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# PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' SELF-EFFICACY ABOUT A CHILD'S EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS: EARLY INDICATORS FOR ASSISTANCE FOR TEACHERS

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## ABSTRACT

Preschool teachers in the Republic of Croatia are likely to encounter children with challenging behavior but may be less likely to receive support given the low numbers of preschool children identified as having emotional and behavioral disabilities. This study aimed to examine the perceptions of 254 Croatian preschool teachers regarding their self-efficacy in their ability to managing, instructing, and engaging a specific child whom they found to be behaviorally challenging. The results showed that teachers' self-efficacy was negatively associated with children's ratings of internalizing and externalizing problems and positively associated with children's ratings of social competence. The number of years children attended preschool, and the amount of time spent with their preschool teacher were associated with higher ratings of children's social competence and lower ratings of children's anxiety/withdrawal. Evidence is also suggested for the potential feasibility of a brief 3-item screening instrument for early detection of significantly challenging behavior: Children's Brief Sociopedagogical Scanner. The results may contribute to preventing social exclusion, but further research is needed.

**Keywords:** Children's Brief Sociopedagogical Scanner, preschool teachers, prevention of social exclusion, self-efficacy, emotional and behavioral problems

## INTRODUCTION

The Croatian system of early and preschool education in Croatia is organized so that local communities are responsible for the organization of the institutions in which it takes place. Cities and municipalities manage and organize kindergartens and, depending on local political decisions,

co-finance the monthly cost of a child's education in kindergarten (6 months to 7 years old). Some kindergartens are completely private, and the cost of these kindergartens for parents is much higher. According to the State Pedagogical Standard of Early and Preschool Education (2008) and the Law on Preschool Education (2023), the quality of the institutions' work is monitored. The Education and Teacher Training Agency is responsible for the same, as well as the relevant ministry, which has departments responsible for monitoring the quality of program implementation. As a rule, kindergartens employ educators (who have at least a three-year university education or more), as well as professional associates. Children are enrolled to attend mandatory preschool education one year before the obligatory primary education which starts in Croatia in a child's 7<sup>th</sup> year of age.

Some recent research on the Croatian system of early and preschool education in Croatia particularly focused on the protection of children who are at risk of social exclusion (Bouillet & Majcen, 2022; Visković et al., 2023). The Croatian system of early and preschool education, as described, has limited potential to help prevent the risk of social exclusion of children since both the provision and quality are inadequate for ensuring an inclusive system "that could satisfy the needs of all children, regardless of their developmental, economic, family, cultural and other background." (Bouillet & Majcen, 2022: p. 23). Visković et al. (2023) point out that the competences of educators in institutions need to be strengthened as part of the overall improvement of the system. We therefore believe that the importance of this research should be seen in the context of preventing the social exclusion of children in Croatia.

Preschool teachers (further: teachers) support the cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development of our youngest pupils, preparing them for successful transition to primary school and beyond. Young children enter preschool with a wide range of readiness skills for the learning environment and supporting pupils with social and emotional needs is a common aspect of the teacher's role (Eurostat Regional Yearbook, 2019). While most children eventually adapt to the structure of the preschool classroom, some present with challenging behavior at a level concerning school personnel. At times, this behavior may be serious enough to warrant additional support for the teacher to meet the specific needs of the child (Vlah et al., 2018, 2021). Some young children may even require special educational services to address more extensive emotional and behavioral needs. However, the process of formal evaluation for special education services to support children with significant emotional and behavioral disabilities is complex and time-intensive, thus hindering the availability of early services to support young children and their teachers.

Research indicates that high levels of emotional and behavioral problems in early childhood are an international occurrence. For example, in the United States, Webster-Stratton and Reid (2018) reported that 6% – 15% of preschool children as having conduct problems, with much higher rates reported for children from low-income families (i.e., 35%). In Japan, researchers identified 20% of five-year-olds had behavior problems (Minatoya et al., 2017). Other studies examining samples of preschool children found emotional and behavioral problems in 13% of young children in Kenya (Kariuki et al., 2017), 23.5% in Brazil (Santos et al., 2016), and 16% in Germany (Fuchs et al., 2013). In the Republic of Croatia, Bašić et al. (2001) estimated that 10% of children and youth in Croatia could be classified as at 'very high risk' for developing a behavioral disability, with an additional 5% falling in the category of 'high risk'. In Croatia, contemporary research from the MORENC project shows that 21.1% of preschool children are at risk of social exclusion, while 13.2% of children

are in two or more of risk for social exclusion (Visković et al., 2023). Previously, Mikas (2007) found 18% of children in a sample of 3–6-year-olds were in need of professional help due to behavioral and developmental problems. Živčić-Bečirević et al. (2003) found no differences in parent and teacher ratings in a sample of 232 preschool children on internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors in comparison to ratings of children in the United States. Research in Croatia confirms global indicators of the occurrence of behavioral problems in early and preschool-age children, with boys exhibiting more frequent externalizing problems and lower scores on social competence than girls (Mikas, 2007; Mucić-Šutić, 2010; Živčić-Bečirević et al., 2003). Taken together, these studies highlight the widespread need for attending to the problem behavior of our youngest pupils.

The likelihood that teachers will encounter children with emotional and behavioral problems is clear, yet it is less likely that their pupils will have been identified for services in any formal manner. According to Oakes et al. (2014), the majority of pupils in schools in the United States who display significant emotional and behavioral problems are not identified or served through special education. In 2016, in Croatia, 3.9% of the preschool population was identified as having a disability, with 95% of these children educated in an inclusive preschool classroom (Bouillet, 2018). This suggests that an even lower percentage would be identified for social, emotional, and behavioral disorders. A reason speculated for the discrepancy between high numbers of young children with reported problem behaviors and low levels of referral for support has been the assumption that with development, children will outgrow problem behavior (Campbell et al., 2000). While this can and does happen, early identification and services remain the hallmark of best practice. Research suggests that without early intervention, some children will persist with emotional and behavioral problems throughout their school career and beyond, especially when these behaviors are externalizing (Campbell et al., 2000). Indeed, Owens et al. (2015: p. 22) recommend identifying pupils with emotional and behavioral problems “as early as possible to avoid early failure experiences and to maximize the efficiency of intervention efforts”. For this to occur, the process typically requires a teacher to initiate the referral for identification and services.

Teachers are uniquely placed to have the first sustained contact that a school professional will have with a child. In Croatia, children typically remain with the same teacher throughout their early years and preschool experience, allowing for the teacher to develop a clear understanding of the trajectory of their pupils' emotional and behavioral development. This in-depth and ongoing relationship may set the stage for increased opportunities for referrals based on the teacher's long-standing assessment of their pupils' development. In comparison to the US and some other countries that begin preschool services later and commonly limit exposure to teachers to a single year, teachers in Croatia have the potential to use their year-after-year knowledge of a child's development to determine the level of persistence of problem behavior. In theory, this could lead to much earlier and substantiated referrals for special education. However, researchers in Croatia have noted that even when teachers perceive a need for support for their students, the formal determination required to access such services for young children may not have occurred (e.g., Vlah & Ferić, 2017). Moreover, while the Ordinance on Primary and Secondary School Education for Children with Disabilities (2015) legally mandates immediate support for older pupils in primary school once a need has been identified, this has yet to be required for preschool-age children. It also should be noted that Croatia lags behind the majority of European countries in terms of providing early childhood

education for children between ages 4 and the age of compulsory enrollment in primary school at age 7. The goal of the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia is to provide 97% inclusion of four-year-olds in the regular preschool attendance by 2030 (Visković et al., 2023), so, one can assume that the number of children with disabilities attending preschools, including those with emotional and behavioral disabilities, will only increase as Croatia addresses this goal.

Another area for concern is that dealing with persistent challenging behavior for extended periods without support could take a toll on a teacher's perceptions of their ability to effectively teach and manage that student's behavior. Thus, while the multi-year relationships between teachers and children may allow teachers to accurately assess their student's development, the nature of the relation between their views of the pupils' challenges and their skills to teach that pupil may be affected. Research suggests the interplay between teacher self-efficacy and classroom management is dynamic and significant (Taresh et al., 2024). A research report from the US, which is based on a sample of 2247 preschoolers shows that "teachers who reported greater self-efficacy and who endorsed more negative responsibility and causal attributions were more likely to rate preschoolers' behavior as disruptive" (Yoder & Williford, 2019: p. 849). In Croatia, for example, Vlah et al. (2017) found that teachers' self-efficacy was predictive of the teachers' estimations of behavioral problems in their preschool pupils. Teachers with higher self-efficacy reported lower levels of problem behavior for their pupils while those with lower self-efficacy assessed higher levels of challenging behavior. While teachers' self-efficacy for classroom management has been extensively examined for class-wide behavior, the relation between teacher self-efficacy and their assessment of the behavior of a single child who is known to have behavior problems is less clear. It may be that delayed services for a specific child in need or prolonged exposure to a child who is not making progress due to a lack of necessary supports could in turn negatively impact the teachers' perceptions of their ability to effectively teach and manage that child. It could also be that specific types of problem behaviors may have a greater impact on a teacher's sense of self-efficacy, therefore indicating the need for more immediate support than other types of behavior.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Within the broader theoretical framework of social exclusion prevention theory through early intervention, the purpose of this study was twofold. First, we set out to examine the nature of the relation between teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy in their ability to manage, instruct, and engage a specific child they found to be behaviorally challenging. As social, emotional, and behavioral problems take on many forms, we considered their estimations of the nature of that child's behavior problems (internalizing, externalizing) and social competence. We hypothesized that higher teacher self-efficacy would be associated with estimations of lower problem behaviors and higher social competence for their particular child. Specifically, we anticipated that higher levels of externalizing problems, especially for boys, would be associated with lower estimations of teachers' self-efficacy. As young children may take time to adjust to preschool and gain the socialization and developmental benefits of preschool programs, we considered the length of the child's education at preschool and the time spent with their current preschool teacher.

Our second purpose was to explore the potential feasibility of a 3-item brief screening instrument – Children's Brief Sociopedagogical Scanner for early identification of significantly challenging behaviors that directly map to the national criteria for determining special education eligibility for children who are emotionally and behaviorally disabled in the Republic of Croatia. The likely increase in the number of preschool children served as Croatia advances towards meeting EU pillars of service indicates that teachers will encounter more children, including those with significant emotional and behavioral problems in the future. We hope that the results of this research will lay the groundwork for identifying when support for teachers is needed to intervene early in the development of problem behavior, thus ensuring a quality education for our youngest pupils.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 294 teachers from 11 preschools in the County of Zagreb (cro. Zagrebačka županija) in the Republic of Croatia were approached for participation in the present study. After explaining the purpose of the study, informed consent was obtained from 254 of the preschool teachers. Data collection was conducted anonymously and voluntarily in 2017. The resulting sample of teachers ranged in age from 22 to 64 years ( $M = 39.3$ ;  $SD = 11.05$ ) with the overwhelming majority being female ( $n = 249$ ; 98.03%). Prior experience as a teacher ranged from 9 months to 41 years, with an average of 15.2 years in the profession ( $SD = 11.86$ ). The educational preparation of the teachers was reported as follows: 3.9% ( $n = 10$ ) had a master's degree, 90.6% ( $n = 230$ ) had received an undergraduate degree, and 5.5% ( $n = 14$ ) had completed a secondary education.

Teachers were asked to identify only one child (boy or girl) from their class whom they subjectively observed to have emotional or behavioral problems. Informed consent was then obtained from the parents of the selected child for that child to be the teacher's focus for completing the measures used in the study. Accordingly, 254 children were targeted as the focus of this study. Given research indicating the preponderance of children with behavior problems being male, it was not surprising that the teachers identified 167 boys (65.75%) versus 87 girls (34.25%). The age range of children was from 2.5 to 7 years of age. The average length of children's education in preschool institutions was 2.6 years ( $SD = 1.48$ ;  $Min = 0.1$  years;  $Max = 6.3$  years). Of the total number of children, 17 (6.7%) were officially designated by a responsible Social Welfare Centre to receive special educational services identified in the individualized education plan, 4 children were under review for designation, and 233 children (91.7%) were not under consideration for, or identified as eligible for special education and/or officially planned inclusion in a preschool institution.

### Measures

For this research, a survey consisting of four sections was developed and given to the teachers.

Teachers completed **demographic questions** about themselves (i.e., age, gender, length of time as a preschool teacher, highest level of education completed) and the child they selected as their

focus in the study (i.e., gender, length of time attending the preschool institution and length of time with this teacher).

The **Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale** (TSES; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001; adapted by Vlah, 2017) consists of 12 items that were used in the present study to measure teachers' sense of self-efficacy concerning a pre-selected child in terms of the teachers' behavior management, use of instructional strategies, and ability to engage the student. Prior research utilizing the measure to a specific child confirmed a three-factor structure with low to good internal reliability (.66 to .79) (Vlah, 2017). The internal reliability of the full scale was high (.87), and therefore the one-factor scale was considered in the present study. Participants responded on a scale of 0 = never to 4 = always to statements such as: I efficiently control disruptive behavior of this child, when necessary; implement alternative strategies in my work with this child; and motivate this child to participate in various activities, when necessary. Higher scores indicate higher perceptions of teacher self-efficacy to support the target pupil.

The **Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation Scale-Preschool Edition** (SCBE; LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996) was used to measure the problem behaviors and social competence of teacher-selected focus pupils. The measure was translated and verified in Croatian by Bubnić (2002), yielding a three-factor structure (i.e., anger/aggression, anxiety/withdrawal, social competence). In this study, strong internal reliability was found for the 10-item scales for anger/aggression ( $r = .90$ ; e.g., Child is irritable, easy to anger), anxiety/withdrawal ( $r = .90$ , e.g., Child is sad, unhappy or depressed) and social competence ( $r = .93$ ; Cooperates with other children in group activities). Teachers responded to each item on a scale of 1 - never to 6 - always, with higher scores indicating higher levels of problem behaviors for the externalizing and internalizing subscales and higher levels of positive behaviors for the social competence subscale.

**The Children's Brief Sociopedagogical Scanner** consists of three questions constructed in direct accordance with the definition of emotional-behavioral disabilities (EBD) as defined by the National Council in the identification of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in the Republic of Croatia (Koller-Trbović et al., 2011). In a pilot research study, this measure yielded good metric characteristics with a sample of preschool teachers (see Vlah et al., 2017). In the present study, preschool teachers were asked to rate the behavior of a pre-selected focus child on a 3-point scale with 0 = Not at all, 1 = Somewhat, and 2 = Yes, completely, for each component of the definition of EBD. Higher scores indicate greater concern for the child's behavior. The questions ask the respondent to rate the extent to which the targeted child's specific behavior and/or condition:

1. **deviates** from the behavior and/or condition of most of the children in the group;
2. represents a **problem** either to a child or to the child's environment; and
3. requires your extra **engagement** to help the child successfully overcome this behavior or condition.

As the use of the Children's Brief Sociopedagogical Scanner has not yet been established, an exploratory component analysis of the three items was conducted for the present study. According to the Guttman-Keiser Criterion, a one-component scale was derived, which described 80.37% of the variance. The eigenvalue of the first component was 2.41 (the second was 0.31), with common-

alities of items from 0.79 to 0.80. Reliability for the 3-item measure was high for the total sample ( $r = .88$ ), as well as for boys ( $r = .85$ ) and girls ( $r = .90$ ).

## Procedures

After talking with the principals and professional associates of the preschools, questionnaires were distributed. In addition to verbal instructions, each kindergarten received written instructions about the questionnaire to avoid ambiguities (especially due to teachers who were not present when the questionnaire was distributed due to illness or some other reason). On the parent bulletin board, in agreement with the teachers, the consent for participation in the research was placed, and each parent could decide whether they wanted to sign the informed consent for their child's participation in the research. By signing, parents confirmed their agreement to participate. Consent was solicited from all parents so that individual parents whose child was selected in the group as a child with behavioral problems would not be stigmatized. Before filling out the questionnaire, the preschool teachers were informed about the basic objective of the research and filled out a questionnaire containing a series of questions about their assessment of one of their pupil's social competencies, as well as about the behaviors and characteristics of the child from their group, for whom the parents signed consent to participate in the research, which is following the Code of Ethics for Research with Children (2003). The completed questionnaires were returned in the sealed envelopes.

## RESULTS

In the present study, our purpose was twofold. First, we aimed to understand the relation between teachers' self-perceptions of their efficacy in managing, instructing, and engaging a child in their classroom that they considered to have emotional and behavioral problems in light of the specific nature of that child's behavior problems. Second, we began a preliminary exploration of the use of a brief screening tool in assisting in the early identification of children with emotional and behavioral problems. The analyses used to address these questions are presented here.

The first focus of the study was tested using descriptive statistics and Spearman's correlation for the ordinal scale of Children's Brief Screener and Pearson's correlations for linear variables (TSES and SCEB, length of preschool education, length of time with teacher), due to the significant deviation from normal distribution found in the results of the focal variables. Descriptive statistics for the measures are provided in Tables 1, 2, and 3. As it can be seen, teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy were high, with a mean rating of 3.08 ( $SD = .52$ ) indicating an average response of 'almost always' in their ability to efficiently manage, instruct, and engage a preselected child with emotional and behavioral problems. There were no differences between the ratings of teachers who rated boys versus those who rated girls ( $Z = 1.28$ ;  $p = .20$ ). Average length of education in the preschool institution was two and a half years and did not differ between boys and girls ( $Z = 1.16$ ;  $p = .24$ ). Teachers' ratings of the focus child's levels of problem behaviors (i.e., anger/aggression, anxiety/withdrawal) and social competence were moderate. Boys were rated as manifesting more anger/aggressive behavior than girls ( $Z = 2.44$ ;  $p = .02$ ), and girls were rated higher in social competence than boys ( $Z = 3.35$ ;  $p = .00$ ). No differences were found between ratings of boys and girls for

anxiety/withdrawal ( $Z=1.14$ ;  $p=.26$ ). Given that preschool teachers selected children with emotional and behavioral problems for inclusion in this study, it was not surprising that ratings of the focus child on the Children's Brief Sociopedagogical Scanner revealed that preschool teachers estimated moderate (somewhat) levels of the three problems across children. As predicted, boys were estimated higher than girls on behavior that "deviates from the behavior and/or condition of most of the children in the group" ( $Z=4.08$ ;  $p=.00$ ), "represents a problem either to a child or to child's environment" ( $Z=3.22$ ;  $p=.00$ ), and "requires your extra engagement to help the child successfully overcome this behavior or condition" ( $Z=4.18$ ;  $p=.00$ ).

**Table 1**

*Descriptive parameters: Minimum (Min), Maximum (Max), means (M), standard deviations (SD), and Pearson's (for linear scales) and Spearman's (for ordinal scales) correlation coefficients for overall teacher self-efficacy, SCBE scale, Brief screener of children's behavioral problems, and length child's education in preschool institution (N=254)*

Variable	Descriptive				Pearson/Spearman correlation coefficients									
	Min	Max	M	SD	A/A	SC	A/W	deviates	a problem	engagement	overall	length	length_age	length_teacher
SCBE	Self-Efficacy	1	4	3.08	.52	-.14*	.33**	-.16*	-.31**	-.37**	-.17**	.02	.02	-.04
	Anger/Aggression	1	6	2.57	.99		-.40**	-.06	.27**	.43**	.20**	-.02	-.02	-.04
	Social competence	1	6	3.36	1.13			-.29**	-.49**	-.55**	-.19**	.33**	.28**	.29**
	Anxiety/Withdrawal	1	5	2.15	.71				.32**	.23**	.28**	-.22**	-.22**	-.15*
Brief scanner	deviates	0	2	.97	.71				-.37**	.72**	.48**	-.05	-.03	-.11
	a problem	0	2	.80	.68					-.35**	.42**	.01	.02	-.07
	engagement	0	2	1.10	.75						.40**	-.05	-.04	-.13**
	overall	0	2	.85	.62							.05	.08	-.02
Preschool Education	Length in preschool(y)	.5	6.3	2.57	1.48								-	.72**
	Length in preschool with age partialization(y)													.71**
Length with this teacher(y)	.5	7	3.23	2.41										

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; M= subscale means; SD= subscale standard deviations

**Table 2**

*Descriptive parameters: Minimum (Min), Maximum (Max), means (M), standard deviations (SD), and Pearson's (for linear scales) and Spearman's (for ordinal scales) correlation coefficients for overall teacher self-efficacy, SCBE scale, Brief screener of children's behavioral problems, and length child's education in preschool institution (N=167; boys)*

Variable	Descriptive				Pearson/Spearman correlation coefficients									
	Min	Max	M	SD	A/A	SC	A/W	deviates	a problem	engagement	overall	length	length_age	length_teacher
<b>SCBE</b>	1	4	3.05	.53	-.06	.36**	-.03	-.26**	-.33**	-.27**	-.18*	.04	.04	-.01
	1	6	2.67	1.0	-.37**	.09	.23**	.44**	.35**	.18*	.04	.04	.05	.02
	1	6	3.17	1.1	-.27**		-.43**	-.51**	-.50**	-.13	.26**	.23**		.24**
	1	5	2.13	.64			.27**	.13	.22**	.01	-.18*	-.17*		-.11
<b>Brief scanner</b>	0	2	1.10	.70				.67**	.61**	.33**	-.01	-.01		-.10
	0	2	.90	.68					.63**	.38**	.08	.09		-.05
	0	2	1.25	.69						.30**	-.01	.00		-.13
	0	2	.94	.61							.15*	.17		.06
<b>Preschool Education</b>	.5	6.3	2.67	1.54										.68**
	-	-	-	-										.67**
	.5	6.3	2.67	1.54										

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; M= subscale means; SD= subscale standard deviations

**Table 3**

*Descriptive parameters: Minimum (Min), Maximum (Max), means (M), standard deviations (SD), and Pearson's (for linear scales) and Spearman's (for ordinal scales) correlation coefficients for overall teacher self-efficacy, SCBE scale, Brief screener of children's behavioral problems, and length child's education in preschool institution (N=86; girls)*

Variable	Descriptive				Pearson/Spearman correlation coefficients									
	Min	Max	M	SD	A/A	SC	A/W	deviates	a problem	engagement	overall	length	length_age	length_teacher
SCBE	Self-Efficacy	2	4	3.15	.48	-.25**	.26**	-.22**	-.34**	-.40**	-.13	.00	-.00	-.09
	Anger/Aggression	1	5	2.37	.95	-.46**	-.06	.26*	.32**	.38**	.18	-.21*	-.21*	-.18
	Social competence	1	6	3.73	1.07	-.41**	1.07	-.48**	-.52**	-.55**	-.19	.44**	.44**	.42**
	Anxiety/Withdrawal	1	5	2.19	.82			.44**	.40**	.42**	.23*	-.27**	-.28*	-.19
Brief scanner	deviates	0	2	.71	.64				.75**	.74**	.69**	-.19	-.16	-.14
	a problem	0	2	.61	.63					.84**	.47**	-.17	-.18	-.12
	engagement	0	2	.82	.77						.51**	-.21*	-.19	-.17
	overall	0	2	.69	.61							-.19	-.16	-.17
Preschool Education	Length in preschool(y)	.5	5.6	2.38	1.33								-.00	.80**
	Length in preschool with age partialization(y)	-	-	-	-									.81**
	Length with this teacher(y)	.5	7	3.20	2.37									-

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; M= subscale means; SD= subscale standard deviations

A series of correlations were calculated to determine the relation between teachers' estimations of their efficacy in managing, instructing, and engaging their focus pupil and their perceptions of the child's problem behaviors (see Table 1). As anticipated, teachers' overall self-efficacy was significantly and negatively associated with ratings of children's anger/aggression and anxiety/withdrawal and positively associated with ratings of children's social competence. For boys (see Table 2), teacher self-efficacy was significantly and positively associated with ratings of social competence. This same pattern held for girls (see Table 3), with the addition of significant and negative relations between teacher self-efficacy and both anger/aggression and anxiety/withdrawal.

The length of time a child had attended preschool and the length of time the child was with the preschool teacher who rated their behavior were examined to determine possible associations with social competence and problem behavior. When considering the whole sample, both time in preschool and time with the teacher were associated with higher ratings of social competence and lower ratings of anxiety/withdrawal. For boys, longer time in preschool mirrored these associations, but the length of time with the preschool teacher was only associated with higher ratings of social competence. For girls, length of time in preschool was significantly and negatively correlated with anger/aggression and anxiety/withdrawal, and positively correlated with social competence. As with the boys, the length of time with their preschool teacher was also positively associated with social competence.

Our second focus was to explore the potential use of the Children's Brief Sociopedagogical Scanner for early identification of problem behavior. Thus, we examined the relations between the 3-item screener and the teacher ratings of problem behavior using the more established measure of externalizing and internalizing problem behavior (SCBE). We also examined the pattern of associations between emotional and behavioral problems and teachers' sense of self-efficacy to see if they mirrored the patterns with the more established measure. When considering the full group of children, preschool teachers' estimations of self-efficacy were negatively associated with all three socio-pedagogical problem behaviors assessed with the brief screener. Moreover, as anticipated, higher teacher estimations of each of the socio-pedagogical aspects (i.e., behavior that deviates from the group, represents a problem, and requires extra teacher engagement) were positively associated with higher estimations of anger/aggression, and anxiety/withdrawal, and lower estimations of social competence. This same pattern held for the ratings of both boys and girls, with one exception (i.e., the correlation between the behavior representing a problem and anxiety/withdrawal for boys was not significant).

## **DISCUSSION**

In this study, we first examined the relation between teachers' self-efficacy and their pupils' behaviors. Prior studies indicate that lower teacher self-efficacy is associated with higher assessments of class-wide and student-level behavior problems, especially for behaviors that are externalizing in nature (e.g., Vlah et al., 2017; Zee et al., 2016; Yoder & Williford, 2019). The present study extends our understanding by investigating teacher self-efficacy concerning a current preschool child whom they identified as having significant emotional or behavioral problems and demonstrating

that teachers' self-efficacy is associated with the behavior of a single pupil. However, the nature of this relation appears to vary by the gender of the child. While we anticipated that higher teacher self-efficacy would be associated with lower estimations of problem behavior, that held only for the estimations of girls' problem behavior. Boys are commonly rated higher on problem behavior, as they were in this study, especially when the behavior is externalizing in nature. It may be that teachers find the problem behavior of girls to be more unexpected, and as they likely have been given more opportunities to manage the problem behaviors of boys, their confidence to do so with girls may be hindered. Further research is warranted.

We were also curious about how the length of time the child had been with their current teacher might be associated with both teacher self-efficacy and the child's behavior. The Croatian preschool education system affords a unique opportunity for teachers to remain with a child for multiple years. In this study, the average length of time with their current teacher was over three years, indicating that the teachers had ample time with the selected child to develop effective ways to support them. While the length of time the teacher had spent with their pupil did not appear to relate to how they viewed their ability to manage and engage their pupil, it was associated with their estimations of the child's social competence. This finding may indicate that keeping a child with the same teacher for multiple years is good practice for supporting social development. In terms of problem behavior, it appears that the longer children were placed with their teacher, the lower their teacher's estimations of their internalizing behaviors. This is especially relevant given that teachers are less likely to identify children's internalizing problem behavior (Poulou, 2015), thus leaving these pupils' internalizing behaviors unaddressed. The present finding suggests the potential for internalizing behaviors to be positively influenced by remaining with the same teacher over time. It takes time for teachers to build relationships necessary to first recognize and then address the child's feelings of anxiety and social withdrawal. As the intent of quality preschool education is to ensure positive social-emotional growth and development, future research to determine an optimal length of time with a teacher to nurture growth would be informative, especially for countries where the time with a preschool teacher is relatively short (e.g., the United States).

Finally, we set out to examine the potential utility of a brief screener for examining teacher concerns about behavioral problems that directly align with the criteria for identifying emotional-behavioral disabilities (EBD) in Croatia. Poulou (2015: p. 225) states "The preschool period is deemed as the optimal time to identify and reduce early signs of problems before they develop into permanent patterns". Early intervention is considered best practice for children with EBD; yet the majority of children fail to receive the identification often required for more intensive levels of support. With the use of a brief screener for the identification of problem behaviors, preschool children and their teachers could receive much-needed support.

In Croatia, a brief screening process has yet to be adopted. The 3-item Children's Brief Sociopedagogical Scanner used in the present study was examined for content validity against the more widely established 30-item SCBE. The results indicated significant and strong correlations with the SCBE in the predicted directions for the total sample and girls, with 8 out of 9 significant correlations for the ratings of the boys. While more research is necessary to determine any future utility of this measure, the current study suggests potential for further exploration.

A few limitations of the current study should be noted. First, teachers were asked to identify one child out of their current preschool class. Teacher's self-efficacy is likely impacted by the number of children with challenging behaviors in their current class and this was not determined in the present study. Second, preschool teachers were not asked about prior training for addressing the problem behavior of their pupils. Opportunities for professional development in evidence-based classroom management may serve to boost teacher self-efficacy. Future research could provide a more comprehensive picture of the relation between teacher self-efficacy and problem behavior with the inclusion of such questions.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the perceptions of 254 teachers regarding their self-efficacy in managing and engaging the most behaviorally challenging children in their classrooms across 11 early childhood and preschool institutions in one northwestern county of Croatia. Of the total number of children identified as the most behaviorally challenging in their classrooms (N=254), 91.7% were neither under consideration for nor identified as eligible for special education and/or officially planned inclusion in a preschool institution.

Teachers' ratings of the focus child's levels of problem behaviors (i.e., anger/aggression, anxiety/withdrawal) and social competence were moderate. Boys were rated as exhibiting more anger/aggressive behavior than girls, while girls were rated higher in social competence than boys. No differences were found between the ratings of boys and girls for anxiety/withdrawal.

Teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy in their ability to efficiently manage, instruct, and engage a preselected student with emotional and behavioral problems were high. There were no differences between the ratings of teachers who rated boys versus those who rated girls. For boys, teacher self-efficacy was positively associated with ratings of social competence. This same pattern held for girls, with the addition of negative relations between teacher self-efficacy and both anger/aggression and anxiety/withdrawal. Both time in preschool and time with the teacher were associated with higher ratings of social competence and lower ratings of anxiety/withdrawal. For boys, longer time in preschool mirrored these associations, but the length of time with the preschool teacher was only associated with higher ratings of social competence. For girls, length of time in preschool was significantly and negatively correlated with anger/aggression and anxiety/withdrawal and positively correlated with social competence. As with the boys, the length of time with their preschool teacher was also positively associated with social competence.

The evidence supports the potential feasibility of a 3-item screening tool designed for early identification of significant behavioral challenges in children. The proposed new instrument Children's Brief Sociopedagogical Scanner revealed that teachers estimated moderate (somewhat) levels of the three problems across children detected as behaviorally challenged. Boys were rated higher than girls on behaviors that "deviates from the behavior and/or condition of most of the children in the group", "represents a problem either to a child or to child's environment", and "requires your extra engagement to help the child successfully overcome this behavior or condition". When considering the full group of children, preschool teacher estimations of self-efficacy were negatively

associated with all three socio-pedagogical problem behaviors assessed with the brief screener. Higher teacher estimations of each of the socio-pedagogical aspects (i.e., behavior that deviates from the group, represents a problem, and requires extra teacher engagement) were positively associated with higher estimations of anger/aggression and anxiety/withdrawal and lower estimations of social competence. This same pattern held for the ratings of both boys and girls with one exception: the correlation between the behavior representing a problem and anxiety/withdrawal for boys was not significant.

In conclusion and in relation to the practical implications of the obtained results, teachers are part of the early intervention system that "needs to be improved, both in terms of increasing the capacity to include all children and improving pedagogical practices so that all children in the educational group can engage in quality interactions with peers and adults" (Bouillet & Majcen, 2022: p. 23). Therefore, we agree with the recommendation of Visković et al. (2023) to strengthen the competencies of teachers in institutions as part of a comprehensive system improvement. We hope that these results can highlight some key elements of qualitative prevention of social exclusion of young children. In the broader context of preventing social exclusion, our results may contribute to the recommendations of empowering teachers for competent early recognition of behavioral problems in children, so that timely early intervention can be implemented in inclusive early development and preschool classroom settings.

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## **SAMOEFIKASNOST ODGOJITELJA KOD DJETETOVIH EMOCIONALNIH PROBLEMIMA I PROBLEMA U PONAŠANJU: RANI POKAZATELJI ZA POMOĆ ODGOJITELJIMA**

### **SAŽETAK**

Odgojatelji u predškolskim ustanovama u Republici Hrvatskoj vjerojatno će se susresti s djecom čije je ponašanje izazovno, no ipak je manja vjerojatnost da će primiti podršku s obzirom na mali broj djece predškolske dobi za koju je utvrđeno da imaju emocionalne poteškoće i poteškoće u ponašanju. Ovo istraživanje imalo je za cilj ispitati percepcije 254 hrvatska odgojitelja o njihovoj samoefikasnosti u sposobnosti upravljanja, poučavanja i angažiranja određenog djeteta za koje smatraju da je izazovno u ponašanju. Rezultati su pokazali da je samoefikasnost učitelja negativno povezana s dječjim ocjenama u vezi s internaliziranim i eksternaliziranim problemima te pozitivno povezana s dječjim ocjenama u vidu socijalne kompetencije. Broj godina tijekom kojih su djeca pohađala predškolski odgoj i količina vremena provedenog sa svojim odgojiteljem bili su povezani s višim ocjenama socijalne kompetencije djece i nižim ocjenama dječje anksioznosti/povlačenja. Također se predlažu dokazi o potencijalnoj izvedivosti kratkog instrumenta probira od tri stavke za rano otkrivanje značajno izazovnog ponašanja: Kratki dječji socio-pedagoški skener. Rezultati mogu doprinijeti prevenciji socijalne isključenosti, no potrebna su daljnja istraživanja.

**Ključne riječi:** kratki dječji socio-pedagoški skener, odgojitelji u predškolskim ustanovama, prevencija socijalne isključenosti, samoefikasnost, emocionalni i ponašajni problemi



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