs and the acceptance of family backgrounds. Quality ECEC provides appropriate support through an individualized approach for children at RSE due to their developmental level, socioeconomic status, cultural background, or adverse family dynamics (e.g. Kumpulainen, 2018; Pianta et al., 2009). Acknowledging cultural and individual diversity and the cultural backgrounds of families is a crucial element for teachers' professional work, as their cultural frameworks shape their work with families (Jørgensen et al., 2020).

The findings also suggest a lack of teacher training related to children at RSE, which is fundamental to understanding the current state of ECEC. First, Croatian initial teacher education programs do not adequately prepare teachers to work with children at RSE (Bouillet et al., 2021). Moreover, initial teacher training in the last two decades in Croatia has transformed from two – to five-year study programs, as well as from professional to university degrees, as can be seen from the sociodemographic data of teachers, which shows wide variations in educational qualifications, ranging from high school to master's degrees.

The research revealed that preschool teachers' enrolment in in-service training for children at RSE was inadequate. Bouillet and Domović (2021) found that teachers were not sufficiently familiar with the full complexity and diversity of the needs of children at RSE. Approximately 30 % of preschool teachers stated that they had gained competencies for practice through literature and exchanges of examples of good practice, as well as reflection on their own pedagogical practice, that is, through informal channels. Participation in professional development training results in teachers having more positive attitudes toward inclusive education (e.g., Holmqvist, Lelinge, 2020). However, considering that less than a quarter of the preschool teachers reported developing professional competencies for educating children at RSE through specific programs, such as through a learning community or consulting scientific data, it may be concluded that Croatian preschool teachers lack opportunities for formal education on quality ECEC for children at RSE.

Continuous professional development presupposes the presence of quality lifelong programs and training for preschool teachers that are locally available as well as affordable. The need for ongoing training is recognized by students before they enter the labor market. However, themes regarding children at RSE, that is, the developmentally appropriate practice for children at RSE, must be included. To achieve quality ECEC in in-service training, it is useful to channel Bynner's (2001) thoughts on children and the interactive nature of their development –children are the most vulnerable social group, incapable of complete self-care; the socio-economic context of a child's development has a long-term impact on their cognitive development, and subsequently, academic achievement; risk and protective factors in the child's immediate surroundings interact with the child's biological characteristics, defining their resilience; and children's development is dynamic and unpredictable, rather than linear. These findings suggest that quality ECEC practice toward children at RSE should be flexible and closely connected to preschool teachers' meta-knowledge.

In the micro-system, preschool teachers are a structural factor enhancing ECEC quality, which can be seen in their level of engagement derived from their value system, attitudes, and opinions regarding pedagogical practice (Gormley et al., 2005; Kelley, Camili, 2004). Quality ECEC practice is

oriented toward designing an inclusive environment and curriculum, enabling optimal support for child development, starting from their interests, abilities, and functioning. Preschool teachers' competence in securing adequate support and inclusive ECEC practice opens up opportunities for resilience building in children at RSE, which can be seen as a critical tool for life. However, the findings of this research confirmed that ECEC institutions lack adequate conditions and opportunities to meet the needs of children at RSE, leaving preschool teachers in a conundrum.

Protective factors closely related to the prevention of social exclusion are the quality of ECEC, availability of resources within the community, and well-established mechanisms of social support for families. Considering that 'the gap between policy recommendations that highly support inclusive education and obstacles still exists' (Bouillet, Domović, 2021: 962), and owing to the diversity in ECEC organization, law regulation, and other structural aspects, preschool teachers bear the responsibility to be the propellers of change. Preschool teachers play a crucial role in high inclusive quality education, and their beliefs, knowledge, experiences, self-efficacy, mental health, and social-emotional competence directly influence their ability to support children's social-emotional development (e.g. Blewitt et al., 2020), with long-term outcomes. Finally, the results point to the need of ECEC institutions to ensure greater accessibility, quality, and fairness of services to encompass more children at RSE.

### **5. Limitations**

First, this study used a self-report measure to assess teachers' attitudes; such measures are known to be affected by various types of response biases. Second, the concept of risk of social exclusion is very broad and somewhat vague in nature. Although the terminology is widely used in ECEC practice, the epistemology is still uncertain. This is probably because of its close connection to the axiology and declarative level of societal values present in legislation. Social exclusion is a complex, multidimensional process, which involves a lack or total absence of 'resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas' (Levitas et al., 2007: 9). Thus, a large proportion of people are expected to face disadvantages and social exclusion, suggesting that the same situation exists in ECEC classrooms. Notwithstanding the limitations of this research, there is a need for quality in-service training. Longitudinal and cross-cultural studies should be undertaken for ECEC in-training programs for children at RSE. Further, mixed method approaches with participative methodologies, such as photovoice or double photo voice in real-life situations (Romstein, 2019), should also be considered.

### **6. Conclusion**

Preschool teachers perceived the conditions and opportunities for quality ECEC toward children at RSE to be mostly adequate; however, their attitudes were not related to different forms of in-service training with quality ECEC. Positive attitudes toward ECEC conditions and opportunities were related to preschool teachers' level of formal education. Preschool teachers with master's degrees and those who had previously participated in formal in-service training about developmentally-appropriate practices for children at RSE had positive attitudes toward the conditions and possibilities of quality ECEC for children at RSE. The implications of these results are twofold. First, preschool teachers perceive the importance of continuous professional development for quality ECEC oriented toward the individual needs of each child, suggesting the need for quality in lifelong learning programs for preschool teachers. Second, the conditions and opportunities of ECEC institutions have to be studied, since kindergartens are places for child development in the most sensitive period of their life. Therefore, ECEC institutions must shape themselves into places of support and opportunities, places for unlocking children's true potential.

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