Research article

Components of an inclusive, democratic culture in pedagogical practice of early childhood education and care teachers in Croatia

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Abstract

Educational policy and pedagogical practice that meet the needs of young children and their families are those that are inclusive, diverse and democratic. The early childhood education and care system serves as an essential tool for preventing inequality and educational poverty, while enabling every child to develop to their full potential. The aim of this article, therefore, is to identify elements of democratic culture and inclusive pedagogical practice within the early childhood education and care system in Croatia. Following a qualitative interpretative approach, data collected from 35 interviews with teachers from 13 early childhood education and care institutions were analysed using the NVivo software. The coding framework was based on the selected International Step-by-Step Association standards of quality pedagogical practice within the standard of Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy. Inter-rater reliability was assured. The results indicate a diverse understanding of democratic values among early childhood

education and care teachers, as well as differences in incorporating elements of inclusive and democratic culture in their practice. Furthermore, there is a lack of specific knowledge about diversity, democracy and inclusion. However, an analysis of specific elements of early childhood education and care teachers' everyday pedagogical practice indicates warm, supportive and responsive democratic relationships. These relationships focus on the child's abilities, potential and needs, along with the teacher's ability to create an inclusive and stimulating learning environment within the early childhood education and care setting. Implications for improving pedagogical practice are discussed.

Keywords early childhood education and care; quality pedagogical practice; inclusiveness; diversity; ISSA standards

Introduction

Democracy, in its most basic definition, means 'the power of the people', where the willingness of individuals to take responsibility is as important as their competence to contribute to the development of a democratic society. In this research, democracy implies majority rule; however, it also relates to the concept of changing societies as a dynamic process in which minorities, individual rights, equality of opportunity, and liberties play crucial roles in its implementation and continuous development (Rohmann, 1999). These elements are continually discussed and reconsidered in everyday situations, making democracy 'a living organism' that functions both at individual and societal levels. Viewed as such, democracy becomes a process of creating quality relationships between the individual and the collective identity. This includes the ability to live together, build relationships among people, respect the freedoms of others, and establish a balance of power between individuals, groups and institutions (Perotti, 1994).

The process of finding and maintaining a balance between individual freedom and belonging to the community, under the umbrella of democracy – which guarantees equality, the rule of law and freedom for every citizen – opens the space for two important concepts: diversity and inclusion. Diversity in democratic societies begins with the understanding that everyone is different, both in visible and non-visible characteristics, and that no one should face discrimination based on these differences. However, when the values of equality and solidarity compete with the values of individual freedom and autonomy (Sorensen, 2008), a critical question arises: What is the appropriate liberal democratic balance between these competing values? Is such a balance even possible? With this question in mind, one of the greatest challenges for democracy is achieving true inclusion, which ensures that all who are affected by a decision are equally involved in the processes leading to that decision (Young, 2002).

The connection between democracy and education is undoubtedly crucial. Educational institutions should serve as hubs of social activity and keys to community engagement (Dewey, 2005). Therefore, democracy can be ensured through education, while the right to education is guaranteed by democracy (Dundar, 2013). The right to education encompasses not only the availability and accessibility of education, but also the opportunity to learn and develop in the spirit of human rights (Tomaševski, 2001). The responsibility for enabling the right to education for all depends on the national context, educational institutions and individuals within the educational process. In other words, there are three dimensions to developing inclusion within an educational institution: producing inclusive policies, creating inclusive cultures and evolving inclusive practices (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Thus, the true right to education can only be realised in a developed democratic society with an established educational democratic culture (Pažur, 2019) supported by responsible and active citizens, particularly those involved in education. In conclusion, fostering democracy, nurturing diversity and promoting inclusion in educational practices is achievable only in a democratic environment, guided by teachers who have developed civic competence, civic confidence and a democratic character (Lonto, 2019).

Education for democracy in early childhood education and care settings

The goal of introducing democratic values in education is to promote social justice and equality (Giroux, 1989). In the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC), engaging young children as active citizens, recognising their agency and encouraging their participation have become significant topics (Moss, 2007). The foundation for a democratic everyday culture can and should be established in day nurseries (Priebe, 2008) through democratic practices. In ECEC, this means adopting and enacting democracy as a fundamental value (Moss, 2021). Democratic pedagogies reconceptualise children's role in the learning process, emphasising their active involvement (Leavers, 1994) and enabling them to make their own learning choices (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002). If democracy in educational institutions is viewed as a living organism, ECEC teachers' role is to create an environment where the principles of equity, plurality and participation are implemented (Turnšek and Pekkarinen, 2009).

Inclusion in education involves valuing all children, students and staff equally, while restructuring cultures, policies and practices to respond to the diversity of all children (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). In quality ECEC, inclusion is characterised as comprehensive, multisectoral, integrated, child-centred and play-based. It ensures that all children and their families are involved in the process (UNESCO, 2021), which should be marked by access, participation and support. This entails providing a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings and environments, which are key features of high-quality and inclusive ECEC (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Furthermore, inclusion involves reducing barriers to learning and participation for all children (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). This requires recognising that some children may need additional, individualised support to fully participate in play and learning activities (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

ECEC teachers bear the responsibility for fostering inclusive and democratic environments in which children can actively participate (Eriksen, 2018). Teachers can achieve this by reflecting on their understanding of democratic values (Aasen et al., 2009), creating projects that establish a sense of solidarity among children (Hellman, 2012), and empowering children to derive meaning from the activities in which they engage (Arthur and Sawyer, 2009).

The International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA) is a leading international learning community and dynamic member association, powered by Europe's and Central Asia's foremost early childhood experts. Founded in 1999, its programme today has expanded to 29 countries. It is an impact network that unites stakeholders to advance early childhood development. ISSA (2010) categorises the quality of pedagogical practices into seven areas, each with targeted standards (Tankersley and Ionescu, 2016). One such standard is Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy, which focuses on fostering mutual understanding, embracing diversity and ensuring social inclusion. According to these standards, ECEC teachers should, through interactions with children and the development of a supportive learning environment, encourage children's sense of identity and belonging. This ensures that every child feels safe, stimulated and included (Tankersley et al., 2012).

The development of democratic culture at the institutional level, and consequently in the daily practices of ECEC teachers, is closely tied to national-level ECEC policies. In Croatia, the education system is centrally managed by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, with ECEC plans outlined in national documents. However, ECEC institutions are funded at the local level, either by public founders (local community) or by private entities. The primary framework for ECEC practices (for children aged 1 to 7) is the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (NN 05/15) (Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, 2025). This curriculum emphasises core values that children in ECEC institutions should develop, such as knowledge, identity, humanity and tolerance, responsibility, autonomy and creativity. One of the main competencies highlighted is social and civic competency, which involves accepting differences and acting responsibly in relation to human rights. However, the methodology for how and when these values and competencies should be developed is not specified in national legislation. In such a national context, where autonomy and responsibility for fostering democratic practices lie with ECEC teachers, it is essential to investigate and better understand how teachers perceive diversity and implement inclusive practices in their work with children. With that in mind, this article answers three research questions:

1. What is the perception of diversity in the daily practice of ECEC, and how does it vary in relation to the quality of ECEC?

2.   What are the modalities of democratic relationship within ECEC everyday practice, and how do they vary in relation to the quality of ECEC?

3.   What key aspects of an inclusive learning environment emerge from ECEC everyday practice, and how do they vary in relation to the quality of ECEC?

Research methodology

In this study, a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) was conducted, with the aim of understanding the prevalence of inclusive, democratic culture in ECEC pedagogical practice, along with associated aspects of ensuring democratic relationships and creating inclusive learning environments.

The data analysed in this article were collected as part of the project Models of Response to Educational Needs of Children at Risk of Social Exclusion in ECEC Institutions (funded by the Croatian Science Foundation). For the purposes of this research, data collected through interviews with 35 ECEC teachers were analysed. Before conducting the interviews, 13 ECEC institutions were sampled according to the self-assessment of the quality of pedagogical practice (quantitative data collected through a questionnaire on the quality of pedagogical practice, adapted according to the ISSA quality standards [ISSA, 2010]), whereby 10 per cent of ECEC institutions with the highest quality rating and 10 per cent of ECEC institutions with the lowest ratings of quality pedagogical practice were selected for participation in the following research phase (Skočić Mihić et al., 2022). Within the sampled ECEC institutions, interviews were conducted in small groups of two to four ECEC teachers, depending on the size and characteristics of the ECEC institution. Respondents differed in relation to the specifics of ECEC institutions (for example, urban/rural, founder), which ensured variability in the experiences of ECEC teachers in relation to the research topic (Table 1). All participants were informed of the research objectives and provided written consent for data collection and analysis.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample (*N* participants; *N* ECEC institutions)

Self-assessed quality of pedagogical practice	Total	ECEC institution setting		ECEC institution founder	
		Rural	Urban	State	Private
High	16 (6)	5 (2)	11 (4)	9 (3)	7 (3)
Low	19 (7)	5 (2)	14 (5)	13 (4)	6 (3)

For data collection purposes, a highly structured interview protocol was used. Interviews were conducted by nine trained researchers following the protocol and took place in April and May 2021. The semi-structured interview began with an opening question with the purpose of familiarising participants with the topic. It was followed by five thematic question groups (with more orientation and focused sub-questions). These question groups had been previously aligned with the methodological framework of quality pedagogical practice – that is, seven focus areas (ISSA, 2010) – with an emphasis on children in disadvantaged situations. With the participants' consent (sampled ECEC teachers), all interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated. The interview questions were:

• In previous phases of research, we concluded that around 20 per cent of children involved in ECEC institutions are at some kind of risk of social exclusion. Could you briefly talk about your experiences while working with those children and their families? What do you find to be the most important elements of successful practice when working with those children? Could you give us some examples?

• What strategies do you use in planning, documenting and evaluating your practice while working with children at risk of social exclusion? Could you give us some examples?

• While creating the physical and social environment, how do you enable participation and optimal development of all children, including those at risk? Could you give us some examples?

- Do you – and how – consider and integrate the family culture of every child in your educational processes? Do you have experience of working with children from different religions? What do you do with children from minority groups to make them equal with children from the dominant culture?
- In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a quality relationship between an ECEC teacher and a parent of a child at risk of social exclusion? Could you share some examples of this partnership within your work? Have you faced any problems and obstacles?
- In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a quality partner relationship between ECEC teachers and other employees of an ECEC institution? Could you share some examples of this partnership within your work? Have you faced any problems and obstacles?

The coding framework followed the selected standards within the ISSA focus area Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy. A deductive approach was used to identify a number of thematic codes from the available data, which allowed for the definition of new, even unexpected, subthemes that complemented those that were predetermined (Merriam, 2009). The process of developing the data coding framework was as follows:

1. reading of the interview transcripts by two independent researchers to familiarise themselves with the content of the interview
2. repeated reading of the interview transcripts by two independent researchers and developing the first two independent versions of the coding framework
3. developing a unique coding plan and discussing the meaning and interpretation of the codes
4. independent coding of 10 per cent of randomly selected interview transcripts
5. checking the inter-rater reliability via NVivo (average Cohen's Kappa Coefficient > 0.70; '*substantial agreement*' [Landis and Koch, 1977]; with an average level of agreement 97.51; min. = 82.28; max. = 100) for all nodes and sources
6. revising the coding plan and discussing the meaning and interpretation of the codes with lower inter-coder reliability
7. developing the final coding plan, which was used by both researchers in the following steps
8. coding of all interview transcripts by two independent researchers following the final coding plan
9. coordinating the themes and their meanings among the researchers.

The data coding framework was constructed, and three key topics were ultimately identified: (1) diversity; (2) democratic relationships; and (3) inclusive learning environment. These topics were associated with themes and subthemes, and their variations in practice, with the focus on teachers' competence, confidence and character for developing democracy and inclusive practices.

The first topic of diversity focuses on ECEC teachers' views on diversity, democratic values and beliefs, as well as on their manifestations in everyday practice, which are the main aspects of their competence and democratic character (Table 2). Within the first theme, teachers' responses range from those with *inclusive*, and those with *non-inclusive* experiences and attitudes about diversity. Within the second theme, the main criteria used by ECEC teachers to identify children who need additional support have emerged: the child being part of a minority group; their family's characteristics; and the child's characteristics or behaviours.

The second topic of democratic relationships refers to the modalities and frequencies of democratic relations within pedagogical practice (Table 3). This relates to teachers' democratic competence and confidence in contributing to the development of democratic culture and inclusive practices. Three different types of interaction were present in ECEC teachers' interviews: ECEC teacher–child interactions; interactions between ECEC teachers and other practitioners/experts (within ECEC setting/institution); and interactions between the ECEC teachers and other practitioners/experts (outside ECEC setting/institution). Data analysis revealed that all three main groups of ECEC teachers' democratic relationships vary according to the purpose of the interaction: to assess the level of a child's development (*assessment*); to act preventively to mitigate the development of a potential risk (*preventive*); or to act in order to answer a specific need of a child (*corrective*). Some interactions are orientated towards the whole group, meaning that the ECEC teacher includes all children, but considers the interaction particularly beneficial for a specific child, who is different in some way. However, there are

also interactions that are oriented towards an individual child or chosen precisely to answer the specific needs of some child.

Table 2. Examples of answers that were coded within the teachers' views on diversity

Themes	Subthemes	Examples
Teachers' experiences and attitudes about diversity	Inclusive	'… it is important to create conditions in which individuals and social groups can have same possibilities …'
	Non-inclusive	'… minority groups learn normal things like all other children, that is normal, they have to respect the dominant culture …'
Teachers' attitudes about children who need additional support	Child from a minority group	'… we have this girl that came from Albania, she didn't speak Croatian, and barely spoke English …'
	Family characteristics	'… girl is in a specific situation, her parents divorced two years ago, and that has had an important influence on her life …'
	Child characteristics or behaviour	'… we are following the development of a child that is so self-deprecating, that reacts badly when he comes into contact with other children, he says something bad, or hits another child …'

Table 3. Examples of answers that were coded within the topic of democratic relationship

Theme	Subtheme	Example
Level of interaction	ECEC teacher–child	'… our role as a teacher is to be available to the child, to know what his/her situation is, to be familiar with it and to be open to conversation …'
	ECEC teacher–other practitioners/experts (within ECEC setting/institution)	'… the exchange of information about the child, above all. Of course, it's important that we help each other in any aspect, with ideas, didactics, professional literature … exchange of knowledge …'
	ECEC teacher–parents and other practitioners/experts (outside ECEC setting/institution)	'… that's where I really focused on working with parents to see how that child spends time when he's at home, how he gets involved in social interactions when he's in the park, what that child likes to do the most …'
Objective of interaction	Assessment	'… we were following her, and then also come in some activity in her to direct her attention towards some game, that will help us to see what she can or cannot actually do …'
	Preventive	'… I sat every day with her, and teaching her English with cards, so she would be able to make contact with other children and not be excluded …'
	Corrective	'… I prepared music activities, because those are most productive with these types of children …'
Interaction orientation	Individual support	'… we have this time every day when two of us talk, about anything, what happened today, what made her happy …'
	Whole group	'… we talk with all children about culture and what families do, and that is how everyone's family culture is included …'

The third topic of inclusive learning environment refers to the categories of the most frequently developed inclusive learning environment in ECEC teachers' practice (Table 4), which are connected to

their democratic character, as well as to their democratic competence in contributing to the development of democratic culture and inclusion of children in early and preschool education. Two main categories of inclusive learning environments are detected in ECEC teachers' pedagogic practices: physical and social. The physical learning environment encompasses the layout of the playroom and the types and number of materials available for children to play with, while the social learning environment is focused on creating an atmosphere in which everyone can share their ideas, where there is no violence and children feel secure. Both categories of learning environments vary in terms of the approach used, where ECEC teachers differentiate between environments created for all children (*whole group*) and environments tailored to the specific needs of a child in order to provide him/her with individual support.

Table 4. Examples of answers coded within topic of inclusive learning environment

Themes	Subthemes	Example
Level of a learning environment	Physical	'… we agree on the centres that will be in our playroom … we monitor children in some activities, and if something happens that makes us aware of an interest of a child or a group of children, we adjust the material surroundings to them in a week or two.'
	Social	'… very good for us are circles when we talk with children. Mostly on Mondays we discuss: "Where have you been, what did you do?" We discuss that …'
Learning environment approach	Individual support	'… we know that he likes to have some time alone, so we have created this space where a child can isolate himself …'
	Whole group support	'… through different symbolic games children can learn that diversity is normal, and learn that it is important for everyone to have their opinion …'

Results

How do ECEC teachers describe democratic culture and diversity in their everyday practice?

When asked about differences and diversity in their everyday work, as well as how they implement democracy in what they do, ECEC teachers expressed the following ideas: 'we accept differences'; 'we don't judge anyone'; 'everybody is welcome'; and 'we just don't perceive anyone as normal or different from normal'. However, they often lacked more precise explanations of those statements, although some of them provided some positive, as well as some negative, examples. Most positive examples related to moments when an ECEC teacher responded to an emerging situation, for example:

> One day, children went to sleep, and one girl started to pray. Some children joined and explained that they do that before they go to sleep. In the group there was one Muslim child who said that he also prays with his grandpa, but he doesn't know the words of the prayer. So, I said to him that he can ask his grandpa to teach him the words, so he can teach me, because I don't know his prayer. (T_26; urban ECEC setting, state)

Some negative examples of ECEC practice are evident from the following statement:

> We, for example, have children who are surprised or even mad at children who are not colouring Easter eggs … some colleagues get that, but some of them believe that the dominant culture needs to remain dominant, but I think we should make it more universal. (T_28; urban ECEC setting, private)

Few differences were found among ECEC teachers working in ECEC institutions with higher and lower quality of pedagogical practice. Those in higher-quality settings reported more positive examples of inclusion, while those in lower-quality settings reported more negative examples (Figure 1).

Many responses indicated a lack of competence among ECEC teachers in perceiving differences, primarily by explaining that there were no differences in their group of children: 'I would say that we accept all cultures, I mean, we actually don't have any mix … I don't know how to say that. We are homogeneous' (T_39; urban ECEC setting, private). However, ECEC teachers have three main criteria of targeting children that need their additional support: *child being part of a minority group*; specific *family characteristics*; and specific *child characteristics or behaviours*. While talking about minority groups, the ECEC teachers mentioned characteristics such as national minorities or different religions. More examples like this were found in ECEC institutions with higher-quality pedagogical practice (Figure 1). Many examples of children needing additional support were connected to varying levels of risk in their family situations, such as poverty, domestic violence, illness or death of family members. Regarding a child's specific individual characteristics, ECEC teachers recognise developmental delays, mainly in the sensorimotor area and speech. However, most ECEC teachers identified children needing additional support, based on the emotional and social behaviours of the children: 'What worried us was their social interaction with other children. They were too excluded, too much in their own world' (T_19; urban ECEC setting, state). They mentioned both internalised behaviours (for example, *self-deprecating*, *reticent*, *calm*, *isolates herself/himself from the group*) and externalised behaviours (for example, *angry*, *scream*, *rebellious*, *stubborn*, *has outbursts of anger*) as indicators of a child needing individual support.

Figure 1. Diversity compared by number of coded references with quality practice strata
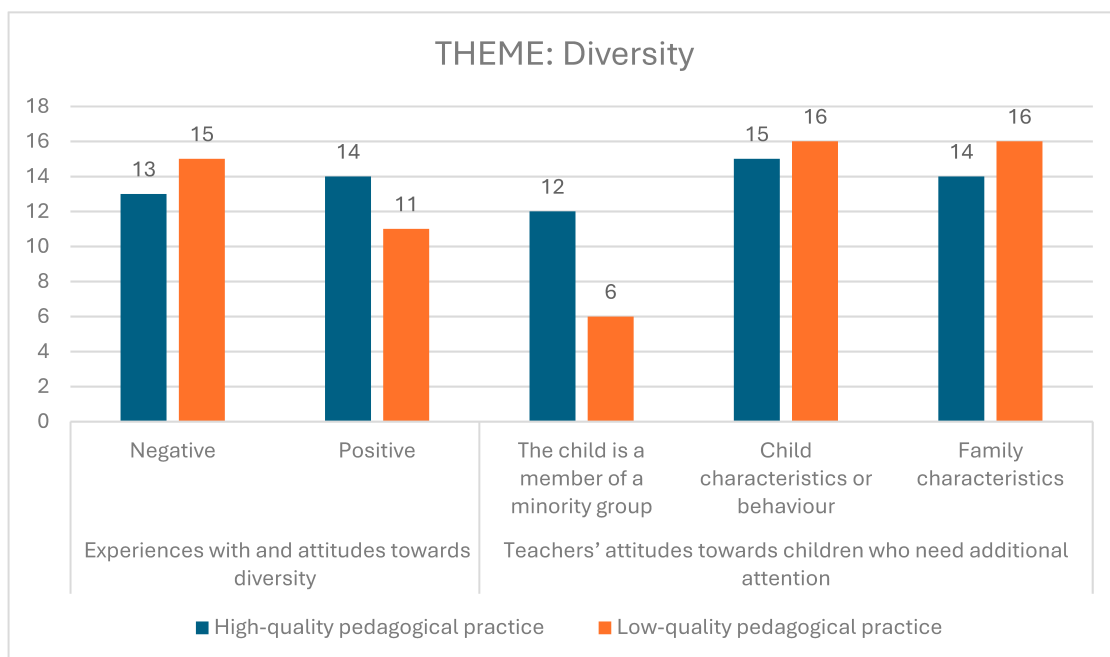
**Democratic culture and inclusion through democratic relationships**

Democratic relationships were analysed according to the relationship of the ECEC teacher to the child. The data analysis confirms the predominance of child–ECEC teacher interactions in all ECEC institutions, regardless of the quality of practice. A key characteristic of these interactions is that they are warm and supportive, and that the ECEC teacher is available, sensitive and responsive whenever a child is in need. They are often used to get to know the child better, to understand their needs and therefore to assess if there are some specifics of a child that a ECEC teacher must react to. Assessment activities are more frequently observed in ECEC institutions that have better quality of pedagogical practice. The same applies to corrective interactions, where the ECEC teacher acts as a support mechanism for a child:

> I always observe the child and if I see that the child will go to the table where I have prepared clay or dough, then I will go with them and play with them, and then the other children will come to us and join in. (T_25; urban ECEC setting, state)

Preventive child–ECEC teacher interactions, which were more common in ECEC institutions with lower quality of pedagogical practice, focus on supporting the child in developing positive self-esteem, self-awareness, emotion recognition and appropriate regulation: 'We usually use art activities, through which the child, for example, recognises and names emotions' (T_5; urban ECEC setting, private). These interactions are predominantly created for the whole group, with the explanation that they are something needed for all children, although some children may benefit more than others. It is interesting to note that individual support activities are more prevalent in kindergartens with lower quality of pedagogical practice, while whole-group activities occur more frequently in those with higher quality of pedagogical practice (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Democratic relationships compared by number of coded references with quality practice strata
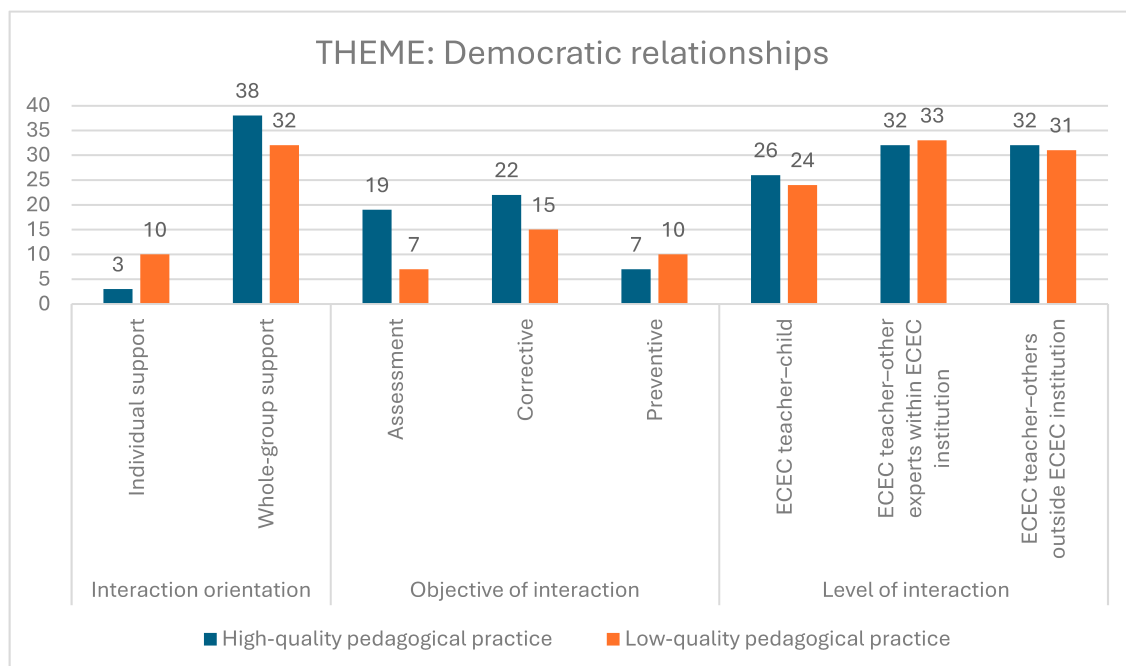
Another aspect of developing democratic relationships of ECEC teachers involves their interactions with other professionals within and outside the ECEC setting. Interactions with other professionals within the ECEC institution are predominantly described as involving communication, information exchange, exchange of experiences (especially from more experienced colleagues), process observation, progress assessment, reflection and the collaborative planning of day-to-day activities: '… exchange of information about the child, above all. Of course, it's important that we help each other in any aspect, with ideas, didactics, professional literature … the exchange of knowledge' (T_19; urban ECEC setting, state). The most important interactions between ECEC teachers and other professionals outside the ECEC setting are those between the ECEC teacher and a child's parents or guardians, as can be discerned from the following statement: 'That's where I really focused on working with parents to see how that child spends time when he's at home, how he gets involved in social interactions when he's in the park, what that child likes to do the most …' (T_34; urban ECEC setting, state). According to ECEC teachers, the common practice is the inclusion of a child's parents or guardians in everyday activities, such as presentations of another language, culture or special or native dishes. The frequency of interactions between ECEC teachers and other adults, both within and outside the ECEC institution, is similar in institutions with both higher and lower quality of pedagogical practice.

Democratic culture and inclusion through inclusive learning environments

ECEC teachers present the physical and social environments as key elements they develop to improve the inclusion of children. The physical environment is explained as creating surroundings where both the layout of the playroom and the types and number of materials enable every child, regardless of age, to cooperate, be involved and learn. There are examples where ECEC teachers discuss the physical environment as something that is constantly changing: 'We monitor children in some activities, and if something happens that make us realise a particular interest of a child or a group of children, we adjust the material surroundings to them within a week or two' (T_12; rural ECEC setting, state). However, some teachers provided negative examples of unchanging surroundings:
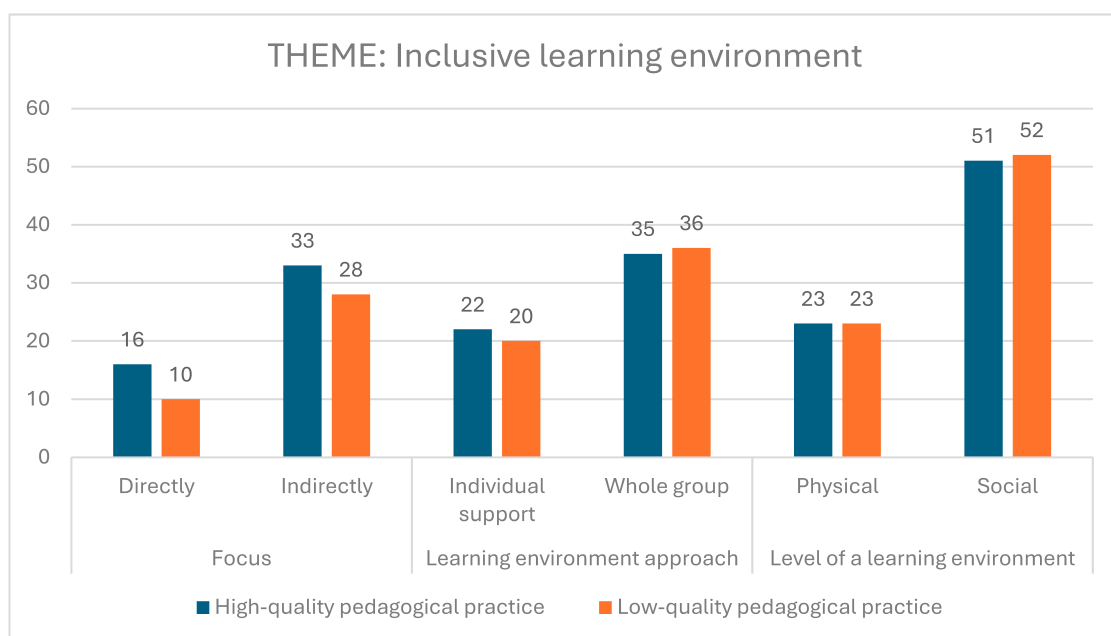
> Regarding the physical environment in our kindergarten, unfortunately, nothing changes. All the centres have been the same for about four months. I have just noticed that one girl changes one centre alone on a daily basis, and then, at the end of the day, she puts everything in the place where it was originally. (T_37; urban ECEC setting, state)

ECEC teachers believe that the social environment creates a space based on valuing diversity and everyone's opinions – a secure, violence-free place where everyone can share their ideas, and can feel free to explore, learn and develop. ECEC teachers most frequently bring the whole group together and discuss some relevant topic, frequently using a children's book or video:

> Very helpful for us are circle times when we talk with children. Mostly on Mondays, we discuss: 'Where have you been? What did you do?'; or during holidays: 'How did you spend your holidays?' We discuss these no matter what holiday it is. That is something we do all the time. (T_10; urban ECEC setting, private)

The frequency of examples related to the physical and social environments is similar among teachers from ECEC institutions with both higher and lower quality of pedagogical practice. However, all teachers tend to focus more on the social environment than on the physical one (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Theme 'Inclusive learning environment' compared by number of coded references with quality practice strata

THEME: Inclusive learning environment

ECEC teachers suggested that both learning environments are designed for all children in the group, and that they can easily be adjusted if needed for a specific child. Regarding the design of the

physical environment, one teacher commented: 'We use some universal design when we create our physical learning environment, so it is suitable for all children – functional and contextual' (T_12; rural ECEC setting, state). Regarding individualised environments for a child with special needs, they mainly answered: 'Nothing special. Everything is available for the child; they can use everything' (T_32; urban ECEC setting, private). Some teachers recalled adding materials to a play centre that would be useful for a specific child: 'If we have a child with speech difficulties, then in the writing and reading centre, we add materials that allow us to work individually with that child on language development' (T_15; urban ECEC setting, private).

ECEC teachers mostly create a universal social environment, with little individual adjustments where they try to encourage a specific child to build friendships with other children: 'I love to introduce her to a game that other girls are already playing, for example, in a family centre, where she can share her experience with other children and maybe learn something new' (T_33; urban ECEC setting, private). Sometimes, an unexpected situation arises, and to address the issue, ECEC teachers mostly discuss the situation with the whole group of children:

> For example, we are telling a story and there are both parents in the story. And one boy says to another: 'My dad has two wives.' I was listening to a conversation, and another child asked how is that possible. The boy replied: 'Easy, he loves my mom but also Aunt Jasna.' Another child did not understand how that is possible. So, we discussed it with the group and tried to explain to them that that is normal, and that it can happen that someone's dad lives with another family and another wife. (T_40; rural ECEC setting, state)

A slightly higher number of examples of individualised approaches towards children were found in institutions with higher-quality pedagogical practice.

Discussion

Contributing to the development of a democratic culture is possible only if one is an active and responsible citizen who possesses knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for meaningful participation in democratic society (CoE, 2010). In other words, being prepared for democracy means understanding what democracy entails. The results of this research suggest that ECEC teachers in Croatia often discuss democratic culture based on their personal experiences, rather than based on specific democratic competence and democratic character. This leads to a lack of recognition when someone's rights are diminished, or, more specifically, to perceiving a group of children as homogeneous. These attitudes do not directly define teachers' practices but instead appear as 'tacit knowledge' that guides unreflective behaviours (Turnšek and Pekkarinen, 2009). For example, this is evident in their interpretation of the 'non-discrimination rule', which they often understand as: 'We don't see anyone as different; for us, everyone is the same, so there is no need for special interventions to create a democratic culture.' This understanding aligns more closely with the idea of equality, where every individual or group receives the same resources or opportunities. However, quality ECEC practice should lean more towards equity, where resources are allocated to meet the individual needs of each person, considering their different circumstances. For this to be achieved, ECEC teachers must work on their attitudes towards democracy and their democratic character. Democracy is not just about applying certain principles, but requires careful reflection on the values behind the actions (Turnšek and Pekkarinen, 2009). This result has implications for both policy and practice. Democratic changes in preschool education can only occur alongside changes in public opinion, which must be driven by positive political action (Turnšek and Pekkarinen, 2009). Furthermore, universities should not only reconsider the traditional 'from beliefs to practices' paradigm, but also explore processes such as 'beliefs that are present in my practice', which could help all ECEC teachers to develop the competencies necessary for fostering democratic culture (CoE, 2016). The first step in this should be to create a shared understanding of 'democracy' (Reitzug and O'Hair, 2002; Rusch, 1994) and a common mission and vision for institutional development grounded in democratic values, norms and relationships (Pažur, 2019). This is crucial for enabling ECEC teachers to understand and implement diversity in their everyday practice.

For an ECEC teacher, adjusting their practice to meet the individual needs of each child is the essence of inclusion. Therefore, it is vital to recognise differences, categorise them and select

appropriate interventions in ECEC practice (Smith, 2020). One statement from this research illustrates this point:

> Up until this research, we were pretty selective when identifying children at risk. Until now, we've only focused on children with developmental issues. We never thought a child from a single-parent household might also be at risk. After the research, we realised how many children are actually at risk. (T_15; urban ECEC setting, private)

In ECEC institutions where the quality of pedagogical practice is higher, the recognition of differences is somewhat better. However, the frequency of non-inclusive practices is high in both higher- and lower-quality ECEC institutions. Therefore, current ECEC teachers, as well as teachers-to-be, should not only be more thoroughly introduced to inclusion theory, but also encouraged to engage in research and professional development activities related to topics on inclusion. Additionally, they should collaborate daily with psychologists, pedagogues and other professionals in their work with children.

Inclusive pedagogical practices serve as an important compensatory tool to reduce the risk of social exclusion (Balladares and Kankaraš, 2020). The development of democratic spaces of unity and diversity includes moments of emotional conflict, which can facilitate dialogue about social injustice and help recognise conflicts that are usually overlooked (Kuby, 2013). The results of this research suggest that ECEC teachers engage in various interactions and create a stimulating environment to promote openness and respect for diversity, as well as encourage children's engagement in research, play and interactions, all of which are considered quality pedagogical practices (Tankersley et al., 2012). These elements of ECEC practice are recognised in previous research as crucial steps toward developing a democratic culture (Aasen et al., 2009; Arthur and Sawyer, 2009; Hellman, 2012; Serriere, 2010). For that reason, it is important to note that these practices are found in both higher- and lower-quality ECEC institutions. However, data analysis identified areas for improvement in ECEC teachers' practices. When describing their practices, ECEC teachers more often provide examples of democratic relationships and learning environments aimed at developing a sense of diversity within the entire group, rather than offering individualised support for children perceived as different. Such interactions and learning environments are more aligned with the dominant culture than with minority cultures. Some children require additional individualised support to fully participate in play and learning activities (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that there are instances when children who need individualised support from an ECEC teacher lack such support, as well as the necessary tailored interactions and adjustments to the learning environment. Since the sample was stratified based on the quality of pedagogical practice, which was related to ECEC teachers' perceptions of their practices in various areas, it must be emphasised that, in the specific area of democracy and inclusion, there are not many differences in the examples of their quality, inclusive practice. ECEC teachers should receive education and support to improve the quality of their practice, with a focus on implementing selective teaching methods, which are directly linked to reducing the disadvantaged position of any child at risk.

Finally, the quality of ECEC teachers' practice, which fosters an inclusive and democratic environment, can be enhanced by increasing the child's participation and involvement in creating interactions and learning environments (Tankersley et al., 2012). This specific element, however, was not mentioned as relevant in any of the interviews. As Sheridan (2001) points out, the quality of pedagogical practice relates not only to the extent to which the educational institution's context positively impacts individual growth, but also to how much the child can influence their context and manage their own learning process.

This study has some limitations. As the sample was convenience-based, the possibility of generalisation should be considered with caution. Another limitation is that the data were derived solely from interviews, which were not compared with additional, more objective measures or resources. Future studies should consider adopting a mixed-methods approach to address these issues.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify elements of democratic culture and inclusive pedagogical practices within ECEC in Croatia. The results indicate a diverse understanding of democratic values among ECEC teachers, and variations in their incorporation of aspects of inclusive, democratic culture into their practice. Furthermore, there is a lack of specific knowledge and understanding, and a lack of

recognition of children who need additional support. Nevertheless, the analysis of specific elements of ECEC teachers' everyday practice reveals examples of warm, supportive and responsive democratic relationships that focus on children's abilities, potentials and needs, alongside teachers' ability to offer an inclusive and stimulating learning environment. There is, however, still room for improvement, especially regarding the ECEC professionals' knowledge and understanding of the diversity of children's needs, and regarding ECEC institutions' ability to ensure sufficient resources for inclusive educational practices.

The key findings of this study imply the need for more elaborate initial ECEC teacher education and professional development, with an emphasis on inclusive education. This should be accompanied by increased opportunities for learning, the exchange of experiences with other professionals, and professional support. At the institutional level, the findings suggest a need for a more extensive focus on the development of democratic culture within each ECEC institution, including the need for a collaborative approach among ECEC practitioners, and for developing meaningful partnerships with parents and the local community.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty for Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, and research was compliant with ethical standards outlined in the Ethical Code of the University of Zagreb.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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