

## Croatian Teachers' Perceptions of Available Support and Barriers to Preschool Inclusion of SEN Children

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∞ In line with inclusive legislation, quality in inclusive early childhood education and care institutions refers to the available support and resources in order to provide a suitable environment for diverse children. The aims of this study are to determine (1) differences in teachers' perceptions of the level of available and necessary support for preschool inclusion, and (2) the correlation between the perceptions of support and teachers' sociodemographic data, attitude towards inclusive education and perceived competencies for inclusive teaching. A representative sample of 476 Croatian preschool teachers employed in 28 early childhood education and care institutions in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County participated in the research. The Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion was used to establish teachers' perceptions of the necessary factors and available support for successful inclusion. Teachers indicated a lower level of available support for successful inclusion than required, while their perceptions of available support depended on their higher level of positive attitudes and perceived competencies for inclusive teaching. The perception of a higher level of perceived competencies for inclusive teaching and a more positive attitude resulted in a higher level of perceived available support, which supports previous findings underscoring teachers' professional development for inclusive teaching as a baseline for ensuring high-quality inclusive early childhood education and care that supports the development of all children.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, barriers, preschool education, support, teachers

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## Zaznave hrvaških vzgojiteljev o razpoložljivi podpori in ovirah pri inkluziji predšolskih otrok s posebnimi izobraževalnimi potrebami

SANJA SKOČIĆ MIHIĆ, MATEA BUTKOVIĆ IN SNJEŽANA SEKUŠAK-GALEŠEV

☞ Skladno z inkluzivno zakonodajo se kakovost v inkluzivnih ustanovah predšolske vzgoje, izobraževanja in varstva nanaša na razpoložljivo podporo in vire za zagotavljanje primerne okolja za različne otroke. Cilji te študije so ugotoviti: 1) razlike v zaznavah vzgojiteljev glede ravni razpoložljive in potrebne podpore za predšolsko inkluzijo; 2) povezavo med zaznavami podpore in sociodemografskimi podatki vzgojiteljev, njihovim odnosom do inkluzivne vzgoje in zaznanimi kompetencami za inkluzivno poučevanje. V raziskavo smo vključili reprezentativni vzorec 476 hrvaških vzgojiteljev predšolskih otrok, zaposlenih v 28 ustanovah za predšolsko vzgojo, izobraževanje in varstvo v regiji Primorje - Gorski kotar. Za ugotavljanje zaznav vzgojiteljev o potrebnih dejavnikih in razpoložljivi podpori za uspešno inkluzijo je bila uporabljena »Lestvica podpore za predšolsko inkluzijo« (The Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion). Vzgojitelji so navedli nižjo raven razpoložljive podpore za uspešno inkluzijo, kot je potrebna, medtem ko so bile njihove zaznave razpoložljive podpore odvisne od njihove višje ravni pozitivnega odnosa do in zaznanih kompetenc za inkluzivno poučevanje. Zaznavanje višje ravni zaznanih kompetenc za inkluzivno poučevanje in bolj pozitiven odnos sta povzročila višjo raven zaznane razpoložljive podpore, kar potrjuje prejšnje ugotovitve, ki poudarjajo, da je strokovni razvoj vzgojiteljev za inkluzivno poučevanje izhodišče za zagotavljanje visokokakovostne inkluzivne predšolske vzgoje, izobraževanja in varstva, ki podpira razvoj vseh otrok.

**Ključne besede:** inkluzivno izobraževanje, ovire, predšolska vzgoja in izobraževanje, podpora, vzgojitelji

## Introduction

In line with inclusive legislation, the fundamental principle of quality with equity in education strives to create an education system that is accessible, equitable, inclusive and of high quality for all individuals, regardless of their differences or circumstances. Inclusive education is a global agenda that seeks to ensure every child's wellbeing and include their diverse lived experiences as an enrichment, not an impediment, to life inside the classroom and the broader community. It is an ongoing process that entails an obligation to ensure reasonable support to the individual needs of each child, removing the barriers to their learning and universal participation (e.g., Ainscow & César, 2006; UNESCO, 2000) and shifting the focus from labels, diagnosis and deficit to quality education for all children (Kielblock & Woodcock, 2023). The aim is to ensure quality and free basic education to all learners in their local community on an equal and equitable level, regardless of a child's diverse needs.

As a global descriptor of education policies (Vislie, 2003), inclusive education is based on human rights and has a firm "legal, rational, moral and empirical ground" (Bailey et al., 1998, p. 27). Its values and goals are promoted, supported and advocated in key international documents, such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), the World Education Forum Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) and the Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), as well as in documents and related regulations at the national level.

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions play a crucial role in enhancing children's wellbeing, fostering their learning and promoting positive developmental outcomes (e.g., Bodin, 2021; Lundqvist & Larsdotter; Odom et al., 2004). Additionally, they contribute to building an inclusive society, with the inclusive agenda serving to advance social equality, prevent discrimination and promote solidarity (Simó et al., 2020; UNESCO, 1994). Enhancing the comprehension of quality ECEC facilitates early identification and tailored pedagogical approaches that foster an environment conducive to optimal development, learning and long-term quality of life for every child, especially those at risk of social exclusion (Antulić Majcan & Drvodelić, 2022).

Inclusive education is commonly understood as an approach to teaching that creates educational opportunities for all learners, especially learners who have traditionally been excluded from the education system, who are at high risk of being excluded, or who have not received the kind of support they need to succeed in their educational studies (Kamenopoulou, 2018).

Inclusion policies mandate and encourage the provision of sufficient support for ensuring high-quality ECEC institutions (Barton & Smith, 2015). However, these policies often become entangled in various regulations, rather than standing as independent entities in political discourse (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). Providing comprehensive quality education for children with disabilities within the inclusive framework represents a complex endeavour (Bouillet, 2013), as inclusive practices face numerous challenges in effectively implementing these policies. Effective implementation of inclusive education requires targeted policies that address both the macro and micro levels, ensuring a comprehensive understanding and application of inclusive practices (David & Brown, 2022).

Inclusion can be understood by identifying both “barriers to learning and participation” and “resources to support learning and participation” (e.g., Booth & Ainscow, 2002), particularly for children with special educational needs (SEN), who require additional support to participate, learn and develop through various educational activities (e.g., Lundqvist et al., 2016; Lundqvist & Larsson Bodin, 2021).

Successful inclusive practices are intricately tied to the availability of human resources, such as well-trained personnel, teachers with positive attitudes, and a solid foundation of knowledge and skills, referred to as ‘inner capital’. The values, perceptions and empathy of personnel are essential factors. Additionally, inclusive programmes, support services, professional assistance, material resources (including financial support) and environmental factors such as administrative support, access to information, adaptability of space and materials, and communication support, all play pivotal roles (e.g., Karlsudd, 2017; Lieber et al., 2000; Rudelić et al., 2013).

Teachers are regarded as the most influential stakeholders who can either facilitate or impede inclusion (Leatherman, 2007). Their beliefs about their abilities and responsibilities significantly influence their perceptions of teaching in inclusive settings (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Gorski et al., 2012).

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012) has categorised the competencies of an inclusive teacher into four key areas: valuing learner diversity, supporting all learners, collaborating with others, and engaging in continuing professional development. Although there is no legal prescription for a specific set of teacher competencies for working in inclusive settings, it is emphasised that teacher competencies are crucial in providing the necessary support for all learners’ achievements and employing appropriate strategies tailored to the individual needs of children with SEN (e.g., Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; UNESCO, 2000). However,

many teachers feel that they are inadequately trained to provide quality services to students with SEN due to inadequate pre- and in-service training (e.g., Avramidis et al., 2000; Pijl, 2010; Skočić Mihić, 2019; Skočić Mihić et al., 2022). Additional barriers to the achievement of successful inclusion include the scarce existence of adapted curricula meeting the needs of children with SEN (e.g., Skočić Mihić, 2016) and insufficiently available support from professional experts (e.g., Rudelić et al., 2013).

Küçüker et al. (2006) emphasise that the availability of supportive factors for inclusion should be observed through teachers' perceptions.

### **Early childhood care and education in Croatia**

Croatian inclusive legislation, like that in most European countries, has ratified conventions and international documents, aligning the current preschool legislation with the social model and the existing legal documents (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2015; Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia, 2011; Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2022; Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2008) in order to ensure access to equal opportunities.

The Preschool Education Act (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2022) provides preschool education for children from 6 months to 6 or 7 years of age (school enrolment) and inclusion for children with special needs. The State Pedagogical Standard (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2008) defines ten categories of special educational needs (SEN): visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, two categories of behaviour difficulties, orthopaedic impairment, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, multiple disabilities, health difficulties and neurological impairment. Depending on their educational needs, children with disabilities are included in one of three available programmes – regular setting, special setting, and special education programmes – based on the opinion of an expert committee (whose establishment is regulated in the field of social welfare) and the opinion of professional support staff in the education and rehabilitation fields as well as relevant medical and other findings, opinions and decisions of competent bodies, institutions and experts (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2008, para. 6). Most children with SEN are enrolled in regular settings. They have the right to additional support from a professional associate who is a qualified person in the field of education and rehabilitation and provides assistance to children and teachers in their educational work, thereby contributing to high-quality, inclusive education and care.

The results obtained in a large national study on a stratified sample of 535 teachers from 66 institutions and 3,500 children, which focused on estimating children at risk of social exclusion, revealed that ECEC accessibility was highest for children with developmental disabilities (SEN) possibly due to the obligation to report children's developmental disabilities to the governing body. It was also found that ECEC accessibility was lower for children at risk of social exclusion due to poverty, ethnicity and other characteristics (Bouillet & Antulić Majcen, 2022). Although inclusive education encompasses a broad range of diverse educational needs, the present paper focuses on preschool teachers' perceptions of the support they receive in teaching children with SEN.

Despite the existence of a legislative framework of inclusive ECEC policy in Croatia that addresses children with SEN, which has been regulated by legislation in the last two decades, there are still gaps in the practical implementation of SEN support.

There is no systemic preview of available support and accommodations for preschool teachers in inclusive ECEC, and implementation varies depending on the regional location of the preschool and features such as public/private, urban/rural, big/small, as well as the following key factors: an available qualified preschool teacher (a qualified preschool teacher or unqualified substitute), available support of a professional expert in inclusive education, such as an educator rehabilitator or a speech and language therapist, and the quality of pre- and in-service teacher training in obtaining inclusive teacher competencies.

Given that preschool teachers report a lack of training to teach children with SEN, insufficient professional development opportunities and inadequate material resources greater community engagement is needed to improve inclusive educational practice in Croatia, including more opportunities for teacher training, increased expert support, assistance in developing individualised education plans for children and access to more material resources (Skočić Mihić et al., 2016; Loborec & Bouillet, 2012; Rudelić et al., 2013).

### Research aims and hypotheses

The purpose of the present research was to identify teachers' perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to successful inclusion in Croatian ECEC institutions. Its aims were therefore to determine (1) differences in teachers' perceptions of available and necessary support for preschool inclusion, and (2) the correlation between perceptions of available and necessary support for preschool inclusion and teachers' sociodemographic characteristics, attitudes toward inclusive education and competencies for inclusive teaching.

Based on these aims, the following hypotheses were set:

- H1. Teachers perceive a higher level of needed support for preschool inclusion than is available.
- H2. Teachers' perceptions of the necessary and available support correlates with their demographic data (age, years of experience, regular or special settings, individual educational programmes (IEP), received professional support and previous participation in a course on inclusive education), their attitude toward inclusive education, and their competencies for inclusive teaching.

## Methods

### *Participants*

The stratified representative sample included 476 teachers (473 of whom were female) employed in 28 ECEC institutions in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County. The average age of the teachers was 40 years ( $SD = 10.06$ ,  $Min = 21$ ,  $Max = 62$ ) and they had an average of 17 years of experience ( $SD = 10.11$ ,  $Min = 0$ ,  $Max = 41$ ). With regard to their education, 8% of the teachers had only completed high school education, 75% had completed two-year college education, and 15% had completed three-year undergraduate studies in early and preschool education. Two-thirds of the teachers reported having experience working with children with SEN in regular educational groups and 14% in special educational groups, while one-fifth of the teachers had experience developing an IEP for a child with SEN. Half of the teachers stated that they had participated in a course focused on working with children with SEN during their studies and in professional development programmes aimed at working with children with SEN.

### *Instrument*

With the authors' approval, the *Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion* (Küçüker et al., 2006) was translated and used in full for the present research. The Supports Scale contains 34 items that assess teachers' perceptions of support for successful inclusion in two dimensions: necessary factors and available support. The items describe different aspects of resources for inclusion, such as environmental resources (material, physical, equipment), professional support, and training and human resources (knowledge, skills and attitudes about inclusive education of different stakeholders). The participating teachers assessed the degree of their agreement with statements on a four-degree Likert-type scale (1 – none, 2 – to a small degree, 3 – somewhat, 4 – completely). The results on the Supports Scale are presented as a minimum total score of 34

and a maximum of 136, and as the arithmetic mean on the Supports Scale with a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 4.

The metric characteristics indicate a high degree of scale reliability (Cronbach alpha coefficient 0.95 on both dimensions, Bartlett's test 0.947 on both dimensions).

The *Teachers' Readiness for Inclusion Scale* includes 15 items that describe teachers' opinions about inclusive education and their competencies for inclusive teaching. The teachers assessed their level of agreement with statements on a five-degree Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The results on the *Teachers' Readiness for Inclusion Scale*, previously published by Skočić Mihić and Sekušek Galešev (2016), are presented in Table 1, as they correlate with the data obtained in the present study.

**Table 1**

*Factor structure and descriptive data on the Teachers' Readiness for Inclusion Scale*

Factor	N	$\beta$	M/SD
<i>Attitudes towards IE</i> (Eigenvalue = 6.197; Common variance = 41.316%)			
The majority of children with SEN benefit more from being in regular preschool groups.	471	.862	3.951/.915
Children with SEN can progress more in regular settings than in special settings.	471	.814	3.737/.919
Interaction with other children in regular groups is more beneficial for children with SEN than interaction with children in special settings.	470	.806	4.104/.815
The majority of children with SEN can follow the programme in a regular setting with the support of an educational rehabilitator.	470	.700	3.777/.921
It would be best if all children with SEN were placed in regular groups.	468	.634	3.205/1.108
A regular setting in ECEC can provide for children with SEN to the same degree as a special setting.	469	.618	3.141/1.080
Interaction with children with SEN is beneficial for typically developing children.	470	.605	4.115/.856
In many aspects, children with SEN are equal to typically developing children.	465	.528	3.437/1.063
I need to teach children with disabilities in a regular setting.	462	.515	3.584/1.029
<i>Competencies for inclusive teaching</i> (Eigenvalue = 2.246; Common variance = 14.974%)			
I consider myself competent to teach children with SEN.	467	.802	2.807/1.075
I am qualified to teach children with SEN.	457	.737	2.333/1.077
I can and know how to teach all children.	462	.733	3.370/1.067
I am capable of teaching all children effectively.	467	.681	3.467/.969
I am sufficiently informed about the characteristics of children with SEN and how to teach them.	472	.614	2.892/1.002
I am motivated to teach children with SEN in a regular setting.	463	.508	3.252/1.110



The factor structure and descriptive data indicate two factors: 1) attitudes toward inclusive education (IE):  $N = 9$ ;  $\alpha = 0.89$ ;  $M = 3.67$ ;  $SD = 0.72$ ; and 2) competencies for inclusive teaching:  $N = 6$ ;  $\alpha = 0.84$ ;  $M = 3.02$ ;  $SD = 0.79$ .

### *Research design*

After collecting data on the total number of preschools in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, each preschool principal was informed about the research and invited to participate. After receiving the principals' consent, 643 printed questionnaires in physical form were sent by mail to the selected ECECs' appointed preschool coordinators, who distributed them to the preschool teachers in their institution. The teachers completed a total of 482 questionnaires independently over a period of two weeks. The preschool coordinators then collected the completed questionnaires and returned them to the researchers. Of the questionnaires received, 476 were valid and therefore included in the processing. This represents 74% of the total population of teachers in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County. Participation in the survey was anonymous.

The data were processed using the SPSS statistical programme and the basic statistical parameters were calculated. An exploratory factor analysis (varimax rotation, Maximum Likelihood Factoring) was performed to establish the factor structure of the Croatian version of the *Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion*. Cattell's graphical representation (scree plot) was used to determine significant factors. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) on factors were calculated. A t-test for dependent variables was used to determine the difference in scale factors. The Kendel-tau test was performed to determine the correlation between the factors and the dichotomous variables; the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to test for normality, the Pearson's coefficient of correlation was calculated for factors that have a normal distribution, while Spearman's test was used for factors with a non-normal distribution of results.

### *Ethics statement*

The research study was approved by the University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences Ethical Research Committee.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive data, factor structure and differences between the dimensions*

Descriptive data, factor structure and t-test coefficients on the *Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion* for the dimensions *Necessity* and *Availability of Support* (Küçüker et al., 2006) are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive data, factor structure and t-test coefficients on the Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion for the dimensions Necessity and Availability of Support*

Factors Items	Necessity		Availability of Support		t (df)
	$\beta$	<i>M(SD)</i>	$\beta$	<i>M(SD)</i>	
Opportunity to observe other teachers	0.396	3.73 (.60)	.529	1.97 (.83)	<b>37.19***</b>
Collaboration with professionals outside the preschool	0.745	3.74 (.57)	.662	2.11 (.89)	<b>32.66***</b>
Additional personnel in the classroom or school	0.439	3.68 (.64)	.577	1.91 (.93)	<b>32.47***</b>
Classroom/school's physical environment adapted for CSN	0.465	3.73 (.61)	.525	2.10 (.86)	<b>31.35***</b>
Knowledge and skill about appropriate instruction methods for CSN	0.723	<b>3.84 (.46)</b>	.670	2.59 (.74)	<b>31.17***</b>
Knowledge and skill about the classroom environment	0.693	3.70 (.57)	.744	2.32 (.84)	<b>31.15***</b>
Knowledge and skill about the usage of special equipment for/with CSN	0.596	<b>3.80 (.55)</b>	.683	2.14 (.97)	<b>31.02***</b>
In-service training in needed areas of inclusion	0.699	3.78 (.49)	.702	2.36 (.84)	<b>30.84***</b>
Appropriate materials for CSN	0.617	3.69 (.69)	.622	2.14 (.82)	<b>30.04***</b>
Contact with professionals for cooperation and supervision at the preschool	0.777	3.76 (.54)	.722	2.25 (.89)	29.65***
Regular meetings with families and specialists about CSN	0.774	3.68 (.60)	.752	2.26 (.87)	29.32***
Knowledge about the child's disability/illness	0.448	<b>3.82 (.49)</b>	.505	2.63 (.78)	29.26***
Reduced class size	0.702	<b>3.86 (.49)</b>	.612	2.28 (1.06)	28.70***
Knowledge and skill to assess the development of CSN	0.591	3.76 (.58)	.620	2.53 (.78)	28.73***
Knowledge and skill in curriculum adaptation and implementation	0.799	3.65 (.61)	.766	2.36 (.82)	27.84***
Knowledge and skill to identify appropriate educational goals for CSN	0.673	3.69 (.64)	.632	2.47 (.79)	27.08***
Written information on needed areas	0.716	3.67 (.61)	.754	2.34 (.88)	26.96***
Opportunities to attend meetings, conferences, etc.	0.655	3.65 (.68)	.627	2.36 (.89)	26.48***
Knowledge and skill about how to adapt/use toys/materials for CSN	0.700	3.75 (.52)	.783	2.52 (.88)	25.85***
Training for the school personnel fostering positive attitudes	0.676	3.66 (.58)	.644	2.46 (.88)	25.39***
Extra time for collaboration with professionals/ personnel/ families	0.548	3.68 (.57)	.704	2.53 (.87)	24.57***
Technological equipment to support the education of CSN	0.576	3.35 (.82)	.595	1.99 (.97)	24.29***

Factors Items	Necessity		Availability of Support		t (df)
	$\beta$	$M(SD)$	$\beta$	$M(SD)$	
Volunteers in classroom	0.527	3.47 (.76)	.375	2.09 (1.05)	24.17***
Regular meetings with families and specialists about CSN	0.534	<b>3.85 (.45)</b>	.592	<b>2.86 (.82)</b>	23.70***
Support from school principals for CSN	0.538	<b>3.84 (.42)</b>	.610	2.75 (.92)	23.28***
Knowledge and skill in behaviour management	0.694	3.72 (.55)	.668	2.74 (.85)	22.32***
Positive attitudes of families of typically developing children	0.657	3.69 (.52)	.590	2.78 (.74)	22.25***
Knowledge and skill in communicating with families	0.668	3.73 (.55)	.607	<b>2.81 (.79)</b>	21.80***
Knowledge about laws and regulations concerning inclusion	0.629	3.42 (.75)	.675	2.30 (.85)	21.77***
Knowledge and skill in promoting positive interactions among all children	0.600	<b>3.80 (.47)</b>	.634	<b>2.89 (.82)</b>	21.70***
Appreciation of others in the workplace	0.607	3.60 (.62)	.577	2.66 (.85)	19.49***
Positive attitudes of school personnel toward inclusion	0.613	3.68 (.54)	.546	<b>2.90 (.81)</b>	18.84***
Peer social acceptance of CSN	0.494	3.76 (.52)	.578	<b>3.12 (.73)</b>	17.87***
Appreciation of others outside the workplace	0.479	3.52 (.70)	.566	<b>2.90 (.87)</b>	13.23***
$M(SD)$		<b>3.74 (.33)</b>		<b>2.45 (.53)</b>	<b>34.80 ***</b>
Eigenvalue (Common variance)		13.989 (41.11%)		13.773 (40.508%)	

Legend: CSN – child with special needs;  $M$  – arithmetic mean;  $SD$  – standard deviation;  $N$  – number of participants; t-test; \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$

The factor analysis revealed a one-factor structure in each dimension. The *Necessity* factor explains 41.11% of the common variance (eigenvalue = 13.989), and item saturations ranged from 0.777 to 0.396. The *Availability of Support* dimension explains 40.508% of the common variance (eigenvalue = 13.773), with item saturations ranging from 0.783 to 0.375.

The total score on the *Necessity* dimension was 121.18, with an arithmetic mean of 3.74 and a low standard deviation of 0.33, which indicates that teachers largely agree in assessing the factors necessary for successful inclusion. Almost all of the items (except one) were ranked as completely necessary for successful inclusion in ECEC. The total score on the *Availability of Support* dimension was 83.38 ( $SD = 18.38$ ), with an arithmetic mean of 2.45 (Min = 1.06; Max = 3.88), a standard deviation of 0.54 and items ranging from 1.91 to 3.12, indicating a medium level of available support for successful inclusion.

From the teachers' point of view, the seven most necessary factors for successful inclusion are reduced class size, regular meetings with families and a

specialist about CSN, support from school principals for CSN, knowledge and skill about appropriate instruction methods for CSN, child's disability/illness, usage of special equipment for/with CSN, and promotion of positive interactions among all children.

The most available support for teachers in providing successful inclusion in ECEC institutions in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County comprises peer social acceptance of CSN, appreciation of others outside the workplace, positive attitudes of school personnel toward inclusion, knowledge and skill about promoting positive interaction among all children, regular meetings with families and specialist about CSN, and knowledge and skill about communicating with families.

A significant difference was established using the t-test for dependent groups between the factors on the dimensions *Necessity* and *Availability of Support*. The average mean is statistically significantly higher in teachers' perceptions of the necessary factors for successful inclusion than in available support, indicating that teachers require a higher level of support than is available. Moreover, differences were found in the arithmetic means between all pairs of items in the perception of the necessary and available support. More significant differences were found in teachers' perceptions of opportunities to observe other teachers in inclusive education, followed by collaboration with professionals outside the preschool, additional personnel in the classroom or school, classroom/school's physical environment adapted for CSN, knowledge and skill about appropriate instruction methods for CSN, knowledge and skill about the classroom environment, knowledge and skill about the usage of special equipment for/with CSN, in-service training in needed areas of inclusion, and appropriate materials for CSN. These factors present higher barriers to the successful inclusion of children with SEN (Küçüker et al., 2006).

The facilitators of successful inclusion include appreciation of others outside and in the workplace, peer social acceptance of CSN, positive attitudes of school personnel toward inclusion and families of typically developing children, knowledge and skill about promoting positive interaction among all children and communicating with families, and knowledge about laws and regulations concerning inclusion.

***Factor correlation with teachers' demographic data, attitudes towards inclusive education and perceived competencies for inclusive teaching***

The second aim was to determine the correlation between the preschool teachers' perceptions of available and necessary support for preschool inclusion and their sociodemographic characteristics, their attitudes towards

inclusive education and their perceived competencies for inclusive teaching. The obtained results on attitudes towards inclusive education and competencies for inclusive teaching, presented in Table 1, indicate preschool teachers' tendency to have a positive attitude towards preschool inclusion ( $M = 3.67$ ), as they recognise the advantages it offers. However, the preschool teachers of this sample are uncertain of their own competencies for teaching children with SEN ( $M = 3.02$ ) in inclusive settings (Skočić Mihić & Sekušek Galešev, 2016).

No correlation was found between the teachers' perceptions of necessary factors and available support for successful inclusion, on the one hand, and their age, years of experience, and workplace (regular or special settings), on the other.

Correlation coefficients between the dimensions of the Supports Scale with attitudes towards inclusive education and competencies for inclusive teaching are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Correlation between the dimensions of the Supports Scale for Preschool Inclusion and the teachers' demographic data, attitudes towards inclusive education and perceived competencies for inclusive teaching*

	Factors	
	Necessity	Support
Teachers' statement that they:		
– provided an IEP for a child with SEN	.031	.211***
– received support from professional staff	.0384	.130*
– attended a course on inclusive education during PTT <sup>1</sup>	.634	.113*
Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education	.180***	.309***
Teachers' competencies for inclusive teaching	.054	.445***

<sup>1</sup>PTT: pre-service teacher training ( $z = .574$ ;  $p < 0.005$ )

A weak statistically significant positive correlation was found between teachers' perception of available support for successful inclusion and their pro-inclusive behaviour towards the provision of an IEP for a child with SEN, the perceived support from a professional and prior participation in a course on inclusive education. Moreover, a moderate correlation was established between the perception of a higher level of necessary factors for successful inclusion and a positive attitude towards preschool inclusion.

A moderate statistically significant positive correlation was found between teachers' perceptions of available support for successful inclusion and

teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusive education and perceived competencies for inclusive teaching.

Teachers with a more positive attitude towards inclusive education perceived a higher level of the necessary factors for successful inclusion and a higher level of available support. Similarly, teachers with a higher level of perceived competencies for inclusive teaching perceived a higher level of available support for successful inclusion.

Interestingly, while the teachers' age, years of experience and workplace (regular or special settings) do not correlate with their perception of available support, these factors do correlate with the provision of an IEP, the perception of available professional support and pre-service training in inclusive education. Teachers who stated that they had prior experience with developing an IEP for a child with SEN, had received support from a SEN specialist and had participated in a course on inclusive education (IE) during their pre-service training (the majority of the teachers had in fact been enrolled in study programmes that included a course on inclusive education) perceived a statistically significantly higher level of provided support than teachers who had not received similar support or reported participation in a course on IE. Furthermore, the perception of the necessary and available support is independent of teachers' stated age, years of experience and workplace in regular or special settings.

## Discussion

Teachers' perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to including children with special educational needs (SEN) in preschool settings were measured using the Support Scale for Preschool Inclusion (Küçüker et al., 2006), revealing two key dimensions. Each dimension, represented by 34 items, highlights essential factors and available support crucial for successful preschool inclusion, including: 1) teachers' knowledge and skills for inclusive teaching, such as assessment methods, understanding disabilities, implementing strategies, fostering cooperation, utilising special equipment, and receiving adequate training; 2) subjective factors linked to positive attitudes among various stakeholders in education, support from management, workplace respect, and external recognition; 3) professional support and collaboration with various stakeholders, additional staffing, and volunteer involvement; and 4) spatial and material conditions, encompassing adaptations to physical space, equipment, didactic materials and toys.

Aligned with the social model's principles, which emphasise environmental factors in equalising opportunities for individuals with disabilities,

preschool teachers perceive quality preschool inclusion as a unified dimension that combines various resources into a comprehensive array of interconnected elements, including teachers' competencies and additional material and personnel support to address the diverse needs of children with SEN.

Among the 34 items indicating successful preschool inclusion, 33 were deemed fully necessary. Notably, the most crucial factor for successful preschool inclusion is reduced class size. This aligns with national legislation, where the enrolment of a child with SEN in a regular educational group leads to a reduction in class size (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2008, Art. 22). A decrease in the number of enrolled children is expected to enhance the quality of teaching, particularly through individualised approaches to diverse educational needs.

Moreover, knowledge and skills related to appropriate instructional methods for children with SEN, understanding the child's disability/illness, using special equipment, and fostering positive interaction among all children are perceived as the most essential factors. Teachers' knowledge stands out as a significant barrier to effective inclusion, which is consistent with previous research findings (e.g., Avramidis et al., 2000; Florian, 2009; Ginja & Chen, 2021; Pijl, 2010). Competencies for inclusive teaching encompass a broad range of skills needed in inclusive classrooms, including positive attitudes towards inclusive education, understanding diverse learners, implementing effective teaching strategies, and translating acquired knowledge into educational practice (Skočić Mihić et al., 2022a, p. 447).

According to the teachers' ratings, additional teacher training is especially needed in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills for appropriate instruction methods for CSN, the features and factors of functioning related to a child's disability/illness, usage of special equipment for/with CSN, and the promotion of positive interaction among all children. Additionally, family participation and support from a specialist about SEN and the support provided to teachers from preschool management for working with children with SEN are highlighted as necessary elements that facilitate successful inclusion. Teachers recognise the importance of collaboration between experts with diverse professional backgrounds (Fukink & van Verseveld, 2019) and providing support to parents of a child with SEN. Teachers' emphasis on the need for regular meetings with families and specialists about children with SEN align with the premise that ECEC services should provide an integrated approach to children and their families, especially those at risk of social exclusion. The child's optimal development depends on the partnership built between the teacher and the parents, and on quality communication (e.g., Skočić Mihić et al., 2022a; Skočić Mihić et al., 2018).

Technical equipment and volunteer support are perceived as the least necessary forms of assistance in preschool inclusion for children with disabilities, probably due to the limited utilisation of such resources in teachers' daily routines or insufficient availability and training. Conversely, teachers highly value support related to fostering positive attitudes, peer acceptance, and creating a supportive work climate both within and outside the classroom.

Furthermore, teachers express a need for physically adapted spaces and collaboration with outside professionals such as trained preschool teachers, doctors and psychologists, emphasising the importance of environmental accessibility and interdisciplinary cooperation in facilitating inclusive practices. The provision of support services is recognised as crucial for establishing successful inclusive classrooms (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003), with physical adaptations to spaces, particularly for children with mobility impairments, serving as key indicators of inclusion support.

In line with the first hypothesis, a lower level of available support for successful inclusion than needed was determined. This finding indicates that, from the teachers' point of view, an insufficient degree of support is made available to teachers in implementing inclusive legislation. The obtained results are consistent with the original research by Küçüker et al. (2006). Croatian teachers ( $M = 3.73$ ) perceived a slightly higher level of support needed for successful inclusion than their Turkish peers ( $M = 3.55$ ) and a higher level of available support ( $M = 2.08$ ). Küçüker et al. (2006) pointed out that the success of implementing inclusion can be determined by comparing the required and available support levels in the overall result. A more significant gap in the mean value indicates insufficiently provided support, while the interpretation of certain forms of support indicates either facilitators or barriers to successful inclusion.

Starting from the premise that each factor contributes to successful inclusion, it is vital to closely examine teachers' assessments of the most and least necessary factors and available support for successful inclusion. Among these factors, the most needed but least available resource is the opportunity for teachers to observe colleagues engaged in inclusive practices, facilitating experiential learning and collaboration with other professionals. Collaboration between professional personnel and teachers is considered a cornerstone of high-quality inclusive care for young children with special educational needs (SEN) (e.g., Fukkink & van Verseveld, 2020; Schoyerer & van Santen, 2016). A gap between needed and implemented legislation in preschool inclusion is, from the teachers' perspective, reflected in insufficient opportunities for professional development, including learning from colleagues and professionals outside the ECEC institution. Additional personnel in the classroom/school's



physical environment, adaption of the classroom environment for children with SEN, utilisation of special equipment for/with children with SEN, and in-service training in necessary areas of inclusion are also crucial components for achieving high-quality inclusive education.

The findings of the present research underscore the essential elements required in an educational environment to meet the diverse needs of every child. Despite inclusive education being a global educational agenda accompanied by inclusive policies aimed at promoting equality, access and high-quality education, its adequate implementation and success are not guaranteed. Ensuring quality inclusive education necessitates the involvement of all stakeholders in the educational process, recognising that the inclusion of children with SEN in regular settings goes beyond mere enrolment and attendance.

Findings that focus on available support to teachers in teaching children with SEN are relevant for all children from diverse backgrounds. Inclusive policies play a crucial role in shaping European educational frameworks by promoting equitable opportunities for all children, regardless of their ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds. These frameworks aim to foster democratic values and harmonious coexistence within an increasingly diverse society, with intercultural education integrated as a fundamental component (Skočić Mihić et al., 2020).

Although it may be anticipated that teachers will perceive a lower level of support than needed, such research offers a clear overview of the relationship between the types of support teachers require, their relevance and their availability. For policymakers and other key decision-makers, as well as researchers, this presents a unique opportunity to identify what is most lacking for preschool teachers, despite being deemed crucial. Based on the assumption that preschool teachers, as implementers of inclusive education policies, are in a unique position to confirm the relevance of theoretical concepts incorporated into policy documents, the present research provides a circular feedback loop, moving from a top-down approach to a bottom-up response from preschool teachers. Understanding the challenges teachers face can help develop strategies, resources and training programmes that effectively support inclusive education and enhance the learning environment for children with SEN. Such programmes may be prescribed in advance at the system level as the minimum criteria that ensure quality and equality in inclusion. Additionally, obligatory support provided to preschool teachers may enable quality, while the realisation of true inclusiveness is largely dependent on professional development respecting the individual autonomy of each preschool teacher in responding to the diverse needs of children, as well as on ensuring an encouraging institutional climate.

Research into the barriers that preschool teachers perceive in including children with SEN is critical for improving the effectiveness of inclusive education. Identifying these challenges informs policy development and facilitates the design of targeted professional support and training, ensuring that preschool teachers are well equipped to meet diverse student needs. Additionally, addressing these barriers promotes greater educational equity by fostering more inclusive learning environments for all students. Thus, policymakers have the ability to create targeted, evidence-based forms of support that address the specific needs of teachers and children with SEN. This may include specially tailored professional development and emotional support to ensure that teachers feel equipped and confident in implementing inclusive education that fosters greater educational equity, thus ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities, have access to high-quality education and are fully integrated into the classroom environment.

According to the second hypothesis, teachers' perceptions of available support are closely linked to their readiness to develop individualised education plans (IEPs) for children with special educational needs (SEN), their access to professional support and their pre-service education, rather than being solely based on their perception of necessary factors for successful inclusion. Furthermore, a higher level of self-perceived competencies for inclusion and positive teacher attitudes are associated with a greater perception of available support for implementing successful inclusion. Notably, teachers who perceive themselves as more educated and competent, and who possess positive attitudes, tend to perceive higher levels of available support. Additionally, teachers' perceptions of available support for successful inclusion correlate with their readiness to develop IEPs, their access to professional support and their participation in pre-service training on inclusion. Teachers with experience in IEP development, collaboration with experts and participation in inclusive education courses perceive significantly higher levels of provided support compared to their counterparts without such experiences.

The importance of enhancing teachers' professional competencies for inclusive teaching through both initial and continuous professional development is widely acknowledged (e.g., Skočić Mihić et al., 2014; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2018). However, variations in how teachers are prepared for inclusive teaching within and outside the EU suggest that extensive training in special education is not universally integrated into initial teacher education curricula. In the Republic of Croatia, for instance, an analysis of teacher education programmes revealed only one mandatory course on inclusive education (Skočić Mihić, 2019). Hence, continuing professional development programmes should

prioritise equipping teachers with the additional skills and competencies needed for inclusive practice (Čepić et al., 2015). Research consistently demonstrates a positive relationship between teachers' competencies for inclusive teaching, their attitudes, their confidence in working with children with special needs (Hornby, 1999; Siegel & Jausovec, 1994) and their professional development in this field (e.g., Avramidis et al., 2000; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2018).

In the present study, the preschool teachers who stated they had experience developing an IEP, had collaborated with experts and had stated that they participated in a course on inclusive education also perceived higher levels of available support for implementing successful inclusion. It is crucial to provide children with SEN with developmentally appropriate practices, that is, activities or approaches that are well-suited to their developmental stage, ability level and individual needs, and that aim to support the success of all children in ECE settings (Gestwicki, 2010). The findings of the present study therefore emphasise that teachers' professional development for inclusive teaching is fundamental to ensuring high-quality inclusive ECEC.

A higher level of self-perceived competencies for inclusion and a more positive teacher attitude are related to a higher level of perceived available support for implementing successful inclusion. The necessary support provided to preschool teachers is needed to facilitate a uniformly successful implementation of inclusive policies nationwide for children with SEN and other diverse needs. Every child should be guaranteed the same high level of support by well-trained staff in order to be able to appropriately respond to their diverse needs. This includes qualified preschool teachers as well as professional support from educational rehabilitators, speech and language therapists, and other professionals.

Recent legislative changes to the Croatian Preschool Education Act (Narodne novine: Službeni list Republike Hrvatske, 2022), aimed at improving ECEC access and quality, have not outlined how support structures for preschool teachers will be strengthened (Eurydice, 2024). The need for professional development opportunities is critical in order to attract and retain qualified personnel. At present, there is a shortage of qualified preschool teachers in the Republic of Croatia, prompting the government to invest in expanding the workforce by launching new ECEC programmes for part-time students and preparing lifelong learning programmes to retrain primary school teachers as ECEC teachers. There is also an ongoing shortage of educational rehabilitators, who play a vital role in supporting preschool teachers by assessing children's developmental potential, creating IEPs and suggesting support strategies. For example, the availability and quality of expert support can vary depending on

the size of the preschool institution, whether it is in an urban or rural area, and whether it is a public or private institution. Moreover, regional disparities in access to services highlight the need for more specific and actionable plans to support preschool teachers effectively. Furthermore, many ECEC professionals, particularly teaching assistants, face precarious employment conditions, including fixed-term contracts and low wages. This instability undermines the support system for preschool teachers, as it affects their ability to provide quality education and care (UNICEF, 2021).

One limitation of the present study is the use of teachers' perceptions in assessing available and needed support as a subjective measurement of the existing gap in the legislation. Its implementation reflects the conditions in which inclusive practice is realised. A second limitation is that the representative sample is drawn from only one Croatian county. Future research should include a broader region of Croatian preschool teachers. Given that preschool teachers play a crucial role in implementing inclusive education policy, it would be interesting to explore in future research their perceptions of the supportive factors and barriers in Croatian ECEC institutions in the context of an objective measurement of environmental factors and the degree to which teachers' subjective perceptions are a reflection of objective factors.

## Conclusions

The present paper underscores the critical role of available support for teachers in achieving the core tenets of inclusive education, equality, accessibility and high quality. Teachers play a central role in implementing inclusive practices, and their perceptions reveal significant gaps between prescribed support and what is actually available in preschool settings.

The findings obtained highlight the multifaceted nature of support needed for successful preschool inclusion, encompassing factors such as teachers' knowledge and skills, positive attitudes, collaboration with stakeholders, and spatial and material conditions. However, there is a clear discrepancy between the support deemed necessary by teachers and what is accessible to them, which poses significant barriers to effective inclusion, as it impacts teachers' confidence, competency and ability to meet the diverse needs of children with SEN. Adequate support is essential for fostering positive attitudes, promoting collaboration, ensuring equitable access to resources and, ultimately, enhancing student success and wellbeing.

Addressing the present gap requires concerted efforts to provide teachers with the necessary resources, training and support networks to effectively

implement inclusive practices. Additionally, there is a need for policymakers to bridge the divide between prescribed legislation and the actual provision of support in preschool settings in order to fully realise the vision of inclusive education and to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities, have equal opportunities to learn, grow and thrive in preschool environments.

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## Biographical note

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