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## Inclusive Culture in Preschool Institution – Pedagogical Competences of Preschool Teachers in Croatia<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Inclusive education in a theoretical context is a direct contribution to the development of qualitative inclusion at every level of the educational system. Inclusive culture implies the involvement of all participants in the process of education. In the educational context, the implementation of inclusive education enables children with special needs to be successful in acquiring and developing the necessary competencies for life and work, or in acquiring the knowledge, skills and habits in accordance with their capabilities. This empirical research work considers preschool teacher pedagogical competences in the preschool educational system through forms of cooperation with parents as key stakeholders of the inclusive processes and examines their perceptions of an inclusive environment at educational institutions. The roles and tasks of teachers in the contemporary pedagogical discourse are focused on building a preschool institution that respects the diversity of each individual involved in the formal education system. Building an inclusive environment and creating a community where everyone feels welcome encourages the adoption of inclusive values as the foundation of any society. Implementation of inclusive concept in the early and preschool system in the Republic of Croatia is partial and unsystematic. The analysis of the results in this study indicates the need for the professional training of educators to enable the quality implementation of inclusive education in preschool institutions. Providing an inclusive education at each level of the educational system helps to avoid obstacles when working with children.

**Keywords:** Inclusive culture, cooperation with parents, pedagogical competences, preschool teachers, the quality of education

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## Introduction

Since the concept of inclusive education in an educational institution implies a change to the overall practices, values and attitudes, the assumption is that the quality of its application depends largely on the work of the preschool teachers, associates and principals when it comes to early and preschool education. Defining and providing inclusive culture in the institutions of early education enables us to identify the key parameters that improve the quality of implementing inclusiveness at the institution level, including the relationship between the key participants of the inclusive process. In the context of this paper, inclusive culture is considered a key parameter for applying inclusiveness both in the educational community in the narrow sense of the word and in the socio-cultural community in the broader sense of the word. Inclusive culture as a main dimension of this paper refers to the presence of quality communication between the participants of the educational process in preschool institutions and the organisation of different inclusive activities to promote positive attitudes toward inclusion in general. The roles and tasks of preschool teachers in the contemporary pedagogical discourse are focused on building a culture of the institution that respects diversity on an individual level in the system of formal education. Building an inclusive environment and creating a community where everyone feels welcome promotes the adoption of inclusive values as the foundation of every society.

Thus, one of the most important points in improving the quality of early and preschool programmes is to enable the implementation of inclusive education. Carrying out that aim provides these children with the necessary competences for schooling, life and works within a natural environment.

This study identifies how preschool teachers evaluate their competences for working with parents and how they rank different forms of their work with parents and determines how they perceive the elements of the inclusive culture at their institution. The results in this study shown that most of the respondents considered themselves competent at working with parents, particularly in terms of informing parents about their child's progress and achievements and the problems they en-

countered during their child's stay at the preschool institution. The teachers also openly support the inclusive culture of the institution.

### **Inclusive environment – assumption for developing an inclusive culture at a preschool institution**

Inclusion as a basic principle within the national curriculum implies that the overall organisation of the education system and the specific tasks, methods and forms of work are appropriate for each student irrespective of their background. The development of an inclusive culture is a task for each participant in the educational process at the preschool institution. Therefore, the challenge for preschool teachers is to create a place where all children, regardless of their background, feel welcome and respected. In such an environment, the children will learn and achieve more competences for their later education. Muthukrishna and Schluter (2011) showed that providing appropriate forms of learning and teaching for the development of inclusive schooling is one of the main aims for effective inclusion later in the education process. According to the *National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education and General Compulsory and High School Education of the Republic of Croatia* (2011), inclusive education is based on the provision of conditions in a mainstream school system that enable children with special needs to acquire the necessary competencies. Because of the differences among children, there is an increasing need to use an individualised curriculum, which implies acquiring competences in accordance with the individual needs of each child and ensuring appropriate methods and forms of educational work. Overall, positive attitudes towards inclusion are essential for an effective inclusive process (Jeznik et al. 2018).

The organisational assumptions for providing inclusion in education (Dyson and Millward 2000) are based on the ever-increasing need for educational systems to have a clear operationalisation of inclusion at the level of the preschool environment.

Certain models of rehabilitation that have been developed throughout history relate to the integration of people with special needs into the educational system or social world. These models are important for considering the relevance of preschool education because preschool represents the first formal level for education. The models of rehabilitation developed during the creation of inclusive practices discuss the correlation between models of rehabilitation and integration as the core of every society, and define the process of moving from integration to the inclusion of children with disabilities in the mainstream school system. For example, in the 1960s, the medical model prevailed, offering a representative concept in which a person with special needs was treated as a social problem and the focus was oriented towards the difficulty of each person. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a transition from the medical model to a social model, which emphasised the including people with disabilities of any kind in social participation, not only in the broader social environment but also in the narrower educational environment (Alfirev 2000).

According to Soldo (1986), educational and integral education should be seen as terms that relate to the transitional process. Sebba and Sachdev (1997) claimed

that the negative attitudes of teachers toward inclusion, referring to the inclusion of children with special needs in the regular education system, are considered to be the most important obstacle to its successful implementation. The educational institution is responsible for ensuring the continuous development of its pupils as spiritual, moral, intellectual and working beings in accordance with their abilities and talents (Vukasović 2001). Other studies have also pointed out the beneficial effects of providing an inclusive experience in the pre-school context in the area of gaining the same social skills as peers without special needs. Inclusion in the regular school system contributes to good social skills for peers with and without special needs and highlights the importance of learning self-control (Ogelman and Secer 2012).

In the context of inclusive culture in early and pre-school education, preschool educators are key people in developing the nursery culture and achieving the set goals within and outside the educational setting. Therefore, we assumed a pedagogical view of inclusive culture where the role of the preschool teacher implies the competencies for providing and organising inclusion activities in the preschool institution. Providing inclusive culture in educational institutions requires several important factors such as material, personnel, programme and organisational structures. Each one of them are equally important in the inclusive process.

### **The role of immediate stakeholders in educational practice**

The role of the preschool teacher in the implementation of inclusive education at a preschool institution requires certain competences for working with children with special needs and their families. For example, the pedagogic competences of preschool teachers are important for providing inclusive education. Within this paper, the pedagogic competences include effective communication skills and quality cooperation with direct stakeholders in everyday educational work. The humanistic approach to education requires two-way communication in which the child and teacher both feel accepted. Educational inclusion in theoretical considerations and practical solutions is a direct contribution to quality educational system. Children with special needs can be successful in acquiring and developing the necessary competencies for life and work, or in acquiring the knowledge, skills and habits that align with their capabilities. The role of the participants in the educational process in contemporary pedagogical discourse is focused on building a culture within the institution that accepts and respects the differences between children.

In the Republic of Croatia, the legal framework for implementing an inclusive education clearly defines the role and position of the key participants in the inclusive process. Educational inclusion in the legal documents in Croatia appears as a key principle that is equally important at all levels of the education system. In the following paragraphs we give an overview of some legislative documents outlining the importance of implementing the inclusive concept at the level of early and preschool education.

The *Act on Preschool Education* (2013) establishes the conditions for implementing a pre-school education and the ways of caring for children of early and preschool age. Article 3 of this Act clarifies that the preschool education is realised in accordance with the developmental characteristics and needs of children and the social, cultural, religious and other needs of the family. This Act also emphasises that the preschool education is based on the *State Pedagogical Standard of Preschool Education* (2008), which, among other guidelines, establishes the ways, conditions and obligations behind the process of including children with special needs into the regular preschool education system. Article 17 of the Act clarifies ways to organise programmes for children with special needs, emphasising that children with special needs have an advantage when enrolling in preschool institutions, and Article 15 of the Act indicates that the preschool education is based on the *National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education* (2014), which contains the fundamental values of educating and training early and preschool children. One of the values of inclusive education is to raise awareness among peers, family members, and the environment in which they live so that children in preschool institutions learn to recognise and accept their own and others' needs. Developing respect for diversity and building relationships in the community, thus encouraging the inclusion of children with special needs in the regular educational programme becomes the main aim of qualitative inclusion.

Understanding the importance of early and preschool education in the educational verticals of children and young people has raised the importance of an appropriate context for early and preschool education. Consequently, the Ministry of Education accepted the framework principles of quality early and preschool education of the EU countries by developing a *Strategy of Education, Science and Technology* (2014), which proposed permanent guidelines for improving the educational system. The main objective of the strategy was to provide a quality educational system that offers equal opportunities for every child. The strategy is based on four values, one of which is to provide equal conditions for each child to achieve their individual potential. In addition, a comprehensive support system should be established for children with developmental special needs, taking into account their specificity of learning, the differences in the dynamics of the learning progress and their personal interests, motivational factors and individual abilities. It is also important to organise support systems for the parents of children with special needs, transform educational institutions into a friendly environment for children with special needs and establish a national support network for inclusive education. These documents show that the Republic of Croatia understands the importance of including children with special needs in the regular educational system and acknowledge its role in engaging them in the daily life of the community.

As the family is the first educational and social environment that the child encounters, the inclusive culture of the institution implies the involvement of the parents. An inclusive education requires a strong partnership and regular communication between families and preschool teachers about the children, their learning and development, the programme requirements and the events at the preschool institutions. The preschool teacher is the key factor that links the school, family and

community. Different structures, origins, lifestyles and characteristics of the families and communities in which children live must be taken into account to support the child's development and learning. By involving the family in the decision-making related to the different environments in which children are taught, the inclusive preschool teacher can use formal and informal opportunities to communicate and exchange information with families. Some research shows that good cooperation with families and experts is particularly important among the preschool teacher's. All together, they must provide clear curriculum aims including all individual needs of the children. In that frame they promote inclusive culture in preschool institutions and active participation of preschool teacher in assessments of special needs of children (Bouillet 2011; Brooker 2011; Brooker 2014; Lambiasi 2014; Stage et al. 2017). The partnership between preschool teachers and parents is therefore important for the social development of the child in kindergarten and it requires a certain level of trust, openness, tolerance, objectivity and willingness to respect the personal and professional competencies; mutual respect; sharing of emotions and skills; harmonisation of educational impacts; and the joint resolution of problems in the development and education of children (Mlinarević and Tomas 2010). A partnership is a situation where an exchange of information is possible, counselling is arranged, mutual learning is induced and responsibilities are equally distributed to have a positive impact on the development of the child. According to Ljubetić (2009), being aware and accepting its role means building a quality partnership, which makes the role of every expert in the educational process complex. The pedagogical employee also requires the competence to establish and develop partnerships (Slunjski et al. 2006; Gittell 2012).

## **Methodology**

### *Aim of the Research*

This study identifies how preschool teachers perceive their competences to work with children's parents and how they rank the different forms of work with parents and determines how the teachers perceive the elements of the inclusive culture at their institution.

### *Problems of the Research*

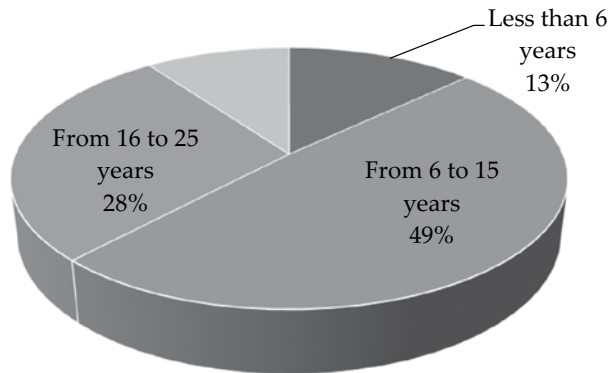
The following research questions were formulated:

- How do preschool teachers determine their pedagogical competences to work with parents and how do they rank the different educational forms of work with parents?
- What do the preschool teachers think about their previous education and the importance of legislative forms in inclusive education?

- How do the preschool teachers determine the elements of the inclusive environment at their preschool institution?

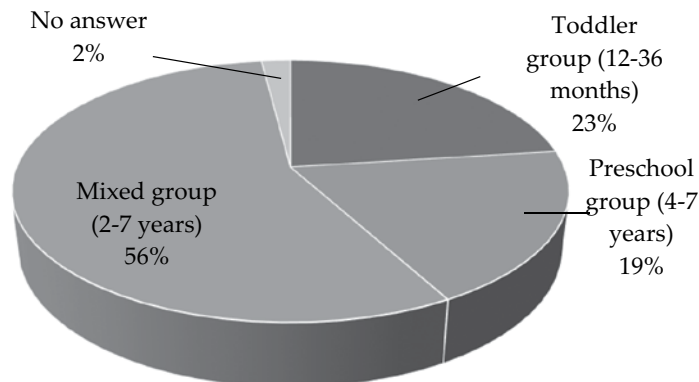
### Sample

This study used a sample of 160 female preschool teachers from preschool institutions in the city of Zadar. Figure 1 shows the number of years the respondents had worked at a preschool institution. The majority of the respondents had been working at a preschool institution for 6 to 15 years (*Figure 1*).



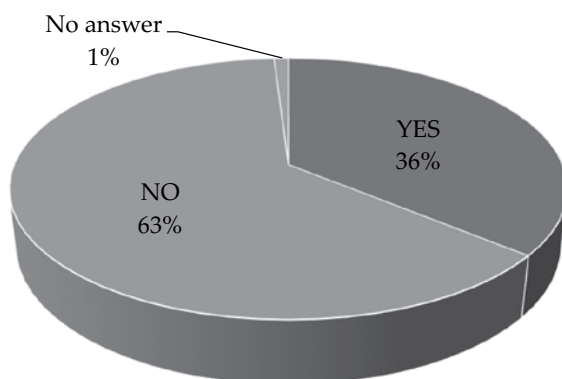
*Figure 1: Number of working years.*

In Croatia, children in preschool institutions are divided into several groups. Most of the preschool teachers work with mixed groups of children aged 2 to 7 years (*Figure 2*). If one child with major or combined disabilities is included in the educational group, the number of children is reduced by four (*State Pedagogical Standard of Preschool 2008*).



*Figure 2: Working groups*

Since Croatian children with special needs are included in mainstream early and preschool education programmes, 36% of preschool teachers work with children with special needs who are integrated into the preschool groups (*Figure 3*). According to the *State Pedagogical Standard of Preschool Education* (2008), the mainstream preschool programme for children with special needs defines which types of disabilities and degrees of difficulty can be included. It is important that each child, despite the specific conditions, can participate in the regular educational programme with other children. For children with severe difficulties, specific conditions can be arranged if necessary.



*Figure 3: A child with special needs integrated in the preschool institution.*

### *Instruments*

In this study, we designed a questionnaire comprising 23 statements for the self-assessment of the teachers' competences, which included a Likert-type scale for nine statements related to working with parents and a Likert-type scale comprising 11 statements to measure the teachers' perceptions of inclusive culture at their institution. The respondents were asked to give one of five possible responses on the scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*), to express their level of agreement with the statement. Furthermore, the questionnaire consisted also three statements measured on a Likert-type scale, to assess their views about the legal regulation of inclusion and education of preschool teacher. Finally, the respondents were asked three open-ended questions to elicit their opinions about providing a qualitative inclusive education.



## Results and Discussion

### *Competences for Working with Children's Parents*

The examined variables related to examining the teachers' competences for working with the children's parents could be grouped into three categories: the teachers' pedagogical knowledge and the education of the preschool teachers (statements 1, 3, 9, 12, 15, 19, 21, 23); the teachers' competence in cooperating with parents (statements 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, 14, 22) and the teachers' current and future cooperation with parents (2, 7, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 20).

VARIABLES	%				
	1	2	3	4	5
I consider myself sufficiently competent for quality pedagogical work with parents.	45.6	41.9	5.6	5.6	1.3
I am ready to cooperate more with parents on child welfare.	77.5	14.4	2.5	3.8	1.9
During my studies I am sufficiently trained for quality co-operation with parents.	16.9	31.9	21.9	13.8	15.0
Working with parents burdened me more than working with children.	18.1	28.1	27.5	12.5	13.8
I do not have the necessary knowledge nor skills for systematic work with parents (lectures, workshops, management ...).	3.8	21.3	24.4	23.1	27.5
For better quality work with parents, I need specific skills that I do not own.	1.9	14.4	18.8	16.9	48.1
I am ready to work more with parents to raise their parental competence.	46.9	32.5	12.5	5.6	2.5
I feel neither comfortable nor safe when I am in front of parents (meetings, lectures, workshops ...).	6.3	23.1	17.5	17.5	35.6
I believe that the knowledge and skills needed to work with parents will be gained in some additional education (theory of choice, 'critical thinking', NLP, etc.).	29.4	36.3	22.5	9.4	2.5
Contemporary parents have high expectations of educators when it comes to pedagogical management, teacher education, help in resolving problems with the child and the like.	51.3	25.6	13.3	3.8	5.6
Quality work with parents is far more than informing about the achievements of the child.	66.3	21.3	7.5	2.5	2.5
In acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to work with parents, it would help me if continuous workshops (trainings) were organised in and outside of kindergarten.	35.6	39.4	18.8	3.1	3.1
Most educators lack specific knowledge about parenting.	12.5	24.4	33.8	10.6	18.8
I do not know how to 'deal' with most of the questions (situations, problems) that parents address with me.	0.6	9.4	15.6	21.9	52.5
Educators have sufficient knowledge of the needs of children and how to respond adequately to them, but are not 'good' in transferring this knowledge to parents.	2.5	35.6	29.4	15.6	16.9

'Classical' informative parents meetings with modern parents are no longer sufficient.	23.1	25.0	29.4	16.3	6.3
It is necessary to invest a lot of effort to help encourage parents for cooperation.	36.9	33.8	18.1	6.3	5.0
Parents expect counselling from kindergarten teachers with whom they are in good relationship.	41.9	38.8	13.8	2.5	3.1
During the study, it required a lot more attention to prepare students to work with parents.	58.1	26.9	8.8	3.1	3.1
Kindergarten teachers should know to help parents perform parental obligations.	21.3	33.1	32.5	6.3	6.9
Kindergarten teachers are not adequately trained for parents' pedagogical education.	10.0	35.0	39.4	7.5	8.1
Most educators lack communicative skills.	11.3	36.3	30.6	7.5	14.4
The permanent professional development of kindergarten teachers should be directed to a much greater extent towards training for better quality work with parents.	26.9	43.1	21.3	3.8	5.0

Table 1: Competences for working with children's parents

The data obtained show that while almost 87.5% of respondents agree that they are pedagogically competent for performing quality work with the children's parents (VAR 1), 65.7% of the respondents believe that they need additional education for working with parents (VAR 9) and 45% of the respondents agreed with the statement that preschool teachers are not adequately trained to work with parents (VAR 21). These results show that preschool teachers are aware of the knowledge lacking from their teacher education.

Regarding the assessment of the competence in cooperating with parents, 46.2% of the respondents expressed that the work with parents placed a heavier burden on them than working with children (VAR 4). Additionally, while more than half of the respondents evaluated their competences for working with parents highly (VAR 5, 6), they found this part of the job to be burdensome. Of the preschool teachers, 47.6% agreed that, in most cases, they lack sufficient communication skills (VAR 22).

Regarding their future cooperation, 91.9% of the respondents were more willing to cooperate with parents on the welfare of the children (VAR 2), and 79.4% of respondents were more willing to work with parents to raise their parental competence (VAR 7). Therefore, the preschool teachers were interested in raising their quality of work. The results also showed that 76.9% of respondents agreed with the statement that modern parents expect a lot from their preschool teachers such as pedagogical management, education and solving childcare problems (VAR 10). However, 70.7% of the respondents believed that a lot of effort is needed to encourage parents to cooperate (VAR 17) and that preschool teachers should know how to help parents perform their parental obligations (VAR 20).

*Cooperation with Parents*

The second part of the questionnaire aimed to determine how preschool teachers rank different forms of their work with parents. The respondents were offered nine statements relating to cooperating with parents, which they were asked to rank from 1 to 9. Table 2 shows the results of the ranking.

No.	STATEMENTS	Rank
	<b>Working with parents means...</b>	
1.	informing them about progress, achievements and problems with the child.	1
2.	holding occasional parent meetings.	9
3.	maintaining thematic lectures at the choice of parents.	3
4.	maintaining thematic lectures at the choice of preschool teacher, professional associates, etc.	4
5.	organising and implementing joint activities and actions of parents, children and educators.	5
6.	conducting continuous workshops aimed at parents' pedagogical education.	8
7.	leading parents with the aim of overcoming problem situations (family situation, relationships, difficulties in educating children with special needs, etc.).	7
8.	active involvement of parents in the implementation of programmes in the group (reading of stories, making of didactic materials, visits, drama section etc.).	2
9.	conducting discussion groups of parents on different topics (needs of children, educational difficulties, behavioural disorders, preschool programmes etc.).	6

*Table 2: Cooperation with parents*

The results are obtained by counting the frequencies at which each rank was selected. As Table 2 shows, the respondents ranked informing parents about the progress and achievements of their child and the problems that their child encounters while at the preschool institution first. The second place in the rankings was the active involvement of parents in the implementation of programmes in their children's group (reading stories, making didactic material visits, drama sections, etc.). The third place in the rank list is maintaining parenting sessions with the topics suggested by parents. The fourth place in the rank list is the selection of thematic lectures by educators and professional associates. Preschool teachers consider that the quality of the educational process, or partnership with parents, contributes to the organisation and implementation of joint activities, involving parents in various activities carried out within preschool institutions, which ranked fifth in the table. The sixth place in the table focuses on quality co-operation with parents, which is manifested in the management of parents' discussion groups on different topics (children's needs, educational difficulties, behavioural disorders, preschool programmes etc.). The seventh place is leading parents with the aim of overcoming the problematic situations (family situation, family relationships, difficulties in raising children, children with special needs, etc.). Eighth place is conducting continuous workshops to increase the level of pedagogical competences of parents. The preschool teachers consider holding occasional parental meetings

the least important. This last result implies that preschool teachers inform the parents about the progress of their child in their everyday communication; thus, they do not have to wait for the parent meetings.

### *Education and Legislation*

In the follow-up statements, we posed several ones to the respondents, which referred to education and legislation (*Table 3*).

No.	QUESTIONS	Mean	St. Dev.
1.	Do you feel that you have acquired enough knowledge during your studies to work with children with special needs?	3.706	1.236
3.	Did the education offered by the Agency of Education help in your day-to-day work with children with special needs?	3.012	7.875
6.	I consider appropriate legislation for inclusion and integration of children with special needs.	2.78	1.033

*Table 3: Education and legislation*

A preschool teacher has to complete a three-year undergraduate course at the faculty of education in Croatia, which has specific teaching facilities for future preschool teachers to acquire the necessary qualifications, knowledge, skills and competences for teaching all children. In our study, most of the respondents expressed a partial disagreement with the claim that they had acquired enough knowledge during their studies to work with children with special needs. This finding is in line with previous research (Bouillet and Loborec 2012, Kudek Mirošević and Jurčević Lozančić 2014), which showed that preschool teachers generally have a positive approach to inclusion but they are concerned about their lack of knowledge and competence in dealing with children with special needs. The inclusion of children with special needs in preschool education leads to the need for unified knowledge from two areas: early and pre-school education and education for inclusion and diversity. The results obtained indicate that preschool teachers are obliged to take care of children with special needs as soon as they graduate, but they lack the relevant knowledge. Continuous professional development of the preschool teacher is a necessary prerequisite for developing a preschool inclusive culture and for understanding and adapting one's own practices (Slunjski 2006). Such development will enable the preschool teacher to become a reflexive researcher of his own practice and to construct the culture of the preschool institution with the children. Additionally, most of the respondents partially agreed with the statement regarding the legal regulations, which suggests that the preschool teachers are not fully satisfied with the way in which the inclusion and integration of children with special needs is carried out within their institution of preschool education.

In addition to the questions mentioned above, the respondents were asked the following three open-ended questions:

- From which courses did you acquire some knowledge in this field?
- What do you think would be helpful for you to work better with children with special needs?
- Do you think the expectations of parents and preschool teachers about the material and organisational conditions in preschool institutions for working with children with special needs are appropriate?

The respondents reported that they took the following courses during their study such as: Special Pedagogy, Pedagogy of Children with Special Needs, Developmental Psychology. Regarding, what additional education they would need to improve their competences, 26% claimed that additional training, seminars, professional training and workshops would help them to work with children with special needs. Others pointed out that they needed more assistance from professional experts (e.g. pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists), a smaller number of children in the educational groups (for one child with lesser difficulty, the number of children in the group decreases for two children), an assistant (the position of assistants in a preschool institution in Croatia is not yet legally regulated) or a third preschool teacher in the group (trainee) and better cooperation with the parents. Of the respondents, 21% did not answer the question. In the Republic of Croatia, it is not possible for children at preschool institutions to have a personal assistant, as is the case in elementary schools; however, the role of a third preschool teacher raises the quality of working with children with special needs. In some European countries, teaching assistants are regular professions in the educational systems (Webster and Blatchford 2015). Over 50% of the respondents also believed that parents' and preschool teachers' expectations of material and organisational conditions in preschool institutions are not harmonised. To work with children with special needs, besides the previous and high quality education of the preschool teachers, the preschool institution should also provide good material conditions for work, arrange spaces for children with various difficulties and offer flexible school hours.

### *Inclusive Culture at a Preschool Institution*

The school culture is built on the norms, values, beliefs, traditions and rituals that have developed over time as people work together, solve problems and confront challenges. This set of informal expectations and values shapes how people think, feel and act in schools (Peterson and Deal 1998, p. 28). The clear role of key stakeholders in the educational process is aimed at building an educational institution where everyone feels welcomed. Providing effective inclusive education implicates many more elements than merely having the presence of children with special needs in the regular preschool system. Quality inclusion in school means making improvements on many levels for each student (Skrtric et al. 1996). Table 4 shows the preschool teachers' perceptions of inclusive culture at the institution.

No.	STATEMENTS	Mean	St. Dev.
1.	In our preschool institution, everybody feels welcome.	1.418	0.928
2.	Children help and accept each other.	1.687	0.884
3.	Educators, co-workers and the director cooperate with each other.	2.056	1.161
4.	The local community is involved in work of preschool institution.	2.525	1.170
5.	There is a partnership between educators, associates and parents.	2.187	1.214
6.	Educators and parents work well together.	1.837	1.033
7.	Expectations and wishes for participation are high for all children.	2.218	1.097
8.	Educators, professional associates, principals and parents share the commitment to involvement.	2.431	1.174
9.	All children are equally important.	1.337	1.008
10.	The role of all participants in the educational process in kindergarten (educators, professional associates, parents, principals and children) is clear and meaningful.	1.850	1.111
11.	Preschool teachers, educational experts and children respect each other as human beings and they are aware of their roles.	2.181	1.148

Table 4: *Inclusive culture of preschool institution*

The questionnaire for examining the perception of the inclusive culture of an educational institution comprised 11 statements, with which the preschool teachers expressed their degree of agreement. The preschool teachers showed a relatively high level of agreement with the statement regarding the existence of an inclusive culture at their institution as well as the existence of positive communication among co-workers at their educational institution. The preschool teachers expressed the highest degree of agreement with the statement that everyone in the preschool institution is welcome ( $M = 1.42$ ) and with the statement that all children are equally important ( $M = 1.34$ ). Considering that the content structure of the stated particles focuses on the quality of cooperation between the participants of the educational institution and the high awareness of the acceptance of diversity among children, we consider there is a positive tendency towards accepting inclusion in the educational institution, thus raising the quality of the inclusion culture in the preschool educational process.

The preschool teachers further expressed a positive degree of agreement with the statements concerning the role and importance of partnership and the quality of cooperation between the participants in the inclusion process at the level of the educational institution. Specifically, we indicate the importance of the role of the preschool teachers, professional associates, principals and parents. In view of the above, we conclude that the preschool institutions included in this research are places where quality inclusive practice is carried out with a clear inclusive culture. The statement that the respondents put to the middle of the Likert scale relates to the role of the local community involved in the work of preschool institutions.

This finding shows that the external stakeholders can improve their involvement in the implementation of inclusion at the local community level by organising activities oriented to placing social importance on the process of inclusion. In terms of raising the quality and culture of the institution, the role of external stakeholders in the educational process at the local, regional and national levels is one of the fundamental aims of establishing the institutional culture as a whole.

The organisation of inclusive activities requires making various assumptions at each level of the educational system with the aim of gaining a positive perspective towards providing an inclusive education at the preschool level, especially because of the importance of a successful start to formal education. Creating an inclusive culture thus becomes the main task for all participants in the process.

Wiener and Tardif (2004) examined the effect of including students with special needs in regular classes, with the focus on the special needs students' friendships with other children, solitude, self-perception and social skills, and they compared the results with students who were not included in the regular school system. The results showed that the students who were included in the regular classes had higher positive academic self-perceptions and were much more satisfied in their relationships with other children than those who did not included in the regular classes. Those elements are important for creating quality inclusive culture. Every child should be happy in the educational process.

Positive attitudes for including children in the regular school system are the most important assumption for providing qualitative inclusion in preschool groups. One reason for not including special needs students is the lack of preparation and competence of preschool teachers to meet children's special needs.

## **Conclusion**

The equal participation of key stakeholders in establishing conditions for an inclusive education is a prerequisite for its successful implementation at the level of practice and work of the institution. The preschool teacher must achieve the necessary competences for organising, implementing and providing inclusion at the preschool level. The preschool teacher must also promote two-way communication at all levels of co-operation and develop self-determination and motivation to realise the set goals, with the emphasis on involving families in the implementation of inclusion at the institutional level. Since the concept of an inclusive education involves every level of the educational system, its effective implementation relies on organising activities that promote an inclusive culture at each level of the preschool institution. The aim is to ensure the continuous cooperation of all participants in the education practice to improve the organisation and implementation of inclusive education on every school level in the system formal education.

The limitations of this research include the small group of respondents which prevents us from making generalisations, the metric characteristics should be better, and we examined only one level of the educational system.

The research results show the importance of defining the key elements for building a qualitative inclusive environment in a preschool institution where every participant has a clear role. The results also indicate that an inclusive education has moved on from being theoretical to the development of practical solutions. The results of this research can be used to create specific programmes for working with children with special needs.

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## **INKLUZIVNA KULTURA IN PEDAGOŠKE KOMPETENCE VZGOJITELJEV V USTANOVAH PREDŠOLSKE VZGOJE NA HRVAŠKEM**

**Povzetek:** Inkluzivna naravnost vzgoje in izobraževanja neposredno prispeva k razvoju kakovostne inkluzivne prakse na vseh stopnjah izobraževalnega sistema. Inkluzivna kultura predvideva vpletenost vseh deležnikov v vzgojno-izobraževalnem procesu. Na področju izobraževanja je inkluzija povezana tudi z zagotavljanjem možnosti otrokom s posebnimi potrebami, da so lahko uspešni pri razvoju kompetenc, ki jih potrebujejo za življenje in delo, ter pri usvajanju znanja ter razvoju spretnosti in navad skladno s svojimi zmožnostmi. V empirični raziskavi obravnavamo pedagoške kompetence vzgojiteljev predšolskih otrok v sistemu predšolske vzgoje kot se kažejo na področju sodelovanja s starši, ki so ključni deležniki v inkluzivnih procesih in skozi njihovo zaznavanje inkluzivnosti vzgojno-izobraževalnega okolja. Sodobni pedagoški diskurz poudarja pomembno vlogo vzgojiteljev pri oblikovanju predšolske ustanove, ki spoštuje različnost vanjo vključenih otrok. Prizadevanja za vzpostavitev inkluzivnega okolja ter ustvarjanje skupnosti, v kateri se vsakdo počuti sprejetega, spodbuja tudi uveljavljanje inkluzivnih vrednot kot temelja vsake družbe. Na Hrvaškem je udejanjanje koncepta inkluzije na področju predšolske vzgoje še vedno nesistematično in le deloma uveljavljeno. Analiza empiričnih ugotovitev kaže, da obstaja potreba po strokovnem usposabljanju pedagoških strokovnih delavcev za kakovostno implementacijo inkluzivne vzgoje v predšolskih ustanovah.

**Ključne besede:** inkluzivna kultura, sodelovanje s starši, pedagoške kompetence, predšolski vzgojitelji, kakovost vzgoje in izobraževanje

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