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# Pedagogical Response to the Needs of Preschool Children in a Disadvantaged Situation

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the pedagogical response of Croatian ECEC teachers to the needs of preschool children in a disadvantaged situation. The quality of pedagogical practise to prevent unfavourable developmental trajectories in children in a disadvantaged situation, particularly in the Croatian system, is poorly researched. A vignette describing an imaginary child in a disadvantaged situation was used and 35 preschool teachers from 15 ECEC institutions described in writing in an online application how they would support the child in his or her development. The qualitative thematic analysis was conducted according to the five components of the strengths-based approach (relationships, empowerment, collaboration, strengths and focus on change). This approach assumes that through reciprocal relationships between children, parents and teachers, previously agreed goals are achieved and personal resources, motivation and belief in the possibility of achieving sustainable change are unleashed. The results show that ECEC teachers are predominantly oriented towards individual components of the strengths-based approach (quality of relationships, focus on children's strengths), while the implementation of the entire strengths-based approach in its entirety is lacking. It is emphasised that the strengths-based approach needs to be more strongly affirmed in Croatian ECEC system so that its principles are recognisable in the pedagogical practise of all ECEC teachers.

## Keywords

Strengths-based approach, pedagogical practise, ECEC teachers, children in a disadvantaged situation, qualitative analysis.

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## Respuesta Pedagógica a las Necesidades de los Niños en Edad Preescolar en Situación Desfavorecida

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### Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la respuesta pedagógica de los profesores croatas de EAPI a las necesidades de los niños en edad preescolar en situación desfavorecida. La calidad de la práctica pedagógica para prevenir trayectorias de desarrollo desfavorables en niños en situación desfavorecida, especialmente en el sistema croata, ha sido poco investigada. Se utilizó una viñeta que describía a un niño imaginario en situación desfavorecida y 35 profesores de preescolar de 15 centros de EAPI describieron por escrito en una aplicación en línea cómo apoyarían al niño o al a niña en su desarrollo. El análisis temático cualitativo se llevó a cabo de acuerdo con los cinco componentes del enfoque basado en las fortalezas (relaciones, empoderamiento, colaboración, fortalezas y enfoque en el cambio). Este enfoque parte de la base de que, a través de las relaciones recíprocas entre niños, padres y profesores, se alcanzan los objetivos previamente acordados y se fomentan los recursos personales, la motivación y la creencia en la posibilidad de lograr un cambio sustentable. Los resultados muestran que los profesores de EAPI están orientados principalmente hacia componentes individuales del enfoque basado en las fortalezas (calidad de las relaciones, atención a las fortalezas de los niños), mientras que falta la aplicación del enfoque basado en las fortalezas en su totalidad. Se hace hincapié en que el enfoque basado en las fortalezas debe afirmarse más enfáticamente en el sistema croata de EAPI para que sus principios sean reconocibles en la práctica pedagógica de todos los profesores de EAPI.

### Palabras clave

Enfoque basado en las fortalezas, práctica pedagógica, profesores de EAPI, niños en situación desfavorecida, análisis cualitativo.

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The European Commission emphasises in the recent Council Recommendation on Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Systems (2019) that participation in ECEC is beneficial for all children, especially those in a disadvantaged situation. The recommendations point to the importance of children's experiences through social-emotional learning in ECEC programmes, which promote the development of empathic behaviour, understanding of human rights, equality, and other values of inclusive modern societies.

Disadvantage is defined in terms of (under)privileged social status and implies the need to ensure compensatory measures without which children cannot exercise their rights (Schober & Spiess, 2013; Walsh et al., 2019; Motiejunaite 2021). Disadvantage is a consequence of differences in children's ethnicity, language, developmental and health status, gender identity or socio-economic status (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). The term is usually associated with the concept of high risk, meaning a significantly increased likelihood that a child will not fulfil his or her innate potential and integrate successfully into the community. Fleming and Harford (2021) associate disadvantaged with barriers to education arising from children's social or economic status that significantly hinder the realisation of their educational achievements. Downes and Gilligan (2007) point out the relativity and multi-faceted nature of this term and emphasise the need to focus on ways to overcome disadvantage in the educational context, considering the equal worth of every child and their inviolable right to education. This means that it is not enough for children in a disadvantaged situation to simply be admitted to an educational programme or institution, but that their progress and development is expected (European Commission, 2020).

The participation of children in a disadvantaged situation in ECEC programmes is only meaningful if high quality and accessible services are provided (European Commission, 2014; Driessen, 2020; Archambault et al., 2020; Balladares & Kankaraš, 2020). ECEC institutions are expected to fulfil a preventive and/or rehabilitative function that ensures the holistic development and learning of all children, regardless of their developmental, health, social and other characteristics (Messiou, 2017; Peleman et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2020; West et al., 2020; Bartolo et al., 2021). It is about the need to ensure the meaningful participation of every child in a developmentally appropriate and stimulating educational process that is accessible, participatory, and inclusive, and which requires the availability of appropriate support for children and their family members.

The diverse needs of children in a disadvantaged situation highlight the importance of ensuring appropriate pedagogical practise in childcare settings. Such pedagogical practise requires that learning is child-led and that there is a strong partnership with families and the community to open up opportunities for sustained improvement in children's educational and socialisation achievements (Tankersley et al., 2012). The quality of pedagogical practise is highly dependent on the prevailing beliefs and values of ECEC teachers, which should promote purposeful, reciprocal, warm and responsive interactions with children and other actors in the ECEC system (Antulić Majcen & Drvodelić, 2022). Oberklaid et al. (2013) conclude that a high-quality ECEC system contributes to the long-term well-being of children in a disadvantaged situation because it produces favourable outcomes in children's cognitive and social-emotional development, leading to higher educational attainment in adulthood, better health and improved socio-economic status. Quality means attentive adult-child interaction, competent staff (including identification of and appropriate response to risk), availability of

parent support programmes, appropriate staff-child ratios, continuous training and support for staff, and a developmentally appropriate curriculum.

Strengths-based approaches (SBA) are considered fundamental principles of quality pedagogical practise (Broski & Dunn, 2018), especially when it comes to children in a disadvantaged situation (Black & Hoeft, 2015). Although this approach has been widely elaborated in the literature (e.g. Bozic, 2013; Epstein et al., 2000; Galloway et al., 2020), there is little research on its application in ECEC settings (Fenton et al., 2015), especially in Croatia. Since "children learn the values, we practise more than the values we talk about" (Flecha, 2022, p. 22), research on the implementation of SBA principles in relation to children provides information on the willingness of ECEC teachers to support these children appropriately and to help prevent unfavourable developmental trajectories of children in a disadvantaged situation.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the pedagogical response of Croatian ECEC teachers to the needs of preschool children in a disadvantaged situation. The research is part of the scientific project "Models of response to the educational needs of children at RSE in ECEC institutions" (MORENEC) of the Croatian Science Foundation. A vignette describing an imaginary child in a disadvantaged situation was used and the ECEC teachers described in writing in an online application how they would support the child in his/her development. The ECEC teachers' responses were analysed as part of the SBA.

The following research questions were asked:

- Does the pedagogical practise of teachers in Croatian childcare institutions in relation to children in RSE correspond to the components of the SBA?
- Which components of the SBA would Croatian ECEC teachers implement in their pedagogical practise towards children in RSE?

### **Theoretical Framework: Strengths-Based Pedagogical Practise**

SBA was developed in the 1960s in the context of social work as a response to the discouraging deficit model that labels, pathologises, blames and overemphasises the limitations of these children (Gardner & Toope, 2011). The deficit model contributes to the children's dependence on others and reduces expectations and opportunities for change because it focuses on problems and hopelessness (Hammond & Zimmerman, 2012). Rather than compensating for identified deficits, the SBA is focused on opportunities, hope and solutions (Black & Hoeft, 2015). It seeks to identify and eliminate or reduce the impact of social, personal, cultural, or structural constraints on children's growth and empowerment (Fenton, 2013), while respecting individual and family qualities that promote resilience and support resourcefulness, optimism, and development (Fruhauf et al., 2020). It is based on the belief that all people have the capacity to overcome difficulties and realise their own aspirations (Black & Hoeft, 2015; Broski & Dunn, 2018) when their dignity, abilities, rights, uniqueness, and unity are respected (Fenton et al., 2015). SBA makes an important contribution to the promotion of social justice (Gardner & Toope, 2011). Difficulties are not seen as the sole cause of problems and difficulties but are interpreted as opportunities for growth and resilience (Simmons et al., 2016).

SBA does not deny the existence of problems and challenges in the ecological systems of children in a disadvantaged situation, but they are not the starting points of pedagogical practise (Black & Hoefft, 2015). On the contrary, SBA-based pedagogical practise emphasises children's strengths and contextual protective factors, while teachers change the paradigm of disadvantaged children's experiences (Bozic, 2013; Broski & Dunn, 2018; Epstein et al., 2000). ECEC teachers are expected to shift their attention from children's limitations and difficulties to their resources and abilities. Strengths are seen as multifaceted, manifesting themselves through individual action, existing in unique combinations in everyone, positive traits, behaviours, thoughts and resources (Simmons et al., 2016). They include personal qualities, characteristics, talents, skills, interests, and aspirations, as well as the ability to consistently achieve positive outcomes even in the face of challenges or difficulties.

According to Heyne and Anderson (2012), strengths can arise from a child's characteristics (inner strengths) or from the environment and context in which a child lives, learns, and plays (outer strengths). The very dynamic and complex relationship between inner and outer strengths highlights the importance of implementing the principles of SBA in ECEC pedagogical practise. Such practise is based on cooperation and mutual interpersonal relationships between ECEC teachers, parents and children, experiential learning, and development. It is characterised by mutual trust between those involved in the process and empowers children and their families to be active subjects of their own developmental process (Galloway et al., 2020). Through reciprocal relationships, previously agreed goals are achieved, personal resources, motivation, and belief in the possibility of achieving sustainable change are unleashed (Pulla 2017; Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2021). Such an approach leads to a holistic perspective on the child's potential, directs attention to the value of the child's competencies and contributes to the child's better engagement in the educational process, making it meaningful for the child itself (Bozic, 2013). SBA provides children with a sense of competence because it highlights their areas of achievement, promotes their autonomy, and enables them to recognise their own strengths, make decisions about learning goals and methods, and develop supportive interpersonal relationships (Galloway et al., 2020).

It is important to note that the SBA emphasises the capacity of children and adults to bring about change, which is possible when the conditions for identifying, assessing, and mobilising their strengths, skills and resources are ensured (Fruhauf et al., 2020), reaffirming the following beliefs (Epstein et al., 2000):

1. All children have strengths.
2. When adults caring for a child emphasise their strengths, the child's motivation becomes stronger.
3. If a child does not acquire a skill, it does not mean that he or she has a deficit, but that he or she was not able to have the experience that would enable him or her to acquire a skill.
4. The goals and content of support for the child are based on the strengths and resources of the child and the family.

Accordingly, the purpose of the assessment of children in the SBA is to identify the emotional and behavioural skills and abilities and the characteristics that contribute to the



child's sense of personal fulfilment and the development of satisfying interpersonal relationships among members of their family. It is conducted with the aim of planning an educational process that promotes the child's personal, social, and academic development, with a focus on developing their resilience or growth despite adversity (Black & Hoeft, 2015; Fruhauf et al., 2020). The specific goals of the pedagogical practise are defined by the partnership relationships of all stakeholders (children, parents/guardians, ECEC teachers), considering the strengths of the whole ecological system (resources of the child, family, ECEC institution and community) while affirming the principles of respect, self-determination, empowerment, social justice and power sharing between users and experts (Fenton, 2013).

SBA is based on various theories drawn from positive psychology, social work, and organisational practise (Hopps-Wallis et al., 2016), as well as critical pedagogy. These perspectives broaden the focus of ECEC from an exclusive focus on the child to the family and community, considering the socio-political and cultural context and the perspective based on the benefits of the participants in the process (Fenton et al., 2015). These are theories that explain children's well-being, such as happiness theory, broaden-and-build theory, learned optimism theory, community building theory, resilience theory, theory of change, and many others (Heyne & Anderson, 2012; Sonnenschein & Sawyer, 2018). The main theoretical constructs of SBA are resilience, hope, empowerment, and self-determination (Simmons et al., 2016), and they are all reflected in a pedagogical practise informed by the principles of social justice, transparency, shared power, respect, self-determination, focus on strengths and abilities, and cooperation (Pulla, 2017). The SBA is considered in this paper as a quality framework for the prevention of negative developmental trajectories of children in a disadvantaged situation.

### **A brief Introduction To The Croatian ECEC System**

Croatian ECEC is a part of the education system and consists of two educational cycles (children aged 6 months to 3 years and children aged 3 years to school entry). Childcare programmes are mainly provided in kindergartens, which can be run by the state, cities or municipalities, religious communities or other private individuals or non-governmental organisations. Most kindergartens are run by cities or municipalities, although the number and proportion of private kindergartens has grown steadily in recent years. The financing of ECEC is almost exclusively the responsibility of local governments (cities and municipalities). Public programmes, such as pre-school programmes for children with developmental disabilities or programmes for gifted children, are partly financed from the state budget. The only compulsory programme is the short preschool programme with a duration of 150 to 250 hours, organised for children who start school in the year before their enrolment, i.e. during their 6<sup>th</sup> year. It is based on the Croatian National Curriculum for ECEC (2015), which promotes children's active participation in social life and supports their responsibility towards the general welfare of society and nature, themselves, and others. The need to develop the child's capacity to participate proactively and constructively in community life and to learn about his or her own rights and the rights of others, duties, ways of acting in the community and ways of contributing

to the common good are emphasised. Children are seen as subjects of the educational process who gradually learn to take responsibility for their own decisions.

The minimum requirement for employment as an ECEC teacher in Croatian ECEC institutions is a completed undergraduate degree (Bachelor's degree, ISCED level 6). After completing a three-year undergraduate degree (six semesters), ECEC teachers can pursue a two-year university degree (four semesters) with a master's degree in early childhood and preschool education (ISCED level 7). Many universities offer study programmes for initial education in ECEC in Croatia, but the study programmes are not uniform.

Previous studies conducted in Croatia (Dobrotić et al., 2021) have shown that ECEC providers prefer children of working parents when enrolling children in ECEC programmes, while a significantly smaller number of ECEC institutions prefer other groups, such as children living in single-parent households, children living in families with three or more children, children with developmental difficulties or children in foster care. It has also been found that as the severity of a child's risk of social exclusion increases, accessibility to ECEC decreases (Matković et al., 2020). Poverty and belonging to an ethnic minority (especially among Roma children) are the disadvantaged situations that have the most detrimental effect on children's participation in regular ECEC programmes in Croatia (Bouillet & Antulić Majcen, 2022).

Improving access to a quality ECEC system from the earliest age while ensuring a quality standard and resources to support children in a disadvantaged situation is one of the priorities of the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030 (2021). The strategy envisages reform processes in the Croatian education system to create equal pedagogical conditions for the achievement of educational goals, respect for the right to education under equal conditions and participation of all in education.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 39 teachers from 15 Croatian ECEC institutions participated in this qualitative research. Depending on the size of the institution, between 2 and 4 teachers from each institution participated. The ECEC institutions differed in terms of their geographical location (institutions from 9 out of 21 different counties), providers and the administrative status of the municipality in which they are located (Table 1). All participants are female and have a Bachelor's degree in ECEC. Previous analyses carried out as part of the MORENEC project showed that in the ECEC system, when it comes to children in a disadvantaged situation, children living in single-parent families and children with developmental disabilities predominate, while children at risk of poverty and children from ethnic minorities are underrepresented (Bouillet & Antulić-Majcen, 2022).

**Table 1***Research participants according to characteristics of the ECEC institution*

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Number of Children</i>	<i>Pro-vider</i>	<i>Administrative status</i>	<i>County</i>
3	106	P	City	Zagreb
4	433	M	City	Zagreb
2	50	P	City	Zagreb
4	301	M	City	Zagreb
2	37	P	City	Istria
3	83	M	Municipality	Istria
4	540	M	City	Split-Dalmatia
2	97	P	City	Split-Dalmatia
3	147	M	Municipality	Split-Dalmatia
2	52	P	City	Zadar
2	49	M	Municipality	Sisak-Moslavina
2	37	M	Municipality	Varaždin
2	89	P	City	Varaždin
4	343	M	City	Lika-Senj

P = private; M = municipal

**Procedure**

The MORENEC project collected quantitative and qualitative data to analyse the etiological, phenomenological, and intervention-related aspects of children's risk of social exclusion. In the qualitative part of the research, interviews were conducted with educational staff in ECEC institutions to analyse the quality of their practise in relation to children in a disadvantaged situation. Before each interview, participants commented on a vignette (linguistic illustration) describing an imaginary child. This method was chosen to ensure an independent description of pedagogical practise, without the influence of the researcher (Schratz et al., 2013).

The ECEC teachers were selected from a representative sample of ECEC institutions that were part of the MORENEC project (Bouillet & Antulić-Majcen, 2022). They were asked to read and comment on the following vignette:

Josipa (6 years old) has been going to kindergarten since this year. Josipa's parents are divorced and she lives with her mother and grandmother. The father only occasionally takes part in the child's upbringing (Josipa spends part of the holidays with him). Josipa has little contact with her peers, who often complain about her inappropriate behaviour. She often takes away other children's toys and hits them. She has difficulty waiting and therefore always tries to be first (in the queue, when choosing toys, on nature walks, etc.). Josipa's mother often blames her behaviour on her father, who she believes is prone to excessive drinking and violent behaviour.

The ECEC teachers have described in writing the components of pedagogical practise in the education of this girl, with particular emphasis on the goals and content of the pedagogical work with Josipa, the entire education group and Josipa's parents.



Participation in the research was voluntary and was based on written and verbal informed consent. The form contained information about the purpose and components of the research. Their anonymity and the responsible handling of the information provided were guaranteed. The project has the approval of the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education (in the form of an official letter) and the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Zagreb. The Ethics Committee reviewed the project at its meeting on 30 April 2019 and concluded that the project complies with the ethical standards of the Code of Ethics of the University of Zagreb and other applicable regulations. The data for this research was collected in April and May 2022.

## Analysis

The ECEC teacher's self-reports about their pedagogical practise were used as a unit for this thematic analysis. The SBA was used as the theoretical framework for the analysis, according to Hammond and Zimmerman (2012) who recognise the following components of the SBA:

- Quality of relationships: Focus on mutual trust, respect, and meaningfulness.
- Empowerment: focus on enabling the child/family member to play an active role in managing the educational process.
- Cooperation: development of partner relationships in achieving mutually agreed educational goals.
- Strengths: Relying on strengths and personal resources, and promoting motivation.
- Focus on change: achieving sustainable change through experiential learning and development.

These components are used as categories in the analysis because they are consistent with pedagogical practise that can enhance the learning and development of children in a disadvantaged situation in the ECEC setting.

The NVIVO programme was used to analyse the data. Examples of the categorisation of ECEC teachers' responses can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Examples of coding of research participants' responses to questions about self-reported pedagogical practise towards a child in a disadvantaged situation*

Category	Examples of categorisation
QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS	I would focus on creating a positive atmosphere in the group with the aim of building a good relationship between the girl, the other children and the teacher.
EMPOWERMENT	... work on self-confidence: promote positive aspects of the child, autonomy and cooperation with other children, reflect and praise successes in non-violent conflict resolution as well as in other activities.

Category	Examples of categorisation
COOPERATION	I would encourage parents to reflect on how they perceive their parenting, what they focus on, what is most important to them, with the aim of finding out the most important part - to focus on the well-being of the girl (Josipa).
STRENGTHS	I would include the child's strengths, constructive elements of the child's interest and support from friends, mother, grandmother, father and community.
FOCUS ON CHANGE	I would focus on games with rules with the aim of developing social skills and self-regulation of emotions.

### Findings

The analysis of the components of SBA in the education of children in a disadvantaged situation showed that the self-reported pedagogical practise of ECEC teachers usually includes some components of SBA, but teachers who implement a larger number of components of this approach are rare.

ECEC teachers who explained their practise in a way that could be linked to SBA pay most attention to fostering supportive relationships with the child and between children (e.g. 'I would focus on creating a positive atmosphere in the group...'). The majority of ECEC teachers also indicate that they would emphasise and develop the child's strengths (e.g. 'I would include the child's strengths, constructive elements of the child's interests and support from friends...'). Collaboration in planning the educational process is less frequently mentioned in the responses, and ECEC teachers who mentioned collaboration in sustainable change and empowering the child and parents to take an active role in achieving change are particularly rare. Many ECEC teachers' responses indicate a pedagogical practise that reflects an unequal power relationship, with the child and parents expected to follow their instructions and advice (e.g. '...talking to the mother about not speaking negatively about the father in front of Josipa...').

When it came to the quality of relationships, the ECEC teachers wrote mainly about building mutual trust and about ways to satisfy the child's need for belonging and safety (e.g. '...I would focus primarily on developing attachment – strong socio-emotional bonds with me...'; '...creating a happy and pleasant atmosphere where the child feels safe and accepted, developing a positive self-image and emotional intelligence through various prevention programmes...').

The promotion of an active role of the child/family members in managing the educational process (empowerment) is evident in the self-reported practise of a few ECEC teachers. These teachers encourage the child to be self-reflective and autonomous (e.g. '...individual and joint meetings with parents showing documents about Josipa's behaviour as a reflection of their mutual relationships...'). Even though collaboration is an imperative in the self-reported pedagogical practise of all ECEC teachers who participated in this research, there are only a few who described collaboration as mutual agreement and synchronisation of educational goals and practise (e.g. '...sharing information about the girl's development at home, her favourite activities, her involvement in play...').

Few ECEC teachers reported encouraging active parental involvement in the process (e.g. ‘... respect parents as competent participants involved in the educational process...’).

Drawing on the strengths and resources of the child, with the aim of fostering motivation and hope, ECEC teachers most often refer to respecting and promoting the child's interests and preferences (e.g. ‘... recognise and promote what the child is good at and develop and promote this...’).

Experiential learning is the basis of the ECEC curriculum, and the SBA implies that it should be aimed at achieving sustainable change with the child's conscious and active participation. Experiential learning is therefore mentioned in the responses of all the ECEC teachers, but only some of them try to link this process to achieving sustainable change (e.g. ‘...encouraging the expression of one's feelings, the possibility of processing feelings with different stimuli, overcoming feelings of guilt, encouraging conversations about their problems and worries...’).

Some ECEC teachers did not express any components of SBA in their responses. These teachers emphasise Josipa's insufficiently developed social skills (e.g. ‘... raising awareness through conversations about how other children in the group feel when she hits them or takes away a toy without their consent.’). They also have little hope for the girl's nurturing and development (e.g. ‘...involve the girl in board games with some quiet children who do not react to the girl's behaviour.’) and develop their relationships with parents based on advice and instructions (e.g. ‘I would advise the parents that the child should know about events related to divorce and life planning...’). In addition, there are inappropriate pedagogical practises in this group of teachers that are not in line with the child's needs and well-being (e.g. ‘I would help Josipa develop the habit of waiting her turn to explain and bring her back in line each time’; ‘...familiarise Josipa with the rules that prevail in the group and show her how to respect the rules of the group, point out to her inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour.’).

In general, the analysis of the representation of SBA in Croatian ECEC teachers' self-reported pedagogical practise towards children in a disadvantaged situation points to the conclusion that many ECEC teachers intuitively aspire to practise some elements of SBA but have not internalised this concept, especially in terms of promoting children's and parents' participation in the planning and design of the educational process itself. Of particular concern are ECEC teachers whose pedagogical practise does not include a single element of SBA, but rather is based on the deficit model because it focuses exclusively on the limitations of the child and his/her family. Thus, the question of the possibility of preventing unfavourable developmental trajectories of children in a disadvantaged situation in Croatian ECEC institutions remains open.

## Discussion

Universally available services for families and children of early and preschool age are considered central to children's social protection, especially in the ECEC system, which supports families in raising children (Pölkki & Vornanen, 2016). Therefore, it is important to develop various social support programmes for children and families in disadvantaged situation. The common feature of such programmes is social support and strengthening of social cohesion, where the ECEC facility is perceived as a meeting place for parents, children,

and experts to participate together in the processes of child rearing and community building (Geens & Vandebroek, 2013). In this process, the SBA approach plays an important role in the pedagogical practise of ECEC teachers.

However, this research confirmed the limited understanding of SBA among Croatian ECEC teachers, as they focus on achieving children's supportive relationships and strengths and neglect the other components. It was found that ECEC teachers most concerned with fostering supportive relationships with the child and between children and are primarily focused on emphasising and developing the child's strengths. This results in an inadequate representation of curriculum content and processes that would be more focused on children and parents taking an active role in identifying personal resources as well as achieving sustainable change. Galloway et al. (2020) also point out that most of the time, ECEC teachers strive to use children's strengths, but they do so in ways that are not consistent with the principles of SBA. Hopps-Wallis et al. (2016) have come to a similar conclusion, pointing to the benefits of SBA and the inconsistency of its implementation in ECEC, while other researchers point to the positive effects of consistent implementation of SBA when working with children in a disadvantaged situation (LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004; Kalke et al., 2007; Walsh & Canavan, 2014).

It seems that the good intentions of Croatian ECEC teachers to contribute to the child's well-being remain at the level of supporting the child's social functioning within ECEC, focusing predominantly on group and individual work with the child and aligning the curriculum and pedagogical context with the child's needs. The focus on using resources from the wider community and intervening in risk factors in the family context is evident in the practise of a smaller number of ECEC teachers.

Joint planning of the educational process is mentioned less frequently in the responses. The weak focus on collaboration with children's family members calls into question the possibility of a meaningful contribution to preventing the negative consequences of a disadvantaged situation, as the development of children's resilience, self-confidence and socio-emotional skills that enable them to grow and develop despite adverse circumstances requires collaboration between ECEC teachers and children's parents/caregivers.

ECEC teachers who work together to achieve sustainable change and empower the child and parents to take an active role in achieving change are extremely rare. Referring to the relevant literature, Menand et al. (2021) concluded that cooperative, empowering, and reciprocal relationships between parents and ECEC teachers contribute to improved parental role competence in both parents and teachers. The authors emphasised the need for a new approach 'with parents' that recognises the shared social responsibility of family and society for the upbringing and education of children, rather than the current approach 'about parents', which is based on the belief that parents are solely responsible for the development and education of their children.

The possibility of building collaborative relationships with children's parents/caregivers is questionable if the relationship focuses on problems and difficulties without recognising parents' potential and ability to change. It is well known that the way in which teachers perceive, and experience change largely determines its success or failure. The willingness to change depends on beliefs, attitudes, and the assessment of the need for change, which also requires institutional support. As the ECEC system should contribute to reducing the risk of

social exclusion, including an appropriate pedagogical response to the needs of children in a disadvantaged situation, changes are needed in the Croatian ECEC system. The need for change is also indicated by responses that point to a pedagogical practise that reflects an unequal balance of power, where children and parents are expected to follow the teacher's instructions and advice.

The results of this research point to the need for a stronger affirmation of SBA in Croatian ECEC so that its principles become visible in the pedagogical practise of all ECEC teachers. There is a need for initial training and continuous professional development of ECEC teachers for the education of children in a disadvantaged situation and their family members in accordance with the SBA, as well as the development, proposal, and adoption of professional standards for pedagogical practise that promote this approach. Initial training and continuous professional development should be improved in Croatia to prepare ECEC teachers to promote the well-being, learning and development of all children. It is important to ensure a common understanding of SBA and achieve its implementation in pedagogical practise by developing a system of mutual support, implementing activities that promote children's social-emotional learning, using procedures to develop supportive social interactions, using procedures to constructively resolve problem situations, and implementing activities to support competent parenting. The MORENEC project has developed a model for such practise that includes the professional development of ECEC teachers, a focus on children's social-emotional learning, cooperative relationships with children's parents/caregivers and the process of documenting and evaluating the educational process and its outcomes. It is expected that the application of the model will contribute to a better recognition of the SBA approach in the Croatian ECEC system. It is about the need to empower ECEC teachers, children, and their family members to make a better contribution of ECEC to prevent unfavourable developmental trajectories in children a disadvantaged situation.

However, greater involvement of the ECEC system in interventions for children in a disadvantaged situation also means significant improvements and close collaboration with health and social protection systems. In this context, it is particularly important to ensure timely identification of risks and linkage of the child and his/her family members with providers of appropriate intervention services. Given the scale, multidimensionality and dynamics of disadvantaged situations, these interventions should cover a wider range of risks and involve the child's family (Sukkar et al., 2018). This requires significant changes in the Croatian education and social system to strengthen the ECEC system and better link it to the social protection system (e.g. Raat et al., 2011; Kovan et al., 2014; Tayler et al., 2015).

### **Limitations of the research**

In interpreting this analysis, some limitations of the research should be considered. The research used a vignette and the ECEC teachers' responses as an instrument to determine the extent to which they were implementing the SBA, and it remained unknown whether the ECEC teachers had experience of working with children in a similar disadvantaged situation. This means that self-reported practise is analysed without insight into their actual pedagogical practise. This approach was applied in the other phase of the MORENEC project, when ECEC

teachers' practise in educating children in a disadvantaged situation was observed and evaluated.

The ECEC teachers commented on a vignette in an online environment, which made direct communication between them and the researchers impossible. Therefore, there is a possibility of misinterpretation of some components of the ECEC teachers' pedagogical practise. Although the questions were asked to describe in detail all components of their practise, some of the ECEC teachers commented only sparingly.

Additional research on the implementation of the SBA approach in the Croatian ECEC system is needed, with a particular focus on research on readiness for change (cognitive, affective and behavioural components) to ensure a better contribution of the system to the equalisation of educational opportunities of preschool children.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to analyse the pedagogical response of Croatian ECEC teachers to the needs of preschool children in a disadvantaged situation to investigate the extent to which they can adequately support and prevent unfavourable developmental trajectories of these children. It was found that ECEC teachers are predominantly oriented towards individual components of SBA (quality of relationships, focus on children's strengths), while the implementation of SBA in its entirety is lacking. Particularly striking is the weak focus of ECEC teachers on the implementation of the SBA approach in relationships with parents/caregivers of children in a disadvantaged situation, which would contribute to strengthening the child's ecological system. Given the importance and potential of the SBA in preventing educational inequalities and promoting the development of children in a disadvantaged situation, as well as the high expectations that today's education policy places on this system, significant improvements in the Croatian ECEC system are needed. These changes range from the initial training of ECEC teachers to the creation of conditions that improve the quality of pedagogical practise for children in a disadvantaged situation and ensure a better link between the education and social welfare systems.

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