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CHILDREN AT RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN THE EARLY AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEM

Abstract: *Children at risk of social exclusion (RSI) are more than average exposed to the risk of violation of their socio-emotional and psycho-physical integrity. The term includes children with challenging developmental and/or psychophysical status, exposed to inappropriate conditions in which they grew up, children in families of minority cultural identity. Exposure to RSI is associated with below-average educational outcomes, lower socio-emotional competencies, psychological difficulties, and antisocial/or addictive behaviours.*

Earlier studies found that 7 to 10% of preschool children are in RSI. Research in Croatia shows that 21.1% of preschool children are in one RSI, while 13.2% of children are in two or more RSI (<http://morenec.ufzg.hr/>). Children's involvement in early childhood education and care (ECEC) stands out as an instrument for the prevention of educational poverty and one of the predictors of children's well-being. Involvement alone is not enough, and the quality of the ECEC system and the process are more important indicators of well-being. Unfortunately, only 30% of ECEC institutions have a standardised child risk assessment procedure and organised support for children and families. Only 20% of ECEC teachers estimate that they are educated for (some) forms of support for children in RSI.

Keywords: *children of early and preschool age, children's participation, social justice, the quality of the educational process; vulnerable children.*

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of children in the ECEC system is an asset of civilisation and a guaranteed right of every child (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). The European Child Guarantee (European Union, 2021) advocates, among other things, equal access of every child to institutional ECEC. The ways of including children in the ECEC system are determined by the public education policy of each country.

The well-being of the child from the involvement of children in ECEC is indisputable. The modern curricular approach recognises the well-being of children as the fundamental starting point, the norm and the desired outcome of education and care. The well-being of each individual child is social capital that can contribute to the quality of life of the community and the long-term well-being of society. But the findings

of relevant research as well as pedagogical practices indicate that involvement in itself is not (the only nor the most important) predictor of a child's well-being.

As a rule, the benefit from involvement in ECEC is greater for children who grow up in unfavourable conditions. That is why this paper analyses growing up in risky situations and the outcomes of children's exposure to RSI, and the possibilities of ECEC in prevention of risks and unfavourable outcomes of those children.

CHILDREN AT RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Vulnerable children are more than the average exposed to the risk of violation of their social, emotional, physical or psychological integrity. These are children with a challenging psycho-physical status (giftedness or difficulties in development), exposed to inappropriate conditions of upbringing (low-quality parenting, low SES, specific family structure and/or history, and dysfunctional families) and children in families of minority cultural identity (national, ethnic, racial, religious, migrant background). Children in the health care system (child patients), children in the justice system (child victims and/or perpetrators of crimes, children of interested parties in the proceedings – for example, divorce of parents), children living in isolated or remote communities can also be considered as particularly vulnerable groups (islands, mountain areas and underdeveloped rural areas) and children in the system of alternative care (children excluded from the family, in social welfare institutions or foster children). As an additional risk for children, non-standard/non-standardised professional involvement of parents stands out.

Vulnerable children significantly more often than their peers have less favourable outcomes, which in adulthood can manifest as psychological problems, antisocial or addictive behaviours (Chen et al., 2017; Mulvey et al., 2017; Ramchandani et al., 2017). Belonging to one or more groups in risky situations at the same time significantly increases vulnerability (Bouillet & Domović, 2021; Farkas, 2014).

Although not all vulnerable children are socially excluded, growing up in risky conditions increases the risk of social exclusion. Social exclusion is interpreted as a process and not only as an outcome. Individuals and/or (smaller) groups are marginalised, left out or stigmatised, most often because of visible (socially unusual) characteristics that distinguish them from the majority as a dominant group, or whose lifestyle deviates from what the dominant group considers normal (Hill et al., 2004). This is visible in physical separation from others and/or socio-emotional exclusion (ignoring and/or preventing involvement in relationships with others). As a rule, children at RSI have limited access to socio-emotional, economic, educational and cultural resources important for their complete development (psycho-physical, cognitive, socio-emotional). That is why Crous and Bradshaw (2017) believe that social exclusion is determined precisely by the lack of (some or all) resources for a quality life. The experience of social exclusion can result in impaired emotional and mental health (Chen et al., 2017; Mulvey et al., 2017), academic difficulties (Eurostat, 2013; Raabe, 2019), reduced prosocial behaviours (Flouri & Sarmadi, 2015) and low self-esteem (Coplan et al., 2004; Doi et al., 2019). Stenseng et al. (2014) find that longer and continuous social exclusion of children generates more aggressive behaviours. Research by Peleman et al. (2020) indicated that children of minority cultural identity and migrant origin have a higher risk of social exclusion due to cultural and language barriers. Their social interactions and consequently play activities are reduced compared to children of the ethnic majority. Vandebroek and Lazzari (2014) warn that their status is further complicated by the lack of a family support network and limited access to the ECEC system.

The risk of social exclusion of children is often related to the quality of family functioning and parenting. Dysfunctional families and families with low emotional connection of members are at risk for the overall development of the child. Families with a specific structure (single-parent families, families with a large number of children) and family history (delinquent behaviour of a family member, victim of crime or domestic violence, poor health status of a family member) are more often at risk of poverty and, consequently, at risk of low-quality parenting (Visković, 2021). The psychophysical status of parents (work, economic and social status) is related to the quality of parenting and, consequently, the well-being of children. The work status of parents is also a significant factor in children's social behaviour (Perra et al., 2020). Parents exposed to professional stress, economic insecurity and social deprivation have a harder

time balancing business and family life and are less consistent in childcare (Kaiser et al., 2019; Lie et al., 2014; Rönkä et al., 2017).

Non-standard employment of parents (non-standard schedules, rotating shifts, night and weekend work, and risky occupations) are additional risk factors for parenting quality and, consequently, children's well-being (Kim, 2021; Koivula et al., 2023). Such parental employment is associated with difficulties in the psycho-physical status of parents (including sleep disturbance, fatigue, emotional stress and unsatisfactory relationships). High levels of parental stress are undeniably linked to low child well-being. It is recognised in reduced affirmative interactions of parents towards children, lower emotional connection and lack of support (Kaiser et al, 2019). Although the effects for children have not been sufficiently investigated, a negative association of non-standardised employment with the quality of meeting the child's basic physiological needs (quality of nutrition and rest), family functioning and the quality of the relationship between children and parents has been established (Li et al., 2020). Difficulties have also been recognised in the increased obesity of children, long-term exposure to the media, behavioural problems and lower cognitive achievements (Kaiser et al., 2019). Nevertheless, some studies indicate that higher income from non-standardised work of parents can have a positive effect on the quality of shared free time and consequently on children's educational chances (Kim, 2020).

Earlier research estimates that 7 to 10% of the total population are at risk among children of early and preschool age (Gudmundsson et al., 2013; Wichstrøm et al., 2012). New data are less favourable, possibly due to changes in living conditions, changes in research methodology and/or greater awareness for identifying children who grow up in risky conditions. They mainly refer to the research of certain types of risks. For example, according to Eurostat data (2022), as many as 24.4% of children in the EU are exposed to the risk of poverty and/or social exclusion.

CHILDREN AT RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN THE ECEC SYSTEM

Social exclusion of children is directly contrary to children's rights and, most often, generates long-term social exclusion of an individual and/or group and leads to deeper social divisions (Bouillet & Domović, 2021). The *European Social Charter* (Council of Europe, 1996) guarantees every person the right to adequate social, legal and economic protection that can contribute to reducing the social exclusion of individuals. The *European Child Guarantee* (EU, 2021) advocates for the effective access of every child to basic rights, for example the health care system and institutional upbringing and education. The recommendation *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (European Commission, 2013) emphasises the importance of social investment in ECEC as a way of mitigating and/or continuously preventing unfavourable growing up conditions. Member countries are invited to enable easier access to ECEC, ensure quality education and care in early childhood, promote children's right to play, cultural and sports activities, but also active participation in their own personal upbringing and education. It is recommended to invest in designed social, educational, economic and health models that can contribute to the well-being of children, the development of their potential and the return of human capital to society (Babić, 2020; Baran, 2013).

The well-being of children implies acting in the best interest of the child. In the context of an educational institution, it can be interpreted as the level to which a child feels comfortable with other children and teachers, the quality of social interactions, and how and to what extent her/his basic needs are met (Koivula et al., 2023). Individual well-being is recognisable at the psycho-physical, socio-emotional and educational level (National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education, hereinafter National Curriculum, 2015). In the long term, it is recognisable as economic, civil, health, social and ecological well-being and, consequently, the quality and satisfaction with life of the individual and the community. Well-being can therefore be interpreted as an interpersonal and intrapersonal relationship and a cultural process.

The well-being of children from attending ECEC has been repeatedly recognised for the overall development of the child. At the same time, the involvement of children in institutional ECEC stands out as an instrument for the prevention of educational poverty (Council of the European Union, Recommendation, 2019) and one of the predictors of children's well-being at RSI (Moss, 2017).

Involvement in the ECEC system can contribute to initial educational achievements, which simultaneously reduces RSI (Siraj et al., 2017; Vandell et al., 2010). Well-being is greater for children who grow up in various adverse conditions (Burchinal et al., 2012; Buswell, et al., 2012). Using the example of Norwegian education policy, Sibley et al. (2015) highlight solutions that enable high accessibility for all children. However, Siraj et al. (2017) emphasise that there is no real benefit for children, while the goal is only availability and adaptation to the labour market. Relevant research indicates that children's well-being is primarily related to quality, and not (only) to involvement in ECEC (Crous & Bradshaw, 2017; Ishimine et al., 2010; Peleman et al., 2020; Peeters, 2019). Melhuish et.al. (2015) point out that only a high-quality ECEC system is associated with the affirmative development of children and the success of educational policies. At the same time, the structural and process quality of ECEC is expected as an indicator of children's well-being (Peleman et al., 2020).

The effectiveness of high-quality ECEC systems for the well-being of children is recognised, in addition to educational achievement, as well as personal well-being. Longitudinal research through the preschool and elementary school system shows that children who were included in a higher quality ECEC system have better self-regulation, a higher level of self-confidence and self-esteem, and more developed prosocial behaviours. At the same time, dropping out of education decreases, which in the long term reduces the occurrence of unfavourable behaviours, and contributes to a better position on the labour market and, consequently, the quality of life (Siraj et al., 2017). The retention of young people in the educational system at all levels, and especially in lifelong education, is one of the strategic goals of education policy, which is emphasised in the *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training until 2020* (European Commission, 2011).

Institutional ECEC in most EU countries strive to find appropriate models of welfare between children, families and the labour market. They are mostly not adapted to the non-standardised form of parental employment. This form mostly affects single-parent families and their children, who, on average, are most often exposed to financial risk (Barnes & Helms, 2020; Hepburn, 2018). Some ECEC systems, for example the Finnish one, try to respond to the needs of working parents with flexible working hours (Rönkä et al., 2017). According to available data, about 7% of children are included in such ECEC programs ((Ruutiainen, 2023; Salonen, 2018). The effects of adapting the working hours of educational institutions to the needs of the labour market and the long-term and non-standard stay of children in ECEC have not been fully investigated so far. Nevertheless, Anme et al. (2010) find that for the well-being of children, the quality of family time is a more important affirmative development factor for children than the length of stay in ECEC. That is why it is recommended that in the early morning and late evening hours, in the ECEC institution, a setting is created as similar as possible to a family one, less focused on (formal) education. This can also contribute to the quality of the relationship between children and teachers (Salonen, 2018).

The quality of ECEC is undeniably contributed by the cooperation of the institution and educational staff (teachers and professional associates) with parents (Lang et al., 2020; Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2019). Quality cooperation between parents and teachers increases the socio-emotional well-being of children and reduces the risk of social exclusion of children (Kaise & Pollmann-Schult, 2019; Li et al., 2014). The cooperation of parents and professional staff is determined, among other things, by the developmental status of the children. Parents of those children, whose developmental status is within the limits of chronological age, with behaviour appropriate to socially acceptable norms, value cooperation with experts more positively (Vasiljević-Prodanović et al., 2021). Differences in the assessment of well-being were observed in relation to the age and gender of the children. The well-being of collaborative relationships has the greatest impact on the youngest children and boys (Li et al., 2014). That is why not only time and effort are sufficient for the development of quality collaborative relationships, but a true focus on the well-being of children (Vuorinen, 2021).

Certain studies point to the importance of developing the quality of the educational process in relation to reducing RSI and achieving optimal educational outcomes (Balladares & Kankaraš, 2020; Bouillet & Antulić Majcen, 2022). Quality pedagogical support can prevent and/or mitigate risks, recognise them in a timely manner, encourage the development of children's affirmative identity and resilience, and encourage peer interaction (support, care, empathy) that can contribute to the child's long-term socio-

emotional well-being and reduce negative effects in adulthood (Visković, 2021a). Boyd-Swan (2019) finds that high-quality ECEC can reduce children's anxiety and promote their affirmative social development. The level of inclusiveness (interpreted as the possibility of equal participation) is inversely correlated with RSI (Crous & Bradshaw, 2017; Peleman et al., 2020). For example, Stengelin et al. (2022) suggest that children from developed multi-ethnic cultures recognise individuals in RSI and include them in joint activities.

Following the research of teacher's opinions, Visković (2021b) singles out the relationships between stakeholders in the process, primarily children and teachers, and teachers and parents, a comprehensive focus on understanding and respecting the child's personality and family cultural identity, and learning and teaching strategies in a game environment as predictors of the quality of the educational process in ECEC setting. Affirmative attitudes of preschool institution stakeholders towards inclusion and having confidence in children's abilities and possibilities contribute to understanding diversity and can encourage support and provision of support to children at RSI (Seghedin, 2014). The attitudes of professional staff are also particularly significant, on the basis of which they create their personal pedagogical practice (Alashwal, 2019; Alexiadou & Stadler Altmann, 2020). Rooted prejudices can act as obstacles, especially if individuals (members of dominant groups) cannot recognise the discourse and difficulties of RSI, and this results in additional segregations (Lambrev et al., 2020). Negative attitudes and prejudices can be an obstacle to the development of competences for the appropriate support of children at RSI (Turner & Morgan, 2019). Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola (2019) therefore associate quality with the systematic development of teachers' professional competencies and with the quality of leadership and human resource management (Hujala et al., 2016). As a predictor of development, Hayes and O'Neill (2019) emphasise the need for systematic (self) evaluation, and Silva et al. (2020) the alignment of public education policy, formal education, professional development and systematic support for practitioners.

CHILDREN AT RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

The Council of the EU adopted the *Recommendation on High-quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems* (Council of the EU, 2019). With the European Child Guarantee (EU, 2021), member states, including the Republic of Croatia, undertake to ensure the availability of quality ECEC for all children in accordance with the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017). The Republic of Croatia is also part of the *Joint Group for Children's Rights and the EU Alliance for Investment in Children*, which aims to implement the *Strategy on Children's Rights* (European Commission, 2021).

On the basis of an *In-depth analysis of the situation and the basis for the development of a national action plan for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Croatia* (UNICEF, 2021), a draft of the *National Action Plan of the Republic of Croatia* (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2022) was prepared. The *National Plan for Children's Rights 2022-2026* (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (MoLPFS), 2022) and the *National Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Croatia* (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2022) are directly related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2017) and the indicated goals of sustainable education. This implies the availability of quality ECEC for all children, the promotion of the experience of social participation and equality for all children, access to information, freedom, peace and respect for children's opinions.

Dobrotić (2021) sees visible obstacles in the realization of these strategic documents in the family risk of poverty. Bouillet and Domović (2021) recognise difficulties in regional inequality and the affordability of ECEC, which leaves children outside the system and possibly at risk of social exclusion.

In Croatia, there is very little research available on (all) the risks of social exclusion of children. Earlier research conducted in Croatia examines the representation of individual risks. They recognise the risks of growing up in poverty and the risk of poverty (Šućur et al., 2015) and belonging to national minorities (Hrabar, 2013). Družić Ljubotina and Dragičević (2022), analysing the social situation, conclude that the number of risk factors that increase the likelihood of negative developmental outcomes for children is increasing. Vargas-Barón et al. (2020), analysing the early intervention program in the Republic of

Croatia, estimate that at least 10.5% of children need early intervention, and parents need systematic support. Such services are least available to families at risk of poverty and in rural areas (Pećnik, 2013; Vargas-Barón et al., 2020). Based on the available data, Bouillet and Domović (2021) estimate that only one out of 8 children who need this service is included in early intervention in Croatia.

According to the latest data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2022), about 18.4% of children in Croatia are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Particularly vulnerable groups in this context are children living in families of beneficiaries of the guaranteed minimum benefit. These are mostly children of the Roma national minority. Single-parent families and families with three or more children stand out as having an increased risk of vulnerability. According to the CBS (2022) estimate, 37.5% of single-parent families and 22.8% of families with three or more children are at risk of poverty in the Republic of Croatia.

Since 2020, the project *Models of Responses to the Educational Needs of Children Exposed to the Risk of Social Exclusion in Early and Preschool Education Institutions*, financed by the Croatian Science Foundation (<http://morenec.ufzg.hr/>), has been implemented in Croatia. The involvement of children at RSI in the ECEC system in the Republic of Croatia and the types of RSI were investigated (Table 1). The aim of the Project is to investigate the etiological, phenomenological and interventional aspects of RSI in children of early and preschool age in institutional ECEC. The prevalence of risk was investigated. At the same time, through the analysis of the quality of pedagogical practice and support measures, a model of pedagogical support for children in RSI within the RPOO system was developed and evaluated.

The sample included 3,500 preschool children and their parents and teachers in 66 ECEC institutions, which represents 10.4% of all institutions in Croatia. Most of the sample consisted of mothers (78.5%). The sample is stratified by region and is representative of the size and structure of institutions. Table 1 shows the assessment of parents and teachers about the types of risk factors represented by children within ECEC system.

Table 1

The risk of social exclusion of children in the ECEC system – assessment (MORENEC 2021., according to Bouillet & Antulić Majcen, 2022)

RSI	parents' assessment	teachers' assessment
child characteristics	18.3%	16.3%
family characteristics	12.6%	17.7%
minority or/and deprived background	10%	13.1%

A high level of agreement between parents and teachers for assessments of children's psychophysical status is evident. Parents attribute factors of RSI difficulties more to children, and teachers to family status. Project data indicate that around 21.1% of children have one (observed) factor for RSI, 8.7% of children have two, and 4.5% of children have three or more combined factors of RSI.

Global research findings indicate that children at RSI, compared to their peers, are shorter and less regularly involved in ECEC setting (Peleman et al., 2018). This research recognized following as the predominant RSI factors: children's developmental difficulties; risk of poverty; life in a single-parent family and minority ethnic identity (Table 2). Accessibility is assumed to be greatest for children with developmental disabilities. This can also be interpreted as their greater "visibility" in society (Bouillet & Antulić Majcen, 2022). Eurostat findings (2022) warn that children at risk of poverty and unfavourable influences are often either not seen in the system, or are not considered as a priority group. This is also recognisable in Croatian case (Table 2). It can be seen that the smallest discrepancy in relation to the representation in the population and the registered RSI factor in the ECEC system is observed in the recognition of the category of developmental difficulties, and to some extent in the category of single-parent families. Risk of poverty and ethnic minority identity are the least recognized RSI categories in the ECEC setting, in relation to the population of children included in this system.

Table 2

Relationship between assumed representation in the population and recorded involvement in ECEC (MORENEC 2021, as cited in Bouillet and Antulić Majcen, 2022)

RSI	representation in the population	involvement in ECEC
developmental difficulties	9%	8.1%
risk of poverty	13.5%	5.5%
single-parent families	12%	10.9%
ethnic minority identity	6.8%	1.4%

Data on the low involvement of children of ethnic minority identity in the ECEC system refers primarily to children of Roma nationality. A study by UNICEF Croatia (2022) estimates that less than one in five children from Roma households are included in the ECEC system. Data on the inclusion of children at risk of poverty in ECEC is difficult to interpret unambiguously. It is possible that they indicate insufficient recognition of these children in the system, insufficient involvement as a result of the economic status of the family, insufficient (professional) sensitivity of practitioners and/or objective limitations of families at risk of poverty, and insufficient engagement of public education policy and local self-government units that finance the development of ECEC. The data are worrying because these children do not receive optimal care in the ECEC system. As a result, equality in education and the conditions for long-term academic achievements that European regulations guarantee in the Recommendations, and outcomes of the quality ECEC systems are limited to them (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Although the well-being of children is most often associated with the quality of the process (Slot, 2018), the structural quality of the system is also significant, which is recognisable in Croatia. The low coverage of children, from 30% to 76% (Ministry of Science and Education (MoSE), 2023a), indicates insufficient capacities. The *National Action Plan* (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2022) singles out the problems of an insufficient number of qualified teachers and professional associates, unregulated relationships between founders and assistants for children with disabilities and communication intermediaries, insufficiently developed action at the national level, insufficient intersectoral cooperation and coordination of public bodies.

The data collected in the framework of the MORENEC project (2022) also indicate additional difficulties. Only 30% of ECEC institutions have a standardised procedure for assessing children's RSI and organised support for children and their families. It is additionally worrying that only 20% of teachers in ECEC institutions estimate that they are educated for (some) of the forms of support for children at RSI and their families (Skočić Mihić et al., 2022). Insufficient professional competences, insufficient and/or inappropriate organisation of the ECEC institution and (non)cooperation with other institutions can result in insufficient willingness of practitioners to provide support to children at RSI (Bouillet & Domović, 2021). Although there is a lack of research on the engagement of principals, founders and management bodies of ECEC, OECD data indicate that engaged and development-oriented management positively correlates with structural and process quality (Douglass, 2019).

Based on the presented data, it is justified to conclude that in the Republic of Croatia there are multiple difficulties in the involvement of children at RSI in the ECEC system. Unfortunately, there are still difficulties with access, inclusion and quality of the ECEC setting (UNICEF, 2022). In the *Analysis of policies, programs, services, funding sources and mechanisms aimed at preventing poverty and social exclusion of children in Croatia* (UNICEF, 2021, p. 9, 10), three goals are suggested:

- planning funds for participation in ECEC programs (for example, transportation costs to the institution, day trips/theatre visits) including support for assistants or additional educators in educational work,

- adaptation of the infrastructure, didactic equipment and work methods to the specific needs of children,

- adjustment of the personnel structure of kindergartens attended by a larger number of children at risk of poverty, children of the Roma national minority, children with developmental disabilities, so that kindergartens can respond to the specific needs of children and parents at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The above, in addition to a clearly defined public education policy, also presupposes a greater engagement of all stakeholders of ECEC. Competent institutions, for example the *Education and Teacher Training Agency*, in cooperation with higher education institutions, should continuously conduct professional training to develop the competencies of practitioners to provide pedagogical support to children in RSI, but also to work with their parents.

Given that in the Republic of Croatia there is no unique mechanism within existing system, such as a center that automatically collects and processes and communicates with each other all relevant data on the condition of children from social and health care and all other non-family services, which includes the ECEC system, for now, it is impossible to talk in general about timely detection and quality reaction to RSI factors. Data collected at individual levels, which include selective monitoring and partial interventions, do not represent an effective response of a preventive, pedagogically purposeful model aimed at the well-being of children. The development of an interconnected system is necessary in the prevention of the appearance of the effect of unfavorable growing conditions from the earliest age of the child. The ECEC system represents one of the most reliable social institutions, which has the ability to maximize benefits for all children, and above all for children at RSI. In order for it to be as effective as possible, it is necessary to recognize the exceptional role of RPOO through joint efforts, and make it as high-quality as possible through elaborate investment, implementing the signed charters and recommendations of the European Union through the adoption and implementation of strategic documents.

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) guarantees children the right to participate in personal upbringing and education, the right to express themselves and the right to be heard. Children's participation is interpreted as equal participation of children in the process of receiving and sharing information, active involvement in various activities, including proposing and deciding in accordance with the interests and capabilities of children. At the same time, this assumes the obligation of adults to consult with children on relevant topics and to provide support for their activities. International research by Ursin and Haanpää (2018) indicates the connection between the level of family deprivation and the family and school environment with children's perception of respect for their rights. The lower the indicator of family deprivation, the stronger was the children's perception that they were listened to and respected in the family and at school, they were more self-aware of their role in society, they had more knowledge and they more affirmatively perceived adults as persons who respect children's rights.

The *National Plan for Children's Rights in the Republic of Croatia 2022-2026* (MoLPFS, 2022) emphasises that the right of children to participate should be incorporated into all systems of social action, and especially into the educational system. Unfortunately, this is difficult to recognise even in documents issued by state institutions. For example, even the new Proposal of the ordinance on forms and content of pedagogical documentation and records of children in kindergartens and the electronic register of preschool institutions (e-kindergartens) (MoSE, 2023b) does not state the child's right to participatory documentation.

A UNICEF Croatia study (2022) indicates that children have the impression that adults decide „everything” for them. At the same time, 25% of adults (in the sample) do not support children's right to self-determination – free expression of opinions and decision-making, and only 30% believe that children can form personal opinions on topics of social importance. Adults involved in the study estimate that children at RSI are less capable of self-determination and decision-making and that their right to participation should be limited.

The data collected as part of the MORENEC project (2022) on children's opinions have not yet been fully processed. They were collected through semi-structured interviews with children in accordance with the *Code of Ethics for Research with Children* (Ajduković & Keresteš, 2020), with the informed consent of the parents and the ECEC institution. First, preliminary data indicate that children recognise RSI in themselves and

in other children. They are ready to provide peer support. They recognise subjective well-being in social interactions with peers (friendship, joint play) and family relationships. The findings are in agreement with earlier research on children's sense of well-being opinions in Croatia (Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2021).

Andresen et al. (2019) point out that children's perception of their own sense of well-being is one of the most important factors in assessing the adequacy of the environment for the overall development of children. Trust in the potential of children, and acceptance of the child as an active participant in personal upbringing and education obliges public policies, the educational system and parents to change the paradigm about children as immature and incomplete individuals (Guć et al., 2021; Turšnek, 2016), respect for the *Convention* (1989), recommendations, guidelines and laws based on scientific facts, and finally on the priority of ensuring their well-being.

CONCLUSION

Vulnerable children are more than usual exposed to risks of violation of personal integrity in the family, social, economic, educational sense. This prevents them from equal participation in community life and access to system institutions and, consequently, causes or increases RSI. Social exclusion is a multidimensional construct that negatively affects the child's current and long-term well-being. In relation to children of early and preschool age, it can be a reflection of the child's health and developmental status, poor parenting, growing up in unfavourable conditions, and insufficient environmental and system support for children and their parents (Bouillet & Domović, 2021).

Based on relevant research and current practice, it is justified to conclude that the inclusion of children in quality inclusive ECEC is significant for all children, especially children who grow up in risky conditions. A high-quality system of ECEC can contribute to the prevention of RSI in children and, consequently, to the reduction of the negative effects of exposure to risks. The modern curriculum of ECEC promotes an integrated holistic multidisciplinary approach and the acceptance of the child as an active, equal participant in personal upbringing and education. In addition to respecting the rights of the child, involvement and cooperation with parents is encouraged.

The Council of the European Union interprets the right to institutional ECEC as a priority and obligation of all member states. The recommendation projected the coverage of at least 95% of four-year-old children by 2020 and 100% by 2030, which has not yet been equally fulfilled in all member countries. Most EU member states, according to Eurydice and Eurostat reports (2022), have uniform efforts to ensure greater inclusion and fair social participation of children in educational systems. In addition, the greater involvement of vulnerable children and the support of assistants for children at risk are financed. Projects that provide additional support for children in RSI and their families are also encouraged.

The coverage of four-year-old children in ECEC in the Republic of Croatia ranges from 30% to 75%, and is very unevenly distributed regionally. The financing of the ECEC system is left to local self-government units, which independently decide on ECEC capacities and coverage of children. Economically more developed local self-government units are in a better position, where at the same time the pressure on the existing capacities of ECEC is greater.

Since 2014, the coverage of children in the ECEC system is also connected with the obligation to attend preschool in the year before starting elementary school, but the obligations of parents regarding children's enrolment are not regulated. The goal of the *National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030* (Croatian Parliament, 2021) is to include 97% of four-year-olds in a regular stay in ECEC, but there is no elaborated strategy plan to achieve this. Unfortunately, even the legal legislation currently does not meet all the standards of the assumed obligations. Although it has been planned for a long time and prescribed obligations to both local self-government units and the state, the ECEC network has not been created. The limited availability and (in)accessibility of the ECEC system to all children is evident. There is a lack of interdepartmental cooperation and uniformity of the quality of ECEC at the national level.

Children at RSI join the ECEC system later than their peers. At the same time, the system itself does not provide measures of social and pedagogical support for children and their families. Positive outcomes are primarily linked to the quality of professional competencies of educators and experts in the system, which is not accompanied by the quality of the professional training program for practitioners or measures to develop structural and process quality. Public education policies in Croatia should possibly focus on supporting real

indicators of the quality of ECEC. In interaction with other public policies (social, demographic, economic), it is necessary to respect the findings of relevant and recent scientific research on the profitability of investment in education and to (re)define priorities.

This work was created within the project *Models of Responses to the Educational Needs of Children Exposed to the Risk of Social Exclusion in Early and Preschool Education Institutions* / MORENEC, funded by the Croatian Science Foundation. The goal of the project is to investigate the representation of children at RSI in the ECEC system, the types of risks, and the professional competence of teachers to provide pedagogical support to children and their families. Based on the collected data, a support model aimed at identifying and preventing RSI and pedagogical support for children at RSI and their families is constructed and evaluated.

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