# Enhancing Well-Being in Early Childhood Educators: A Workshop-Based Approach to Professional Stress

Lana Šarec*
*lana.sarec@skole.hr*
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3144-3746

Renata Martinec**
*renata.martinec@erf.unizg.hr*
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0820-7850

Renata Pinjatela***
*renata.pinjatela@er.unizg.hr*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5601-1425

https://doi.org/10.31192/np.24.3.7
UDK / UDC: 37-051:159.944.4
331.362:37-051
303.423
Izvorni znanstveni rad /
Original scientific paper
Primljeno/Received:
19. veljače 2026. / Feb 19, 2026
Prihvaćeno/Accepted:
15. travnja 2026. / Apr 15, 2026

*The work of early childhood educators is increasingly demanding, exposing them to high levels of professional stress that can negatively affect job satisfaction, psychophysical health, and well-being. This study aimed to design, implement, and evaluate a series of thematic workshops incorporating evidence-based stress management strategies to enhance self-esteem and reduce professional stress and perceived stress level in early childhood educators. The research was conducted on a sample of 12 participants. Six workshops were delivered over two months, structured around the following themes: introduction and relaxation, trust and teamwork, self-perception and personal strengths, assertiveness, empowerment, and unity and collaboration. Pre- and post-intervention assessments included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), the Questionnaire of Burnout Intensity at Work, the IS Questionnaire – Exposure to Stressors, and the Workshop Evaluation Questionnaire. The results of this study showed statistically significant improvements in self-esteem, reductions in professional stress, and a decreased assessment of role in work as a source of stress in the work environment. In contrast,*

* Lana Šarec, mag. rehab. educ., Centre for education Rijeka; Address: Ul. Senjskih uskoka 2, HR-51000 Rijeka, Croatia.
** Renata Martinec, PhD, Full Prof., University of Zagreb, Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences; Address: Borongajska cesta 83f, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia.
*** Renata Pinjatela, PhD, Full Prof., University of Zagreb, Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences; Address: Borongajska cesta 83f, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia.

*participation in the workshops did not result in statistically significant changes in perceived stress level for variables job-related stressors, career development, social relations, work organisation, or private life. Participants reported high satisfaction with the workshops, noting that their long-term implementation could contribute to improved collegial cohesion, communication, work quality, self-efficacy, and stress reduction. These findings underscore the value of holistic stress management interventions in supporting educators' well-being and highlight the need for further research examining multi-level stress coping strategies that address both individual and organisational risk factors.*

Key words: *coping stress strategies, early childhood educators, professional stress, thematic workshops, well-being.*

## *Introduction*

According to numerous scientific research, chronic professional stress is recognised as a persistent issue among early childhood educators.[1] These findings are concerning because chronic stress is associated with a higher risk of psychosomatic disorders, psycho-emotional disturbances, feelings of dissatisfaction and helplessness, and an overall reduction in quality of life.[2] Professional stress arises when the demands of the work environment exceed an employee's skills and available resources.[3] Early childhood educators are exposed to specific stressors, including high levels of responsibility, extensive administrative duties, direct engagement with children, and challenging interactions with parents and colleagues.[4] In addition, suboptimal organisational practices significantly contribute to work-related stress. For example, one systematic review identified inadequately defined organisational frameworks, dysfunctional professional relationships, low professional standing, and limited opportuni-

[1] Cf. Daryl B. O'CONNOR, Julian F. THAYER, Kavita VEDHARA, Stress and health: A review of psychobiological processes, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 72 (2021) 1, 663-688; Mariana SOUTO-MANNING, Samantha A. MELVIN, Early childhood teachers of color in New York City: Heightened stress, lower quality of life, declining health, and compromised sleep amidst COVID-19, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 60 (2022) 34-48.

[2] Cf. George P. CHROUSOS, The neuroendocrinology of stress: the stress-related continuum of chronic disease development, *Molecular Psychiatry*, 27 (2022) 1, 502-513; Emilija KNEZEVIC et al., The role of cortisol in chronic stress, neurodegenerative diseases, and psychological disorders, *Cells*, 12 (2023) 23, 2726.

[3] Cf. Dhruba L. PANDEY, Work stress and employee performance: an assessment of impact of work stress, *International Research Journal of Human Resource and Social Sciences*, 7 (2020) 5, 124-135.

[4] Cf. Ivanka ŽIVČIĆ-BEĆIREVIĆ, Sanja SMOJVER-AŽIĆ, Izvori stresa na poslu odgojitelja u dječjim vrtićima [Origins of work stress in kindergarten teachers], *Psihologijske teme*, 14 (2005) 2, 3-13.

ties for career advancement and professional development as factors associated with increased risk of professional stress among early childhood educators.[5]

Working in groups of children with special needs or in inclusive educational settings, which integrate typically developing children and children with developmental disabilities, presents additional challenges. These types of work environments further reinforce professional demands, requiring individual approaches, negotiation with parents or guardians, adaptation of materials, and the use of targeted educational and rehabilitation methods.[6] Early childhood educators in inclusive groups must demonstrate high levels of emotional regulation, patience, and adaptability, as they need to continuously adjust to the developmental and individual needs of each child. These complex conditions are associated with elevated levels of professional stress, particularly when adequate institutional and professional support is lacking.[7]

Prolonged professional stress can lead to burnout, characterised by physical exhaustion, emotional fatigue, depersonalisation, and reduced professional efficacy.[8] These conditions negatively affect not only the well-being of early childhood educators but also their motivation, concentration, and decision-making. As a result, such responses may impair work efficiency and adversely influence children's communicative and behavioural responses.[9] According to some authors higher levels of stress among early childhood educators are negatively correlated with children's cooperation skills, empathy, and motivation, while positively correlated with the frequency of conflicts in the group,[10] Consequently, recent research has increasingly focused on strategies to prevent burnout and support the well-being of early childhood educators.[11] Well-being in this population is multidimensional, encompassing self-efficacy, resilience, socio-emotional competence, and individual responses to working conditions,

[5] Cf. Joanne NG, Marg ROGERS, Courtney McNAMARA, Early childhood educator's burnout: A systematic review of the determinants and effectiveness of interventions, *Issues in Educational Research*, 33 (2023) 1, 173-206.

[6] Cf. Hyun-Joo JEON et al., Early childhood special education teachers' job burnout and psychological stress, *Early Education and Development*, 33 (2022) 8, 1364-1382.

[7] Cf. Flora BELLOUR, Paul A. BARTOLO, Mary KYRIAZOPOULOU, *Inclusive early childhood education: Literature review*, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017.

[8] Cf. Rachel STEIN, Megan GARAY, Anh NGUYEN, It matters: Early childhood mental health, educator stress, and burnout, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 52 (2024) 2, 333-344.

[9] Cf. Alison Hope FRIEDMAN-KRAUSS et al., The role of classroom-level child behavior problems in predicting preschool teacher stress and classroom emotional climate, *Early Education and Development*, 25 (2014) 4, 530-552.

[10] Cf. Martti SIEKKINEN et al., Social competence among 6-year-old children and classroom instructional support and teacher stress, Early Education & Development, 24 (2013) 6, 877-897.

[11] Cf. Rosa GOMES et al., Prevention practice of stress in preschool education: Educators' perception, *Case Studies Journal*, 12 (2015) 4, 15-19, Stein at al., *It matters*…

including professional burnout, fatigue, and stress.[12] Given the complexity of well-being, its promotion should be managed both at the individual level, through personal strategies and self-care interventions, and at the organisational level, through supportive work environments.[13]

Individual coping strategies encompass various self-help and self-care techniques, applied dynamically and adaptively to meet unique personal needs and circumstances.[14] Some of them are progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, guided imagery, biofeedback, diaphragmatic breathing, mindfulness, meditation, prayer, physical activity, and engagement with the arts through visual arts, music, literature, or dance.[15] These activities support multiple dimensions of personal existence, including emotional, physical, recreational, relaxational, solitary, and spiritual aspects, thereby fostering overall well-being and resilience in both personal and professional contexts.[16]

At the organisational level, enhancing well-being and mitigating stress may involve providing support staff, ensuring equitable task distribution, reducing administrative burdens, fostering team collaboration, offering professional support, and recognising professional achievements.[17] Systematic assessment of workplace demands and resources, along with the development of emotional competencies, communication skills, and social support, should be considered a professional imperative. That would also mean providing psychological support through psychoeducation, supervision, thematic workshops, counselling, support groups, and, if necessary, psychotherapeutic interventions.[18] Such approaches facilitate reflection on workplace challenges, sharing of personal experiences and emotions, and the acquisition of social and communication competencies. These activities can contribute to the development of positive

[12] Cf. Sanja TATALOVIĆ VORKAPIĆ, Sanja SKOČIĆ MIHIĆ, Martina JOSIPOVIĆ, Early childhood educators' personality and competencies for teaching children with disabilities as predictors of their professional burnout, *Socijalna psihijatrija*, 46 (2018) 4, 390-405.

[13] Cf. Tamara CUMMING, Early childhood educators' well-being: An updated review of the literature, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45 (2017) 583-593.

[14] Cf. Allise M. PENNING, *Self-care and burnout in early childhood educators*, Mills College, 2018.

[15] *Cf.* Sarah Angela KRIAKOUS et al., The effectiveness of mindfulness-based stress reduction on the psychological functioning of healthcare professionals: A systematic review, *Mindfulness*, 12 (2021) 1-28; Val HUET, Literature review of art therapy-based interventions for work-related stress, *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 20 (2015) 2, 66-76; Hector W. TSANG et al., A pilot evaluation on a stress management programme using a combined approach of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) for elementary school teachers, *Stress and Health*, 31 (2015) 1, 35-43.

[16] Cf. Penning, *Self-care and burnout…*

[17] Cf. Erin TEBBEN et al., Identifying primary and secondary stressors, buffers, and supports that impact ECE teacher wellbeing: Implications for teacher education, *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 42 (2021) 2, 143-161.

[18] Cf. Eileen M. BRENNAN et al., The evidence base for mental health consultation in early childhood settings: Research synthesis addressing staff and program outcomes, *Early Education and Development*, 19 (2008) 6, 982-1022.

attitudes and beliefs, improved emotional self-regulation, a sense of acceptance and belonging, and increased resilience to stress.[19] Ultimately, fostering a supportive and well-structured work environment is essential not only for individual well-being but also for the overall effectiveness and sustainability of professional practice.[20]

## *1. Aim of the research*

It is indisputable that the work of early childhood educators is becoming increasingly demanding and complex. Overall job satisfaction or dissatisfaction is influenced not only by the complexity of the work itself, but also by inadequate work organisation, poor working conditions, limited opportunities for career development and advancement, challenging communication with parents/guardians, and strained interpersonal relationships with colleagues. In response to these challenges, interventions to support educators' well-being and foster positive workplace dynamics are crucial. This dual approach is essential for preventing burnout and enhancing overall self-efficacy and personal satisfaction. Such considerations are supported by various studies, which confirm the importance of building teaching competence and efficacy, and preparing early childhood educators to manage stressors in the work environment to reduce depression, stress, and emotional exhaustion.[21] Since it is known that the assessment of a stressful stimulus is influenced not only by its intensity and duration, but also by personal cognitive and emotional evaluations of its quality, supporting feelings of satisfaction and self-efficacy is essential. These positively influence not only self-experience, accompanied by high levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, but also the level of perceived stress. Finally, this can provide an important foundation for building resilience in coping with stress.[22]

In this context, the present research aimed to design, implement, and evaluate thematic workshops incorporating techniques and strategies for coping with stress, with the purpose of enhancing self-esteem and reducing profes-

[19] Cf. Lieni JEON, Katharine ARDELEANU, Work climate in early care and education and teachers' stress: Indirect associations through emotion regulation, *Early Education and Development*, 31 (2020) 7, 1031-1051.

[20] Cf. Emily BERGER et al., A systematic review of evidence-based wellbeing initiatives for schoolteachers and early childhood educators, *Educational Psychology Review*, 34 (2022) 4, 2919-2969.

[21] Cf. Lieny JEON, Cynthia K. BUETTNER, Ashley A. GRANT, Early childhood teachers' psychological well-being: Exploring potential predictors of depression, stress, and emotional exhaustion, Early Education and Development, 29 (2018) 1, 53-69.

[22] Cf. Sergio EDÚ-VALSANIA, Ana LAGUÍA, Juan A. MORIANO, Burnout: A review of theory and measurement, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18 (2022) 3, 1780.

sional stress and perceived stress level in early childhood educators. In line with this aim, it was hypothesised that participation in the thematic workshops would lead to an increase in self-esteem (H1), a reduction in professional stress (H2), and a reduction in perceived stress level (H3).

## *2. Methods*

### *2.1. Participants*

This research initially involved 16 early childhood educators, all of whom were women, from the same kindergarten. However, due to irregular workshop attendance caused by health-related issues or other obligations, the final sample included in the data analysis consisted of 12 participants. Among these were two educators working with groups of children with developmental disabilities and two educators working in inclusive groups. The remaining participants worked in regular groups, which also included children who, to some extent, deviated from typical developmental milestones or exhibited difficulties in everyday functioning.

The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 63 years, with a mean age of 42.75 years. Their work experience ranged from 1 to 41 years, with a mean of 15.5 years.

### *2.2. Variables and instruments*

Given the aim of the study, the following questionnaires were administered at two assessment points: before and after the completion of all six workshops.

*A) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)*[23]

This scale measures an individual's overall evaluative orientation towards the self, that is, how a person perceives themselves. Self-esteem refers to the overall evaluation an individual has of their own worth, self-confidence, and self-respect. The scale consists of 10 statements to which respondents indicate their level of agreement or disagreement. This scale is widely used in research and clinical practice due to its simplicity, brevity, and high reliability and validity in assessing self-esteem.[24]

[23] Cf. Abdelouahed BOUH et al., The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: A Confirmatory Factor Analysis Study, *European Journal of Psychology and Educational Research*, 5 (2022) 2, 145-160.

[24] Cf. Renata MÖHR NEMČIĆ, Sandra BRADARIĆ-JONČIĆ, Relacije kulturnog identiteta i samopoštovanja, zadovoljstva životom te psihičkog zdravlja gluhih i nagluhih Osoba [The Relationship Between Cultural Identity and Self-Esteem, Satisfaction with Life and Psychological Health in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons], *Govor*, 33 (2016) 1, 3-37.

*B) Questionnaire of burnout intensity at work*[25]

This questionnaire consists of 18 statements representing various symptoms of work-related burnout. Respondents are asked to rate, on a scale from 1 to 3, the extent to which each statement applies to them.

*C) IS Questionnaire – Exposure to Stressors*[26]

The IS Questionnaire assesses the degree of an individual's exposure to various stressors in the work environment and helps identify specific sources of stress affecting employees. The questionnaire includes the following categories: *Job*, *Role in Work*, *Career Development*, *Social Relationships*, *Work Organisation*, and *Private Life*.

*D) Workshop Evaluation Questionnaire*

After 6 workshops have been completed, a *Workshop Evaluation Questionnaire,* developed by the authors of research, was administered. It assessed participants' satisfaction, the content, and the perceived contribution of the workshops. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments.

## *2.2. Procedure*

Before the workshops were implemented, participants were informed of the aim and purpose of the research. Participation was voluntary, and the option to withdraw from the study at any time was emphasised, along with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Six workshops, each lasting 60 minutes, were conducted over a three-month period. Each workshop focused on a specific theme, selected based on existing knowledge of the abilities, skills, competencies, and situations that may help prevent or alleviate professional stress among early childhood educators. The workshops were organised around the following themes: introduction and relaxation, trust and teamwork, self-perception and personal strengths, assertiveness, empowerment, and unity and collaboration.

Generally, workshops are considered an approach in which the implementation and change of activities are planned in advance, following a structured format that includes an introductory, central, and concluding phase. In this research, the workshops were designed so that the introductory phase included warm-up activities, self-awareness exercises, connection-building activities, and relaxation. The central phase focused on activities related to the specific

[25] Cf. Damir LJUBOTINA, Olja DRUŽIĆ, Sindrom izgaranja na poslu kod pomagača i čimbenici koji utječu na stupanj izgaranja [Helpers' Burn-Out Syndrome and Factors which Influence the Degree of Burn-Out], *Ljetopis socijalnog rada*, 3 (1996) 1, 51-64.

[26] Cf. Ljiljana ŽANETIĆ, Ivo ŽANETIĆ, *Vodič kroz školsku godinu 2018./2019. za učitelje, nastavnike i razrednike* [Guide Through the 2018/2019 School Year for Teachers, Instructors, and Homeroom Teachers], Požega, Refleks, 2018, 78-80.

workshop theme and included various strategies and techniques for stress management and resilience-building in stressful situations. The concluding phase aimed to promote calm, direct attention to participants' emotions and insights, encourage shared reflection on positive experiences, and facilitate a gradual and spontaneous disengagement from the group. Themes, objectives, and main activities of each workshop are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Workshop themes, objectives, and main activities

| | Themes | Objectives and main activities |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Introduction and relaxation | *Objective*: Familiarisation and group cohesion. *Activities*: Introduction of group members using therapeutic circle; sharing personal experiences in pairs; creation of a group poster reflecting collective identity. *Closure*: Guided imagery. |
| 2. | Trust and teamwork | *Objective*: Build trust and collaborative skills. *Activities*: Trust exercises (e.g., trust fall, supporting a blindfolded partner's walk; cooperative problem-solving tasks navigating obstacles together. *Closure*: Guided imagery. |
| 3. | Self-perception and personal strengths | *Objective*: Enhance self-awareness and recognition of personal strengths. *Activities*: Expressing emotions through movement; painting a personal coat of arms and filling it with individual strengths; identifying personal strengths and weaknesses by reflecting on strategies for improvement; writing and sharing compliment with each other. *Closure*: Reflective discussion. |
| 4. | Assertiveness | *Objective*: Develop assertive communication skills. *Activities*: Sharing experiences of challenging situations in a therapeutic circle: play-through with assertive »I-messages«; exploring assertive responses to challenging situations; role-play. *Closure*: Guided imagery. |
| 5. | Empowerment | *Objective*: Reduce stress and enhance personal coping strategies. *Activities*: Stress identification; problem-solving and peer support; role play, visualisation of a »safe space«; group sharing. *Closure*: Progressive muscle relaxation. |
| 6. | Unity and collaboration | *Objective*: Foster team cohesion and collective problem-solving. *Activities*: Warm-up game; acting out in the »Tribe« scene (exploring the names, roles, symbols, shared activity during a hurricane, group decisions). *Closure*: Tribal dance / group celebration |

### *2.4. Data processing methods*

Basic statistical parameters were calculated to process the data. Given the small sample size, relationships between variables before and after the workshops were examined using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. For statistical analysis. IBM SPSS Statistics 31 for Windows was used.

## *3. Results and discussion*

The results of the *Rosenberger self-esteem scale* and the *Questionnaire of burnout intensity at work* before and after the workshops. are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of the initial and final assessments of the *Rosenberger self-esteem scale* and the *Questionnaire of burnout intensity at work*

| | Initial | | Final | | Z | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Median (Mdn) | Interquartile Range (IQR) | Median (Mdn) | Interquartile range (IQR) | | |
| Rosenberger self-esteem scale | 23.00 | 5 | 30.50 | 11 | -2.754 | 0.006 |
| Questionnaire of burnout intensity at work | 31.50 | 6 | 23.00 | 6 | -2.990 | 0.003 |

A Wilcoxon signed-rank test revealed that results for the *Rosenberger self-esteem scale* were significantly higher after the intervention (Mdn = 30.5, IQR=11) compared to the initial results (Mdn = 23, IQR=5), Z = -2.754, p = 0.006. Thus, hypothesis H1, which states that the workshops will lead to increasing self-esteem in early childhood educators, is accepted. Results on the *Questionnaire of burnout intensity at work* were significantly lower after the intervention (Mdn = 23, IQR=6) compared to before (Mdn = 31.5, IQR=6), Z = -2.990, p = 0.003. Hypothesis H2, which states that the workshops will lead to reducing professional stress in early childhood educators, is accepted.

Table 3 presents the results of the *IS Questionnaire – Exposure to Stressors*, which contains 40 statements divided into six categories: *Job*, *Role in Work*, *Career Development*, *Social Relationships*, *Work Organisation*, and *Private Life*.

Table 3. Comparison of the initial and final assessments on the *IS Questionnaire – Exposure to Stressors*

| | Initial | | Final | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variables | Median (Mdn) | Interquartile Range (IQR) | Median (Mdn) | Interquartile Range (IQR) | Z | p |
| Job | 32.00 | 8 | 26.50 | 8 | -1.292 | 0.196 |
| Role in Work | 19.00 | 3 | 17.00 | 5 | -2.153 | 0.031 |
| Career Development | 13.50 | 4 | 11.50 | 5 | -0.211 | 0.833 |
| Social Relationships | 19.50 | 9 | 16.50 | 8 | -0.58 | 0.562 |
| Work Organisation | 15.00 | 6 | 12.00 | 7 | -0.772 | 0.44 |
| Private Life | 7.50 | 6 | 8.00 | 6 | -0.879 | 0.379 |

Table 3 presents the results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, indicating that participation in thematic workshops leads to a statistically significant

change in educators' perceptions of their role at work (Z = –2.153, p = 0.031). Educators' perceptions of job-related demands are not statistically significant (Z = –1.292, p = 0.196). No statistically significant differences were found in the domain of *Career development* (Z = –0.211, p = 0.833). The workshops did not produce significant changes in *Social relations* (Z = –0.580, p = 0.562). The statistical analysis also revealed no significant differences between pre- and post-intervention measurements for the variable *Work organisation* (Z = –0.580, p = 0.562). Finally, regarding the variable *Private life*, the results indicated no statistically significant changes in this domain following participation in the workshops (Z = –0.879, p = 0.379). Consequently, Hypothesis H3, which postulated that participation in the workshops would lead to reduce in stress perception level was not approved.

Regarding the Workshop Evaluation Questionnaire, all 12 participants gave both the workshops and the facilitator the highest score of 5. Participants also reported that the workshops were engaging and reported that, if held over a longer period, they could foster greater collegial cohesion and teamwork, improve communication, enhance work quality, increase self-confidence, and promote a more positive self-perception. When asked whether this type of workshop could reduce professional stress over an extended period, 11 participants (92%) responded »yes«, while one educator selected »maybe«. Their comments at the end of the questionnaire indicated participants' satisfaction with the workshops. They found them interesting, enjoyable, and useful, and expressed a desire to repeat them or have them more frequently. Some of their comments are:

— »Immeasurable. Should be repeated at least twice a year. Thank you.«

— »Extremely good workshops – positive atmosphere, excellent leadership, and the activities are fun and interesting. The environment was encouraging and a lot of advice and support is shared through conversations. It was never dry or boring. The workshops should be mandatory. Thank you.«

— »Interesting and fun. Encourages reflection on certain topics. Well done!«

— »The workshops were interesting, enjoyable, and educational. Most importantly, they were useful – thank you very much.«

— »Relaxed atmosphere, professional leader. Excellent!«

- »Very pleasant atmosphere. The result is better connection and communication between colleagues. One of the rare workshops that is both interesting and useful. Only praise.«

— »We hope to see you again next year!«

— »All the best, high expectations met and exceeded!«

— »They were so interesting that I attended each one with enthusiasm and enjoyed them. This should be repeated. All praise!«

The findings of this study showed statistically significant improvements in self-esteem, reductions in professional stress, and a decreased assessment of role in work as a source of stress in the work environment. In contrast, participation in the workshops did not result in statistically significant changes in perceived stress level for *variables job-related stressors, career development, social relations, work organisation, or private life.* These findings may reflect the relatively short duration of the intervention and the small sample size. Previous studies have similarly noted that changes in organisational perceptions and social dynamics often require longer-term interventions and systemic support.[27] Also, *IS Questionnaire – Exposure to Stressors* assess dealing with conditions and situations often beyond employee's control, such as outdated equipment, lack of materials, lack of playgrounds, salary increases, working hours, excessive administration, all of which can negatively affect the level of perceived stress. Therefore, there is a need for well-being interventions for early childhood educators that address multiple sources of professional stress. This perspective aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which suggests that most initiatives primarily target changes at the individual and microsystem levels, while often overlooking other layers of the ecological framework, such as workplace demands and the broader education setting culture.[28] Importantly, the results of the *Workshop Evaluation Questionnaire* demonstrated a high level of participant satisfaction. Educators evaluated both the workshops and the facilitator very positively and perceived the workshops as engaging, useful, and supportive. Participants believed that longer-term implementation of this type of intervention could contribute to improved collegial cohesion, communication, work quality, self-confidence, and stress reduction. Together, these findings suggest that thematic workshops represent a promising approach for supporting early childhood educators' well-being, particularly when implemented over a longer period and with a larger number of kindergarten employees.

The results highlight the positive impact of the approaches used in this study, which included artistic media, complementary therapies, and various techniques and strategies designed to enhance coping with professional stress. The integrated use of these methods within the workshops provided holistic support across multiple dimensions of the individual, including physical, creative, cognitive, and emotional aspects. These findings are consistent with previous research; for instance, several studies have shown that simply use of artistic media or more complex use of creative arts therapies can positively influence perceived stress and stress management. They have been shown to reduce anxiety levels and enhance participants' mood. These effects are thought to arise

[27] Cf. Patricia A. JENNINGS et al., Long-term impacts of the CARE program on teachers' self-reported social and emotional competence and well-being, *Journal of School Psychology*, 76 (2019) 186-202.

[28] Cf. Berger, *A systematic review…*

from specific therapeutic mechanisms, among which researchers frequently identify hedonism and play, aesthetic experience and authenticity, nonverbal communication and symbolisation, enactment in a transitional space, and processes of creation and generativity.

Results from different research demonstrated that alternative, relaxation, and multimodal interventions are also statistically effective in reducing stress and improving well-being, highlighting their potential as complementary strategies for managing professional stress.[29] Similarly, data of some studies have shown that the use of complementary therapies, designed to incorporate strategies operating through cognitive and physiological mechanisms, can regulate the stress response and enhance awareness of behaviours, emotions, and reactivity.[30] In this context, additional use of principles and methods of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can be a promising approach for preventing and treating professional stress. For example, in one research participants who attended ACT workshops showed reduced experiential avoidance and increased mindful awareness, which were consequently associated with decreases in depression, stress, and burnout in early childhood special education settings.[31] Some other approaches have also been proven to be successful. For example, mentoring programmes and support groups can serve as potential interventions to address stressors and promote educators' well-being.[32] By fostering a nurturing and supportive environment, such approaches can help educators cope better with professional demands and enhance overall job satisfaction. Ultimately, implementing various interventions can contribute to a more positive and supportive learning environment for young children, thereby benefiting the education system. In practice, prioritising educators' health and well-being not only improves the quality of education but also strengthens the reputation and effectiveness of the whole institution.[33]

Despite promising results, this study has several limitations. These include the small sample size and the single-site setting, which limit the generalisability of the findings. The relatively small number of workshops conducted may

[29] Cf. Katherine M. RICHARDSON, Hannah R. ROTHSTEIN, Effects of occupational stress management intervention programs: a meta-analysis, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 13 (2008) 1, 69-93.

[30] Cf. Stevie-Jae HEPBURN, Annemaree CARROLL, Louise MCCUAIG-HOLCROFT, A complementary intervention to promote wellbeing and stress management for early career teachers, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18 (2021) 12, 6320.

[31] Cf. Anthony BIGLAN et al., The value of workshops on psychological flexibility for early childhood special education staff, *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 32 (2011) 4, 196-210.

[32] Cf. Nurul Ain Alwi CANDRA, Basheer AL-HAIMI, Mitigating stress among early childhood educators: interventions and implications for enhancing well-being and productivity, in: Nazimah HUSSIN at al. (eds.), *Conference Proceedings of International* Action *Research Conference*, Kuala Lumpur, University Technology Malaysia, 2023, 28-42.

[33] Cf. Jeon, *Early childhood teachers'…*

also have constrained the quality of outcomes. Given these limitations and the importance of supporting the well-being of early childhood educators, future research should include larger samples and rigorous experimental designs with long-term follow-up. Mixed method approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data could provide deeper insights into the mechanisms through which various interventions exert their effects. Furthermore, comparative studies examining different intervention modalities and their integration could contribute to more effective, holistic stress management and well-being promotion in early childhood educators.

## *Conclusion*

The findings of this research underscore the importance and potential value of thematic workshops that include creative, supportive, and stress-mitigating interventions in promoting early childhood educators' well-being. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, extend the duration of interventions, incorporate different kind of assessment and consider multilevel strategies that address both individual and organisational factors contributing to professional stress. In this way, it would contribute not only to the development of various intervention methods but also to raising awareness of the importance of preserving early childhood educators' physical and mental health within contemporary educational and rehabilitation practice.

Lana Šarec* – Renata Martinec** – Renata Pinjatela***

*Unaprjeđenje osobne dobrobiti odgojitelja kroz radionice za smanjenje profesionalnog stresa*

Sažetak

Rad odgojitelja postaje sve zahtjevniji, izlaže ih visokim razinama profesionalnog stresa koji može negativno utjecati na zadovoljstvo poslom, psihofizičko zdravlje i opću dobrobit. Cilj ovog istraživanja bio je osmisliti, provesti i evaluirati više tematskih radionica koje uključuju znanstveno utemeljene strategije upravljanja stresom radi jačanja samopoštovanja te smanjenja profesionalnog stresa i percipirane razine stresa kod odgojitelja. Istraživanje je provedeno na uzorku od 12 sudionika. Tijekom razdoblja od dva mjeseca provedeno je šest radionica, strukturiranih oko sljedećih tema: uvod i relaksacija, povjerenje i timski rad, samopercepcija i osobne snage, asertivnost, osnaživanje te zajedništvo i suradnja. Evaluacija učinkovitosti tih tematskih radionica provedena je primjenom Rosenbergove ljestvice samopoštovanja (RSES), Upitnika intenziteta sagorijevanja na poslu, IS upitnika – izloženost uzročnicima stresa te Upitnika evaluacije radionica. Rezultati su pokazali statistički značajno poboljšanje samopoštovanja, smanjenje profesionalnog stresa i smanjenu procjenu uloge u poslu kao izvora stresa u radnom okruženju. Nasuprot tome, sudjelovanje u radionicama nije uzrokovalo statistički značajne promjene u percipiranoj razini stresa za varijable stresori povezani s poslom, razvoj karijere, društveni odnosi, organizacija rada i privatni život. Sudionici su iskazali visoko zadovoljstvo radionicama, ističući da bi njihova dugoročna provedba mogla pridonijeti boljoj koheziji djelatnika, komunikaciji, kvaliteti rada, samoefikasnosti i smanjenju stresa. Dobiveni nalazi naglašavaju značenje holistički osmišljenih intervencija usmjerenih na upravljanje stresom u kontekstu očuvanja i unaprjeđenja dobrobiti odgojitelja, kao i potrebu za daljnjim istraživanjem različitih strategija suočavanja sa stresom koje integriraju individualne i organizacijske rizične čimbenike.

*Ključne riječi: dobrobit, odgojitelji, profesionalni stres, strategije suočavanja sa stresom, tematske radionice.*

* Lana Šarec, mag. rehab. educ., Centar za odgoj i obrazovanje Rijeka, Ul. Senjskih uskoka 2, HR-51000 Rijeka; e-mail: lana.sarec@skole.hr.

** Prof. dr. sc. Renata Martinec, Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Edukacijsko-rehabilitacijski fakultet, Borongajska cesta 83f, HR-10000 Zagreb; e-mail: renata.martinec@erf.unizg.hr.

*** Prof. dr. sc. Renata Pinjatela, Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Edukacijsko-rehabilitacijski fakultet, Borongajska cesta 83f, HR-10000 Zagreb; e-mail: renata.pinjatela@erf.unizg.hr.