



# Supporting learning and play of children with developmental difficulties in Croatian ECEC institutions



Dejana Bouillet\* & Sandra Antulić Majcen\*\*

\*Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Croatia

\*\*National Centre for External Evaluation of Education, Zagreb, Croatia

<http://morenec.ufzg.hr/>

# CONTEXT

## ECEC IN CROATIA

- an integral part of the educational system
- it is not compulsory for all children (except the preschool)
- the RSE of children is a great obstacle to the availability of ECEC
- it is divided into two educational cycles:
  1. the nursery cycle (6 months to 3 years) and
  2. the kindergarten cycle (3 to 7 years)
- **The National Curriculum for ECEC (2015):**
- defines the content of the programme
- it is in line with recent international politics & a solid, inclusive framework for Croatian ECEC programmes



# MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

- the ECEC system is significantly decentralized
- local governments (556 cities and municipalities) are responsible for financing and providing services
- Croatia is a small country with huge differences in the level of development among different regions – differences and inequalities within all aspects of ECEC
- in recent years, the number and proportion of private kindergartens have been steadily growing, they are not equipped with specialist support staff
- ECEC teachers are not properly educated to respond to the special educational needs of children with developmental difficulties



# MODELS OF RESPONSE TO EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN AT RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN ECEC INSTITUTIONS



- the goal of the project is to investigate how ECEC institutions respond to the needs of all children at RSE
- it is the first scientific project with this goal in Croatia



## METHODOLOGY:

- many measuring instruments
- different ECEC professionals
- parents and children
- different qualitative and quantitative data

# STARTING POINTS



- children with developmental difficulties will benefit from participation in ECEC only if the institutions and their services are of high quality
- educational or pedagogical practice significantly varies among different ECEC institutions and ECEC teachers who understand and promote an inclusive model of education are rare
- the majority of ECEC teachers are focused on the specific needs of individual children with developmental difficulties and on the development of individualized educational programs
- 30% of children are in some RSE



# THE RESEARCH

The objective of the presentation:



- ✓ is to discuss **how ECEC teachers support learning and play of children with developmental difficulties** in comparison to their typically developed peers, according to the results of the project **“Models of response to educational needs of children at risk of social exclusion in ECEC institutions”**.



# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## PARTICIPANTS:

- ✓ 3500 children aged between 5 and 7 years (48.7% girls, 51.3% boys) from 10% of all Croatian ECEC institutions (N=66)
- ✓ 535 ECEC teachers



## INSTRUMENTS:

- ✓ questionnaire “Assessment of Etiological and Phenomenological Aspects of Risks of Social Exclusion of Children - version for ECEC teachers”

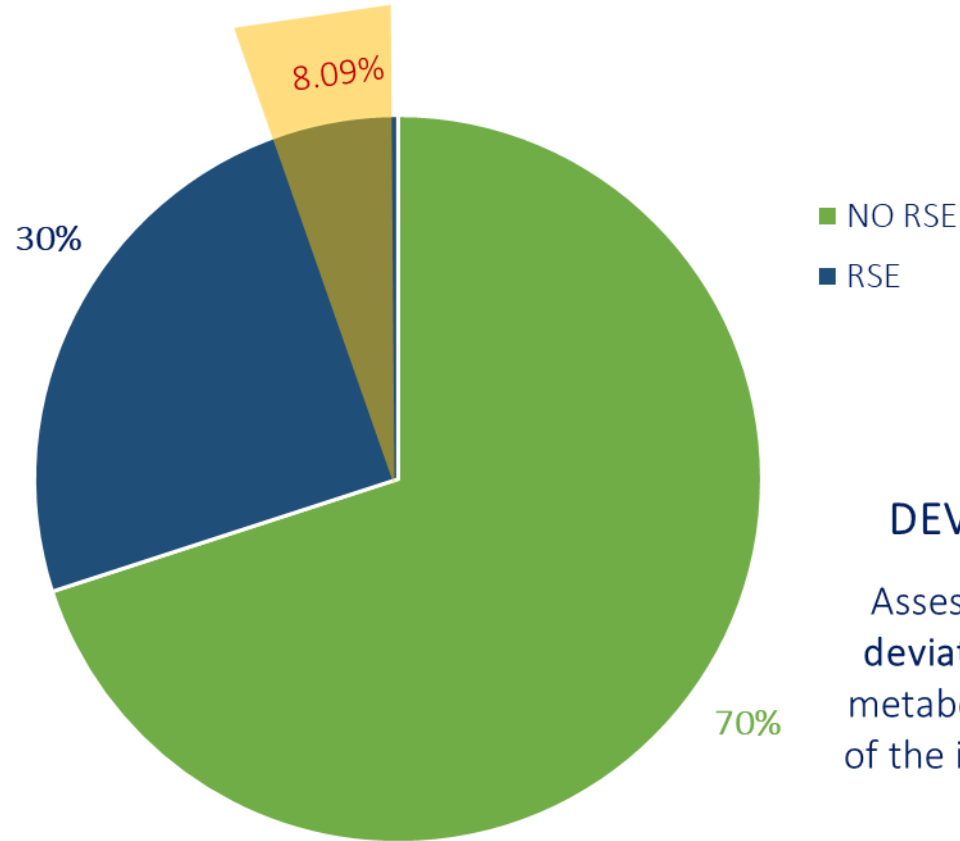
## MAIN DATA COLLECTION:

- ✓ during the pedagogic year of 2020/2021
- ✓ approved by the Ethics Committee and compliant with ethical standards outlined in the Ethical Code of the University of Zagreb



# RESEARCH RESULTS

The share of children with developmental difficulties:



8.09%

CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFICULTIES

Assessed **severe** or **moderate** level of **deviation** in cognitive, sensory, motor, metabolism, skin functions or functions of the immune and respiratory systems.



	N	boys	girls
overall sample	3500	51.3%	48.7%
children with developmental difficulties	283	66.4%	33.6%

\* RSE – Risk of Social Exclusion



# RESEARCH RESULTS

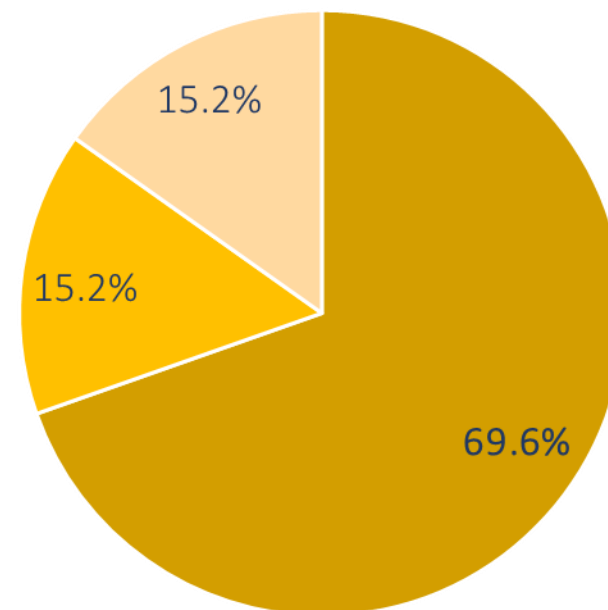
## ECEC PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE OF CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFICULTIES



attend ECEC for 3-5 years  
(M=4.40; SD=1.56; min=1; max=7)



attend ECEC regularly  
(everyday basis, 5 days per week)



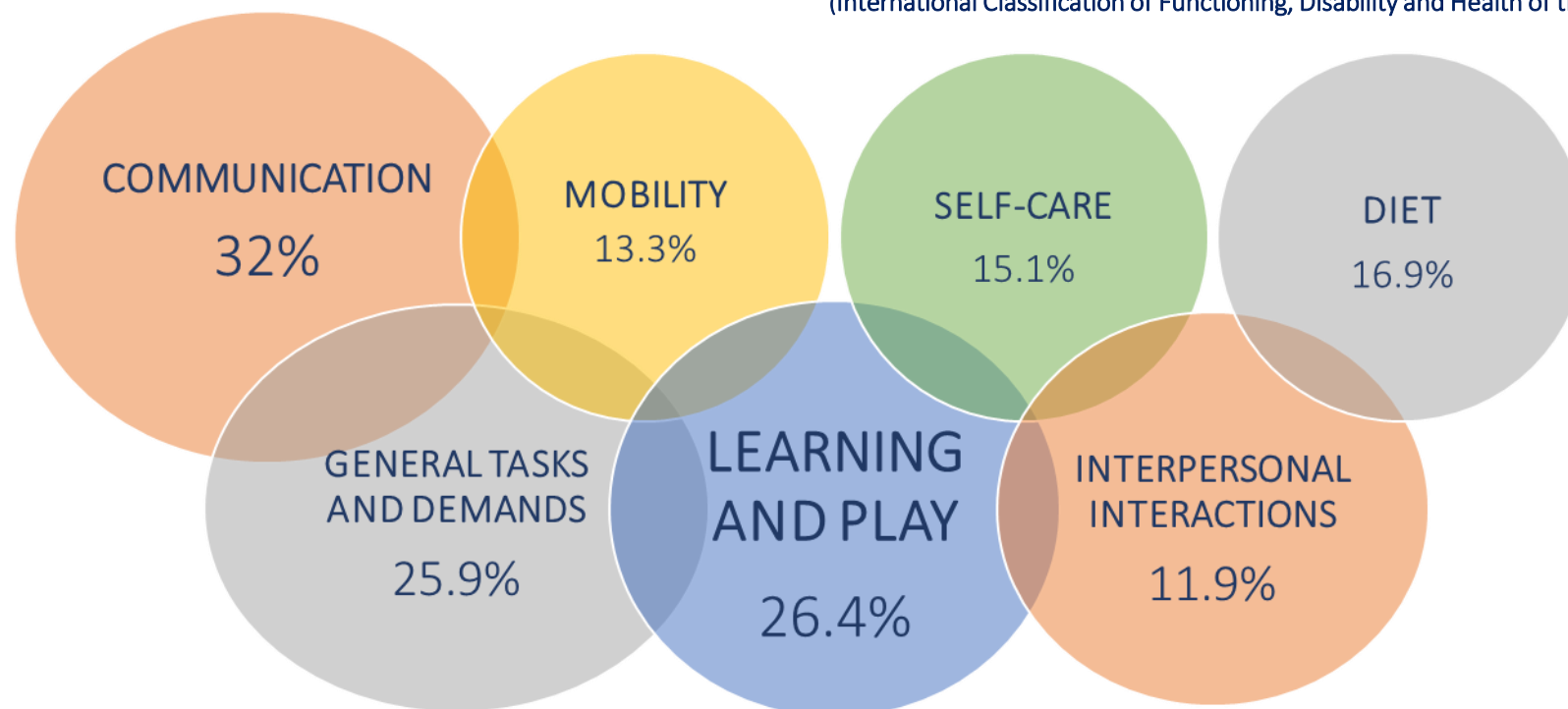
- all-day program (7-10 hours per day)
- half-day program (4-6 hours per day)
- other (shorter program)



# RESEARCH RESULTS

## ASSESSED ACTIVITIES AND PARTICIPATION WITHIN THE ECEC SETTING

(International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health of the World Health Organization, 2001)

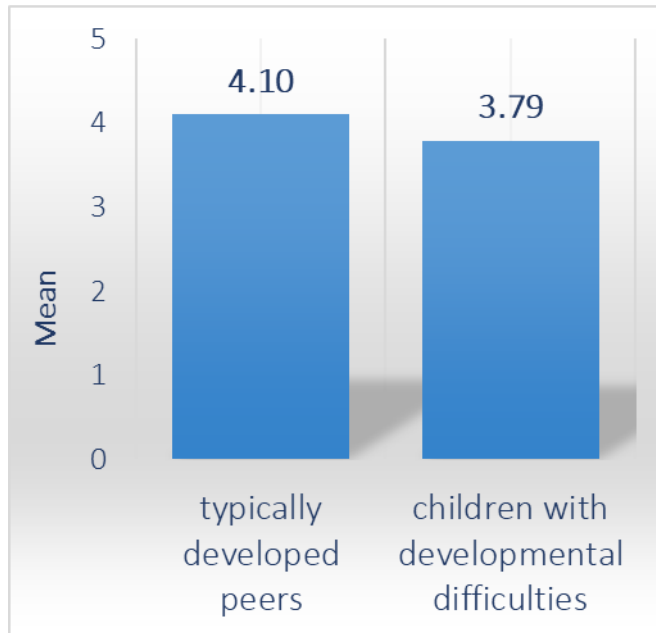


The percentage of children with developmental difficulties who express **moderate or severe deviations** in the assessed areas.

# RESEARCH RESULTS

## CHILD INTERACTION QUALITY IN THE EDUCATIONAL GROUP

### Interaction differences



Mann-Whitney U test = 360108.5  
 $p < 0.01$

Percentage of children with developmental difficulties who rarely or never:

- 12.6% seek help from ECEC teachers when having a problem
- 19.4% show affection for other children
- 15.0% show affection for ECEC teachers in the educational group
- 30.8% share their secrets with ECEC teachers and speak to ECEC teachers in confidence
- 1.8% feel safe, free, and protected in the kindergarten

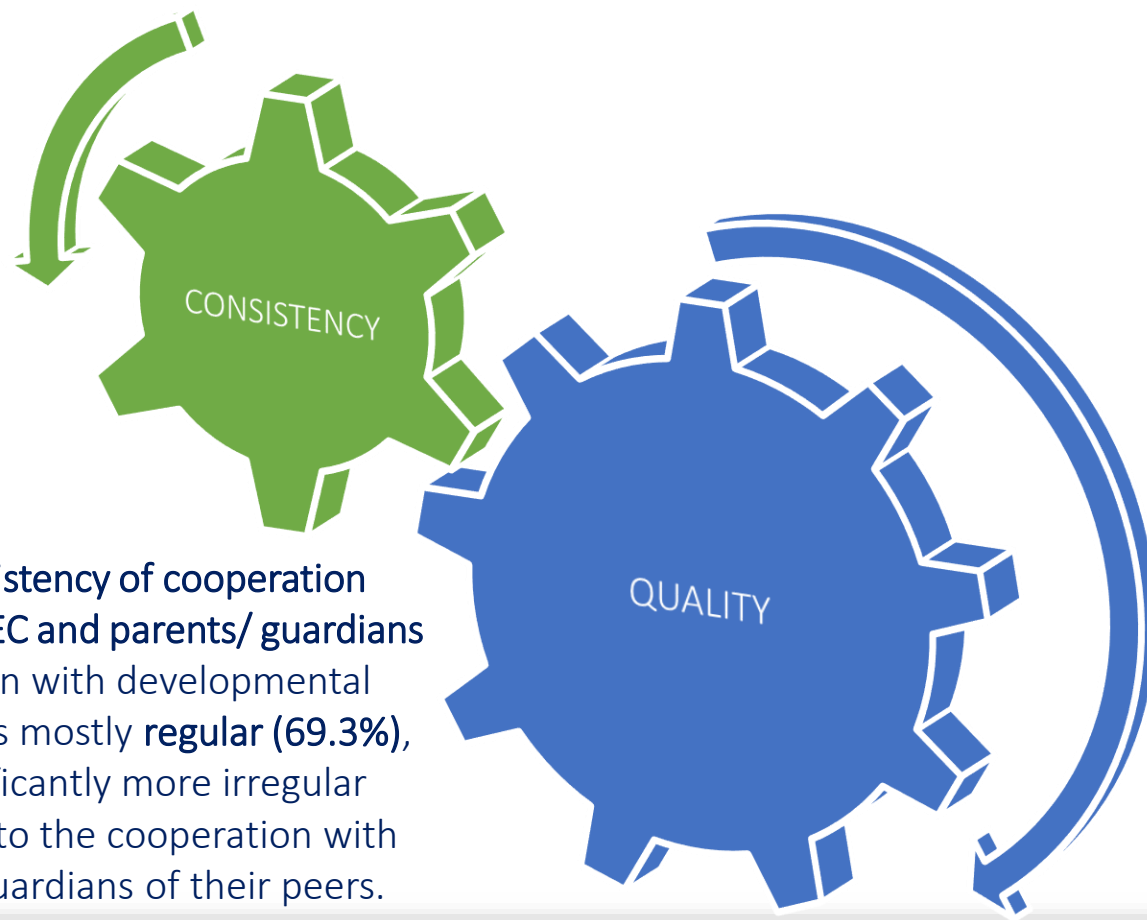


# RESEARCH RESULTS

## THE COOPERATION WITH PARENTS/GUARDIANS



The consistency of cooperation between ECEC and parents/ guardians of children with developmental difficulties is mostly **regular (69.3%)**, but significantly more irregular compared to the cooperation with parents/guardians of their peers.



### THE QUALITY OF FAMILY - INSTITUTION COOPERATION

42.6%	Excellent
15.5%	Good
<b>28.5%</b>	Average
<b>10.5%</b>	Poor
<b>2.9%</b>	Extremely poor



# RESEARCH RESULTS

## ECEC TEACHERS PERCEIVED COMPETENCIES (N=204)



59.5%

of children with developmental difficulties have ECEC teachers who assess that **educational work** with these children is **more demanding** compared to working with their typically developed peers.

70.6%

of children with developmental difficulties have ECEC teachers who assess that they have **sufficient competencies** for answering the needs of those children.

90.6%

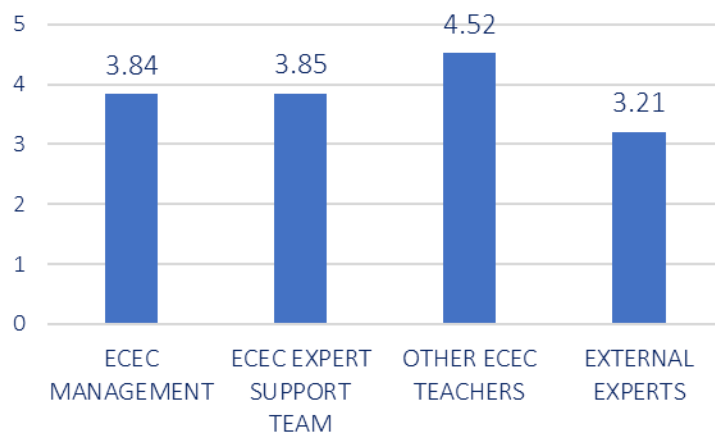
of children with developmental difficulties have ECEC teachers who assess that their **previous working experience** is **helpful** for answering the needs of those children.



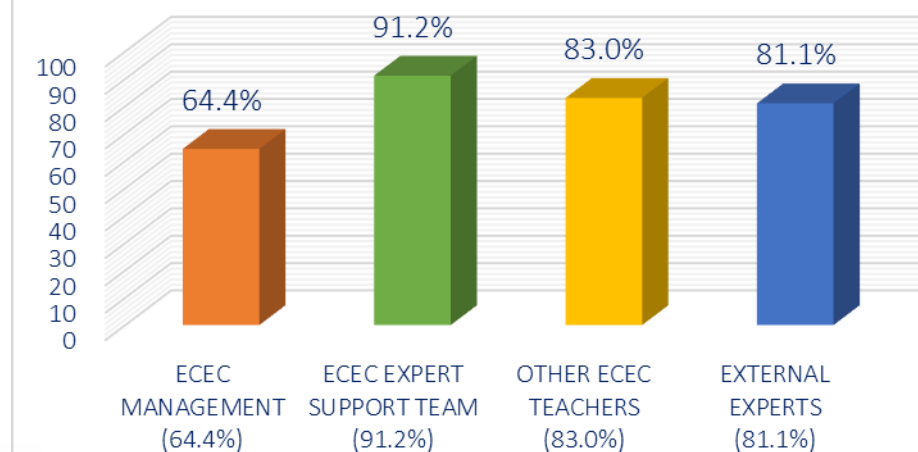
# RESEARCH RESULTS

## ECEC TEACHERS' SUPPORT SYSTEM

ECEC teacher satisfaction with the available support



ECEC teachers' needs for the additional support



# DISCUSSION

- ✓ Croatian educational system – on the policy level – recognizes the educational needs of children with developmental difficulties, and the ECEC institutions are mostly accessible for those children.
- ✓ **The quality of response to the educational needs of those children is still unsatisfactory, especially at the level of:**
  - ✓ understanding the needs and potentials of children with developmental difficulties (ECEC teachers/ECEC institutions)
  - ✓ assuring higher quality of interactions between children at RSE / children with developmental difficulties and their peers, as well as between children and adults
  - ✓ improving consistency and quality of cooperation between parents and ECEC institutions and assuring more regular attendance
  - ✓ providing inclusive high-quality pedagogic practice for all children, especially for children with developmental difficulties.



# CONCLUSION REMARKS



- our ECEC staff and institutions have a long journey ahead to encourage awareness of all Croatian stakeholders in the direction of better and more equitable education
- the goal is to have a pedagogical practice that welcomes all children, regardless of their differences in culture, abilities and other characteristics
- this is the only way to fulfil the preventive function of the ECEC system







Thank you for your attention.



Contact:

[morenec@ufzg.hr](mailto:morenec@ufzg.hr)

<http://morenec.ufzg.hr/>