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EXPLORING CHILD-RELATED FACTORS OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS' BELIEFS AND PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSION[1]

Abstract: This paper explores beliefs of preschool educators regarding the inclusion of children with developmental difficulties in public preschools in Serbia. The main objective is to examine whether child-related characteristics (i.e., the developmental domains in which children experience difficulties or delays) influence preschool staff's evaluations of their teaching experience, competence, perceptions of available expert support, views on the benefits of inclusion for children with specific difficulties, and opposition to placing these children in regular preschool settings. The sample consisted of 201 preschool educators. A series of one-way repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted, followed by pairwise comparisons. The results indicate that children with cognitive/intellectual difficulties or delays could be in the least favorable position compared to children with difficulties and delays in six other developmental domains (speech and language development, fine motor skills, gross motor skills, sensory development and perception, emotional, and social development), with children experiencing sensory difficulties that also could face significant challenges. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: inclusion, preschool educators' beliefs, developmental difficulties, early childhood, preschool education.

INTRODUCTION

INCLUSIVE PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS' PROFESSIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT INCLUSION

Fifteen years after the introduction of the first Law on the Foundations of the Education System (2009) in Republic of Serbia, which aimed to include

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children and students requiring additional support into the mainstream education system, the impact of this policy remains least evident in preschool education. Despite the fact that subsequent legislation, including the most recent *Law on the Foundations of the Education System* (2023) and the *Law on Preschool Education* (2021), reinforced the principle that children needing additional support, such as those with developmental difficulties and delays, can attend regular preschool groups[2], there are indications that these children are not included in preschool institutions at the same rate as their typically developing peers (National report on inclusive education in the Republic of Serbia, 2022). These indicators are concerning, given that early inclusion of children requiring additional support is associated with various positive effects. Some authors emphasize the significance of the probable "sociological" benefits of early inclusion such as participation and forming positive social relationships with typical peers, as well as the "psychological" and developmental ones, such as improvement in developmental domains of communication, cognition or motor abilities (Odom et al., 2011).

Educators' professional beliefs are generally considered significant because they are thought to influence teachers' actions (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). The importance of teachers' and preschool educators' beliefs and attitudes regarding inclusion of children into mainstream school or preschool is recognized as a factor that possibly influences implementation and outcomes of inclusive policies (Norwich, 1994), as well as a possible barrier for inclusion (Buysse et al., 1998). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) suggested that factors that are influencing educators' beliefs about inclusion can be child-related (e.g., type and severity of difficulties), teacher-related (such as grade-level, training, professional and personal experience etc.), as well as educational environment-related (e.g., availability of support services at the classroom and the school levels in form of material recourses as well as support from other experts and educational staff).

This paper explores whether child-related characteristics (i.e., the developmental domains in which children experience difficulties or delays) influence preschool staff's beliefs about the inclusion.

CHILD-RELATED FACTORS OF TEACHERS' AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS' BELIEFS ABOUT INCLUSION

Reviews of research on teacher samples indicate that child-related factors, such as type of difficulties as well as severity of difficulties influence attitudes and beliefs of teachers on inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; De Boer et al.,

[2] According to educational legislation, children in need of additional support or with disabilities can attend regular preschool classes with individualized instruction or an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Alternatively, they can be enrolled in developmental preschool groups, a form of special early education, where an Individual Education Plan is required for each child.

2010). The authors conclude that teachers have a more positive attitude towards the inclusion of children with sensory and motor impairments than towards children with cognitive and emotional-behavioral impairments (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; De Boer et al., 2010).

Perception of difficulties in intellectual and behavioral domains is relatively consistent across different studies. Ward et al. (1994) found that teachers rejected inclusion of children with severe difficulties such as low cognitive ability, as they would likely require additional instructional and other teacher skills. Forlin (1995) compares the level of teachers' acceptance of the inclusion of children with two types of disabilities (intellectual and physical disabilities) in regular schools and indicates that children with physical disabilities are more accepted than those with intellectual disabilities. Clough et al. (1991) concluded that children with behavioral and emotional difficulties were rated as the most demanding, followed by children with cognitive difficulties (learning disabilities). In a study by Bowman (1986), which compared results from 14 countries, it was concluded that teachers were the least willing to include children with profound intellectual disabilities in their classrooms (only 2.5% of teachers), whereas children with mild learning disabilities and behavioral difficulties were considered includable by about one-third of teachers. Cook (2001), on the other hand, indicates that students with what the author refers to as less obvious disabilities (in the behavioral and socio-emotional domains, such as students with ADHD) were most frequently nominated by teachers as the ones they would exclude if given the choice to remove a student from their class. As for students with more apparent disabilities (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorder or intellectual disabilities), teachers were less likely to nominate them for exclusion, but more likely to nominate them as the ones they would feel least prepared to discuss with parents. The author indicates that teachers are the least ready to discuss these children because they know the least about their specific characteristics and needs (Ibid.).

Perception of children with physical and motor difficulties appears to be consistently positive, while there are some inconsistencies regarding perception of children with sensory difficulties. In Bowman's (1986) study, teachers preferred certain categories of students with disabilities in regular classrooms: teachers accepted children with health difficulties, with physical and motor impairments, with mild learning difficulties, and about half of the teachers accepted children with speech development difficulties. In this study, teachers associated significant challenges with the inclusion of children with sensory impairments, specifically those with complete vision or hearing impairments, with about 23% of teachers accepting them (Ibid.). Ward et al. (1994) also found that teachers rejected inclusion of children with profound visual and hearing impairments. However, in the study by Clough et al. (1991), sensory and physical impairments were considered less demanding (with approximately two percent of teachers considering them as the

most demanding). The authors attribute this finding to the small number of such children in regular schools at that time and in that context.

Research on preschool educators' beliefs regarding children with specific difficulties is less common compared to studies involving teachers, and with less consistent findings regarding the perception of different groups of children. Findings that stress the undesirability of behavioral and externalizing difficulties are consistent with similar findings in teacher samples (Buysse et al., 1996; Cologon, 2012; Stanisavljević-Petrović & Stančić, 2010; Stoiber et al., 1998). In some research studies inclusion of children with sensory difficulties is perceived as challenging (Cologon, 2012; Stanisavljević-Petrović & Stančić, 2010), while in other studies, the difficulties for inclusion were assessed as moderate (Eiserman et al., 1995; Stoiber et al., 1998). If the sensory difficulties were explicitly qualified as mild and did not disrupt learning, preschool educators expressed that they felt confident in teaching these children (Eiserman et al., 1995). Lastly, findings about the perception of children with intellectual difficulties were also inconsistent, but generally, in most studies, these difficulties were portrayed as moderately desirable (Cologon, 2012; Eiserman et al., 1995; Stanisavljević-Petrović & Stančić, 2010; Stoiber et al., 1998), while in other studies, they were perceived as the least desirable in regular classes (Buysse et al., 1996).

In a study by Stoiber and colleagues (Stoiber et al., 1998), preschool staff ranked children with difficulties regarding readiness to include them into the regular preschool group. Children with difficulties in speech and language development, mild cognitive difficulties, and learning difficulties bear the highest ranks. Moderate cognitive abilities, ADHD, difficulties in visual and auditory perception, emotional difficulties, and motor development challenges received middle ranks. Preschool educators felt the least prepared to include children with neurological difficulties, hearing or visual impairments, and autism. In essence, they felt prepared to include the groups they believe require the least accommodations.

Buysse and colleagues (Buysse et al., 1996) assessed the comfort zone of early education teachers working with children with different types of difficulties. Overall, they concluded that teachers felt comfortable working with all groups of children. However, they felt the least comfortable working with children with intellectual difficulties, followed by those with difficulties in expressive communication, lack of social skills, and behavioral difficulties. Teachers felt more comfortable working with children with motor and physical difficulties, as well as receptive communication challenges. The comments provided by the respondents in this study regarding different groups of children are also illustrative. They were concerned that working with deaf children would require learning sign language and that children with problems in domain of social skills or behavioral problems might harm other children. When it came to the intellectual domain, they believed that better working conditions were necessary – fewer children per educator to implement individualized measures, as well as access to consultative services from

other specialists and to assistance in their work. Educators also expressed discomfort about the potential use of wheelchairs, fear of injuring a child with physical disabilities, and the need for additional training to work with blind children, as well as support for the educator. Interestingly, when it came to children with communication difficulties, they expressed confidence, as they already had experience working with them. Although these are sporadic comments from individual respondents, they may offer some starting points for interpreting differences in educators' comfort zones regarding different groups.

In a study by Eiserman and colleagues (1995), preschool educators assessed their own ability to work with children in specific categories of difficulty. They had the most favorable self-assessments of their ability to work with children whose cognitive abilities and learning potential were not significantly impaired (e.g., children in wheelchairs or children with visual impairments who could still read printed material), as well as children who required additional support but did not have developmental delays (e.g., children from minority cultural groups). Moderate levels of readiness were reported for children who were completely blind, had partial or total hearing loss, intellectual disabilities, and behavioral problems. They assessed themselves as least capable when it came to working with children with autism spectrum disorder and those with multiple disabilities, especially those involving difficulties with self-care and personal care.

Cologon (2012) indicates that at the beginning of the semester, postgraduate students pursuing a master's degree in early childhood education displayed the most negative attitudes towards including children with externalizing behaviors and sensory impairments (those who cannot hear conversation and require the use of sign language or Braille). The most positive attitudes were towards "shy and withdrawn" children, followed by those needing support in self-care, imprecise articulation, and difficulties in verbal expression, as well as those requiring individualized instruction in reading and math (i.e. the cognitive domain). The author notes that the most positive attitudes were directed towards children with difficulties (socio-emotional challenges, self-care, and speech development) that are typically associated with the usual needs of younger children and are familiar to educators.

In a study by Stanisavljević-Petrović and Stančić (2010), the authors examined the beliefs of preschool educators in Serbia regarding the inclusion of children with various developmental difficulties into regular preschool groups, asking them to nominate three out of ten offered categories they considered most suitable for inclusion. Educators found children with "socio-emotional disorders caused by difficult family situations" (56.3%), children with speech and language communication disorders (43.7%), and children with mild intellectual disabilities (35.6%) to be the most suitable for inclusion. The least nominated were children with "aggressive behavior" (5.2%), followed by sensory impairments (6.7%), autism (9.6%), and physical disabilities (11.1%).

THE PRESENT STUDY

Considering the relative scarcity of research regarding the perception of children with specific difficulties by preschool educators, the inconsistency between findings from these studies, as well as the inconsistency of these findings with results from studies on teacher samples, this study will focus on illuminating these issues. This paper explores the experiences and beliefs of preschool educators regarding the inclusion of children with developmental difficulties in public preschools in Serbia. The main objective is to examine whether child-related characteristics (i.e., the developmental domains in which children experience difficulties or delays) influence preschool staff's evaluations of their teaching experience, competence, perceptions of availability of expert support, views on the benefits of inclusion for children with specific difficulties, and opposition to placing these children in regular preschool settings. For the purposes of this research, we chose not to specify the severity of difficulties (i.e. mild, moderate, or severe) in order to determine which developmental domains are perceived by preschool educators as more challenging than others in terms of inclusion into regular preschool classes.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

This research is a part of a broader study that was conducted on a convenience sample of 201 preschool educators currently employed in public preschool institutions in Serbia. The majority of our sample consisted of preschool teachers working with children aged three to seven years (n_1 = 145), while the other participants were nurses specializing in early education and child care, working with infants and toddlers aged six months to three years (n_2 = 56). One hundred ninety-nine participants (99%) identified as female, one identified as male, and one chose not to respond. On average, participants were experienced professionals with 15 years of teaching experience (M = 15.26, SD = 9.78). The majority of nurses had completed secondary vocational education in nursing and early education, while all preschool teachers held either a bachelor's or master's degree in preschool education.

The questionnaire on the inclusion of children with developmental difficulties was distributed electronically at the beginning of 2024 through the professional association of nurses and preschool teachers, and additional notifications were sent via email to the management of preschool institutions across various regions of Serbia. All participants were briefed on the study's purpose and assured of their anonymity before consenting to participate.

INSTRUMENTS

The participants first completed a brief questionnaire to provide information about their basic socio-demographic characteristics.

A comprehensive questionnaire exploring different aspects of the experiences and beliefs of preschool education staff regarding the early inclusion of children with seven types of difficulties, was created for the purpose of this research. We will be analyzing the data from the questionnaire about self-assessed *teaching experience*, *teaching competence*, *availability of expert support*, *perception of benefits of inclusion* as well as *level of opposing to regular preschool placement* that were explored via five single items applied to seven domains of developmental difficulties (a total of 35 items). Those five items were as follows: "How much experience do you have in working with children who have difficulties in the following developmental domain", "How much knowledge and skills do you have in working with children who have difficulties in the following developmental domain", "To what extent is the support from other experts – from your institution as well as external experts – available for you when it comes to working with children who have difficulties in the following developmental domain", "Children who experience developmental difficulties in following domain benefit greatly from attending mainstream preschool education classes" and "Children who experience developmental difficulties in following domain should not attend mainstream nursery or preschool education classes". The seven domains included intellectual ability, speech and language development, fine motor skills, gross motor skills, sensory development and perception, emotional development, and social development. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale.

DATA ANALYSIS

SPSS 23.0 was used for data analysis. In addition to analyzing descriptive statistics, a series of one-way repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to estimate the influence of the developmental difficulties domain on the beliefs and experiences of preschool educators.

RESULTS

An average preschool group led by preschool educators in this study includes approximately 25 children, while an average nursery group comprises around 20 children. Our data indicate that 56 preschool teachers or nurses (27.9%), stated that they currently do not have any children with developmental difficulties in their

classes, while 141 (70.15%) stated that they have at least one child with developmental difficulties, and four participants did not respond.

PERCEPTION OF CHILDREN WITH DIFFERENT TYPES OF DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFICULTIES AND THEIR EDUCATION

Descriptive statistics for each item on the teaching experience, teaching competence, availability of expert support, inclusion beneficialness, and opposition to regular preschool placement scales, across seven domains of developmental difficulties, are displayed in Table 1. Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests for each item reveal that the score distributions deviate from normal curve. However, in all cases, skewness and kurtosis values remained below 1.0, which falls within the acceptable range (George & Mallery, 2020).

As shown in Table 1, preschool educators have a neutral to slightly positive assessment of their teaching experience ($3.30 \leq M \leq 3.59$) and competence ($3.36 \leq M \leq 3.50$) with different types of developmental difficulties. They feel the least competent and experienced in working with children with intellectual difficulties, while reporting somewhat more experience and competence in working with children who have difficulties in speech development, emotional, social, and motor difficulties. Educators assess the availability of expert support as neutral across all groups of children (the mean is slightly above three for all items). Regarding the perceived benefits of inclusion, their views are generally positive, though they remain neutral when it comes to children with intellectual difficulties. Finally, educators tend to be somewhat opposed to excluding children from regular classes for most types of difficulties, but they take a more neutral stance when it comes to children with cognitive challenges.

In order to determine whether different types of child difficulties influence preschool staff assessments of their teaching experience, competence, availability of expert support, perceptions of inclusion as beneficial for children, and opposition to regular preschool placement, a series of one-way repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted. The results presented in Table 2 indicate a significant effect of the type of child difficulties on self-reported levels of teaching experience, teaching competence (knowledge and skills) in working with specific groups of children, perceptions of inclusion as beneficial for children, and opposition to regular preschool placement for specific groups of children. However, no such effect was found on preschool staff's perception of the availability of support when working with children with different difficulties.

Additional analyses, in the form of pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni correction, indicated that preschool teachers rated themselves as having significantly less experience in working with children with difficulties in intellectual domain compared to those with speech and communication development difficulties

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all items of questionnaire

Variables		N	*M (SD)*	*Range*	*Skew*	Ku	K-S
TE	Cognitive ability	200	3.30 (1.13)	1-5	-.42	-.66	.25**
	Speech development	200	3.53 (1.01)	1-5	-.55	-.32	.28**
	Fine motor skills	200	3.51 (1.06)	1-5	-.68	-.11	.28**
	Gross motor skills	200	3.41 (1.12)	1-5	-.45	-.60	.25**
	Perception	200	3.36 (1.06)	1-5	-.42	-.52	.25**
	Emotional development	200	3.59 (1.01)	1-5	-.51	-.30	.26**
	Social development	200	3.56 (1.03)	1-5	-.55	-.27	.26**
TC	Cognitive ability	201	3.36 (.89)	1-5	-.73	.31	.27**
	Speech development	201	3.44 (.92)	1-5	-.80	.57	.28**
	Fine motor skills	201	3.50 (.92)	1-5	-.85	.60	.30**
	Gross motor skills	201	3.48 (.94)	1-5	-.72	.33	.28**
	Perception	201	3.39 (.90)	1-5	-.77	.27	.29**
	Emotional development	201	3.45 (.90)	1-5	-.76	.38	.29**
	Social development	201	3.49 (.88)	1-5	-.73	.47	.29**
AES	Cognitive ability	201	3.15 (1.11)	1-5	-.28	-.72	.21**
	Speech development	201	3.16 (1.08)	1-5	-.23	-.68	.20**
	Fine motor skills	201	3.10 (1.11)	1-5	-.18	-.79	.20**
	Gross motor skills	201	3.11 (1.08)	1-5	-.16	-.76	.20**
	Perception	201	3.13 (1.10)	1-5	-.25	-.75	.21**
	Emotional development	201	3.12 (1.07)	1-5	-.18	-.69	.20**
	Social development	201	3.11 (1.08)	1-5	-.17	-.70	.19**
IB	Cognitive ability	200	3.37 (1.09)	1-5	-.19	-.56	.19**
	Speech development	201	3.62 (1.06)	1-5	-.38	-.39	.18**
	Fine motor skills	201	3.61 (1.03)	1-5	-.36	-.39	.19**
	Gross motor skills	201	3.54 (1.03)	1-5	-.28	-.35	.20**
	Perception	201	3.51 (1.03)	1-5	-.26	-.44	.19**
	Emotional development	199	3.59 (1.05)	1-5	-.30	-.49	.19**
	Social development	201	3.67 (1.04)	1-5	-.34	-.51	.19**
ORP	Cognitive ability	201	2.70 (1.18)	1-5	.16	-.71	.19**
	Speech development	201	2.49 (1.15)	1-5	.26	-.66	.21**
	Fine motor skills	201	2.42 (1.14)	1-5	.36	-.61	.18**
	Gross motor skills	201	2.51 (1.16)	1-5	.30	-.66	.18**
	Perception	201	2.49 (1.15)	1-5	.26	-.71	.19**
	Emotional development	201	2.45 (1.14)	1-5	.30	-.65	.20**
	Social development	201	2.48 (1.18)	1-5	.30	-.71	.19**

Note. TE – teaching experience; TC – teaching competence; AES – availability of expert support; IB – inclusion beneficialness; ORP – opposing to regular preschool placement; $^{**}p < .001$.

($p < .001$, $d = .30$), fine motor skill development difficulties ($p < .001$, $d = .30$), as well as emotional ($p < .001$, $d = .39$) and social development difficulties ($p < .001$, $d = .33$), all with small effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). Teachers likewise perceived their experience working with children with sensory difficulties to be significantly

Table 2. One-Way Repeated Measures ANOVA for the effect of the type of pupils' difficulties

Variable	*F*	*p*	η^2
Teaching experience[a]	7.73	< .001	.19
Teaching competence[a]	3.62	.002	.10
Availability of expert support[a]	1.00	.425	.03
Inclusion beneficialness[b]	4.88	< .001	.13
Opposing to regular preschool placement[c]	4.17	< .001	.11

[a] *df* = 6,195. [b] *df* = 6,192. [c] *df* = 6,194.

lower than in working with children with fine motor skills difficulties ($p < .05$, $d = .23$), as well as emotional development difficulties ($p < .001$, $d = .32$) and social development difficulties ($p < .001$, $d = .24$), all with small effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). Absolute values of means indicate that intellectual difficulties and difficulties in the domain of perception were least represented in the work experience of our respondents, while difficulties in social, emotional development, speech, and communication development were most prevalent.

Regarding teaching competence (level of knowledge and skills) in working with specific groups of children, pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni correction revealed that preschool teachers rated their competence in working with children with intellectual difficulties lower compared to competence in working with children with fine motor difficulties ($p < .001$, $d = .31$), gross motor difficulties ($p < .05$, $d = .24$), and social development difficulties ($p < .01$, $d = .25$), all with small effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). Teachers also perceived themselves as having less knowledge and skills required for working with children with sensory difficulties compared to those with fine motor difficulties ($p < .001$, $d = .31$). Absolute values of item means again suggest that teachers feel least competent in working with students with intellectual difficulties and sensory difficulties while perceiving themselves as the most competent in working with children with fine and gross motor skill difficulties, and social development difficulties.

When it comes to assessing the extent to which attending regular nursery and preschool education is beneficial for children with difficulties in specific domains, the analysis of variance with repeated measures showed statistically significant differences in the perceived usefulness for different groups. Pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni correction revealed that preschool staff have assessed that children with intellectual difficulties have fewer benefits than children with difficulties in any other domain except for the sensory domain. The effects sizes are all small when it comes to difficulties in the domain of speech development ($p < .001$, $d = .33$), fine motor skills ($p < .01$, $d = .31$), gross motor skills ($p < .05$, $d = .23$), emotional development ($p < .01$, $d = .29$), and social development ($p < .001$, $d = .35$). Other differences are statistically significant at the level $p < .05$: inclusion

is perceived more beneficial for children with difficulties in social development than for the children with sensory development difficulties and for the children with gross motor difficulties; inclusion is also perceived more beneficial for children with disabilities in the domain of fine motor skills than for the children with sensory development difficulties. Absolute values indicate that attending regular nursery and educational groups is considered most beneficial for children with difficulties in social relationships, speech development, and emotional development, and is considered the least beneficial for children with intellectual development difficulties.

Lastly, teachers oppose attending regular preschool groups significantly more when it comes to children with intellectual disabilities compared to all other groups of children – to children with speech difficulties ($p < .001$, $d = .31$), to children with fine motor skills difficulties ($p < .001$, $d = .34$), to children with gross motor skills difficulties ($p < .01$, $d = .24$), to children with sensory development difficulties ($p < .01$, $d = .33$), to children with emotional impairments ($p < .001$, $d = .32$), and to children social development impairments ($p < .001$, $d = .30$), all with small effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). There are no statistically significant differences in the degree of opposition to attending regular nursery or educational groups among other difficulty groups, placing children with intellectual difficulties in the least advantageous position.

DISCUSSION

This paper examines perceptions and beliefs as potential determinants of educators' actions (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996), and as factors influencing the successful implementations and outcomes of inclusive policies (Buysse et al., 1998; Norwich, 1994). The results of our research on child-related factors influencing preschool educators' beliefs about and support for inclusion indicate that children with intellectual difficulties and delays could be in the least favorable position compared to other groups of children. Preschool educators reported the lowest levels of experience and competence in working with these children, maintained a neutral stance on the benefits of inclusion for them, and expressed greater opposition to their placement in regular preschool groups.

How can the undesirable beliefs about inclusive education for children with intellectual difficulties be explained? It is well-known that working with children with intellectual difficulties requires individualization of instruction, such as adjusting the pace of learning (Jerotijević & Mrše, 2015), providing intensive practice and repetition, breaking learning content into smaller elements, and clearly defining rules, expectations, and consequences for different types of behavior (Jerotijević & Mrše, 2015; Kauffman & Landrum, 2007). Additionally, using adapted and concrete materials, encouraging the development of more advanced intellectual

abilities through stimulating learning activities, and facilitating both symmetrical and asymmetrical peer interactions are important strategies (Daniels & Stafford, 2001). However, one could argue that when working with children with intellectual difficulties and developmental delays, educators can adapt their approach and instruction in a straightforward way – by treating them as younger, typically developing children. This should be even more feasible for preschool educators, as preschool education does not involve subject-based teaching and does not require precisely defined curriculum content. It is thus expected that lower-grade teachers, who focus more on the holistic development of individual students rather than primarily on subject matter, would have more positive attitudes towards inclusion in general (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002) and, consequently, would have more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with intellectual difficulties. Indeed, the research on samples of preschool educators indicates that children with difficulties in the intellectual/cognitive domain are perceived as neither as the most challenging group nor the group for whom inclusion would be the easiest (Cologon, 2012; Eiserman et al., 1995; Stanisavljević-Petrović & Stančić, 2010; Stoiber et al., 1998), with some negative exceptions (Buysse et al., 1996). Thus, the findings of our study are more consistent with the obtained perceptions of elementary school teachers. Various authors suggest that children with intellectual difficulties are perceived by pre-service teachers (Macura-Milovanović & Vujisić Živković, 2011), and in-service teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Bowman, 1986; Clough et al., 1991; Cook, 2001; de Boer et al., 2010; Forlin, 1995; Ward et al., 1994), as less suitable for inclusion in mainstream classes.

The second group of children who could be in a somewhat less favorable position compared to others (with the exception of those with intellectual difficulties) are children with sensory difficulties. Preschool educators believe they have less experience teaching these children compared to children with motor, social or emotional challenges and feel less competent working with them than with children who have motor difficulties. Finally, educators believe that children with sensory difficulties benefit less from inclusion than children with social and motor developmental challenges, but they do not oppose including these children in regular groups any more than they do for other groups of children. This aligns with research findings from several studies on samples of preschool educators (Cologon, 2012; Stanisavljević-Petrović & Stančić, 2010) as well as on samples of in-service or preservice teachers (Bowman, 1986; Macura-Milovanović & Vujisić Živković, 2011; Ward et al., 1994) that suggest that respondents generally hold negative beliefs about the inclusion of these children. On the other hand, in some studies conducted with samples of preschool teachers, children with sensory difficulties are perceived by the respondents as moderately challenging (Eiserman et al., 1995; Stoiber et al., 1998) – neither as the most challenging group nor the group for whom inclusion would be the easiest. When it comes to teachers' assessments, children with sensory difficulties are typically portrayed more positively (Avra-

midis & Norwich, 2002; Clough et al., 1991; de Boer et al., 2010), in contrast to our findings.

Preschool teachers may feel insecure about not knowing sign language or Braille, as noted in some studies (see Cologon, 2012). However, these concerns are somewhat unfounded, as communication in spoken language predicts better outcomes for developing reading skills (Kyle & Harris, 2010), and this is primarily achieved in heterogeneous educational groups. Similarly, the use of text-to-speech software is becoming more common (and likely more appropriate), especially with the development of software for specific languages, including Serbian (Lazor, 2017).

Lastly, children with difficulties in motor development, speech and language development, emotional, and social domains appear to be in a somewhat more positive position. Previous research indicated that children with difficulties in the socio-emotional and behavioral domains are perceived negatively by both teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Clough et al., 1991; Cook, 2001; de Boer et al., 2010) and preschool educators (Buysse et al., 1996; Cologon, 2012; Stanisavljević-Petrović & Stančić, 2010; Stoiber et al., 1998). It is possible that preschool educators in our sample associated social and emotional difficulties more with shyness or separation anxiety issues and less with difficulties in social interaction present in children with autism spectrum disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) or with externalizing behavior and aggression. However, it is encouraging that preschool educators have more positive associations regarding children with socio-emotional difficulties.

CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on understanding of how preschool educators perceive working with children with difficulties in specific developmental domains, particularly which domains they consider inherently more challenging, even when the severity of difficulties is not specified. The study revealed that children with difficulties in the intellectual and sensory domains could be in the least favorable position compared to other groups of children. Preschool educators in our study reported having less knowledge and fewer competencies to work with children with intellectual disabilities and sensory difficulties. They also expressed less belief in benefits of inclusion for these children compared to other groups of children. Taking into account that self-assessment of having sufficient knowledge and skills to work with children with developmental difficulties is associated with more positive attitudes towards inclusion (Starčević et al., 2018), while the assessment of insufficient competencies is a barrier to inclusive education (Macura Milovanović et al., 2010), and that beliefs regarding inclusion could influence the successfulness of implementation and outcomes of inclusive policies (Buysse et al., 1998;

Norwich, 1994), we consider enhancement of preschool educators' sense of competence as crucial. To accomplish this, it is essential to provide opportunities for the professional development of preschool educators and nurses, including training related to appropriate measures for individualization, opportunities to learn from successful practitioners, and collaboration with other professionals (psychologists, pedagogues, speech therapists, etc.).

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ИСПИТИВАЊЕ КАРАКТЕРИСТИКА ДЕТЕТА КАО ФАКТОРА У ВЕЗИ СА УВЕРЕЊИМА И ПЕРСПЕКТИВОМ ПРЕДШКОЛСКИХ ВАСПИТАЧА О ИНКЛУЗИЈИ

Резиме: У овом раду се истражују уверења запослених у предшколским установама – предшколских васпитача и медицинских сестара – васпитача (N = 201) у државним предшколским установама у Србији у вези са инклузијом деце са развојним тешкоћама. Основни циљ истраживања је да се испита да ли карактеристике детета (развојни домен у коме дете испољава развојно заостајање или тешкоће) утичу на процене које предшколски васпитачи дају у погледу: а) сопственог искуства у раду са специфичном групом деце; б) компетентности за рад са специфичном групом деце; в) доступности подршке од стране других стручњака (психолога, педагога, логопеда, специјалних едукатора); г) добити од инклузије за децу са тешкоћама у специфичном домену; и д) степена противљења укључивању деце са тешкоћама у редовне васпитне и јаслене групе. Резултати указују на то да деца са тешкоћама у

интелектуалном домену могу бити у неповољнијем положају у поређењу са децом са тешкоћама у шест других развојних домена (развој говора и овладавање језиком, фина моторика, крупна моторика, сензорни развој, емоционални развој, социјални развој). Деца са тешкоћама у сензорном домену су група деце која се такође може суочавати са значајним изазовима. Импликације ових налаза су дискутоване у раду.

Кључне речи: инклузија, уверења васпитача, развојне тешкоће, рано детињство, предшколско васпитање и образовање.