

Croatian Early Childhood Education Teachers' Perspectives on the Quality of Environments for Children at Risk of Social Exclusion

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Abstract

This paperwork provides an overview of research findings of early childhood education (ECE) teachers' opinions on the quality of existing pedagogical practice, ECE conditions and personal competencies for working with children at risk of social exclusion. Factor analysis of (self) assessment of teachers' professional competencies identified three factors. They can be interpreted as individual focus (child and personal practice), support and modification of child behaviour, and dissemination. Working conditions and work experience have been singled out as a fundamental predictor of (self) assessment of competencies. The level of formal education, age and professional development activities are not recognised as significant predictors in assessment.

Keywords : conditions in ECE, social exclusion, teachers' competences, teachers' professional training, vulnerable children

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Introduction

The right to quality education and care are fundamental rights of every child. The quality of early childhood education and care (hereinafter ECE) contributes to the wellbeing of children, including reducing the risk of social exclusion. The Council of Europe Recommendation (2019) emphasizes the importance of institutional ECE as one way to equalize an individual's educational opportunities, the starting point of academic education, and lifelong learning. Some research indicates inconsistencies in educational policies and practices of the ECE, which lacks optimal responses to educational needs of children at risk of social exclusion (Alexiadou & Stadler Altmann, 2020).

Given that children spend a large part of the day in ECE institutions, research is needed on the quality of the environment, especially for vulnerable children. The presented research tried to answer the question of how teachers see the quality of existing pedagogical practice in ECE and their professional competencies for working with children and families at risk of social exclusion. The research was conducted within the project "Model of response to educational needs of children at risk of social exclusion in institutions of early and preschool education / MORENEC" (Croatian Science Foundation, IP-2019-04-2011). Research on educational practice is expected to develop a pedagogically argued response to children at risk of social exclusion and to advocate for equal participation and respect for the diversity of all children and it is based in Bandura's theory of social learning (Bandura, 1969) and Hedegaard's cultural-historical wholeness approach (Hedegaard, 2011).

Children at risk of social exclusion in ECE in the Republic Croatia

The Council of Europe Recommendation (2019) emphasizes the importance of inclusion in the ECE for disadvantaged children. The Republic of Croatia emphasizes the need for quality support for children at risk of social exclusion (Sabor Republike Hrvatske, 2021). Research shows (Bouillet, 2018) that children at risk of social exclusion are children who are more than average exposed to violation and / or risk of socio-emotional and / or

psychophysical integrity. Silver (2019) define social exclusion as multidimensional process of severing social ties, preventing access to institutions, denying opportunities for social participation, and disrupting social cohesion and solidarity. In this way, individual's equal participation in the life of the community is limited. Social exclusion implies both, social non-recognition and non-acceptance which further restricts access to, and use of public services. Hartley (2016) discusses whether poverty and social exclusion are synonymous, and concludes that although they are related, they are not one and the same. Although poverty is most often associated with economic deprivation, poverty causes inequality and leads to relative deprivation, or social exclusion (Shaw et al., 1999). Social inclusion represents social capital and thus ensures support in different spheres. People who are marginalized do not have such opportunities, and thus the effect of exclusion is multiplied.

The risks of children's social exclusion are conditioned by various factors (Figure 1). The causes of social exclusion are most often cumulative which increases children's vulnerability. Older research in developed countries estimated that 7-10% of children below 7 are at risk of social exclusion (Gudmundsson et al., 2013; Wichstrøm et al., 2012). The risk is reflected in significantly worse growing up outcomes, which in adulthood can manifest as psychological difficulties, antisocial or addictive behaviours (Ramchandani et al., 2017). In response to the above Stubbs et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of education as one of the most significant predictors of quality of life.

ECE in the Republic of Croatia is organised for children from 6 months to 6 years of age, and apart from the preschool program (250 hours in the year before starting school) is not mandatory. Croatia has one of the lowest ECE participation rates in the EU for children between the age of 3 and beginning of compulsory primary education (79,4%), while only 15,7% of children under 3 attended ECE institutions in 2019 (European Commission, 2021). According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (hereinafter CBS) (2021), 137 452 children are included in the institutional ECE (56% of the population). Most children (79,41%, N= 112 308) are included in whole day programs (8 -10 hours daily), while 7,27% (N= 9 310) of children attend the shorter programs intended for children in the year before starting primary school.

In Croatia, the State Pedagogical Standard ECE (hereinafter SPS) (2008) regulates the

conditions (material, spatial and social) of work in kindergartens. Two teachers work in class that provides whole day programmes, each of them works for 5.5 hours. In practice, this means that one works in the morning and the other in the afternoon, and they spend 2-3 hours a day together. The classes have 10 to 24 children, depends on the age of the children and organizational conditions. Therefore, the ratio for children aged 1-2 years is 1:5, and for the children aged 5 to 7 years ratio varies from 1:10 to 1:12. Thus, the ratio prescribed by the educational policy is not realistic, because teachers spend most of their working time alone with the children.

Act on preschool education (MSE, 2022) stipulates that professionals who work with children in ECE must have higher education (bachelor's and master's degrees in ECE). Teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) is part of their professional work, however the topics and number of CPD hours are not prescribed. The choice of training content therefore depends on personal preferences or, more often, on the content offered (Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2018).

More than half of all institutions in the Republic of Croatia (57.3%) are public, 37.85% are private and church-affiliated are 5.03%. Regardless of the founder of the ECEC institution, the curriculum, child-adult ratio, and conditions should follow the state regulations.

There is very few available research on the risk of social exclusion of children in Croatia. The few studies conducted on early and preschool children deal with poverty (i.e. Ajduković & Rimac, 2017; Šućur et. al., 2015) or belonging to a Roma national minority (Šikić-Mićanović et al., 2015) as a predictor of social exclusion.

There are no official data on the total number of early and preschool-age children at risk of social exclusion in Croatia. Research within the MORENEC project (Bouillet & Antulić Majcen, 2022) showed that 8.1% of children aged 5 to 7 in ECEC are at risk of social exclusion, 5.5% are at risk of poverty, 10.9% live in single-parent families, and 1.4% come from ethnic minorities. During the research in the MORENEC project, the most common risk factors of social exclusion were identified and grouped according to the key actors (child, family, society) (Figure 1).

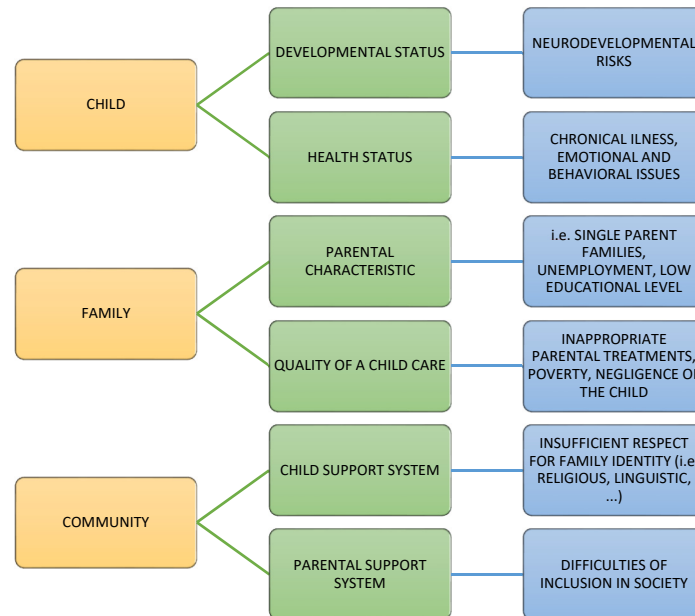


Figure 1. Risks of social exclusion (MORENEC, 2019)

The Quality in ECE

The determination of quality within ECE can be approached from different perspectives. The perspective of educational policy in the Republic of Croatia described in the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (MSES, 2015) (hereinafter the National Curriculum) defines quality as contextual conditions - environment (social and spatial-material), and organisational culture. The National Curriculum (MSES, 2015) sees the pedagogical competence of teachers as a predictor of quality. Contextual conditions must be based on the contemporary image of the child and be child-centered. The National Curriculum (MSES, 2015) advocates child centred approaches learning-by-doing and play as an optimal model. Vulnerable children - children at risk are not explicitly mentioned anywhere (except for children with special educational needs). National Curriculum (MSES, 2015) describes quality conditions without having objective and measurable indicators. The European Commission (2014) has defined the quality of ECE through five dimensions:

access; workforce; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; and governance and funding. Dahlberg et al. (2007) argue this approach because it starts from assumptions of objectivity and measurability. It is possible to consider which (whose) criteria are applied in such assessments and whether they are objective according to different standards of individual institutions.

Given the differences in approaches to the quality, it is impossible to define it unambiguously. Quality entails developing someone's unique viewpoint, but it's influenced by his/her interactions with others – and that aspect is subjective (Dahlberg et al., 2007). The pedagogical perspective emphasizes interactions and process as a key determinant of the quality. Clifford et al. (2010) talks about structural quality (adult-child ratio, teacher education) and process quality (interactions, learning opportunities). Variations in adult involvement, utilization of full group activities, and children's interaction with materials, alongside teacher-child interaction, serve as pivotal indicators of process quality (Cadima et al., 2023). Sheridan et al. (2014) state that pedagogical quality is determined by four dimensions (society, teachers, children, and the learning environment) that are in constant interaction. Although policies are not often cited as one of the factors that determine the quality of ECE, it is undeniable that they affect quality. The policies specifically refer to organizational conditions, such as the adult-child ratio. The lower adult-child ratio enables more frequent and better interactions among all participants, which contributes to the quality of pedagogical practice (Penn, 2011). Some studies (Manning et al., 2019; Peleman et al., 2017) see teacher competencies as the key to ECE quality. Dahlberg et al. (2007) define the quality of ECEC as the interdependence of the values and attitudes of teachers, parents and children, and daily activities, including a continuous dialogue between them (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2016). Dýrfjörð et al. (2023) emphasize the role of children in co-constructing and creating new knowledge about how children experience their daily life in ECEC especially related to time children spend in things they are interested in. Finish reform of ECEC focus on promoting children's rights and well-being as a quality predictor (Alexiadou et al., 2024).

Visković (2021) highlights the professional development of teachers as a fundamental dimension of quality in the Republic of Croatia, with focus on the child's needs and abilities, process and cooperation with parents have been recognised as predictors of quality. Data

indicating an increase in children at risk of social exclusion point to the need to investigate educational procedures and teacher competencies. The researched findings can be used as predictors of providing quality support to children and preventing the risk of social exclusion. Therefore, teachers' opinions on the quality of existing pedagogical practice in ECE and their professional competencies for working with children and families at risk of social exclusion were investigated. The findings from this research are of great importance because they serve as key predictors for providing quality support to children and mitigating the risk of social exclusion. Therefore, the study examined teachers' views on the quality of existing pedagogical practice in early childhood education and their professional competences in working with children and families vulnerable to social exclusion. The overarching goal was to uncover how ECE teachers assess their own competencies in working with children at risk of social exclusion and to identify factors that influence these assessments.

This research represents a possible roadmap towards effective support systems for vulnerable children and families. The insights gleaned from this study not only inform the evaluation of existing practices, but also pave the way for targeted interventions and training programs aimed at improving teacher competencies. Ultimately, by identifying predictors of teacher evaluations, this research equips educators and policy makers with evidence-based strategies for fostering inclusive environments within preschools and promoting the holistic development of all children. The research results are therefore applicable not only in ECEC practices but also within the fields of educational policy, social welfare, and community empowerment.

Method

Data were collected within the research activities of the MORENEC project. The project was approved by the Croatian Science Foundation, therefore all research within the project is conducted in accordance with the ethical code of the Croatian Science Foundation (2018).

Initially, the research was distributed within 63 ECE institutions, which is 9.06% of all institutions in Croatia (MSE, 2021). The questionnaire was distributed to the project participants in electronic form. The collected data were processed by the statistical program

Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS 20). For the purposes of general description, frequencies and percentages, measures of central tendency (statistical mean/M) and scatter (standard deviation/SD) were calculated. The normality of data distribution was determined using the Kolgomorov-Smirnov test. A factor analysis of the scale used was performed. Predictive predictors were identified using multiple regression analysis.

Sample

The sample consists of 1307 teachers, which is 9.33% of the population of all kindergarten teachers in Croatia (CBS, 2021). The sample is representative according to the size of the teacher population in Croatia (Cohen et al., 2007).

The teachers in the sample have an average of 40,96 (SD=11,002) years of age, ranging from 20 to 64 years. Within the ECE system they have an average of 14.79 (SD= 11,566) years of service, ranging from the beginning to 46 years of service.

The sample is not representative by gender. Only 0,9% (N=11) teachers in the sample state that they are men, so this information was not taken into further processing. Data on gender were denied by 8,8% (N=115), and on education by 3,6% (N=47) of research participants. Data on the level of teachers' education are in Table 1.

Table 1. *Level of education of teachers according to the place of work of the employer*

Level of education	Employer's place of work				Total	
	Big city (more than 20 000 residents)	City (up to 20 000 residents)	Small town (up to 5 000 residents)	Municipality (up to 2 000 residents)		
Graduate study (Master)	109	79	27	50	265	20,24%
Undergraduate study (bacc.)	342	343	104	148	937	71,7%
High school degree	19	14	3	21	57	4,4%
Total	470	436	134	219	1260	
	37,3%	34,6%	10,63%	17,38%		100%

Research instrument

Based on the analysis of relevant scientific literature and the conducted pilot research on the quality of existing pedagogical practice (Visković, 2021), the *Questionnaire on the Quality of Pedagogical Practice in Relation to Children at Risk of Social Exclusion* was constructed. The scale consists of 6 parts: educational strategies, interactions between children and teachers and children themselves; educational values of the curriculum; planning, monitoring, and evaluation of the learning environment; cooperation with the parents of the children involved and professional development of teachers. The participants assessed the agreement on a five-point Likert-type scale, where 1 corresponded to disagreement with the statements, and 5 to complete agreement. To be sure that participants have an equal understanding of terms, specific concepts were further explained in the questionnaire. In addition to resistance variables, it contains descriptive indicators of conditions and the *Scale of Assessment of Personal Professional Competences* ($\alpha = ,962$; 38 items). The data collected by the *Scale of Assessment of Personal Professional Competences* deviate from the normal distribution ($KS_{(1307)} = ,043$; $p = ,000$).

Results

Working conditions

The teachers in the sample work in educational groups with an average of 20,54 children ($SD = 5,15$) in the range of 18 to 26 children in the educational group. Most educational groups are structurally mixed groups of children from the age of 3 to the start of primary school (47,3%), followed by groups of younger (22,9%), middle (10,4%) and older (9,4%) children. Only 5,2% of the groups are “preschool” groups (children in the year before starting school). Other groups (5%) have a specific structure conditioned by the organisational context. In one fifth of the groups (21,7%), in addition to the regular educational process, some additional program is implemented.

Assessing the working conditions for the implementation of quality educational process

(Table 2.), participants estimate that *in the institution where they work there are conditions for encouragement, initiative, autonomy, and independence of children, regardless of their developmental, family, cultural and other specifics* ($M = 4,35$; $SD = 0,695$). The relative majority of research participants ($f = 604$; 46,2%) estimate that the conditions are completely satisfactory, and 42,9% ($f = 561$) believe that the conditions are generally satisfactory. Furthermore, 0,8% ($f = 11$) participants consider the conditions to be mostly unsatisfactory, while only 0,2% ($f = 2$) consider them to be completely unsatisfactory. Working conditions are assessed as “partially satisfactory” by 9,3% ($f = 121$) of the research participants. Descriptive indicators of items that interpret the dimensions of these conditions in context or possible support for children at *risk of social exclusion* (hereinafter RSE) are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. *Conditions for appropriate educational procedures that can contribute to supporting children at risk of social exclusion (RSE)*

In the institution where I work there are conditions for...	M	SD	S*	K**
active work on the development of group culture and community of all children.	4,47	0,681	-1,315	2,401
encouraging children's initiative, autonomy, and independence, regardless of specifics.	4,34	0,678	-0,635	-0,274
equal respect for the customs of all religious communities that coexist in society.	4,19	0,950	-1,068	0,501
using a universal learning environment design.	3,77	1,013	0,675	0,050
connecting all families from the educational group so that families of different origins, cultures and mindsets are interconnected.	3,52	1,040	-0,337	-0,464
participation of family members of RSE children in the curricular activities of the group.	3,51	1,041	-0,291	-0,515
personal involvement through community activities to advocate for children's rights at RSE to quality education.	3,49	1,092	-0,330	-0,578
encouraging children at RSE to document the personal learning process.	3,47	0,969	-0,321	-0,194
involving family members of children at RSE in deciding on the work of the educational group.	3,10	1,096	-0,062	-0,596

*S= Skewness; **K= Kurtosis

Teachers in the sample highly appreciate the existence of appropriate conditions for the development of a “culture of community unity” within the educational group. They believe that the institutions in which they work have appropriate conditions for respecting the initiative, autonomy, and independence of children, regardless of their developmental and cultural differences. At the same time, they estimate that the preschool institutions do not have adequate conditions for the active involvement of the families of children at RSE in the educational process.

Research participants doubt whether it is realistically possible to create conditions for universal design. Universal design is a concept that has recently been promoted as an inclusive value and assumes a learning environment adapted to all children, without the need for additional adaptation to the abilities and capabilities of individual children. Most participants (N=412; 31,5%) estimate that the institution only partially meets the requirements of universal design. A small number of the research participants (N=205, 15,7%) estimate that the universal design of learning environment is not applied at all or mainly not applied in their institutions. However, most research participants believe that the institution mostly (N=402; 30,8%) or fully (N=261; 20%) uses a universal environment design that suits all children, without a need for additional adaptation to the specific abilities of individual child. It is questionable to what extent the assessment of the importance of universal design is the result of teachers' beliefs, acceptance of such a concept of work or just a tendency to give desirable answers.

Teachers' professional training

Based on the collected data, it is reasonable to assume that teacher professional training in the field of education and care of children exposed to RSE is insufficiently implemented. Most teachers (N=936; 76,5%) in the pedagogical year of this research, never participated in organised professional training. In general, once a year, 135 teachers participated in professional training (11%), while 97 teachers (7,9%) participated two to three times a year. Only 33 teachers from the sample (2,7%) stated that they are continuously improving their professional development by training (four or more times a year). In addition to organised professional training, some teachers participated in activities that improve professional competencies for working with children at RSE (Table 3.). The findings of other relevant

research indicate the importance of professional training and its connection with the development of quality practice, assuming that it is regular, continuous and goal oriented (Hamre et al., 2017; Piasta et al., 2017).

Table 3. *Participation of teachers in activities that improve professional competencies for working with children at RSE*

Teachers' additional professional activities	YES (f, %)		NO (f, %)	
Exchanging examples of good practice	807	61,7	500	38,13
Research of own practice	552	42,2	755	57,8
Special education programs	319	24,4	988	75,6
Professional literature consulting	930	71,2	377	28,8
Consulting the results of scientific research	175	13,4	1132	86,6
Participation in the "learning community"	217	16,6	1090	83,4
Other	46	3,5	1261	96,5

Teachers in the sample are most prone to "networking" to share examples of good practice (61,7%), which can be a quality way to develop professional competencies. Unfortunately, most of them (83,4%) are not involved in continuing education through "learning communities". It is questionable whether this can be explained by a lack of opportunities and / or willingness to learn together. Most participants estimate that they regularly use professional literature (71,2%), but not scientific literature (86,6%). The lack of interest in findings of scientific research and, consequently, their application and verification in practice, does not contribute to the quality development of pedagogical practice.

Teachers' competencies for working with children at RSE

Teachers from the sample were asked to assess personal professional competencies for educational approaches and actions towards children at risk of social exclusion. To determine the factor structure of the *Scale of Assessment of Personal Professional Competence* items, a factor analysis was performed. The sample is suitable for factor analysis ($KMO = ,566$; $\chi^2_{(6)} = 1892,71$; $p = ,06$). The sphericity test of the Scale used is statistically significant ($KMO = ,973$; $\chi^2_{(703)} = 26390,007$; $p = ,00$) and indicates that the input items significantly correlate with each other and have high factor saturations (Extraction ranging from ,683 to ,467 without a

tendency to single out any item). Using the method of principal components in extraction (Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis), with Varimax transformation of the basic solution, 3 main factors were analysed. Together they explain 55,559% of the common variance. The first factor explains 43,811% of the common variance, which includes items of idiographic focus on child's status and personal practice. The second factor integrates support and behaviour modification procedures, while the third involves the dissemination of practices. The factor structure clarifies the teacher's paradigm about personal professional competences and the importance they attach to individual dimensions. Tables 4., 5. and 6. list the descriptive indicators of teachers' assessments on personal professional competence for educational approaches and procedures towards children at RSE according to isolated factors.

Table 4. *Descriptive indicators for factor Idiographic orientations on child status and personal practice*

Items	M	SD	S*	K**
Encouraging collaborative relationships among children.	4,55	0,596	-1,194	1,894
Using receptive communication in interactions with the child.	4,40	0,644	-0,750	0,353
Encouraging a child to express their own thoughts.	4,38	0,671	-0,941	1,273
Protecting a child from unpleasant social situations.	4,37	0,695	-0,887	0,606
Sharing information with family members.	4,29	0,724	-0,737	0,219
Involving the children in decision making.	4,21	0,762	-0,649	-0,123
Conducting individual conversations with family members.	4,17	0,801	-0,766	0,352
Encourages behaviour choices and taking responsibility for consequences.	4,16	0,721	-0,472	-0,176
Using unacceptable child behaviours for learning.	4,16	0,745	-0,612	0,246
Providing an environment tailored to the needs of children.	4,14	0,736	-0,542	0,235
Planning and developmental support for children.	4,13	0,737	-0,610	0,428
Encouraging children to get involved in group activities.	4,13	0,757	-0,506	-0,213
Using various methods of formative assessment.	4,12	0,771	-0,608	0,059
Systematic observation of a child.	4,08	0,761	-0,525	0,100
Involve available and relevant professionals.	4,03	0,909	-0,711	0,012
Development of new professional competencies.	4,02	0,766	-0,410	-0,149
Conducting individual conversations with children.	3,97	0,851	-0,666	0,313
Creating opportunities to question the identities of other children and adults.	3,98	0,835	-0,555	0,077
Collaborative planning of short-term and long-term work goals	3,95	0,831	-0,461	-0,026
Encouraging children's (self) esteem.	3,94	0,798	-0,546	0,390
Encouraging family members to participate in educational group activities.	3,81	0,904	-0,471	-0,159

*S= Skewness; **K= Kurtosis

Participating teachers tend to encourage children's collaborative behaviours and open, two-way communication. They also use actions that contribute to the development of personal identity and a positive self-image. They are less inclined to cooperative behaviours of joint planning, questioning others, and involving family members in the educational process.

Table 5. *Descriptive indicators for factor Procedures to support and modify the behaviour of children at RSE*

Items	M	SD	S*	K**
Encouraging children's self-esteem	4,45	0,632	-0,886	0,714
Encouraging children to use communication of acceptance.	4,45	0,631	-0,864	0,404
Encouraging the development of children's strengths	4,24	0,706	-0,622	0,174
Assessing a child's individual progress.	4,31	0,698	-0,705	0,085
Using a variety of strategies to motivate a child to learn.	4,27	0,684	-0,662	0,491
Trying new approaches in working with children.	4,16	0,730	-0,534	0,123
Adapting curricular activities to the individual potentials of a child.	4,09	0,809	-0,729	0,551
Using strategies that focus on the holistic development of a child.	4,04	0,809	-0,485	-0,270
Giving direct instructions on how to behave.	3,83	0,835	-0,503	0,250
Encouraging children at RSE to provide feedback on the work and / or behaviour of other children.	3,88	0,833	-0,420	-0,109
Implementing behavioural modification strategies for children at RSE	3,80	0,777	-0,235	-0,175
Teaching children based on the culture, traditions and experiences of his family as they are embedded in the curriculum of the educational group.	3,76	0,844	-0,263	-0,225
Conducting conversations with family members about their background and culture.	3,65	0,860	-0,283	-0,015

*S= Skewness; **K= Kurtosis

Research participants appreciate actions that, although child-centered, emphasise the role of teacher and can be intrusive. There is a visible difference between the use of *communication of acceptance* in interactive relationships with children (factor 1) and encouraging children to use *communication of acceptance* with each other (factor 2). There is a repetition of the previously expressed, less inclination to learn about the diversity of others and different ones. Unfortunately, it is also possible to conclude a preference for directive behaviour, for example "by giving direct instructions on how to behave".

Table 6. *Descriptive indicators for factor Dissemination*

Items	M	SD	S*	K**
Informing family members of children at RSE about available support resources within the ECE institution and / or in the local community.	3,63	0,950	-0,344	-0,264
Using (self) assessment instruments to improve one's own educational practice.	3,67	0,961	-0,377	-0,331
Educating children's family members about the possibilities of encouraging children's learning and development at home.	3,55	0,885	-0,269	-0,061
Presentation of personal practice through lectures and workshops.	2,93	1,106	0,040	-0,641

*S= Skewness; **K= Kurtosis

The teachers in the sample are reluctant to use (self) assessment instruments (e.g., professional development maps, video, or audio recordings of their own development) to reflect on and improve their own educational practice in relation to children at RSE. At the same time, they are less prone to dissemination - informing and educating family members and presenting personal practice.

Predictors of (self) assessment of professional competencies

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was applied to check the relationship between socio-demographic variables and conditions in the institution, with the professional competencies of teachers. In the first step, socio-demographic variables were introduced as predictors, while in the second step; predictors were accompanied by conditions (Tables 7. and 8.).

Table 7. *Hierarchical multiple regression analysis*

Model	R	R ²	F	df	p
1	,143	,020	2,096	(5,504)	,065
2	,701	,491	60,351	(8,501)	,000

Table 8. *Beta coefficients*

		β	t	p
1	Age	,165	2,353	,019
	Years of work experience in the profession	-,111	-1,584	,114
	Level of education	-,046	-0,942	,347
	Number of children in the educational group	,023	0,518	,605
2	Age	,121	2,376	,018
	Years of work experience in the profession	-,105	-2,053	,041
	Level of education	-,025	-0,720	,472
	Number of children in the educational group	-,050	-1,562	,119
	Conditions in the institution	,527	9,940	,000

Table 7. shows that socio-demographic variables as predictors explain only 2% of the total variance ($F_{5,504}=2.096$, $p>.05$), thus showing that the relationship between predictors and (self) assessment of professional competencies is not statistically significant. The only variable that shows a statistically significant relationship with (self) assessment of professional competencies is age. Older teachers estimate that they have more pronounced professional competencies for working with children at risk of social exclusion. By including conditional factors, the amount of total variance is visibly higher at 49% ($F_{8,501}=60.351$, $p<.001$). Condition factor proves to be a significant predictor of (self) assessment of professional competencies. Higher values of conditional factors are associated with higher (self) assessment of professional competencies. This justifies the assumption that (self) assessment of personal competencies associated with a higher level of assessment of adequacy is a condition for the organisation and implementation of the educational process, especially with children at risk of social exclusion.

Discussion

Analysing the quality of ECE, the research was based on the approach of Clifford et al. (2010), i.e. the structural quality and quality of the process were analysed. In doing so, the structural quality was analysed in relation to working conditions, education, and teachers' professional development. The quality of process was analysed in relation to the (self)

assessment of educational competencies for educational approaches and procedures towards children at risk of social exclusion.

The authors state that the size of educational groups significantly contributes to quality (Penn, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2014). Research participants work in educational groups attended by an average of 20-21 children. Given that almost half of the participants work in age-mixed groups that according to the SPS (MSES, 2008) should have up to 20 children, it is possible to conclude that the quality prerequisite prescribed by the public education policy is met. The same data can be argued from the aspect of children and adult's ratio because the organisation of teacher's work (5,5 hours daily) does not provide the desired ratio (for example, 1 adult per 10 children) throughout the stay of children in ECE settings (10 hours daily).

Despite this, almost 90% of teachers estimate that they work in satisfactory working conditions. Since the participants assessed the conditions in relation to the possibility of meeting various interests and needs of children at RSE, they assessed the social environment more than the spatial-material one. It is possible that the results would have been different if the spatial and / or material conditions had been investigated. Also, it is possible that the participants gave partly desirable answers precisely because of their own responsibility for the organization of social environment. Nevertheless, the participants conclude that they do not have the conditions to involve families of children at RSE in deciding on the educational process. Starting from the Hornby model (Hornby, 2011) of family involvement, only a small number of families are expected to be involved in these activities, so it is generally not justified to expect the involvement of all or most of them.

The results did not show the importance of the level of education in relation to the assessment of teachers' competencies for working with children at RSE. Also, most participants state that they have never been involved in any of the organised forms of professional development in the field of education and care of children exposed at RSE. Well-designed professional development activities within the professional development of teachers can contribute to changes in the educational process and the wellbeing of children. One-off professional training, especially in larger groups (mass recipients) of inhomogeneous interests and / or motivation, does not significantly affect the development of practice (Hamre et al., 2017; Piasta et al., 2017). Stewart (2014) states that only continuous improvement and

networking leads to changes in practice. Networking of teachers, practitioners, and researchers according to individual interests and potentials relies on the analysis and development of effective strategies. The results show that teachers are aware of building professional learning communities that contribute to changing theoretical premises and improve practice (Stewart, 2014). One of the forms that contribute to networking and creation of learning communities is certainly the exchange of examples of good practice in which more than 60 % of participants were involved (Table 2.).

At the same time, 80% of participants claim that they do not participate in learning communities, not recognising such forms as “the communities that are learning”. Although there is a lack of system support through ensuring the structural quality of ECE, practitioners, possibly independently, find ways to improve their competencies through various forms of training.

Research shows how teachers apply child-centered principles (Bogatić et al., 2018). Child-centeredness is reflected in the recognition of the *Idiographic focus on child status and personal practice* factors (Table 4.) as significant for achieving ECE quality in relation to children at RSE. A significant part of this factor is the interaction between teachers and children, which has already been mentioned as a predictor of quality. The research by Gregoriadis and Grammatikopoulos (2014) also points to the importance of teacher-child interactions especially in relation to children at RSE.

Teachers value their competencies for working with children at RSE. It remains questionable whether these are objective assessments or whether they are desirable answers. Given that one of the key principles of the National Curriculum (MSES, 2015) is the flexibility of the educational process in kindergarten, teachers in their work start from respecting diversity as an imperative of pedagogical action. Despite the possible bias in assessments, the very awareness of the importance of such an approach indicates the existence of developed teachers' competencies.

Limitations

Limitations of the research may indicate the current epidemiological situation (partial occasional closure of ECE settings and limited social interactions). Consequently, there may

be a reason for the lack of appropriate professional development, as well as cooperation and involvement of families in curricular activities.

Conclusion

In ECE practice, educational activities that contribute to reducing the risk of social exclusion of children are recognizable at two levels: support and empowerment of individuals - children and families at risk of social exclusion and encouraging others to accept and support individuals and / or groups at risk. According to the research findings, it can be concluded that teachers are competent to provide support to children but are less inclined to collaborative activities. The quality of educational process, and consequently the outcome, is related to the structure (social relations and spatial-material conditions), and teachers' professional competencies. This research does not find a connection between the level of education and (self) assessment of teachers' professional competencies. This may be interpreted as perceived lack of professional training as part of professional development. The research findings suggest that working conditions and (partly) previous teacher experience are significant predictors of (self) assessment of competencies. This information is indicative of public education policy makers and founders who fund ECE settings. The focus on wellbeing of children and long-term wellbeing of society necessarily presupposes the creation of optimal structural conditions for ECE settings, and regular, systematically designed and continuously conducted teachers' professional development.

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