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## Quality Pedagogical Practice in Early Childhood Education Institutions Relating to Children at Risk of Social Exclusion

SANDRA ANTULIĆ MAJČEN\*<sup>1</sup> AND MAJA DRVODELIĆ<sup>2</sup>

Quality early childhood education and care has been the focus of interest of researchers for over half a century. Approaches to the quality monitoring and quality assurance of early childhood education and care, as well as its conceptualisation and operationalisation, have changed and developed over the decades in line with contemporary understandings of child development and learning, and in accordance with changes in the purpose and functions of early childhood education and care. The results of many relevant studies confirm that quality early childhood education and care is crucial for short-term and long-term positive outcomes in different development and learning areas, especially in the case of disadvantaged children, including children at risk of social exclusion. The aim of this paper is to present the concept of quality in early childhood education and care from various research perspectives, with special emphasis on a review of the literature on the quality of pedagogical practice aimed at children at risk of social exclusion. The paper presents the theoretical model of responding to the needs of children at risk of social exclusion in Croatian early childhood education and care. Special attention is given to the quality of pedagogical practice regarding children at risk of social exclusion, as a prerequisite for planning targeted measures and interventions directed at this group of children and their families within the Croatian early childhood education and care system. It was concluded that the key factors for quality pedagogical practice are an interdisciplinary approach of highly qualified professionals and the participation of all key stakeholders within the child's immediate environment, as well as connection between relevant policies and practice, which are crucial for early childhood education and care quality.

**Keywords:** children at risk of social exclusion, early childhood education and care, quality pedagogical practice

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## Kakovostna pedagoška praksa v ustanovah predšolske vzgoje in otroci, ki jim grozi socialna izključenost

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≈ Kakovostna predšolska vzgoja in varstvo sta v središču zanimanja raziskovalcev že več kot pol stoletja. Pristopi k spremljanju in zagotavljanju kakovosti predšolske vzgoje in varstva ter njena konceptualizacija in operacionalizacija so se skozi desetletja spreminjali in razvijali skladno s sodobnim razumevanjem otrokovega razvoja in učenja ter s spremembami namena in funkcij predšolske vzgoje in varstva. Izsledki številnih relevantnih študij potrjujejo, da sta kakovostna predšolska vzgoja in varstvo ključnega pomena za kratkoročne in dolgoročne pozitivne rezultate na različnih področjih razvoja in učenja, zlasti pri prikrajšanih otrocih, vključno z otroki, ki jim grozi socialna izključenost. Namen prispevka je predstaviti koncept kakovosti v predšolski vzgoji in varstvu z različnih raziskovalnih vidikov, s posebnim poudarkom na pregledu literature o kakovosti pedagoške prakse, namenjene otrokom, ki jim grozi socialna izključenost. V prispevku je predstavljen teoretični model odzivanja na potrebe otrok, ki jim grozi socialna izključenost, v hrvaški predšolski vzgoji in varstvu. Posebna pozornost je namenjena kakovosti pedagoške prakse pri otrocih, ki jim grozi socialna izključenost, kot predpogoju za načrtovanje ciljno usmerjenih ukrepov in intervencij, namenjenih tej skupini otrok in njihovim družinam v hrvaškem sistemu predšolske vzgoje in varstva. Ugotovljeno je bilo, da so ključni dejavniki za kakovostno pedagoško prakso interdisciplinarni pristop visokousposobljenih strokovnjakov in sodelovanje vseh ključnih deležnikov v otrokovem neposrednem okolju ter povezava med ustreznimi politikami in prakso, ki so temeljnega pomena za kakovost predšolske vzgoje in varstva.

**Ključne besede:** otroci, ki jim grozi socialna izključenost, predšolska vzgoja in varstvo, kakovostna pedagoška praksa

## Introduction

The specific characteristics of the learning and development of children of early and preschool age require a high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) emphasises the right of every child to education on the basis of equal opportunities for all children regardless of their developmental and health status, culture and other characteristics.

A range of longitudinal studies (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002; Lowe Vandell et al., 2010; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Sylva et al., 2004; Sylva et al., 2008) have confirmed the importance of ECEC in the context of the short- and long-term effects on child development and learning. The knowledge gained in these studies has led to a systematic approach to monitoring and improving the quality of ECEC as an important and equal aspect of education policies in an international society (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2011).

Having recognised the importance of providing high-quality preschool education, the European Commission issued the Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for ECEC (European Commission, 2014), which includes ECEC quality standards grouped within five dimensions: 1. Access (ECEC that is available and affordable for all families and their children, encouraging participation, fostering social cohesion and embracing diversity); 2. The ECEC workforce (with initial and continuing training, and supportive working conditions); 3. Curriculum (a holistic approach to child development, cooperation and reflection); 4. Monitoring and evaluation (awareness of quality that is in the best interest of the child) 5. Governance and funding (responsibility and cooperation between various stakeholders and policy makers, and right of access to funding). The Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality ECEC Systems (Official Journal of the European Union, 2019/C 189/02; Recital 4) also emphasises that “participating in ECEC is beneficial for all children and especially for children in a disadvantaged situation”. In this context, it is particularly important to provide high-quality education at this level.

It is well known that inclusive pedagogical practice is an important compensatory tool that reduces the risk of social exclusion (RSE) for children (Balladares & Kankaraš, 2020; Frazer & Marlier, 2014; Geddes et al., 2011). Understanding the concept of quality with regard to children at RSE facilitates the prompt identification of children at risk and the adaptation of pedagogical practice to their specific needs. For example, Smith (2020, p. 199) highlights the fact that the ECEC “workforce must be prepared to work more effectively with diverse group of families [...] as early identification and intervention can

offset future, and worsening, outcomes". Only a quality environment provides the conditions for the proper development and learning of every child, especially for children at RSE. Such an environment is able to respond to the needs of children at the most sensitive age, and thus to contribute to their long-term wellbeing (Campbell et al., 2002; Lowe Vandell et al., 2010; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Until now, there has been no systematic research in the Republic of Croatia on the role and potential of ECEC institutions concerning the RSE of children, especially research that deals with the quality of pedagogical practice. The scientific project of the Croatian Science Foundation entitled Models of Responding to the Educational Needs of Children at Risk of Social Exclusion in ECEC Institutions is devoted to this topic. Relevant data specifically concerning the phenomenon of the social exclusion of young and preschool children in Croatia, and on the capacities of institutions to respond to it, will be gathered as part of this project.

The purpose of this paper is to present the theoretical model of responding to the needs of children at RSE in Croatian ECEC. This will be achieved by presenting the concept of quality in ECEC, with special emphasis on a review of the literature on the quality of pedagogical practice aimed at children at RSE. Special attention is given to the quality of pedagogical practice regarding children at RSE as a prerequisite for planning targeted measures and interventions directed at this group of children and their families within the Croatian ECEC system.

### **Children at risk of social exclusion (RSE) in the context of the quality of ECEC**

The risk of social exclusion is a broad term, the interpretation of which depends on the selected approach and the scientific discipline explaining it. However, all authors agree that the risk of social exclusion of children may lead to undesirable outcomes later in life, both at the level of adjustment to social norms, and at the level of psychosocial functioning (Sabates & Dex, 2015).

Within the project of the Croatian Science Foundation entitled Models of Responding to the Educational Needs of Children at RSE in ECEC Institutions (Bouillet & Domović, 2021), social exclusion of children is understood as a multidimensional concept including economic, social, cultural, health and other aspects of disadvantage and deprivation, which individually or combined can have an unfavourable effect on the current life and development of a child, as well as on the child's development and on disadvantaged life chances in adult life. The most frequently mentioned risks of social exclusion of the child are poverty, mental illness of parents, inadequate parental care, migrations, neglect

and abuse, and premature childbirth (Sabates & Dex, 2015), where a higher number of risk factors increases the likelihood of social exclusion of children (Cernigila et al., 2018; Reiss, 2013). Examples of social exclusion of children in early and preschool age include exclusion from social activities (e.g., parties, excursions, sporting and other activities), from services in the community (e.g., libraries, public transport, cultural, art and sports societies), and from education and care institutions (e.g., due to shortages in personnel, technology, support or funding).

Some of the earliest studies of quality specifically examined the quality of ECEC programmes aimed at groups of underprivileged children. Lazar's meta-analysis (1977) summarises the results of fourteen longitudinal studies conducted since the end of the 1950s that analysed the effect of ECEC experimental programmes aimed at children with low socioeconomic status (e.g., Philadelphia Project, Institute for Developmental Studies, Early Training Project, Perry Preschool Project, Head Start & Follow Through New Heaven Study, etc.). One of the key findings of this meta-analysis confirmed the positive effects of ECEC programmes on adjustment to, and success in, primary school education. It was confirmed that in order to have positive effects, ECEC programmes must be well designed and well implemented (Lazar, 1977). The Perry Preschool Project longitudinal study, which was conducted from 1962 to 2002 on a sample of 123 children from underprivileged families, monitored the effects of a high-quality preschool programme. The study confirmed the positive effects of the programmes, which were sustained to adulthood, and favourable effects on society as a whole were also documented (Barnett, 1985; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Schweinhart, 2003).

Concerning disadvantaged children, the findings of an EPPE longitudinal study (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education: 1997–2003; Sylva et al., 2004) confirm that the wellbeing of children at RSE is significantly conditioned by the quality of the experience at an early and preschool age, with the effect of quality ECEC being greater when the number or complexity of risk factors to which the children are exposed is higher. With regard to children at RSE, the EPPE study confirms that quality ECEC, although unable to remove the circumstances leading to the risk, can help reduce the disadvantaged position of these children. For example, Melhuish et al. (2019) show that the risk of developing cognitive difficulties can be reduced by 40–60% and the risk of developing socio-emotional difficulties by 10–30% in children who attend high-quality ECEC. This effect can last all the way to the children's adolescence. Hall et al. (2009) found that the global quality of ECEC moderates the effects of family risk factors (e.g., poverty), while the quality of the relationship between the

ECEC personnel and the children moderates risk factors at the level of the child (e.g., neurodevelopmental risks, developmental disorders). The quality of the curriculum and of the education process moderates the effects of both risk factor groups. Furthermore, Sammons et al. (2015, p. 3) consider that “early years and primary school experiences, along with better home learning environments in the early years and up to the age of seven, provide a significant boost in attainment for children at the age of 11 and help to counteract disadvantage”.

Although there is a large amount of scientific evidence to show that participating in quality ECEC makes a difference in the quality of life of disadvantaged children, contemporary societies are still faced with the insufficient availability of such programmes for children and families exposed to various risks of social exclusion. Comparative international studies (OECD, 2016) show that children are much more often included in ECEC programmes if they belong to families with above average socioeconomic status, while children from families with an underprivileged socioeconomic status are more frequently left outside these programmes (regardless of the child’s age). Jager (2016) noticed a high percentage of children at risk in early childhood education, yet only a third of them have adequate pedagogical support, suggesting that the quality of early education in relation to the risk of social exclusion needs further research. A recent study by the UNICEF Office for Croatia (2020) has shown that every third child is enrolled in the ECEC system, and this ratio diminishes when children at risk of social exclusion are involved. Hence, ECEC enrolment is only 42% in low-populated areas, 31% in underdeveloped regions, and 18% for children within the Roma population in Croatia. According to Bouillet (2018), the greatest administrative obstacles to the accessibility of ECEC for children at RSE in Croatia are insufficiently developed systems for registering children in early and preschool age, relying on parents’ initiative to protect children’s rights, the criteria for the enrolment of children in ECEC programmes (which are biased towards children of working parents), absence of organised transportation to/from the ECEC institution, and underdeveloped alternative ECEC programmes for children who are not enrolled in an ECEC institution. On a national level, as well as on regional and local levels, there are no standardised mechanisms of intersectoral cooperation and exchange of information regarding ECEC, which leads to the invisibility of children at RSE.

There is a clear need to invest additional efforts in coordinating the Croatian ECEC system with the needs of children at RSE, as the system is not sufficiently accessible to many children. The accessibility of high-quality ECEC is therefore one of the strategic goals of the Republic of Croatia by 2030 (National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030, 2021).

ECEC institutions are expected to ensure greater accessibility, quality and fairness of services in order to encompass more children at RSE. Insufficient access to ECEC for these children poses significant risks to their development and has a detrimental effect on society as a whole (Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014; Das et al., 2018). However, decisionmakers, parents, ECEC professionals, directors of institutions and experts have different definitions of this complex social problem and approaches to resolving it (Van Dyke, 2017). Thus, a comprehensive and effective solution is yet to be found. There is no doubt that part of the problem lies in the insufficient and unequal knowledge of the methods of developing accessible, inclusive and high-quality pedagogical practice.

### **Quality ECEC pedagogical practice with regard to children at risk of social exclusion (RSE)**

Considering the context and complexity of the education process, quality may be operationalised as a multidimensional concept (Donabedian, 1980, according to Sheridan, 2007) or as a “multifaceted construct” (Graue, 2005, according to Dalli et al., 2011, p. 34). The quality concept may be operationalised as a “cultural construction” (Woodhead, 1996, p. 10) that changes in a specific context and under specific circumstances. This supports the fact that quality is a dynamic rather than a static concept (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Moss & Pence, 1994; Moss, 1994). The concept of quality is defined as a relative concept, and not as an objective reality (Moss & Pence, 1994; Moss, 1994; Woodhead, 1996).

The quality of ECEC can be operationalised as a multidimensional concept with three key dimensions: structure, process and outcome (Donabedian, 1980, according to Sheridan, 2007). Structural quality includes the characteristics of the programme, the environment, the equipment, and other aspects of the ECEC institution, such as the number of children in the educational group, the teacher-child ratio, the material equipment in the institution, the level of training of the professional staff, etc. (Moss et al., 2003; Pascal et al., 2012). According to data provided by the OECD (2001, 2006, 2011), this belongs to one of the most frequently applied approaches to assessing the quality of ECEC. Process quality includes the interactions of the participants involved (children and adults), the culture of the organisation, the management of the organisation, the curriculum, the education process, etc. (Moss et al., 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Wangmann, 1995). Dunn (1993) defines process determinants as the child’s direct experiences that include the specific and dynamic characteristics of the environment, such as child-teacher interactions, values, goals, leadership, etc., thus providing a broader framework for observing the process.



Quality operationalised in terms of educational outcomes relies on the assumption that a higher level of quality leads to better educational outcomes and to the better preparedness of the child for school (McQuail et al., 2002; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). The present paper focuses on the elaboration of the process dimensions of ECEC quality, with emphasis on quality ECEC pedagogical practice with regard to children at RSE.

The ISSA approach, which is focused on process determinants of ECEC quality (International Step by Step Association, 2010), operationalises the quality of pedagogical practice through seven quality areas: 1) Interactions, 2) Family and Community, 3) Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy, 4) Assessment and Planning, 5) Teaching Strategies, 6) Learning Environment, and 7) Professional Development. These quality areas are based on a humanist and socio-constructivist paradigm, and the fundamental starting point is developmentally appropriate practice and an individualised approach to children and learning through interactions and dialogue between children, and between children and adults. The fundamental principles include mutual understanding and respect, embracing diversity and ensuring social inclusion. In this approach, the quality of pedagogical practice is considered a key factor in shaping relationships, interactions and the context within which the child learns and develops (Tankersley & Ionescu, 2016).

The ISSA standards of quality (International Step by Step Association, 2010; Tankersley & Ionescu, 2016) place a great deal of emphasis on purposeful, reciprocal, warm and responsive interactions that support children's needs, along with partnership between teachers, ECEC institutions, families and the local community, with special emphasis on embracing and respecting diversity. Partnership with parents includes providing support, effective communication, and exchange of information about children, as well as parental engagement in the curriculum decision-making process. Quality pedagogical practice stems from monitoring the degree of participation and involvement of children in activities, in order to provide a stimulating environment for development and learning. Teaching strategies focus on setting high but attainable goals by encouraging curiosity, research, critical thinking and cooperative behaviour, as well as openness and respect for diversity. Moreover, it is important to ensure a physically and psychologically safe and stimulating environment that offers appropriate activities, materials and stimuli to encourage children to engage in research, play and interactions, both indoors and outdoors. Finally, high-quality professional development, in addition to continuous evaluation and self-evaluation, is the foundation for assuring quality development and learning for every child (International Step by Step Association, 2010; Tankersley & Ionescu, 2016).

The ISSA definition of quality pedagogical practice “reflects a strong belief that a teacher’s role is to provide maximum support to each child in its development into a strong, confident, caring, responsible and happy member of our society. As such, it is founded on beliefs which include child-centred teaching, the need to develop strong partnerships with families and communities, and teachers as advocates of quality education and care for every child” (Tankersley et al., 2012, p. 3). This provides a comprehensive and clear foundation for ensuring a quality environment for the development and learning of children at RSE.

Starting from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems (1979), and in the context of the interactional perspective of pedagogical quality, Sheridan (2001) points out that the quality of pedagogical practice relates not only to the level at which the context of the education institution has a positive effect on the growth and development of the individual, but also to the degree to which the individual can affect and change the context that surrounds him or her, as well as the degree to which the individual can manage his or her own learning process.

Several case studies have been conducted with a view to providing an insight into the quality of pedagogical practice. They have identified six areas that are particularly important for the quality of work with children at early and pre-school age (Sylva et al., 2004): 1) quality of adult-child verbal interactions, 2) initiating activities, 3) knowledge and understanding of the curriculum, 4) knowledge of the child learning and development process, 5) adult skills to support children, 6) a high degree of parental engagement in the children’s learning process, and 7) supporting children with strategies to manage their own behaviour.

Research recognises ECEC teacher-child interactions as the most salient component of ECEC quality in terms of children’s social-emotional functioning, which is of high importance for children in RSE (Blewitt et al., 2020). The quality of adult-child interactions includes cooperation in resolving problems, explaining concepts and evaluating activities, whereby teachers ask open-ended questions and provide clear feedback to children’s behaviour. It is extremely important that adult-child interaction, especially when it involves the child and the ECEC teacher, is responsive, easily accessible and warm (Melhuish, 2004). It has also been shown that it is particularly important to provide children with freedom of choice (Sandseter & Seland, 2016). Sylva et al. (2004) stress the need for uniformity between the activities initiated by the child and those initiated by the teacher. In this sense, interventions initiated by the teacher must focus on enhancing the learning process, and on initiating group work and cooperative learning.

Hamre et al. (2014) suggest a general dyadic systems-level property of ECEC’s teacher-child interaction that includes responsive teaching, active engagement, cue detection, contingent responding, domain-specific elements of

teacher-child interactions, motivation-inducing supports, management and routines, and the facilitation of cognition. However, Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2020, p. 2) emphasise that “in accord with an ecological perspective and person by environment model, individual children may vary in their reactions to the same environment and different environments may produce the same outcome for different children [...] it is critical to examine the interaction between children’s behavioural risks and teacher-child interaction quality”. This includes a positive and active approach to behaviour guidance with the aim of encouraging children to achieve success, develop positive self-esteem and increase competence (Blewitt et al., 2020). It is important to acknowledge Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development in ECEC teacher-child interactions, whereby children’s abilities are challenged to stimulate learning in relation to their current level of knowledge and skills (Kievik et al., 2020). For children at RSE, the availability of ECEC institutions to parents is particularly important. A high degree of parental engagement in the learning process implies an effective exchange of information on the child, involvement in decision-making about the curriculum, and the alignment of common goals connected to the child’s education and care (Goodal, 2018; Ferreira et al., 2018; Melhuish, 2004; Sylva et al., 2004).

An important precondition of quality pedagogical practice is structural quality conditions, such as the number of children per teacher and the size of the educational group (Melhuish, 2004), as well as supportive working conditions (Nasiopoulou et al., 2021). In addition, the level and effectiveness of the education and training of ECEC teachers, their devotion to the job, and continuous professional development are strongly connected with the quality of pedagogical practice (Melhuish, 2004; Nasiopoulou et al., 2021; Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014). Continuous professional development based on the active engagement of ECEC teachers, and on peer exchanges within a shared scientific framework, are the most effective (Peleman et al., 2018).

### **Model of responding to the needs of children at risk of social exclusion in Croatian ECEC**

The scientific project of the Croatian Science Foundation entitled Models of Response to Educational Needs of Children at Risk of Social Exclusion in ECEC Institutions is focused on the quality of educational practice and on creating prerequisites for implementing appropriate responses of ECEC institutions to the educational needs of children at RSE in Croatian ECEC.

Croatian ECEC is regulated by the Preschool Education Act (1997) and accompanying secondary legislation. ECEC functions as a unitary system and

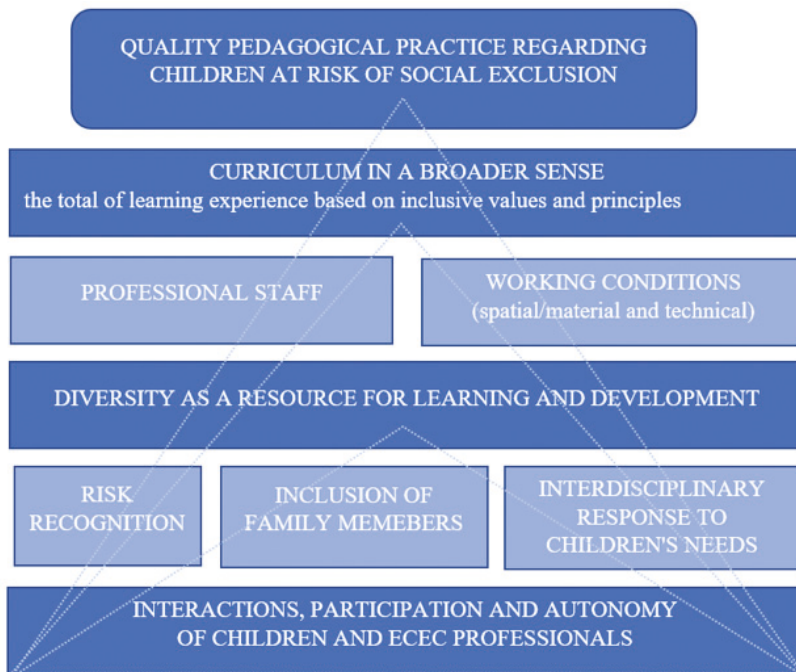
includes the upbringing, education and care of young and preschool children (from the age of 6 months to school age at 6 (7) years). Croatian ECEC comes under the auspices of the Ministry of Science and Education (MSE), which provides nationwide guidance and a framework for the accreditation and monitoring of educational provision. From an operational perspective, the system is highly decentralised, and the funding and management of provision is the responsibility of local authorities. General objectives and principles across all sectors of the education system include: children's right to high-quality education, equality of educational opportunities, acquisition of key competencies as a right and obligation, inclusion, democracy, and pluralism in institutional forms and pedagogical programmes (Bouillet 2018a; Eurydice 2021). Bouillet (2018) confirms that a change of the ECEC system in Croatia is needed in several aspects, specifically: the conditions in which ECEC is performed, the content offered in ECEC, ECEC programme quality assurance, and reduction in the requirements that children at RSE and their parents need to meet in order to access an ECEC programme. Antulić Majcen and Pribela-Hodap (2017) demonstrated the clear need for additional support of ECEC teachers and institutions in the educational area, especially regarding inclusive educational practice, as well as the need for an additional systemic approach regarding advancements in the quality, research, development and topicality of quality in ECEC. The model is therefore oriented towards the key components of ECEC in Croatia that need improvement regarding the response to the needs of children at RSE in the Croatian ECEC setting.

The model is based on the on Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979) and the ISSA approach (International Step by Step Association, 2010; Tankersley & Ionescu, 2016). It implies the implementation of national and international inclusive education policies in the immediate educational practice by ECEC professionals aimed at children at RSE. Such practice includes the collaboration of an interdisciplinary team of experts (ECEC teachers, psychologists, pedagogues, educational rehabilitators, etc.) who can recognise the needs of children and their families. The underlying assumption is that an ECEC institution, in cooperation with local governance bodies, ensures ECEC availability mechanisms regardless of their developmental, familial, social and other attributes. This implies the need to ensure structural determinants of quality (i.e., the number of children per ECEC teacher, group size, spatial/material and technical working conditions) in order to enable quality educational practice regarding children at RSE. Since the MORENEC project is focused on practice, the model aims to define process determinants of quality that are focused on the quality of interactions between ECEC teachers and children, parents/legal

guardians, co-experts, other professionals and the local community, which implies highly qualified professional staff. The microsystem and the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) for a child at RSE are defined according to these principles (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*The model of quality pedagogical practice for children at risk of social exclusion*



Pedagogical practice in Croatia is defined by the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education and Care (2015), which highlights the need to respect differences in children. The principles include the flexibility of the educational process; partnerships between the kindergarten, parents and the local community; ensuring continuity of education and care; and openness for continual learning and improvement of practice. Key values emphasised are: knowledge, humanism and tolerance, identity, responsibility, autonomy and creativity. The general goals of ECEC are to ensure the child's wellbeing and his or her entire development, upbringing, learning and competence development.

Staff professionalism should be achieved through a high level of education of ECEC teachers, positioned on ISCED level 7. However, their profession

is not regulated, and the institutions responsible for their education have different study programmes, resulting in different competences. Coordinating these study programmes is a prerequisite for ensuring highly trained teachers who possess a knowledge of child learning and development paradigms, and are capable of recognising and responding to the needs of a child at RSE.

Inadequacies within the initial education of ECEC teachers are somewhat compensated for later through continuous professional development, led by the Education and Teacher Training Agency (ETTA). With regard to ECEC teachers, however, research points to the absence of lifelong learning activities aimed at building and strengthening their competences in working with children at risk of social exclusion (Antulić Majcen & Pribela-Hodap, 2017, Bouillet, 2018). Through improvements and systematisation of the continuous professional development and training of ECEC teachers, as well as the continuous review of pedagogical practice (e.g., through reflection, self-evaluation and evaluation), skills for moderating purposeful, reciprocal and responsive interactions concerning children would be ensured as important elements of a quality pedagogical practice.

Spatial/material and technical working conditions are defined in the State Pedagogical Standard of Preschool Education, and are the responsibility of the founders of each ECEC institution (owned by natural persons, religious groups or non-governmental organisations). In this context, the founders are directly responsible for accessibility and affordability as components of access to ECEC institutions. This is linked to the number and size of ECEC institutions in the local community, the amount of co-financing of the costs of attending ECEC, the enrolment policy (e.g., enrolment priorities), and to identifying the needs of children and parents. Therefore, the local community has the responsibility to provide instruments and measures of support to parents of children at RSE. Research points to significant regional differences in founders' opportunities to meet the established standards (Bouillet, 2018, Dobrotić et al., 2018).

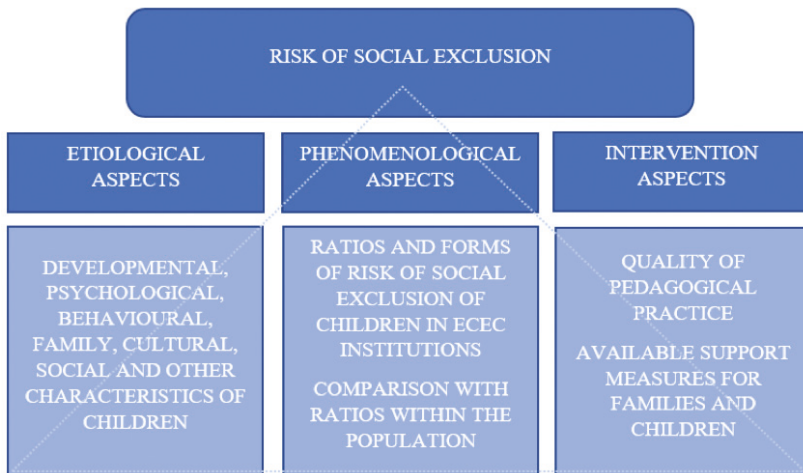
It can be concluded that, on the national level, the ECEC system recognises the rights of children at RSE, but it all depends on the personal views and competences of ECEC teachers. The purpose of the present project is to ensure that each ECEC teacher, within his/her institution, guarantees the participation, interaction and autonomy of children and professionals.

Hence, the main objective of the proposed research project MORENEC is to contribute to the systematisation of current scientifically based findings and the development of new findings regarding etiological, phenomenological and intervention aspects of risks of social exclusion among children in early and preschool years. In relation to the research objective, three key aspects of

the risk of social exclusion are recognised: a) etiological, which includes developmental, psychological, behavioural, family, cultural, social and other characteristics of children; b) phenomenological, which includes an analysis of ratios and forms of risk of social exclusion of children in ECEC institutions and comparison with ratios within the population (outside the ECEC system); and c) intervention, which includes quality pedagogical practice, available support measures for families and children, and elements of successful support models (Figure 2). The objective will be achieved by analysing the aspects of risks of social exclusion of children through establishing the proportion of children at risk of social exclusion, characteristics of educational practices (i.e., quality pedagogical practice) directed to this group of children, and available measures of educational support and professional treatment for these families and children. The results will enable a comparative and critical analysis of the inclusivity of ECEC institutions.

**Figure 2**

*Research goals regarding etiological, phenomenological and intervention aspects of risk of social exclusion of children of early and preschool age*



Relevant data on the actual phenomenon of social exclusion of young and preschool children in Croatia, and on the capacities of institutions to respond to it, will be gathered as part of this project. The model presented in this paper is focused on quality pedagogical practice for children at RSE and is one of the project's theoretical frameworks of responding to the needs of children at RSE in Croatian ECEC. By applying the suggested model, the intention is

to reach synergy within the system, in order to achieve a holistic approach in recognising and responding to the needs of children at risk of social exclusion. In short, to apply this model implies the following: close cooperation between systems, availability of scientifically based models of work with children and their families, and a high level of professionalism of all experts involved, without which it is impossible to ensure the quality of various services. All of these components can and must be developed with the systemic support of all stakeholders within education policy, and with the engagement of the professional community. This represents a serious and substantial reorganisation of current services aimed at children and their families within all operational segments, especially in segments that ensure the quality of pedagogical practice, that is, the quality of ECEC for all children of early and preschool age.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the present paper was to present a theoretical model of responding to the needs of children at RSE in Croatian ECEC. Children at RSE are those who are experiencing economic, social, cultural, health and other aspects of disadvantage and deprivation, which individually or combined can have an unfavourable effect on their current life and development, as well as on their life chances in adult life (Bouillet & Domović, 2021). Risks of social exclusion can be the consequence of the conditions in which a child grows up and develops, or of various developmental specificities. The cumulative effects of the risk of social exclusion have multiple negative effects on the quality of life and development of young and preschool children, which shows that there is a need to approach the development rights of children from the aspect of their multidimensionality, mutual dependence and cumulative effect on the quality of children's life as they grow up (Farkas, 2014). Without additional support and professional help, children at risk of social exclusion have very few opportunities to grow up successfully, because, regardless of the problems they face, these factors generally significantly reduce the children's chances of achieving satisfactory academic and social development.

It is therefore imperative to provide access to high-quality ECEC institutions and quality pedagogical practice in order to ensure compensatory mechanisms that can reduce the risk of children's social exclusion. Understanding the concept of quality when it comes to children at risk of social exclusion enables such children to be promptly identified and pedagogical practice to be adjusted to their specific needs. This provides a quality environment to secure the conditions for the quality development and learning of every child and to cater for



their needs at their most vulnerable age, thus contributing to their quality of life in the long term.

The model of quality pedagogical practice for children at risk of social exclusion presented in the present paper emphasises the importance of the implementation of national and international inclusive education policies in the immediate educational practice by ECEC professionals aimed at children at RSE. In order to implement this model, close cooperation is needed between stakeholders at all levels of the education system. It is also crucial to ensure the availability of scientifically based models of work with children and their families, and to guarantee a high level of professionalism of all of the experts involved. All of these components can and must be developed with the systemic support of all stakeholders within education policy, and with the engagement of the professional community. A serious and substantial reorganisation of current services for children and their families is needed. This should involve a significant change within all operational segments, especially within segments that ensure the quality of pedagogical practice, that is, the quality of ECEC for all children of early and preschool age.

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