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Inclusive Pedagogical Practice as a Predictor of Quality Early Childhood Education

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Abstract: The quality of the educational process within the humanistic concept and holistic-developmental approach is interpreted as the optimal adaptation to the individual needs and abilities of children, while inclusiveness presupposes equal inclusion and participation of all children. This article explores the opinions of teachers as bearers of pedagogical-educational process. The aim of this research was to determine how much importance teachers attach to certain dimensions of the educational process, and the procedures of inclusive practice. Empirical research included teachers in 5 preschool institutions (N=146). The research instrument was constructed based on relevant literature. Teachers in this sample recognize the importance: of individualized support to all children; of respecting the diversity; of collaboration with parents, and personal professional development. At the same time, the level of formal education and in-service teacher training is positively correlated with the assessment of importance towards child-oriented practice, and respect for diversity. Teachers with a higher level of education significantly value the importance of additional vocational training in the field of developmental and social risks, the use of community resources, and involvement of parents in planning individual support for children.

Keywords: Children at risk, children's right to participate, children's well-being, sustainable education, professional development of teachers.

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Introduction

The inclusion of children in institutional early childhood education (ECE) is a civilisation achievement, and the right to quality ECE is a fundamental right of every child (Alexiadou & Stadler-Altman, 2020). The quality of ECE is in positive correlation with the current and long-term well-being of children (Moss, 2017). Hence, quality is recognizable in the development of children's social competencies and initial academic achievements (Loeb et al., 2007; Vandell et al., 2010). Overall well-being gained from involvement in an ECE setting was greater for children growing up in a variety of unfavourable conditions (Barnett & Ackerman, 2006; Buswell et al., 2012). The quality of institutional ECE therefore presupposes individual support to each child, and especially to children at risk due to developmental status, low socio-economic status, cultural background and / or unfavourable family relationships (Burchinal et al., 2012).

One of the EU Council Recommendations emphasizes institutional ECE as one of the most important ways to equalize an individual's educational opportunities (European Union, 2019). Consequently, early involvement in an ECE setting has been interpreted as a "key instrument for combating inequality and educational poverty". Nevertheless, some authors doubt whether and how institutional ECE could reduce the effects of social exclusion (Peleman et al., 2019). They continue to emphasize the importance of the quality of each ECE setting, and not only in its involvement (differences between integration and inclusion), but also in the need for a systematic transition from "child care" to the quality of pedagogical practice (Silva et al., 2020; Urban et al., 2012).

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations [UN], 1989) guarantees the right of every child to active participation in personal upbringing and education, the right to express personal opinions, and the right to be heard and acknowledged. Existing pedagogical practices of institutional ECE settings generally encourage the participation of all children in social interactions and supports social sustainability (Wals, 2017). Child agency is advocated, but

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insufficient attention may be paid to the cultural and social aspects of the individual status of some children, especially children at risk of social exclusion (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017).

Inclusion, as a process of egalitarian and active participation of children in personal upbringing and education, should be one of the fundamental aspects of the quality of educational process (Crous & Bradshaw, 2017; Peleman et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2020). It presupposes respect for the diversity of children of different developmental and psychophysical status, ethnic and cultural origin, family structure, and socio-economic status. Therefore, inclusive education is “a process in which the diversity of the needs of all students is accepted and responded to, by increasing participation in learning cultures and communities, while reducing exclusion from and within the education system” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994, p. 47).

In practice, inclusive education refers to a wide range of strategies, activities and processes that seek to achieve the universal right to high quality, relevant and appropriate education of each individual. Inclusion is the starting point, process and desired outcome achieved by ensuring of improved quality of childhood (Wals, 2017), and ecology of learning (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2019). These outcomes imply social cohesion and respect for diversity as well. Learning and accepting diversity contributes to understanding the importance of interconnectedness and interdependence (people, cultures, and contents). The quality of social interaction focuses on open and constructive dialogue, improved teamwork skills, and encourages the development of empathy for others regardless of their differences. Affirmative feedback creates a safe environment in which children can develop their own agency and resilience (Bogatić, 2021; Wals, 2017). This does not result in predetermined normative outcomes, but opens space for environmentally empowered learning, social dialogue and sustainable development.

The quality of ECE settings is also closely linked to the goals of sustainable development - responsible environmental, economic, social and culturally based decision-making and action. Striving for these goals could enable economic sustainability and social justice (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2019). Therefore, by analysing the quality of institutional ECE settings we can focus on the importance of inclusiveness as a process of ensuring learning conditions and strengthening equal participation of each individual in the culture of a community, which is especially important for children from vulnerable groups (minorities) and children growing up with risk of social exclusion (Bouillet, 2019).

In the legislation of the Republic of Croatia, inclusiveness is indicated as one of the basic determinants of the institutional ECE setting. Two important documents accepting the principles of inclusiveness are reflected in the *National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education* (Ministry of Science and Education, Republic of Croatia [MoSE], 2015), and the emphasis on the tasks of each teacher to “encourage the development of every child according to his/her abilities” in the *State Pedagogical Standard for Preschool Education and Care* (Ministry of Science and Education, Republic of Croatia [MoSE], 2008). Accordingly, the inclusive curriculum of the educational process should be:

- socially responsible: to respect the rights of each individual to actively participate in community, life, personal upbringing, education, and to promote socially responsible behaviours.
- reflect the cultural differences of a particular community while respecting diversity and encouraging individual's pride in their own cultural heritage.
- have a holistic approach: focused on the overall development of the individual, enable self-regulated experiential learning by connecting learning contents, advocate for sustainable development and point to global interdependence,
- be open to evaluation and development.

Teachers' professional competencies, personal values and attitudes towards inclusive education are a significant predictor of the quality of inclusive pedagogical practice and can contribute to the well-being of every child, consequently reducing the risk of social exclusion of children. Therefore, it is justified to investigate teachers' opinions on inclusive pedagogical practice, individual educational procedures, and the effect of the level of formal education and professional development on their assessments.

The predictor of a high quality ECE setting stays the professional development and vocational training of practitioners. By professional development we understand all forms of formal and informal education, and by vocational development or training we understand all additional courses in one's professional life. It is precisely the possibility of vocational training that act as a predictor of professional development, lifelong learning and the development of competencies as functional knowledge, and responsible action within ethical norms (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Hujala et al., 2016). In the process of professional development, the teacher has the opportunity to systematically evaluate the quality of personal practice, previously implemented educational approaches and procedures, and review their personal paradigms (Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2018).

Research questions was set to find out which procedures and dimensions of inclusive educational practice teachers designated as higher quality, so in accordance with these questions it was assumed that there was a connection between professional experience of teachers (level of education and training, length of work experience, and age) with individual dimensions of pedagogical practice. The assessment of the significance of certain aspects of the quality of inclusive pedagogical practice was positively correlated with the level of their formal education and their vocational

training on children at risk of social exclusion. Insight into teachers' opinions provides a clearer starting point for better action aimed at further development of inclusive pedagogical practice.

Methodology

Research Goal

The aim of this research is to determine dimensions of inclusive pedagogical practice, based on teachers' opinions. The importance teachers attach to certain dimensions and procedures of pedagogical practice that encourage inclusion as a process of equal participation of all children was explored through teachers' opinions. The possible connection between teachers' opinions and level of their formal education and additional professional development was also examined.

Data Collection

This research was conducted during the first phase of the project "Models of responding to the educational needs of children at risk of social exclusion in the institutional ECE" (hereafter MORENEC). Before constructing a pedagogical model of action, it was necessary to explore existing practice. The survey of teachers' opinions was conducted on a suitable sample - 5 ECE institutions in the Split-Dalmatia County (Croatia) with which the author cooperates professionally. The research survey was conducted during teachers' professional meetings (a form of internal vocational development). Participation was voluntary, with anonymity guaranteed. The purpose of the research was explained to all potential participants, and the right to withdraw from the research was indicated. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split.

Sample

The research included 146 teachers in the institutional ECE system. According to the number of predicted participants in the project (N = 240), the sample size was defined (Cohen et al., 2007). Only one male teacher was included in the sample, so this data was not taken for further processing. The average age of teachers in the sample was 38.81 years (SD = 10.76) in the range of 21-60 years. The mode is 22 years (N = 10; 6.8%) and 36 years (N = 10; 6.8%). The average length of the teachers' service was 12.86 years (SD = 10.55) in the range of 0-39 years, mode 10 (N = 13; 8.9%).

According to Croatian legislation, the founder of a kindergarten can be a local self-government, persons (private), or a religious community. According to the data of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics and stratum of the founder of the kindergarten (CBS, 2020), the sample was representative. The majority of research participants, 78% of them (N = 114) worked in kindergartens founded by local self-government units, 12% in private kindergartens (N = 17) and 0.2% in kindergartens founded by a religious community (N = 3). Some participants (N = 12; 8%) withheld information about the founder of the kindergarten in which they work.

Teachers with either lower (bachelor's degree) or higher level of education (master's degree teachers) are allowed to work in ECE institutions. The majority of participants in the sample, 72% of them (N = 97) held a bachelor's degree, and 28% had a master's degree (N = 49), which corresponds to the structure of employed teachers in the institutional ECE setting (CBS, 2020).

According to the work status and considering the length of service and professional advancement in the first year of work, teachers hold the status of trainees. With professional achievements and increasing work experience, a trainee can reach the professional status of a mentor or advisor. This research included 17 trainees (11.6% of the sample), 12 mentors (7.2%) and 5 advisors (3.4%). The majority of the sample (n = 108, 76.7% of the sample) were teachers with more than 1 year of work experience and no special professional status.

Research Instruments

For research purposes, the *Questionnaire of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice / Q-TOIPP* was constructed. The basis is found on relevant professional literature grouped around International Step by Step Association (ISSA) pedagogical standards covered by Tankersley et al. (2011), the definition for "Competent teacher of 21st century", and the communication review of the teachers' statements in focus groups with the teachers involved in this project. The measuring instrument contains 7 independent variables (gender, age, and years of work experience, level of formal education, professional status, vocational training, and founder of the kindergarten in which the teacher works). Research instruments coexist of the *Questionnaire of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice* which contains 7 independent variables and *Scale of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice*. The Scale contains 6 following subscales (40 items): educational strategies ($\alpha = .737$); interactions of children and teachers, and children with each other ($\alpha = .733$); educational values of the curriculum of the educational group ($\alpha = .82$); planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning environment ($\alpha = .796$); cooperation with parents of children involved ($\alpha = .78$); and professional development of teachers ($\alpha = .834$). Estimation was performed with a five-point Likert-type scale: 1 corresponded to the lowest score and 5 were the highest score of agreement with any specific statement. The whole

Scale of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice had adequate reliability ($\alpha = .837$). The used Scale does not deviate from the standard distribution ($KS_{(80)} = .079$, $p = .19$).

Analysing of Data

The collected data was 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 and range) were calculated. The normality of data distribution was determined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. A statistically significant difference in assessment between the groups was found using the t-test and one-way ANOVA test. The Bonferroni test was used for the Post Hoc analysis of the ANOVA test. Effect size was investigated by applying Cohen's d Measure. The correlation of individual variables was investigated by Spearman's rho correlation coefficient because the dependent assessment variables are from the ordinal scale.

Findings / Results

Procedures of Inclusive Pedagogical Practice

Teachers from the sample evaluated the importance of individual pedagogical practice procedures in the ECE setting (Table 1.). When evaluating the importance of individual procedures there were differences between teachers with lower and higher levels of education. The effect size has mediocre influence only for few items within 6 subscales/areas. These include ideas on tailoring activities to children's needs, using universal design as a learning environment for all children, frequency of collaboration and testing of pedagogical solutions with scientists, response to children's conflicts, practical examples through playing roles on discrimination of "different" ones, flexible stance on planned activities with children, to seek or not to seek expert advice in case of suspicion of developmental issues of the child. It is easily possible that all of the above indicates the need for further strengthening and consolidation of teachers' knowledge and skills, but also the support of the social context.

Table 1. Descriptive indicators of the Scale of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice and difference of assessment between teachers with lower and higher levels of education ($df = 133$)

			M	SD	t	d
Interactions of teachers and children, and children among themselves	Encourage children to solve problem situations on their own.	LLE	4.74	0.44	0.36	0.06
		HLE	4.71	0.51		
	Explain to the child who does not follow the rules the inappropriateness of this behaviour.	LLE	4.77	0.47	0.37	0.08
		HLE	4.73	0.56		
	Offer a hug to an upset child.	LLE	4.69	0.62	0.61	0.11
		HLE	4.62	0.86		
	Ignore children's conflicts.	LLE	2.09	0.96	2.21*	0.41
		HLE	1.69	0.86		
	Encourage a child who does not engage in social interactions with peers with expressions such as: "Why don't you play? "	LLE	2.08	1.04	-0.68	-0.15
		HLE	2.24	1.42		
	Encourage children's collaborative play.	LLE	4.68	0.53	0.37	0
		HLE	4.68	0.52		
	Provide children with affirmative feedback that highlight their strengths.	LLE	4.65	0.58	-1.28	-0.22
		HLE	4.78	0.47		
Provide children with feedback on perceived negativities (e.g. inappropriate behaviours).	LLE	4.06	0.79	-0.57	-0.12	
	HLE	4.16	1.02			
Upbringing and education strategies	Unannounced rewards motivate children to follow the rules.	LLE	3.24	0.97	-1.19	-0.23
		HLE	3.47	1.08		
	Encourage children's reflections on the activities in which they participated.	LLE	4.48	0.64	-2.68**	0.01
		HLE	4.79	0.47		
	In case of suspicion of deviation from the typical development, seek the advice of other professionals.	LLE	4.69	0.52	-2.01	-0.34
		HLE	4.87	0.41		
	Use children's negative experiences as incentives to learn socio-emotional competencies.	LLE	3.75	1.06	-2.66*	0.48
		HLE	4.26	0.86		
	Emphasize the normative achievements of children.	LLE	2.82	1.01	0.13	0.02
		HLE	2.79	1.21		
	Encourage children to document their personal learning process.	LLE	3.93	0.91	-0.41	-0.07
		HLE	4.00	0.98		

Table 1. Continued

			M	SD	t	d
Democratic values	Mark the important dates of all the religions of the children in the educational group.	LLE	3.74	0.98	-0.91	-0.18
		HLE	3.92	1.02		
	Avoid talking about different conditions of growing up in a family (single-parent families, family poverty).	LLE	2.47	1.11	1.63	0.32
		HLE	2.11	1.29		
	Organize role-playing activities so that children understand what it is like to be a member of a marginalized / minority group.	LLE	3.76	0.93	-2.69**	-0.48
		HLE	4.21	0.84		
Ignore children's remarks that contain prejudices.	LLE	2.05	1.11	1.68	0.27	
	HLE	1.74	0.92			
Arrange the living room with illustrations that indicate the diversity of children (identity, race, physical appearance, etc.).	LLE	4.24	0.76	0.05	0	
	HLE	4.24	0.97			
Monitoring, evaluating and planning a learning environment	Action research to check the compliance of the curriculum with the needs of children.	LLE	4.39	0.63	-1.74	-0.34
		HLE	4.61	0.63		
	Plan activities according to arrangements with children.	LLE	4.44	0.69	-0.23*	-0.43
		HLE	4.47	0.64		
	Activities tailored to children's interests.	LLE	4.79	0.41	2.13*	0.51
		HLE	4.58	0.64		
	I use a universal design of the learning environment to suit all my children.	LLE	3.51	1.09	2.39*	0.55
		HLE	2.91	1.32		
	Document children's individual development.	LLE	4.53	0.57	-0.91	-0.17
		HLE	4.63	0.58		
	Evaluate the impact of educational procedures on children from marginalized groups.	LLE	3.98	0.88	-1.51	-0.29
		HLE	4.24	0.96		
Use community resources (for example, visits to institutions).	LLE	4.63	0.50	-2.24*	-0.38	
	HLE	4.82	0.39			
Cooperation with parents	Regularly inform parents about children's achievements.	LLE	4.04	1.02	-0.73	-0.13
		HLE	4.18	1.03		
	To be informed about the child's life in the family.	LLE	4.12	0.77	-0.61	-0.01
		HLE	4.13	0.77		
	Regularly (min. once in two months) hold individual counselling interviews with parents.	LLE	4.19	0.83	-1.42	-0.27
		HLE	4.42	0.85		
	Involve parents in the planning of the educational curriculum.	LLE	4.13	0.88	-0.34	-0.05
		HLE	4.18	0.89		
	Involve parents in the evaluation of the educational curriculum.	LLE	3.91	0.97	-1.98*	-0.34
		HLE	4.24	0.82		
	Involve parents in planning individual support for a child.	LLE	4.54	0.58	-2.68	-0.33
		HLE	4.79	0.41		
Teach parents appropriate parenting practices.	LLE	4.02	0.99	-0.69	-0.14	
	HLE	4.16	1.21			
Professional development	Change professional practice according to suggestions in modern professional journals.	LLE	3.76	0.81	-0.72	-0.16
		HLE	3.89	1.06		
	Check their practice at an expert meeting.	LLE	4.28	0.82	-1.96*	-0.32
		HLE	4.55	0.68		
	"Networking" with other practitioners/teachers.	LLE	4.58	0.62	-2.37**	-0.41
		HLE	4.84	0.37		
	Cooperate with scientists to verify scientific assumptions in educational practice.	LLE	4.35	0.71	-3.35**	-0.54
		HLE	4.74	0.55		
	Additional (none) formal education in the field of children's developmental risks.	LLE	4.55	0.58	-1.78	-0.32
		HLE	4.74	0.50		
	Additional (in) formal education in the field of children's social risks.	LLE	4.48	0.64	-2.05*	0.35
		HLE	4.71	0.56		
Regularly participate in seminars organized by the Science Agency for Science and Education.	LLE	4.55	0.64	-0.77	-0.17	
	HLE	4.66	0.74			

LLE= teachers with lower levels of education; HLE = teachers with higher levels of education

t = Independent Samples t-test; *p≤ .05; ** p≤ .00

d= Cohen's d

Teachers from the sample assessed most of the listed procedures of inclusive pedagogical practice as important (Table 1.). The teachers were seen to be reluctant to ignore children's conflicts and children's remarks that contained prejudice. They doubted the importance of universal design of the learning environment. These teachers were reluctant to motivate children to follow the rules with unannounced awards, and to emphasize their normative achievements. They believed that it was not appropriate for a child who does not engage in social interactions to be asked questions such as, "Why aren't you playing?".

With regard to the level of education, a statistically significant difference was observed in opinions inclusive educational processes (Table 1.). Teachers with a lower level of education tended to ignore children's conflicts and haven't tailored activities to children's interests. Teachers with a higher education were seen to value the importance of encouraging children's reflections statistically significantly more creatively compared to teachers with lower education. These teachers used children's negative experiences as incentives to learn socio-emotional competencies and organize role-playing activities for children to better understand what it would be like as a member of a marginalized / minority group. Other creative reflections included use of universal design of learning environments, and assessing the use of community resources. The teachers with a higher level of education statistically significantly valued the importance of involving parents in the planning and evaluation of the curriculum, and the planning of individual support for children. More educated teachers also valued cooperation with scientists, networking with other practitioners, participating in professional (vocational) meetings, as well as vocational training for working with children at risk.

Dimensions of Inclusive Pedagogical Practice

The dimensions of the inclusive educational process were formed as variables of cumulative values of items. Teachers from the sample evaluated these criteria as most important: social interactions (M = 31.67; SD = 2.57), professional development (M = 30.93; SD = 3.47) and planning, monitoring and evaluation of the educational curriculum (M = 30.19; SD = 2.63). The largest range of assessment for evaluating cooperation with parents was (M = 29.56; SD = 4.11). The criteria evaluated as least significant were: educational strategies (M = 23.36; SD = 2.67) and upbringing values of the curriculum (M = 16.22; SD = 2.28). In relation to the level of teachers' education, a statistically significant difference was observed in the research participants' assessment of certain dimensions of the inclusive educational process. The teachers with higher level of education statistically significant evaluated as more important educational (t = -2.37; p = .01; d = .52) and professional development (t = -2.86; p = .00; d = .57).

The correlation (Spearman's rho) of scores of the individual dimensions of inclusive educational process indicated a statistically significant correlation between assessments of the importance of professional development of teachers with all aspects of the curriculum except with the assessment of the importance of democratic values (Table 2.).

Table 2. Correlation of dimensions of quality of inclusive educational practice

Σ	Strategies	Democratic values	Monitoring, Evaluation, Development	Cooperation with parents	Teacher's professional development
Interactions	.51**	.15	.43**	.20*	.31**
Strategies		.19*	.45**	.42**	.39**
Values			.19	.20*	.11
Monitoring, Evaluation, Development				.49**	.54**
Cooperation with parents					.58**

* p ≤ .05; ** p ≤ .00

The possible connection between the independent variables and the assessment of the importance teachers attach to inclusive pedagogical practice was investigated. There was no correlation (Spearman's rho) between age and length of service with the assessment of the importance of certain dimensions of the inclusive educational process (Table 3.).

Table 3. Correlation between age and length of service with assessment of dimensions of quality of inclusive educational practice

Σ	Age		Length of service	
	r	p	r	p
Interactions	-.12	.78	-.13	.13
Strategies	-.06	.43	-.05	.37
Values	.03	.72	.02	.78
Monitoring, Evaluation, Development	.06	.51	.02	.81
Cooperation with parents	-.02	.82	-.05	.64
Teacher's professional development	-.02	.74	-.04	.68

Factor Structure of the Scale of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice

The sphericity test performed for sampling is adequacy ($\chi^2(10) = 225.22; p < .59$). All items of the *Scale of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice* had high saturation and reliability, and no item was excluded from data processing (Table 4.).

Table 4. Communalities and Scale Item Reliability

	Extraction	α if Item Deleted
Encourage children to solve problem situations on their own.	.79	.83
Explain to the child who does not follow the rules the inappropriateness of this behaviour.	.68	.83
Offer a hug to an upset child.	.77	.83
Ignore children's conflicts.	.76	.84
Encourage a child who does not engage in social interactions with peers with expressions such as: "Why don't you play? "	.64	.84
Encourage children's collaborative play.	.76	.82
Provide children with affirmative feedback that highlight their strengths.	.71	.83
Provide children with feedback on perceived negativities (e.g. inappropriate behaviours).	.72	.83
Unannounced rewards motivate children to follow the rules.	.67	.83
Encourage children's reflections on the activities in which they participated.	.66	.82
In case of suspicion of deviation from the typical development, seek the advice of other professionals.	.73	.83
Use children's negative experiences as incentives to learn socio-emotional competencies.	.67	.82
Emphasize the normative achievements of children.	.74	.84
Encourage children to document their personal learning process.	.71	.83
Mark the important dates of all the religions of the children in the educational group.	.74	.83
Avoid talking about different conditions of growing up in a family (single-parent families, family poverty).	.66	.85
Organize role-playing activities so that children understand what it is like to be a member of a marginalized / minority group.	.82	.83
Ignore children's remarks that contain prejudices.	.74	.85
Arrange the living room with illustrations that indicate the diversity of children (identity, race, physical appearance, etc.).	.76	.83
Action research to check the compliance of the curriculum with the needs of children.	.66	.82
Plan activities according to arrangements with children.	.66	.83
Activities tailored to children's interests.	.67	.83
I use a universal design of the learning environment to suit all my children.	.73	.84
Document children's individual development.	.72	.83
Evaluate the impact of educational procedures on children from marginalized groups.	.75	.82
Use community resources (for example, visits to institutions).	.77	.83
Regularly inform parents about children's achievements.	.78	.83
To be informed about the child's life in the family.	.78	.83
Regularly (min. once in two months) hold individual counselling interviews with parents.	.69	.83
Involve parents in the planning of the educational curriculum.	.85	.82
Involve parents in the evaluation of the educational curriculum.	.75	.82
Involve parents in planning individual support for a child.	.73	.82
Teach parents appropriate parenting practices.	.65	.83
Change professional practice according to suggestions in modern professional journals.	.74	.83
Check their practice at an expert meeting.	.82	.82
"Networking" with other practitioners/teachers.	.83	.82
Cooperate with scientists to verify scientific assumptions in educational practice.	.74	.82
Additional (none) formal education in the field of children's developmental risks.	.87	.83
Additional (in) formal education in the field of children's social risks.	.89	.82
Regularly participate in seminars organized by the Science Agency for Science and Education.	.75	.83

In order to determine the factor structure of items depicted on the *Scale of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice*, a factor analysis was conducted. The sphericity test performed on the Scale was statistically significant ($\chi^2(780) = 1778.54$; $p < .00$) and indicated that the input items significantly correlated with each other. Based on the Scree Plot, 5 main factors were analysed (Figure 1.).

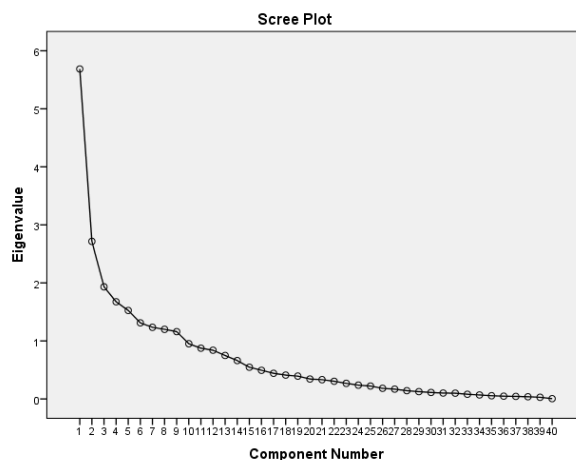


Figure 1. Scree Plot, The Factor Structure of the Scale of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice

Using the Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis, in addition to the Varimax transformation of the basic solution, 5 main factors (components extracted) were singled out, which explained 53.371% of the variance (Table 5.). The first factor which included items of in-service training and professional teachers' networking, explained 20.443% of the total variance. The second factor combined the procedures of cooperation with parents, and the third focused on the child. The fourth factor included the dimensions of diversity (recognition and appreciation), and the fifth focused on the universal design of the educational process.

Table 5. Rotated Component Matrix

Items	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Additional (in) formal education in the field of children's social risks.	.801				
Additional (in) formally education in the field of children's developmental risks.	.792				
"Networking" with other practitioners for support.	.746				
Cooperate with scientists to verify scientific settings in educational practice.	.714				
Use community resources (for example, visits to institutions).	.700				
Check personal practice at professional meetings.	.615				
Regularly participate in seminars organized by education officials.	.553				
Change professional practice according to suggestions in modern professional (vocational) journals.	.439				
Involve parents in the planning of the educational curriculum.		.775			
Regularly (min. once in two months) hold individual counselling interviews with parents.		.702			
Involve parents in the evaluation of the educational curriculum.		.687			
Advise parents on appropriate parenting procedures.		.531			
Use action research to check the compliance of the curriculum with the needs of children.		.571			
Be informed about the child's family life.		.553			
Evaluate the impact of educational procedures on children from marginalized groups.		.490			
Involve parents in planning individual child support.		.376			
Avoid talking about different growing up conditions in the family.		-.448			
Regularly inform parents about children's achievements (closed virtual groups).		.353			

Table 5. Continued

Items	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Provide children with affirmative feedback that highlights their strengths.			.743		
Explain to the child who does not follow the rules the inappropriateness of this behaviour.			.713		
Offer a hug to an upset child.			.347		
Encourage children's collaborative play.			.485		
Encourage children's reflections on the activities in which they participated.			.455		
Document children's individual development.			.393		
Encourage children to document the personal learning process.			.424		
Provide children with feedback on what they have noticed (e.g., inappropriate behaviour).			.687		
Plan activities according to arrangements with children.			.581		
Unannounced rewards motivate children to follow the rules.			.467		
Encourage children to solve problem situations on their own.			.452		
Activities tailored to children's interests.			.323		
Organize role-playing activities so that children understand what it is like to be a member of a marginalized / minority group.				.656	
Use children's negative experiences as incentives to learn socio-emotional competencies.				.615	
When we suspect that a child is deviating from typical development seek the advice of other experts.				.521	
Ignore children's remarks that contain prejudices.				-.361	
Arrange the living room with illustrations that indicate the diversity of children (identity, race, physical appearance, etc.).				.430	
Encourage a child who does not engage in social interactions with peers with expressions such as: "Why don't you play? ".				.391	
Mark the important dates of all the religions of the children in the educational group.					-.424
Emphasize children's normative achievements (e.g. children's academic preparation for school).				.606	
I use a universal design of the learning environment to suit all my children.				.574	
Ignore children's conflicts.				.410	

The first factor of the *Scale of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice* which included items of in-service training and professional teachers' networking proved to be an important influence on opinions on the quality of inclusive pedagogical practice. Consequently, that points out the need of analysing the importance of professional development within lifelong learning.

The results were concerning when 27.7% of participants (n = 36) stated that they had never participated in professional training in the field of educational process with children who were deemed at higher than average risk (Table 6.). As the most important influence on professional development, research participants single out networking with other practitioners (M = 4.65; SD = 0.58) and following suggestions from the professional literature (M = 3.79; SD = 0.89).

Table 6. Frequency of in-service training of teachers from ECE settings about children who are above average at risk (in relation to the founder of a kindergarten)

		Founder of a kindergarten			Total
		Local government	Private person	Religious community	
Professional training in the field of educational process with children who are above average at risk	never	32 29.1%	4 23.5%	0 -	36 27.7%
	rare or insufficient	51 46.3%	5 29.4%	2 66.6%	58 44.6%
	appropriate	27 24.5%	8 47%	1 33.3%	36 27.7%
	Total	110	17	3 130	130

Professional in-service training is one of the activities, i.e. categories related to the professional development of practitioners (Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2018). The paper therefore investigated whether there is a statistically significant difference in assessing certain features of pedagogical practice between participants and the status of their professional development.

The ANOVA test was used with the Bonferroni post hoc test. Participating teachers who regularly participate in in-service training compared to participants who rarely or not participate in this type of professional development statistically significantly valued more individual development of children ($F_{(2)} = 50.60$; $p \leq .05$; $d = .28$), communication with parents ($F_{(2)} = 147.79$; $p \leq .05$; $d = .23$) and their own professional development ($F_{(2)} = 179.855$; $p \leq .01$; $d = .47$).

Also, teachers who regularly participate in in-service training are statistically significantly more likely to assess the importance of offering hugs as support ($F_{(2)} = 3.44$, $p = .03$; $d = .34$); encouraging children to think about the activities in which they participate ($F_{(2)} = 6.07$; $p = .003$; $d = .67$) and marking important calendar dates of all represented religions in the educational group ($F_{(2)} = 4.69$; $p = .01$; $d = .54$), from teachers who rarely or not at all participate in in-service training.

Discussion

In European legislation in a document called *The Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC) (European Commission, 2014), the quality of an ECE settings has been considered through the quality of the structure, educational process and educational outcomes. To this, some researchers add teacher's professionalism (Domović, 2011; Višnjić Jevtić, 2019). The role of teacher is (among other things) to respect individual differences and provide maximum support to each child in his/ her overall development. The quality of the educational process is therefore based on the individual approach and active participation of all stakeholders in the process - children and parents (Tankersley et al., 2011). This research is therefore aimed at examining the importance that teachers attach to certain procedures and dimensions of pedagogical practice.

Teachers from the sample most significantly value the practice of direct social interaction with children and children with each other. This is in line with studies that single out the social experiences of early and preschool children as one of the most significant factors explaining the effect of institutional ECE setting on children's learning and overall development (Wall et al., 2015).

Factor analysis of the *Scale of Teachers' Opinions on Inclusive Pedagogical Practice* indicates that teachers in the sample value child orientation and needs as significant factors in the quality of the process, and thus more significantly assess relationships with children than their normative achievements. Recognition of the importance of emotional expressiveness and mutual trust, in line with relevant research on the well-being of early and preschool children is also recognized by participants in this research (Hujala et al., 2016). Social pedagogy approaches (providing affirmative feedback, encouraging self-evaluation, highlighting the child's strengths) encourage the development of children's social competencies and interest in learning, which the teachers of this research evaluate as positive (Wall et al., 2015). At the same time, research participants encourage children's documentation of personal development, which can contribute to both the well-being of children and quality of the process (Hayes & O'Neill, 2019; Hujala et al., 2016).

Concerning the evaluation of educational strategies, teachers in the sample also recognized the importance of children's play. Learning through free play contributes to development of cognitive and socio-emotional competencies through the processes of self-regulated learning and agency, without coercion and rigidity (Visković et al., 2019). Although some research indicates the benefits of guided play (in which teacher has the role of initiator and moderator), such interventions may limit children's initiative and motivation to learn (Montie et al., 2006). Teachers' focus on certain aspects of play usually has partial outcomes (Goswami, 2015).

Teachers from the sample also recognize the importance of evaluation and documentation for the development of pedagogical practice. Redirecting to action research moves away from the rigid application of certain concepts and at the same time increases the responsibility of the individual. This allows for the development of authentic, culturally appropriate practices. The quality of such an approach is noticed by scientists who estimate that rigid adherence to certain concepts cannot ensure the development of the quality of pedagogical practice (Bašić, 2011; Wall et al., 2015). It is therefore justified to advocate for culturally relevant pedagogy, adapted to authentic conditions (Ladson-Billings, 2014). The findings of this research, as a whole, point to the need for an individual approach to socially relevant pedagogy. Focus on the child and his/her needs, while respecting the right to their active participation, contributes to the quality of learning and development of children's agency (Pramling Samuelsson, 2010). Unfortunately, in the current practice of institutional ECE adults most often control the lives of children. The daily rhythm, ritual contents and activities are most often determined by the adults themselves, and children's equal participation is only declarative. An aggravating factor is situated within conditions of ECE settings, such as the number ratios of children to teachers, which is then reflected in the quality of the relationship (Wall et al., 2015). Some research finds an inverse reciprocal connection between the number of children in the educational group and the quality of teachers' pedagogical approaches (Öun et al., 2018). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the quality of relationships is more important than the number ratios of children to teachers, but a smaller number of children in the educational group leave a professional teacher more room to develop quality relationships.

Teachers from the sample estimated the importance of upbringing values for the quality of pedagogical practice as the lowest. This indicates a discrepancy (differences) between personal values and inclusion, and confirms researches that attitudes are the most difficult to change (Visković et al., 2019). Findings on teachers' pedagogical practice indicate its connectedness with personal values and attitudes (Liakopoulou, 2011). Relevant researches highlight social and ethical sensitivity, tolerance, care, respect and appreciation of diversity and equality as desirable values for teachers (Carr, 2010; Seghedini, 2014; Tirri, 2010). In addition to the assumption of moral integrity, the importance of teacher's expertise is also emphasised (Domović, 2011). All this is recognizable in the process of building children's resilience as resistance and the ability to respond affirmatively to negative and / or potentially stressful experiences and can contribute to the prevention and mitigation of the risk of their social exclusion (Bogatić, 2021). Therefore, it is justified to conclude that the acceptance of inclusive values and understanding of the concept of inclusiveness is a predictor of quality inclusive practice (Alexiadou & Stadler-Altman, 2020).

Some conflicting assessments of teachers in the sample, especially the importance of *universal design* for learning, indicate the possibility of misunderstanding or insufficient knowledge of segments of inclusive curriculum practice. Quality inclusive education advocates a focus on the strengths of the individual, which distances us from the need for "special education" as a model of focusing on the individual deficit (Bouillet, 2019; Nes et al., 2018). Advocating for the "universal design" of learning allows the individual to choose the content and way of learning while using personal potentials according to their interests, rather than imposing (so-called or quasi) development of what the individual does not have.

The importance that teachers in the sample attach to collaboration with parents, scholars, and other teachers indicates their collaborative competencies. This is recognizable in the process of involving children in the educational process, and providing support to children and parents (Van der Schaaf & Stokking, 2011). Research participants prefer networking with other practitioners as confirmed by other relevant research (Carpenter, 2016).

The findings of this research as a fundamental dimension of the quality of inclusive pedagogical practice recognize the professional development of teachers, which is in line with relevant scientific knowledge (European Commission, 2011). These findings correlate with relevant world research that indicates the importance of teachers' professional competencies as an outcome of formal education and systematic professional and vocational development (Marfuga et al., 2013; Saloviita, 2020; Selvi, 2010; Vujičić et al., 2015) and professional ethics (Mohamed et al., 2017). Engagement in vocational trainings considering educational process with children who are above average at risk of social exclusion stand out, which is in line with other research (Bouillet, 2019; Marfuga et al., 2013). Different ways and levels of teacher engagement are associated with the level and quality of initial teacher education and lifelong learning (Hujala et al., 2016; Lieber et al., 2010; Marfuga et al., 2013; Visković et al., 2019). It is interesting that personal engagement in professional vocational training is interpreted as an individual's need for achievement, respect and self-respect (Rossiter, 2008).

This research also found differences in the opinions of research participants in relation to their professional status. Levels of professional status (beginner, advanced beginner, competent, experienced, expert) are recognizable in independent decision-making and reflection on pedagogical activities (Višnjić Jevtić, 2019). This is confirmed by the results of this research because trainee teachers and teachers without vocational status (mentor and counsellor) had lower levels of assessment of the importance of certain dimensions of inclusive pedagogical practice. The findings of this research also pointed to the problem of different understandings of the concept of inclusive education. Research by Nteropoulou-Nterou et al. (2017) indicates precisely the logical connection between the theory and the acquisition of formal education as an insufficient and inadequate basis for the value acceptance and work of students as future teachers in inclusive education. Namely, the research indicates only the principled acceptance of inclusive philosophy, but not the necessary skills for the implementation of the quality of inclusive pedagogical practice.

Different findings also highlighted the problem of different understandings of the concept of inclusive education. Insufficient professional knowledge contributed to the acceptance of inclusion depending only on individual experiences and the functional status of the child (Saloviita, 2020). It is possible that neither teachers nor public education policy from the position of the dominant group recognize the needs of individuals from risk groups, as well as not recognizing already socially excluded child.

Children at risk of social exclusion are children who, due to their familial, ethnic, cultural or developmental status are at a higher risk of exposure to the violation or risk of violation of social, emotional, psychophysical and / or social integrity (Bouillet, 2019). There are usually multiple risks associated. Social exclusion implies social non-recognition and un-acknowledgment, which consequently could generate dissatisfaction with life (Crous & Bradshaw, 2017). The outcomes are unfortunately relatively permanent, multi factorial, and could result in multiple deprivation effects on the individual as a result of cumulative, interrelated economic, cultural, and political factors (Šućur, 2015).

It is also possible that neither teachers nor public education policy from the positions of the dominant groups recognize the needs of individuals at risk which can disable already fragile process and put inclusion in even more challenging path and slow down sensitization of practitioner's personal paradigm simply by minimizing problems and regulating possible "failures" (Lambrev et al., 2020; Selvi, 2010).

Quality inclusive education should therefore be a comprehensive interactive relationship between public education policy, formal education, professional development and systematic support to practitioners for education, empowerment and cooperation with parents (Marfuga et al., 2013; Urban et al., 2012).

Expanding the discussion from the pedagogical practice of teachers, through their formal education, additional professional development, we understand that the sustainability of humanistic principles and associated inclusive policies will not be implemented independently, and that teachers who are in direct contact with children and parents are important for their success. By including the ECE settings as the foundation of the educational continuum, it is not wrong to conclude that quality inclusive pedagogical practice is an integral part of sustainable education conducted by teachers. The transition to sustainable development education also includes teachers who are motivated to act as agents of change and to successfully fulfil the role of teachers of sustainable development education (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2019).

What teachers think, believe, and know affects their pedagogical practice, so any educational reform and implementation can only be successful if teachers' beliefs, their professional qualifications, and their attitudes are taken seriously into account when implementing reforms (Eilks, 2015).

Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2016) obliges all signatories to "provide inclusive, equitable and quality education at all levels - early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training. All people, regardless of gender, age, race, nationality and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and young people, especially those in vulnerable and risky situations, should have access to all levels of education.

Therefore, this and similar research call for further research linking the attitudes, values, education and professional development of teachers that includes identifying children at risk of social exclusion to improve the quality of inclusive pedagogical practice and enable sustainable development goals.

Conclusion

Quality inclusive ECE setting represents an ongoing social process, a right and a well-being for all children, constructed through public educational policies and quality of pedagogical practices. Some research indicates a discrepancy between educational policies and the quality of pedagogical practice of institutional ECE practice, which is why there are no optimal answers to the educational needs of children at risk. Difficulties are recognizable in the practice of political negotiation, cultural processes of not recognizing the needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups and personal attitudes of practitioners (teachers). Although personal attitudes are the most difficult to change, it is reasonable to assume that continuous professional development can contribute to the quality of change, building affirmative inclusive values, approaches and procedures of teachers, and consequently the listing framework of inclusive pedagogical practice.

The presented findings of this research indicate that the professional development of teachers, especially vocational training, is one of the most significant predictors that teachers attach to certain aspects of the inclusive educational process. These findings are important for understanding the existing practice and also represent a starting point for planning further project activities. They emphasised a need to analyse existing formal teacher education programs and to design continuous professional development for practitioners. The aim is to create optimal models of pedagogical practice in the institutional ECE setting for all children.

Recommendations

Further research into pedagogical practice is needed. Understanding teachers' opinions contributes to creating an optimal, science-based ECE curriculum as a benefit to all children. Future research should focus on the professional development of preschool teachers as a significant factor in pedagogical practice. Professional in-service training, as one of the dimensions or features of professional development, has proven to be a predictor in assessing different pedagogical procedures, and thus the potential understanding of their use. Further research should analyse the factors of professional development and their connection with the dimensions of pedagogical practice with the purpose of approaching the best possible practice.

Limitations

The disadvantages of this research are potentially twofold. The sample is small, and although structurally representative, can't be used as overall attitudes of the teacher population in Croatia. Differences in formal teacher education and lack of vocational training in the area of children's vulnerability may prevent an understanding of basic concepts (e.g., universal learning design, inclusive practice). In addition to the above, it is possible to assume that children at risk of social exclusion are not adequately recognised in institutional ECE setting system, and consequently the procedures of inclusive practice are not adequately developed.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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