

**INTERNATIONAL
SCIENTIFIC
CONFERENCE ON**

Korçë, January 15th 2026

**EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE:
CHALLENGES AND
PERSPECTIVES**



4th Conference 2026

International Scientific Conference
**“EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND
CARE: CHALLENGES AND
PERSPECTIVES”**

Hosted by:
“Fan S. Noli” University of Korça, Department of Education

in collaboration with:

- ❖ **Department of Education Sciences "Giovanni Maria Bertin", University of Bologna**
- ❖ **University of Western Macedonia, Greece**
- ❖ **University of Tetovo, North Macedonia**

Korçë, January 15th, 2026

PROCEEDING BOOK



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

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Prof. FEDERICA ZANETTI, Professor at Department of Educational Sciences “Giovanni Maria Bertin”, University of Bologna

Prof. JULIENE FERREIRA, Associate Professor in Education, Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University

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**“EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE: CHALLENGES AND
PERSPECTIVES” CONFERENCE**

KORÇË, 2025

PROCEEDING BOOK

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E-ISBN: 9789928490513

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CONFERENCE PROGRAM

9:30-10:00 Registration to Conference: Hall of Faculty of Education and Philology Building or Registration Platform
<https://forms.gle/6Mz5uyfAubY6n4Vs9>

10:00 Opening

MODERATOR: PROFESSOR DORELA KACAUNI

PLENARY SESSION

**ROOM – Library of Faculty of Education and Philology
FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND PHILOLOGY BUILDING**

ZOOM

Meeting

Link

<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/76078936346?pwd=H9b35FV05vo0K2OMfLHS8G3Bkd6Oyp.1>

10.⁰⁰ : 10.¹⁰

Greeting from the Rector of “Fan S. Noli” University, Prof. Dr. Lorenc Ekonomi

10.¹⁰ : 10.¹⁵

Greeting from the Dean of the Faculty of Education and Philology, University “Fan S. Noli”, Prof.as.Dr. Jonela Spaho

10.¹⁵ : 10.²⁰

Greeting from the Head of the Department of Education. “Fan S. Noli” University of Korça, PhD. ALBINA PAJO

10.²⁰ : 10.³⁰

Greeting from Prof. Dr. Kushtrim Ahmeti, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Tetovo, North Macedonia

10.³⁰ : 10.⁴⁰ - Keynote speaker

Federica Zanetti, Professor at Department of Educational Sciences “Giovanni Maria Bertin”, University of Bologna

Children as Citizens Today: Rethinking Childhood Participation in Times of Global Violence

10.⁴⁰ : 10.⁵⁵ Keynote speaker

Julienne Madureira Ferreira, Associate Professor in Education,
Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University

*An Embodied View on Collaboration between children with
intellectual disabilities and their peers in inclusive Early Childhood
Education*

10.⁵⁵ : 11.¹⁰ - **Keynote speaker**

Tomi Treska, Associate Professor, European University of Tirana

*PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION IN ALBANIA. IS ALBANIA READY TO
MAKE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION COMPULSORY? A MULTIDIMENSIONAL
ANALYSIS*



Federica Zanetti, Associate Professor in Didactics and Special Pedagogy. She teaches teaching and communication strategies for adults and strategies and tools for empowerment and active citizenship. She is the scientific manager of the Education, History and Politics Center. Since 2009 she has been a member of the Center for Gender and Education Studies.

Since 2010 she directs the Advanced Training Course "Theater as a tool for educational professionalism", has the scientific and artistic direction of the Summer School "Theater and Education for Citizenship" and the "Theater Festival of Democratic Citizenship" since 2007.

Since 2001 she has carried out consultancy, monitoring and training activities in the context of international development cooperation, especially in Kosovo and Albania, El Salvador, Belarus, Palestine and the Gaza Strip, Macedonia.



Juliene Madureira Ferreira is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education and Culture at Tampere University and currently leads the subgroup Child and Learning Ecologies within the ECEPP research group. She received her PhD in Psychology (Developmental Psychology) from São Paulo University in 2017 and her PhD in Education from the University of Tampere at the end of 2018, followed by a two-year postdoctoral fellowship also at

Tampere University (TAU). Before arriving at TAU, she worked at the Department of Educational Psychology of the Teacher Training School of the Federal University of Uberlândia, Brazil (2010-2017). During this appointment, she also served as the school's vice dean of the unit and coordinated the administrative, academic, and research activities in the areas of Early Childhood Education and the First years of Elementary Education (2012-2015), and was directly involved in the reconfiguration of the early childhood education curriculum. At the Federal University of Uberlândia, Brazil, Juliene Ferreira also coordinated one of the Programs for Teacher Education in Special Education in the National Network for Teacher Education in Inclusive Education, organised by the Ministry of Education in Brazil (2009-2014).

In her research, Juliene has investigated students' sociability in challenging social interactions/contexts (e.g., when group members have significantly different developmental paths, including children with intellectual disability), analysing how diverse ways of establishing intersubjectivity influence peer learning (2013-2019). Her research has also focused on understanding material affordances for action in learning situations, advancing our understanding of neurodivergent social cognition and developing inclusive practices in special support. In collaboration with colleagues for the USA, China, Taiwan, and Brazil, Juliene has also investigated learning and teaching of (inter)relational processes of care, building on moral education, ethics of care, and developmental psychology to investigate how care is conceptualised, learned, and taught across different ages and cultures. The results provided insights into how learning to care for others, across cultures, is grounded in embodied and affective social experiences.



Tomi Treska is an Associate Professor at the Department of Psychology, Education, and Sports at the European University of Tirana.

He completed his university studies at the Faculty of History and Philology at the University of Tirana, majoring in History and Geography. He also holds a degree in Law from the University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi.”

With a long experience in teaching in university level, enriched experience for several national and international agencies, about cases concerning with teachers’ and principals’ trainings, with the partnerships at school- family, “good” governing, surveys and analysis, reports, etc.

He has published multiple scientific articles in well-known academic journals both in Albania and abroad. Since 2005, he has been the author of history textbooks for the pre-university education system. Dr. Treska has also worked for about eight years with various international organizations and agencies and has served as a member of the National Council for Pre-University Education.

PARALLEL SESSIONS- ROOM 1

11:³⁰ – 12:⁵⁵

ROOM R031 - RECTORATE BUILDING

ZOOM

Meeting

Link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/87934641184?pwd=JTL8m4DESb5c7CD24XzYgR6BL4rijC.1>

MODERATOR: PROFESSOR SUELA KOCA

11:⁴⁵: 11:⁵⁵

ALBINA PAJO & ALBA OSMAN

A HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF INFANT-CARE THEORIES IN THE COMMUNICATIVE CULTURE OF MODERN AMERICA (1890–1930)

11:⁵⁵:12:⁰⁵

LORETA MAMANI, AIDA SOTIRI & JULINDA SINANI

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING NEURODEVELOPMENTAL PROBLEMS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

12:⁰⁵:12:¹⁵

EVJONDA PYLLI & MARIELA BURDA

THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL STIMULI ON THE COGNITIVE AND COMMUNICATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AGED 0–3 YEARS

12:¹⁵:12:²⁵

ARMANDA XHANI (BAÇA)

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY AND TECHNOLOGY – A NEW TREND FOR IMPROVING QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

12:²⁵:12:³⁵

DENIS ARSOVSKI & NATASHA CHICHEVSKA JOVANOVA

*EARLY INTERVENTION AND MEDICAL REHABILITATION IN
CHILDREN WITH CEREBRAL PALSY: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION*

12.³⁵:12.⁴⁵

**AIDA SOTIRI, LORETA MAMANI, HARALLAMB MARGARITI & ALBANA
MUÇO**

*ART THERAPY AT EARLY AGES: THE ROLE OF DRAWING AND
LINGUISTIC-MUSICAL GAMES IN THE EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION OF 3-YEAR-
OLD CHILDREN IN KINDERGARTENS IN GJIROKASTRA*

12.⁴⁵:12.⁵⁵

AURELA ZISI & GERTI JANAQI

*BUILDING COMPETENT EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE:
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING INNOVATIONS*

12.⁵⁵:13.⁰⁵

ARJAN KAMBURI, ILIRJANA NASE & ANJEZA VILA

*CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN ALBANIA: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES
FROM A MULTI-REGIONAL CASE STUDY*

PARALLEL SESSIONS – ROOM 2

11:⁴⁵ – 12:⁵⁵

ROOM “QUADIC” R028

RECTORATE BUILDING

ZOOM

Meeting

Link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/81789663212?pwd=ravL0FYV2wDT5a79tml0HiFi6MMnN2.1>

MODERATOR: PROFESSOR DORELA KACAUNI

11:⁴⁵ : 11:⁵⁵

GERTI JANAQI & AURELA ZISI

*TOWARDS GLOBAL STANDARDS: MEASURING AND ENSURING
QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS*

11:⁵⁵ :12:⁰⁵

IRENA NIKAJ

*EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF DIGITALIZATION:
RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES*

12:⁰⁵ :12:¹⁵

KLEJTI TRESKA, LINDITA TRESKA & ZENEL SINA

*PRIMARY EDUCATION AND INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH
SPECIAL NEEDS*

12:¹⁵ :12:²⁵

STERGIANI GIAOURI & NIKOLETA PERAKI

*FAMILY RESILIENCE, AND WELL-BEING IN FAMILIES OF
CHILDREN WITH SEN: CHALLENGES FOR INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD
POLICY*

12:²⁵ :12:³⁵

ETLEVE KOKURTI & MIMOZA CABELI

THE IMPACT OF MUSIC ON EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

12.³⁵ :12.⁴⁵

AIDA SOTIRI, LORETA MAMANI & FATBARDHA XHUVANI

*NEUROPLASTICITY OF THE BRAIN 0–3 YEARS OLD AND ITS
IMPACT ON KINDERGARTEN TEACHING PRACTICES*

12.⁴⁵ :12.⁵⁵

LORETA MAMANI, AIDA SOTIRI, ANILA CACAJ & MIMOZA CABELI

THE IMPACT OF PLAY ON EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

12.⁵⁵ :13.⁰⁵

RRIOLLZA AGOLLI & LAURA AGOLLI

*STEAM APPROACH THROUGH FAIRY TALES IN PRESCHOOL
EDUCATION*

13.¹⁰: 13.³⁰ – DISCUSSIONS & REFLECTION
ROOM “QUADIC” R028
Rectorate Building

ZOOM

Meeting

Link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/87934641184?pwd=JTL8m4DESb5c7CD24XzYgR6BL4rijC.1>

MODERATOR: PROFESSOR SUELA KOCA

END OF CONFERENCE MEETING

Note:

All participants are kindly requested to respect the presentation time

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION IN ALBANIA. IS ALBANIA READY TO MAKE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION COMPULSORY? A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS

Tomi TRESKA (KEYNOTE SPEAKER)

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Abstract

Pre-school education is internationally recognized as a fundamental investment in human development, influencing academic outcomes, socio-emotional growth, and the reduction of social inequalities. This study evaluates Albania's readiness to make pre-school education compulsory by analyzing developmental, institutional, economic, and societal factors. Through a review of international literature (Heckman, 2006; OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2019; UNICEF, 2021), an analysis of national policies, and the interpretation of visual data illustrating the weight of supporting and opposing factors, the study offers a comprehensive assessment of challenges and opportunities. Findings suggest that the reform is feasible but requires a gradual approach, strengthened institutional capacities, and intersectoral coordination.

Introduction

Early childhood education has been widely identified as a key contributor to children's development and long-term social equity (UNESCO, 2019). Albania has made notable progress in expanding access to pre-school education, yet discussions about making attendance compulsory require an in-depth examination of existing capacities and structural challenges. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the supporting and opposing factors influencing this policy debate.

Literature Review

The Development of Early Childhood Education Research

Research in early childhood education has expanded significantly in recent decades, positioning it among the most effective investments in human development. Early studies by Heckman (2006) demonstrated that investments in early childhood yield high economic returns due in part to lasting impacts on cognitive, social, and emotional skills. This argument is supported by other studies showing that participation in high-quality pre-school programs positively affects later academic success (Barnett, 2011) and contributes to reducing structural inequalities (UNESCO, 2019).

OECD (2020) emphasizes that pre-school education is one of the most effective mechanisms for promoting social equity. In OECD member states, early educational inclusion has shown direct impacts on human capital development and long-term economic indicators. Countries such as Ireland, Estonia, and Denmark report significant progress in literacy and numeracy among students who have attended pre-school for sufficient periods.

Furthermore, UNICEF (2021) highlights the importance of comprehensive approaches, arguing that children from vulnerable environments benefit the most from early interventions. Studies indicate that well-structured pre-school programs can reduce performance gaps between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds by up to 40%.

Regional Literature and Comparative Perspectives

Evidence from Western Balkan countries such as Croatia and Slovenia shows that broad reforms in pre-school education, aligned with EU standards, have led to increased participation, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.

Overall, existing literature strongly supports the notion that making pre-school education compulsory could yield substantial benefits for Albanian society, while simultaneously underscoring the need for investments in infrastructure, staffing, and program quality.

The Importance of Early Childhood Education

Development economists, including Heckman (2006), stress that investments in early childhood generate the highest economic and social returns. Identified benefits include improved cognitive and socio-emotional abilities and enhanced outcomes in later schooling.

Pre-School Education as a Mechanism for Equity

Countries with strong pre-school systems achieve reduced inequalities and improved results among vulnerable groups (OECD, 2020). Scandinavian models serve as reference points for inclusive approaches.

Current State of Pre-School Education in Albania

Legal Framework

Albania recognizes pre-school education as part of the pre-university system but does not classify it as compulsory. National strategies emphasize expanded access and improved quality.

Infrastructure and Institutional Capacities

Although infrastructure has improved, urban–rural inequalities remain evident. Staffing capacities require investments in training and professional development.

Financing

Public spending is below the EU average, making additional funding essential for implementing compulsory attendance.

Analysis of Supporting and Opposing Factors

Analytical Summary

Figure 1 illustrates the relative weight of factors supporting or opposing the adoption of compulsory pre-school education. Identified benefits relate to increased human capital, alignment with international standards, and reduced inequalities, while challenges involve financial constraints, infrastructural capacities, and geographic disparities. A deeper examination of each factor—supported by international literature and national policy analysis—extends the graphical representation and transforms it into a robust academic evaluation.

Supporting Factors

Table 1. Relative Weight of Supporting Factors

Supporting Factors	Relative Weight (1–5)
Early developmental and educational benefits	5
Expansion of universal access	4.5
Alignment with international standards	3.5
Long-term investment in human capital	4
Opportunity for gradual reform	3

Early Developmental and Educational Benefits

Studies demonstrate lasting effects on cognitive and socio-emotional development (Heckman, 2006).

Expansion of Universal Access

Making pre-school compulsory would eliminate inequalities in access.

Alignment with International Standards

The reform would bring Albania closer to European educational policies (OECD, 2020).

Long-Term Investment in Human Capital

Early childhood education enhances productivity and overall social well-being.

Opportunity for Gradual Reform

A phased model of implementation reduces fiscal burden.

Opposing Factors

Table 2. Relative Weight of Opposing Factors

Opposing Factors	Relative Weight (1–5)
Insufficient infrastructural capacities	5
Fiscal costs	4.5
Regional disparities	4
Lack of specialized staff	3.5

Opposing Factors	Relative Weight (1–5)
Risk of rapid reforms	3

Insufficient Infrastructural Capacities

Some areas lack access to high-quality institutions.

Fiscal Costs

Implementation requires sustainable funding and increased staffing (UNICEF, 2021).

Regional Disparities

Rural areas face additional access challenges.

Lack of Specialized Staff

There is a need for increased numbers and improved qualifications of educators.

Risk of Rapid Reforms

Without piloting, implementation challenges may arise.

Methodology of the Analysis

This study employs an integrated qualitative methodology consisting of three main components:

Systematic Literature Review

A systematic review of international academic literature was conducted using databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Sources were selected based on relevance, methodological rigor, and publication date.

Document Analysis of Albanian Educational Policies

Strategic documents, institutional reports, and statistical data from the Ministry of Education and UNICEF Albania were examined to identify structural gaps and opportunities for reform.

Interpretation of Figures and Tables

Visual instruments (figures and tables) were used to synthesize the weight of supporting and opposing factors. The analysis was guided

by critical data interpretation principles used in educational research (OECD, 2020).

This combination of methods ensures a multidimensional and rigorous analysis appropriate for international academic standards.

Discussion

Balancing Benefits and Challenges

Although the benefits of pre-school education are well-documented, infrastructural and financial challenges require careful consideration. Literature suggests that systems undergoing rapid expansion often experience declines in quality if not preceded by adequate training and strategic planning.

Albania's Unique Capacities

Albania's demographic structure favors phased implementation. Combined with trends of emigration and declining birth rates, this allows for more efficient resource allocation. However, regional disparities remain a critical challenge.

Lessons from International Models

Examples from Estonia and Slovenia show that successful reforms require long transition periods and continuous investment (OECD, 2020). Comparative analysis can help Albania avoid structural mistakes.

Recommendations

Increased Investment in Infrastructure

Priority should be given to rural areas and vulnerable communities.

Professional Training of Staff

Standardized training programs for educators should be established.

Intersectoral Approach

Coordination among ministries is crucial for effective implementation.

Pilot Implementation Before Nationwide Reform

Piloting reduces the risks associated with large-scale reforms.

Parent Awareness Campaigns

Public campaigns are necessary to increase participation.

Conclusions

Albania demonstrates significant potential to implement compulsory pre-school education; however, success depends on strategic planning, infrastructure development, staff training, and gradual implementation of the reform.

References

- Heckman, J. J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312(5782), 1900–1902.
- OECD. (2020). *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*. OECD Publishing.
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- UNICEF. (2021). *The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind*. UNICEF.

A HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF INFANT-CARE THEORIES FROM HOLT TO WATSON (1890–1930)”

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Abstract

This study examines the theories of infant care advanced by pediatrician Luther Emmett Holt and psychologist John B. Watson within the socio-historical context of early twentieth-century America. Far from being neutral medical or psychological prescriptions, their ideas embodied the industrial and moral logic of the Progressive Era—a time that equated scientific order with social progress. Holt’s *The Care and Feeding of Children* (1894) and Watson’s *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928) transformed motherhood into a field of expert management: feeding, sleeping, and affection were to be timed, measured, and regulated as if under factory discipline.

Viewed historically, these doctrines paralleled the rise of urban industrial capitalism, in which efficiency, predictability, and emotional restraint became civic virtues. The increasing participation of women in wage labor, the emergence of public health campaigns, and the growing authority of medical and psychological experts all reinforced an ideology of “scientific motherhood” that sought to standardize domestic life according to the rhythms of industrial production. Both Holt and Watson thus constructed the ideal mother as a disciplined technician—obedient to expert rules, emotionally restrained, and detached from instinctual affection.

By situating these theories within broader transformations of labor, gender, and class, this article argues that the early psychology of infant care functioned as a moral technology of modernity: one that reshaped private maternal behavior in the image of industrial rationality. In doing so, Holt and Watson not only defined the scientific norms of childrearing but also mirrored the anxieties and aspirations of a society learning to live by the clock.

Keywords: *Historical perspective, clock, care, control, infant theories.*

Introduction

The history of infant care offers a revealing window into the making of modern society. The ways parents fed, comforted, disciplined, and cared for young children were never simply private family matters; they were shaped by wider ideas about health, authority, citizenship, and social order. In the United States, the decades between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought profound changes associated with industrialization, urban growth, demographic expansion, and the rise of professional expertise. As cities expanded and traditional family networks weakened, mothers increasingly encountered new forms of advice and supervision from physicians, psychologists, public-health officials, and educational reformers. Childrearing gradually moved beyond the realm of inherited family knowledge and maternal experience, becoming an area in which experts claimed growing authority. Infancy itself came to be viewed as a stage of life that could be observed, measured, and managed scientifically, while motherhood was increasingly redefined as a responsibility requiring specialized knowledge and professional guidance. Historians have described this shift as the rise of scientific motherhood, an ideology that encouraged women to look beyond family traditions and rely on professional advice when raising children (Apple, 1995). Yet the concept contained a striking contradiction. Mothers were increasingly portrayed as the individuals most responsible for their children's physical health, emotional development, and moral character, while at the same time being told that their own knowledge and instincts were insufficient for the task. As Apple (1995) observes, authority over childrearing increasingly migrated from the household to a growing network of physicians, health officials, and educational experts. The expansion of pediatrics, maternal welfare programs, public-health

campaigns, and childrearing manuals reinforced this process by presenting scientific expertise as the most reliable guide to infant development. Women acted on the basic tenets of scientific motherhood: women maintained primary responsibility for infant and childcare, but they were dependent on experts to tell them and to teach them how to best raise their children. By the second half of the twentieth century, most women believed that the best childrearing was done under scientifically informed medical supervision. (Apple, 2014). At the same time, the emergence of maternal and child welfare initiatives contributed to the consolidation of professional authority over family life, transforming child health into an issue of public concern and expert intervention (Barker, 1998). What had once been learned through observation, family experience, and community practice was increasingly reframed as a matter requiring professional instruction. Childrearing therefore became more than a private domestic responsibility; it became a sphere in which experts sought to define appropriate maternal behavior and establish standards for the care of young children.

The growing influence of professional childrearing advice did not emerge in isolation. It was closely connected to the social and economic changes that reshaped American life at the turn of the twentieth century. Industrialization and urbanization transformed how families lived, worked, and cared for children. Continuing urbanization, as families increasingly lived in cities rather than on farms, meant that nuclear families were less likely to live close to extended family; therefore, mothers lacked communal parenting support they might have found in earlier times. (Atkinson, 2022). Migration to cities weakened many of the informal support networks that had traditionally assisted mothers, while overcrowding, poverty, and high rates of infant mortality generated new concerns about child health and family welfare. For many parents, particularly those raising children in rapidly expanding urban environments, questions that had once been addressed within the family increasingly became matters of public concern and professional intervention. In response, physicians, social reformers, and public-health authorities sought to provide guidance on what they considered proper infant care. Parenting manuals, government publications, maternal welfare initiatives, and health campaigns brought expert advice directly into the home, offering recommendations on feeding, hygiene, sleeping routines, and child discipline. These developments occurred alongside growing concern over infant nutrition and feeding practices,

which increasingly became subjects of medical supervision and public-health intervention. Two sets of public health campaigns resulted. One, designed almost solely by local public health officials, urged mothers to breastfeed for as long as possible. The other, involving public health departments and a much wider array of supporters, including concerned citizens, municipal government, medical charities, settlement houses, private physicians, and newspapers, crusaded for clean cows' milk. Calling pure cows' milk "one of the essentials of daily living," urban newspapers decried "the diluted, adulterated, and harmful quality of milk" common to US cities. (Wolf, 2003). These publications did far more than communicate medical information. As Atkinson (2022) argues, they also reflected contemporary assumptions about authority, gender roles, class relations, and the characteristics of the ideal family. Advice literature therefore offers historians a valuable opportunity to examine how scientific knowledge was translated into everyday practice and how broader social values entered the intimate sphere of family life. Within this expanding world of expert advice, few individuals exerted greater influence on American childrearing practices than the pediatrician Luther Emmett Holt and the psychologist John B. Watson.

Holt's *The Care and Feeding of Children*, first published in 1894, quickly became one of the most influential child-care manuals in the United States and remained a standard reference for decades. Its popularity reflected a growing desire for authoritative guidance at a time when concerns about infant mortality, health, and proper child development were widespread. Holt advocated regularity, discipline, hygiene, and close adherence to prescribed routines. Feeding, sleeping, and bodily functions were expected to follow carefully regulated schedules, and mothers were encouraged to trust professional recommendations rather than personal judgment or family tradition (Holt, 1923/2005). In Holt's vision, successful childrearing depended on consistency, self-control, and respect for expert authority. Several decades later, Watson carried many of these assumptions into the emerging field of behaviorist psychology. In *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928), he argued that children's behaviour was shaped primarily by their environment and that parents played a decisive role in that process. Effective parenting, in his view, required emotional restraint, predictable routines, and the systematic management of behaviour (Watson, J. B. (1928). His warnings against excessive affection became particularly

controversial, but they were rooted in a broader belief that children should be guided through discipline and conditioning rather than emotional indulgence. As later observers noted, the search for routine and predictability in child training reflected wider efforts to bring order and regularity into family life during the early twentieth century (Stendler, 1950). While Holt focused primarily on physical care and Watson on psychological development, both presented childrearing as a task that could be improved through scientific principles and expert supervision.

Recent scholarship has challenged the tendency to view these childrearing theories as straightforward applications of medical or psychological knowledge. Historians increasingly argue that parenting advice cannot be separated from the social and cultural environments in which it was produced. Manuals written by experts did more than offer guidance on feeding schedules, sleeping habits, or child discipline; they also conveyed assumptions about authority, citizenship, productivity, gender relations, and the proper organization of family life (Atkinson, 2022). In this sense, childrearing literature served not only as a source of practical instruction but also as a vehicle through which broader social values were communicated to parents. This perspective has encouraged scholars to examine parenting advice as a historical source in its own right. Rather than asking whether experts were correct, historians have become increasingly interested in what their recommendations reveal about the societies that produced them. Russell's (1985) study of nineteenth-century infant-care practices demonstrates that efforts to regulate children's bodies were often linked to wider concerns regarding discipline, control, restraint, and efficiency. Similarly, studies of scientific motherhood have shown how expert advice reflected contemporary ideas about maternal responsibility and the proper relationship between families and professional authority (Apple, 2014). Seen from this perspective, infant-care theories emerge not simply as responses to children's biological needs but as products of specific historical circumstances and cultural priorities.

The period between Holt's first publications in the 1890s and Watson's influential manual in 1928 coincided with a broader transformation in American society. These were the decades of Progressive Era reform, when faith in science, expertise, and rational planning reached unprecedented levels. Across a wide range of institutions, from factories and schools to hospitals and government agencies, efficiency, standardization, and

professional management were increasingly promoted as solutions to social problems. The belief that human behavior could be observed, measured, and improved through scientific methods shaped not only public institutions but also expectations about family life and child development. Growing concern for maternal and infant welfare culminated in initiatives such as the Sheppard–Towner Act of 1921, which represented one of the earliest federal efforts to improve maternal and child health through education and public-health intervention (Schlesinger, 1967). Childrearing did not remain outside these developments. Many experts came to view infancy as a critical stage during which future habits, character, and behavior could be shaped. Feeding schedules, sleeping routines, toilet training, hygiene practices, and even parental expressions of affection were increasingly presented at that time. The popularity of expert advice during this period suggests that many parents found such guidance persuasive in a rapidly changing society where traditional sources of authority appeared increasingly uncertain.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative historical methodology to examine the development of infant-care theories in the United States between 1890 and 1930. Rather than evaluating the medical or psychological validity of childrearing recommendations, the study investigates how infant-care advice reflected broader social, cultural, and intellectual transformations associated with industrialization, urbanization, Progressive Era reform, and the growing authority of scientific expertise. The analysis is guided by the historiographical concept of scientific motherhood, which emphasizes the increasing reliance of mothers on professional knowledge and expert guidance in matters of childrearing.

The research is based on the analysis of both primary and secondary sources. The principal primary sources are Luther Emmett Holt's *The Care and Feeding of Children* (1923/2005) and John B. Watson's *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928). These texts are examined not as medical manuals to be assessed according to contemporary standards but as historical documents that reveal prevailing assumptions about childhood, motherhood, authority, discipline, emotional expression, and the role of expert knowledge in family life. Their recommendations are analyzed as representations of broader cultural values and social expectations rather than as isolated medical or psychological prescriptions. To contextualize these

primary sources, the study draws upon scholarship in the history of childhood, medicine, parenting advice, and scientific motherhood. Particular attention is given to the works of Apple (2014), Atkinson (2022), Bigelow and Morris (2001), Russell (1985), Wolf (2003) etc. These studies provide the historiographical framework necessary to situate Holt's and Watson's writings within wider developments such as the professionalization of pediatrics, the expansion of public-health initiatives, the emergence of behaviorist psychology, and the increasing involvement of state institutions in maternal and child welfare.

The analysis follows a contextual and thematic approach commonly employed in social and cultural history. Recurring themes identified in the primary texts include scheduled feeding, sleep regulation, toilet training, emotional restraint, parental authority, and the regulation of infant behavior. These themes are examined in relation to broader historical processes, including the rise of scientific motherhood, the institutionalization of pediatric medicine, the expansion of maternal and infant welfare programs, and Progressive Era ideals of efficiency, regularity, and social improvement. By comparing Holt's and Watson's recommendations and situating them within their historical context, the study seeks to identify both continuities and changes in expert approaches to infant care during the transition from late nineteenth-century pediatrics to early twentieth-century behaviorist psychology. This study does not attempt to reconstruct the experiences of individual mothers or measure the practical impact of expert advice on everyday family practices. Nor does it seek to determine whether Holt's or Watson's recommendations were scientifically correct. Instead, its purpose is to examine how influential childrearing theories reflected contemporary concerns about health, discipline, citizenship, gender roles, and social order. In doing so, the article approaches infant-care manuals as historical sources that illuminate the relationship between expert knowledge and the wider social transformations that characterized modern American society.

Results

Regulating feeding, sleep, and bodily functions. A central finding emerging from the analysis of Holt's and Watson's manuals is the importance assigned to routine in the organization of infant life. Both authors regarded regularity as essential for healthy development and recommended that feeding, sleeping, and bodily functions follow predetermined schedules rather than

the spontaneous demands of the child. Holt repeatedly emphasized that feeding should occur at fixed intervals and that regular habits should be established from the earliest months of life. Sleep was similarly subjected to strict regulation, with infants expected to adapt to scheduled periods of rest rather than dictate their own routines (Holt, 1923/2005). Watson adopted a comparable approach several decades later, arguing that orderly feeding, sleeping, and daily routines were fundamental to successful childrearing (Watson, 1928). The regulation of bodily functions extended beyond feeding and sleep. Holt encouraged the early establishment of bowel regularity and recommended toilet training practices that began during infancy (Holt, 1923/2005). Watson likewise viewed the development of regular habits as an essential component of child management. In both texts, bodily functions were not treated as natural processes that would develop spontaneously but as behaviors that could and should be shaped through routine and repetition.

Managing infant behavior and dependency. The analysis further reveals that both authors were concerned with limiting dependency and discouraging behaviors perceived as undesirable. Holt warned against excessive rocking, carrying, or entertaining infants and argued that children should not become accustomed to constant adult attention (Holt, 1923). Crying was frequently interpreted as a learned behavior rather than an immediate expression of need, and parents were advised not to reinforce such habits through excessive responsiveness. Watson developed this position more systematically within a behaviorist framework. He maintained that many problematic behaviors resulted from parental responses and could therefore be modified through consistent environmental control (Watson, 1928). The child was expected to learn self-control, patience, and independence through carefully managed routines. Across both texts, the desired outcome was an infant capable of adapting to externally imposed expectations rather than one whose daily life was organized around immediate desires or emotional demands.

Affection and emotional control. One of the most striking findings concerns the treatment of affection and emotional expression. Although Holt generally focused on physical care, he also cautioned against excessive stimulation and unnecessary handling of infants. He advised that young babies should not be excessively played with and that parental interactions should remain moderate and controlled (Holt, 1923/2005). Watson

addressed this issue much more directly. He argued that excessive affection could foster emotional dependency and interfere with healthy development. Parents were instructed to limit physical demonstrations of affection and to maintain emotional distance in their interactions with children (Watson, 1928). Affection was therefore treated not simply as an expression of parental feeling but as a behavior requiring regulation and discipline. Compared with Holt, Watson expanded the scope of regulation from the management of bodily routines to the management of emotional relationships.

Expert authority and maternal practice. A further finding concerns the prominent role assigned to professional expertise. Both manuals positioned expert knowledge as the foundation of proper childrearing. Holt's text presented itself as a guide derived from medical experience and institutional practice, offering detailed instructions on feeding, sleep, hygiene, and infant management (Holt, 1923/2005). Mothers were expected to follow recommendations grounded in pediatric knowledge rather than rely exclusively on inherited customs or personal judgment. Watson similarly presented his advice as scientifically informed guidance based on psychological principles. His recommendations were framed as objective and systematic rather than intuitive or experiential (Watson, 1928). In both manuals, successful childrearing depended upon adherence to expert instruction, and mothers were assigned responsibility for implementing prescribed routines within the home.

Continuities and differences between Holt and Watson. The comparative analysis reveals significant continuities between Holt and Watson despite their different professional backgrounds. Both emphasized routine, regularity, self-control, and the regulation of infant behavior. Both viewed child development as something that could be shaped through systematic intervention, and both assigned parents the task of establishing disciplined habits from an early age. Important differences nevertheless emerged. Holt's recommendations focused primarily on the management of the infant body through feeding schedules, sleep routines, hygiene, and toilet training (Holt, 1923/2005). Watson retained many of these concerns but extended them into the psychological sphere, emphasizing emotional restraint, behavioral conditioning, and the management of parent-child relationships (Watson, 1928). The findings therefore suggest a shift from predominantly physiological regulation toward a broader concern with psychological and

emotional development, while maintaining a common commitment to routine, discipline, and expert-guided childrearing.

Discussions

The findings of this study suggest that infant-care theories in the United States between the late nineteenth century and the interwar period should be understood as part of a broader reorganization of authority within family life. Rather than representing merely technical recommendations about feeding, sleeping, or hygiene, the childrearing systems developed by Holt and Watson reflected a growing belief that the healthy development of children required scientific guidance and professional oversight. Historians have described this process through the concept of scientific motherhood, whereby mothers remained responsible for children's welfare while increasingly relying upon physicians, psychologists, and other experts to determine appropriate childcare practices (Apple, 2014). The evidence examined in this study supports this interpretation. In both manuals, maternal competence was measured less by instinct or inherited knowledge than by the ability to implement expert-approved methods consistently and correctly. The growing acceptance of expert authority was not simply the consequence of professional ambition. It emerged within a society confronting persistent public-health challenges, particularly high rates of infant illness and mortality. Under such circumstances, medical advice appeared to many families not merely as an abstract source of authority but as a practical means of protecting infant health and survival. The increasing influence of pediatric expertise therefore reflected both the expansion of professional authority and parental concerns regarding child welfare in a rapidly changing society (Golden, 2018).

This shift in authority occurred within a society undergoing rapid economic and social transformation. Industrialization, urbanization, mass education, and the expansion of public-health institutions contributed to a climate in which scientific expertise increasingly became associated with progress, efficiency, and political and social changes. Within this context, parenting manuals acquired significance beyond their practical advice. As Atkinson argues, such texts often reflected prevailing middle-class assumptions about family life, discipline, and social order rather than purely scientific discoveries about child development (Atkinson, 2022). The findings presented here reinforce that interpretation. The recommendations found in

Holt's and Watson's manuals promoted ideals of regularity, predictability, self-control, and discipline that mirrored broader cultural values associated with modern industrial society. Urbanization further altered the conditions under which mothers acquired childcare knowledge. As families increasingly moved into urban environments, traditional networks of advice rooted in extended family and local communities became less central. Childcare manuals, health pamphlets, clinics, and visiting nurses increasingly supplemented or replaced forms of knowledge that had previously been transmitted through kinship networks. Expert literature thus became attractive not only because it claimed scientific legitimacy but also because it addressed the practical uncertainties of modern family life (Hays, 1996). The findings also indicate that the regulation of infancy extended beyond concerns for physical health. While the immediate purpose of scheduled feeding, controlled sleep routines, and early habit formation was presented as medical or developmental, these practices simultaneously encouraged broader forms of behavioral regulation. The child was expected to adapt to externally imposed routines, to tolerate delay, and to develop self-discipline from an early age. In this respect, infant-care advice functioned not only as health guidance but also as a mechanism through which particular social values were transmitted into everyday family life. The importance attached to regularity and habit formation suggests that childcare became one of the earliest sites where modern expectations of discipline and self-regulation were cultivated. These ideals reflected more than concerns about child development alone. The emphasis on regularity, predictability, and self-control closely resembled values increasingly associated with industrial modernity, where schools, workplaces, and bureaucratic institutions depended upon disciplined behavior and the management of time. Childcare routines therefore helped socialize children into broader cultural expectations that extended well beyond the nursery itself (Stearns, 2003).

The broader material and cultural environment further support this interpretation. Russell's study of nineteenth-century child-care artifacts demonstrates that objects such as cribs, barriers, walkers, and other nursery equipment reflected assumptions about control, restraint, and independence (Russell, 1985). When considered alongside the recommendations identified in Holt's manual, these developments suggest that the regulation of infancy was not confined to medical advice alone but was reinforced through the

physical organization of domestic space. Expert literature and material culture therefore worked together in shaping new expectations regarding appropriate childcare practices. The comparison between Holt and Watson reveals both continuity and change in the evolution of expert childrearing advice. The findings show substantial continuity in their shared emphasis on routine, order, self-control, and the management of behavior. However, they also reveal an important shift in focus. Holt's recommendations concentrated primarily on regulating bodily functions and establishing physical habits, whereas Watson extended similar principles into the realm of emotional and psychological development. In Watson's framework, not only feeding and sleeping but also affection, attachment, and emotional expression became subjects of expert regulation. This transition suggests a broader historical movement from the management of the infant body toward the management of personality and emotional life. At the same time, the findings support recent historiographical efforts to place Watson within the intellectual context of his era rather than portraying him as a uniquely extreme figure. Bigelow and Morris argue that many aspects of Watson's recommendations were consistent with wider expert opinion during the 1920s, particularly regarding routine, prevention, and parental control (Bigelow & Morris, 2001). The comparison undertaken in this study supports that conclusion. Several practices commonly associated with Watson were already present in earlier pediatric literature, including scheduled feeding, controlled responses to crying, and the importance of habit formation. Watson's distinctive contribution was therefore not the invention of disciplinary childrearing itself but the application of behaviorist psychology to existing patterns of expert advice. His rejection of overt affection may have represented a more radical position, yet it emerged within a broader culture that already valued emotional restraint and parental authority.

The findings likewise highlight the role of public institutions in reinforcing expert authority. The expansion of child-welfare programs, public-health campaigns, and educational initiatives contributed to the wider dissemination of childcare advice and helped establish professional expertise as a legitimate source of guidance for families. Studies of the Children's Bureau and the Sheppard-Towner Act demonstrate how state institutions participated in the circulation of infant-care knowledge and encouraged increasingly standardized approaches to childcare (Atkinson, 2022). Consequently, the influence of expert childrearing literature cannot

be understood solely through individual authors. Holt's and Watson's manuals formed part of a broader network of institutions, professionals, and reform movements that collectively sought to shape family practices. The growing involvement of public institutions reflected a broader transformation in the social significance of childhood. Children increasingly came to be viewed not only as members of individual families but also as future citizens whose health and development carried implications for society as a whole. Maternal and child welfare programs therefore formed part of wider reform efforts concerned with public health, social efficiency, and national progress (Muncy, 1991). The gendered dimensions of this process are equally significant. Although mothers remained the primary audience for infant-care advice, the findings suggest that maternal responsibility expanded at the same time that maternal autonomy became increasingly constrained. Scientific motherhood elevated the importance of mothers while simultaneously encouraging them to defer to professional expertise (Apple, 1995). In this respect, childcare manuals functioned not only as educational tools but also as instruments through which authority over child development was progressively transferred from traditional female experience to professional knowledge. Barker's work further demonstrates that these developments were closely connected to broader struggles over professional jurisdiction and authority within maternal and child welfare programs (Barker, 1998).

This process generated a notable paradox. Mothers were increasingly held responsible for children's physical, emotional, and moral development, yet the standards used to evaluate maternal competence were increasingly defined by experts rather than by mothers themselves. Scientific motherhood thus expanded maternal obligations while simultaneously narrowing the range of practices considered acceptable or legitimate (Hulbert, 2003). Nevertheless, the findings do not support a simple narrative of professional domination. Historians have shown that mothers were not passive recipients of expert advice and that responses to scientific childrearing varied according to class, education, ethnicity, and local circumstances (Atkinson, 2022). The evidence therefore suggests that expert authority was influential but never absolute. Parenting manuals established ideals and standards, yet the ways in which those standards were interpreted and implemented remained diverse. Their significance lies less in

determining precisely how parents behaved than in redefining what counted as legitimate and respectable childrearing.

Taken together, the findings indicate that infant-care theories between 1890 and 1930 were closely intertwined with broader transformations in American society. The recommendations advanced by Holt and Watson reflected changing relationships between family life, professional expertise, public health, and state intervention. More importantly, they reveal how childhood became a central arena in which modern ideas about discipline, scientific authority, and social progress were negotiated. Rather than viewing these manuals solely as medical or psychological texts, they are perhaps best understood as historical documents that illuminate the changing cultural meanings of motherhood, childhood, and expertise in modern America. Although many of the specific recommendations advanced by Holt and Watson have subsequently been challenged by developmental psychology and pediatric research, their historical significance lies less in the accuracy of their prescriptions than in their role in establishing expert-guided childrearing as a cultural norm.

Ultimately, the rise of scientific motherhood represented not simply a transformation in parenting techniques but a broader transfer of authority from inherited family knowledge toward professional expertise. Childrearing increasingly became an activity expected to be justified through scientific evidence, expert guidance, and institutional standards rather than tradition alone. In this sense, the enduring significance of Holt and Watson lies not only in their recommendations but also in their contribution to redefining who possessed the authority to determine what constituted good parenting.

Conclusion

This study has examined the infant-care theories of Luther Emmett Holt and John B. Watson within the broader social and intellectual transformations that reshaped American society between the late nineteenth century and the interwar period. Through a comparative analysis of their childrearing manuals, it has shown that infant care increasingly became organized around the principles of scientific expertise, routine, discipline, and professional authority. Although Holt and Watson approached child development from different disciplinary traditions, pediatrics and psychology, their recommendations shared a common assumption: that

healthy childhood development depended upon the systematic regulation of behavior through expert-guided practices rather than maternal instinct or inherited family knowledge.

The findings further demonstrate that these theories were closely connected to wider historical developments, including industrialization, urbanization, public-health reform, and the professionalization of knowledge. They also emerged within a society increasingly concerned with infant survival, social efficiency, and the challenges created by rapidly changing family structures. As traditional networks of childcare knowledge weakened, expert guidance came to be viewed as both a practical and legitimate means of navigating the uncertainties of modern parenthood. Infant-care advice functioned not merely as a set of practical recommendations for mothers but also as a mechanism through which broader social values entered domestic life. Through feeding schedules, sleep routines, habit formation, and the regulation of emotional expression, childcare became increasingly associated with order, predictability, self-control, and efficiency. In this sense, the rise of scientific motherhood represented not only a transformation in parenting practices but also a redefinition of the relationship between families and professional expertise. At the same time, the study suggests that the historical significance of Holt and Watson lies less in the accuracy of their recommendations than in the broader cultural transformation they helped to advance. Historians have demonstrated that mothers did not simply accept expert advice passively; they interpreted, adapted, and sometimes resisted professional recommendations according to their own circumstances (Apple, 2014). Nevertheless, the growing authority of experts fundamentally altered the standards by which good parenting was judged. Childrearing increasingly became an activity expected to be informed by scientific knowledge and professional guidance.

From a contemporary perspective, many of the specific recommendations advanced by Holt and Watson have been substantially revised or abandoned. Rigid feeding schedules, very early toilet training, limited responsiveness to infant crying, and restrictions on parental affection are no longer widely supported within developmental psychology or modern pediatric practice. Yet their broader legacy remains remarkably resilient. Contemporary parents continue to seek guidance from specialists, consult expert literature, and justify parenting decisions through scientific evidence. As Faircloth (2010) observes, appeals to what “science says is best” remain a powerful

source of legitimacy in parental decision-making. In this respect, the intellectual foundations of scientific motherhood continue to shape contemporary parenting culture, even when the specific advice of early twentieth-century experts has changed dramatically.

Ultimately, the history of infant-care theories between 1890 and 1930 demonstrates how childhood became a central arena through which modern societies negotiated questions of authority, expertise, gender, and social progress. The rise of scientific motherhood reflected not only confidence in science but also a broader reorganization of authority within family life, as professional expertise increasingly displaced inherited forms of childcare knowledge. The enduring importance of Holt and Watson lies not in the lasting validity of their prescriptions but in their contribution to a broader historical shift: the transformation of parenting from a domain primarily grounded in family tradition into one increasingly guided by professional knowledge. Understanding that transformation helps illuminate not only the history of childhood and motherhood but also the continuing influence of expert authority in modern family life.

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THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL STIMULI ON THE PHYSICAL AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AGED 0–3 YEARS

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Abstract

The cognitive and communicative development of children aged 0–3 represents a critical period characterized by rapid brain growth and fundamental learning processes. During this stage, infants and toddlers acquire essential cognitive abilities such as attention, memory, perception, problem-solving, and early language skills. Piaget defines this stage as the sensorimotor period, in which learning occurs primarily through sensory experiences and motor actions. Likewise, during this period, children begin to form two important concepts: self-perception and social awareness. By the end of this phase, most children develop object permanence and begin to form basic symbolic thinking.

The aim of this paper is to identify and analyze external stimuli—such as engagement in group play, dyadic play, the influence of colours, and other environmental factors—that serve as positive contributors to children’s cognitive and communicative development.

Current challenges in supporting optimal cognitive development include socio-economic disparities, limited access to quality early childhood education, lack of parental support or awareness, and exposure to unfavorable environments such as neglect or stress. Furthermore, the

increasing use of digital technology in early childhood raises concerns regarding its impact on attention, social interaction, and language acquisition.

Early intervention, responsive caregiving, and stimulating environments are essential to overcoming these challenges and fostering healthy cognitive development during this foundational stage of life.

Keywords: Cognitive development, language development, self-perception, social-perception, external stimuli.

Abstrakt

Zhvillimi kognitiv dhe komunikues i fëmijëve të moshës 0–3 vjeç përfaqëson një periudhë kritike, e karakterizuar nga rritje e shpejtë e trurit dhe procese themelore të të nxënës. Gjatë kësaj faze, foshnjat dhe fëmijët e vegjël fitojnë aftësi thelbësore kognitive si vëmendja, kujtesa, perceptimi, zgjidhja e problemeve dhe aftësitë e hershme gjuhësore. Piaget e përkufizon këtë fazë si periudhën sensomotorike, në të cilën të nxënës ndodh kryesisht përmes përvojave shqisore dhe veprimeve motorike (Piaget, 1957-1977-1978). Po ashtu, gjatë kësaj periudhe, fëmijët fillojnë të formojnë dy koncepte të rëndësishme: vetë-perceptimin dhe ndërgjegjësimin social. Në fund të kësaj faze, shumica e fëmijëve zhvillojnë qëndrueshmërinë e objektit dhe fillojnë të formojnë mendimin simbolik bazë.

Qëllimi i këtij punimi është të identifikojë dhe të analizojë stimujt e jashtëm — si përfshirja në lojëra në grup, lojëra dy-palëshe, ndikimi i ngjyrave dhe faktorë të tjerë mjedisorë — të cilët shërbejnë si kontribuues pozitivë në zhvillimin kognitiv dhe komunikues të fëmijëve.

Sfidat aktuale në mbështetjen e zhvillimit optimal kognitiv përfshijnë pabarazitë socio-ekonomike, aksesin e kufizuar në arsim cilësor të fëmijërisë së hershme, mungesën e mbështetjes ose ndërgjegjësimin prindëror, si dhe ekspozimin ndaj mjedisve të pafavorshme si neglizhimi apo stresi. Për më tepër, përdorimi në rritje i teknologjisë digjitale në fëmijërinë e hershme ngre shqetësime lidhur me ndikimin e saj në vëmendje, ndërveprimin social dhe përvetësimin e gjuhës.

Ndërhyrja e hershme, kujdesi i ndjeshëm dhe mjediset stimuluese janë thelbësore për kapërcimin e këtyre sfidave dhe për nxitjen e një zhvillimi të shëndetshëm kognitiv gjatë kësaj faze themelore të jetës.

Fjalë kyçe: zhvillimi kognitiv, zhvillimi gjuhësor, vetë-perceptimi, perceptimi social, stimuj të jashtëm.

The development of motor and socio-emotional skills during early childhood has been a subject of study and scholarly discussion since the early stages of scientific research. The primary reason for this focus is that the changes occurring during this period are fundamental to a child's physical and psychological development. For this reason, exposure to specific behaviours, objects, and surrounding environments becomes a determining factor in these developmental processes. In this context, continuous interaction with the social and physical environment directly influences the formation of basic learning and adaptive skills. Furthermore, these early experiences lay the foundation upon which later academic and social competencies are built.

Play and the external environment are widely regarded as key factors in the holistic development of children during early childhood. Various strands of literature indicate that children's engagement in play activities, as well as exposure to richly stimulating environments, contributes significantly to cognitive, motor, social, and emotional development (Avril Johnstone et al., 2022).

Through interaction with their environment and participation in play, children develop essential skills for learning, communication, and problem-solving. In particular, outdoor activities support the development of motor skills, promote physical well-being, and enhance psychosocial health. In this context, the creation of stimulating environments and the encouragement of play constitute essential components in promoting optimal child development.

According to Piaget, play initially emerges as a simple form of action assimilation, in which the child repeats behaviours for functional pleasure rather than for any practical purpose. Over time, these adaptive actions begin to be reproduced for their own enjoyment and gradually evolve into play. Subsequently, play progresses from simple sensorimotor activities to repetitive rituals and later develops into symbolic play, in which the child engages in pretend actions and uses objects as representations of something else (e.g., pretending to eat, sleep, or using one object to represent another).

In this way, play evolves from practical assimilative actions toward increasingly symbolic forms that become progressively detached from immediate reality.

Summary of infant motor actions (Piaget, 1951)

PHASE	TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	KEY CHARACTERISTICS	HOW PLAY OCCURS
1. Reflexes	Reflexive behaviour	Feeding, sucking, basic responses	Rarely play; only simple functional exercises
2. Primary circular reactions	Body-based actions (hands, voice, movement)	Repetition for functional pleasure	Simple play begins (pleasure from action itself)
3. Secondary circular reactions	Object-related actions	Exploration and manipulation of objects	Becomes play when exploratory purpose fades
4. Coordination of schemes	Application of schemes to new situations	Problem-solving and combinations of actions	Play occurs when actions are performed for their own sake
5. Tertiary circular reactions	Experimentation and new combinations	Variations and “trial-and-effect” experiments	Transforms into play and motor rituals
6. Symbolic play	“Make-believe”, imagination	Uses objects as representations (symbols)	Full symbolic play (pretending, role-play)

Lev Vygotsky also considers play a highly important element in a child's cognitive and social development (Vygotsky, 1978). According to him, through play, the child activates what he terms the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD), as during play the child is able to perform actions and engage in thinking at a higher level than would be possible independently, without assistance or interaction with others. He further emphasizes that the development of thinking and language in children occur simultaneously and are not separate processes. Rather, he views them as interdependent and closely interconnected. According to his theory, language is initially used in social interaction for communication purposes and is later internalized, becoming an inner form that functions as thought (Vygotsky, as cited in Kozulin, 1986).

Similarly, Montessori (1912; 1936; 1949) views the environment as the most influential factor in a child's development across physical, cognitive, and emotional domains. According to her, this environment should facilitate the child's developmental process rather than hinder or restrict it. Only in this way can a space be created that allows the child's energies to unfold freely, providing the necessary tools for emerging activities. In many cases, the adult is also part of the child's environment; therefore, the adult must adapt to the child's needs so as not to become an obstacle or replace the child's active engagement in essential developmental experiences (Montessori, 1949). For this reason, children should be supported and exposed as much as possible to environments where physical activity, play, and similar experiences occur frequently.

Furthermore, children's participation in activities such as play, dancing, and singing contributes to stress reduction, as these activities promote the release of endorphins in the body, thereby enhancing overall well-being (UNICEF, 2026). Exposure to play-based experiences is so significant that even short-term engagement in such activities can produce positive outcomes. Thus, physical activity is considered a key component of early childhood development.

Similarly, other scholars have identified physical activity as a significant determinant of development and health in early childhood (Pfeiffer & Clevenger, 2025). Empirical findings indicate that, in infants, physical activity is associated with more favourable levels of adiposity (BMI, i.e., the amount of fat accumulated in the body), as well as improvements in motor and cognitive development. In young children, it is linked to benefits in

skeletal health, while in preschool-aged children it contributes to optimising body composition, enhancing motor skill development, improving psychosocial health, and strengthening cardiometabolic indicators. These findings underscore the importance of promoting physical activity as a fundamental component of holistic child development (Pfeiffer & Clevenger, 2025).

Interventions focused on the development of fundamental motor skills in preschool children significantly enhance motor competence, particularly object control. However, their effects on physical fitness and movement behaviours remain limited. These results highlight the importance of early motor skill development and the need for further research on the role of socio-ecological factors and more effective intervention strategies (Alonso-Martínez et al., 2025).

Furthermore, Felfe and Lalive, as well as Lemos, Avigo, and Barela, emphasise that children's motor skills can be developed through play-based physical activities in early childhood education settings, where motor development is an explicit curricular objective. Such activities contribute to strengthening coordination, balance, and overall control of body movements. Through both structured and free play, children gradually enhance their motor abilities in a natural and enjoyable manner (Felfe & Lalive, 2018; Lemos, Avigo & Barela, 2012).

Thus, through structured and spontaneous play, children develop their motor skills in a continuous and natural way. These activities enable them to experience and practice a variety of movements within a safe and motivating environment. Gradually, they gain greater confidence in using their bodies and performing different physical actions. As a result, overall coordination, balance, and motor control are improved.

CONCLUSIONS

The first years of life (0–3 years) represent a critical period for cognitive and communicative development, during which external environmental stimuli play a decisive role in shaping foundational learning and social interaction skills.

Theoretical and empirical evidence indicates that play constitutes a fundamental mechanism for the development of cognitive, linguistic, motor, and social processes in early childhood.

Children's engagement in play activities and exposure to richly stimulating environments contribute positively to cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development.

The theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Montessori emphasise that child development occurs through active interaction with the environment, play, and meaningful social relationships. Stimulating and supportive environments foster the development of language, symbolic thinking, creativity, self-perception, and social awareness.

Physical activity and participation in activities such as play, dance, and singing have a positive impact on psychological well-being, motor development, and overall child health.

Factors such as socio-economic inequalities, lack of early stimulation, neglect, and uncontrolled use of digital technology may limit optimal cognitive and communicative development.

Consequently, the creation of enriched environments, the promotion of play, and early educational interventions should be considered priorities for supporting the holistic development of children in the early years of life.

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**EARLY INTERVENTION AND MEDICAL
REHABILITATION IN CHILDREN WITH CEREBRAL
PALSY: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

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Abstract

Early intervention acts as a primary component in improving developmental and functional results among persons with cerebral palsy. The aim of this research is to assess the effects and challenges of integrating medical rehabilitation in inclusive early education programs in western and southwestern part of Macedonia. A total of 20 children with cerebral palsy from different rehabilitation and educational centres in Prilep, Bitola, Kicevo, Ohrid and Struga were included. A mixed method is implemented, with combination of quantitative assessment and qualitative observation. Functional abilities were evaluated with the Gross motor function classification system - GMFCS and Pediatric evaluation of disability inventory - PEDI. Statistical analysis included descriptive measures, paired t-tests and Pearson correlation to assess the relationship between therapy frequency, functional independence and school participation. The results showed improvements in self-care, mobility and social interaction, showing the value of coordinated therapeutic and educational approaches. This research identifies systemic barriers such as limited access to multidisciplinary services and insufficient teacher training. Strengthening collaboration between physiotherapists and special educators and rehabilitators is important for sustainable inclusive models in early childhood care for children with cerebral palsy.

Keywords: early intervention, cerebral palsy, medical rehabilitation, inclusive education, functional development.

INTRODUCTION

Cerebral palsy is one of the most common causes of motor impairment in childhood that affects approximately 1.5-3 per 1,000 live births around the globe (Patel et al., 2020). This condition is a non-progressive and is characterized by impairments of movement, posture, and motor control, accompanied by disturbances of sensation, perception, cognition, communication, and behaviour (Twum & Hayford, 2024). These impairments influence a child's functional independence, participation in everyday activities, and long-term educational inclusion and consequently, early childhood is a critical window for therapeutic intervention, especially when neuroplasticity is highest and functional trajectories can be shaped (Morgan et al., 2021).

Early intervention has shown as a basis of the management of cerebral palsy. It includes medical rehabilitation, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and developmental support provided during the first years of life, with aim not only to prevent secondary complications but also to improve motor learning, autonomy, and participation (Damiano & Longo, 2021). Research confirms that children who receive timely, intensive, and coordinated rehabilitation show superior results in gross motor function, self-care, mobility and social engagement compared to those who enter therapy later or receive inconsistent services (Opheim et al., 2025). On the other hand, the effectiveness of early intervention does not depend only on the intensity of therapy, but also on how well rehabilitation is integrated into the daily environment of the child, especially within inclusive education (Harniess et al., 2021). Inclusive education based on the principles of equity, participation, and non-discrimination became a fundamental component of modern child development policies (Michopoulou, 2025). For children with cerebral palsy inclusion in early childhood education offers not only academic stimulation but also opportunities for social interaction, communication, emotional regulation, and functional skill acquisition in natural contexts (Kılınç et al., 2025). When medical rehabilitation is integrated in the inclusive education, therapy extends beyond clinical environments and becomes part of everyday learning and participation and

this ecological approach connects with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (Simon et al., 2024).

Despite the strong theoretical and empirical support, the integration of medical rehabilitation into inclusive early education is a big challenge, especially in low- and middle-income countries and transitional health-education systems (Almasri et al., 2023). In many regions, rehabilitation and education operate in parallel rather than in partnership, resulting in inconsistent services and therapeutic goals, as also reduced functional transfer into school participation (Abdi et al., 2025). In North Macedonia, and especially in its western and southwestern regions children with cerebral palsy face unequal access to early rehabilitation services and inclusive educational support (Karovska-Ristovska et al., 2023). While rehabilitation centres and special education institutions exist in cities such as Bitola, Prilep, Ohrid, Kičevo, and Struga, the collaboration between these sectors is largely informal and dependent on individual professionals rather than structured systems (Ajdinski, 2006).

The aim of this research paper is to evaluate the effects of medical rehabilitation in inclusive early education among children with cerebral palsy in western and southwestern North Macedonia. With standardized functional assessments with qualitative observations of school participation, this research identifies the benefits and the systemic barriers that determine early developmental results.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

For this research, a mixed-methods design was used combining quantitative functional assessment with qualitative observation of participation in inclusive early education.

Setting and participants

The sample consisted of 20 children with cerebral palsy recruited from Prilep, Bitola, Kičevo, Ohrid, and Struga - western and southwestern part of North Macedonia. Children represented a range of types of cerebral palsy and functional severities enabling analysis across different levels of motor limitation.

Procedures and data collection

For the ecological validity and reduce assessment-related stress, quantitative assessments were collected in home conditions - domestic environment with the presence of a parent/caregiver. In parallel, participation within inclusive early education was documented through structured qualitative observation and recording of a school participation score used for correlational analysis with rehabilitation intensity.

Outcome measures

The outcome measures were Gross Motor Function Classification System (GMFCS) and its used to classify gross motor functional level (I–V) as an indicator of motor severity. Also, Pediatric Evaluation of Disability Inventory (PEDI) for functional abilities in three categories: self-care, mobility, and social function with pre-intervention and post-intervention scores recorded for each participant. It was measured the rehabilitation intensity and weekly therapy frequency was recorded as ≤ 2 sessions/week, 3-4 sessions/week, or ≥ 5 sessions/week., and inclusive participation - a participation indicator (school participation score) was obtained from the qualitative observation component and included in correlation analyses.

Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics (n, %, mean $\pm$ standard deviation). Change in PEDI categories scores were examined with paired t-tests (pre-post) to determine statistically significant functional improvements. Associations between weekly rehabilitation frequency and functional change scores (Δ = post-pre), as well as school participation were assessed with Pearson correlation coefficients (r).

Ethics, consent, and confidentiality

Participation was voluntary. Prior to inclusion, written informed consent was obtained from parents/legal guardians. All data were handled anonymously: participants were coded, and no identifying personal information was included in analyses or reporting. Data collection in home conditions was conducted respectfully, minimizing problems on the child and family and ensuring privacy throughout the assessment process.

RESULTS

Table 1. Gender of children included in this research.

Gender	n	%
Male	12	60
Female	8	40
Total	20	100

Table 1 shows the gender of the participants with cerebral palsy. The sample included 12 boys (60%) and 8 girls (40%), showing a higher representation of male participants in this research.

Table 2. Age distribution of children with cerebral palsy.

Years	n	%
3-4	6	30
5-6	8	40
7-8	6	30
Total	20	100

Table 2 shows the age distribution of the participating children with cerebral palsy and the largest proportion of children were 5-6 years (40%), while the 3-4 and 7-8 years were equally represented (30% each).

Table 3. Type of cerebral palsy among the participants.

Type of cerebral palsy	n	%
Spastic diplegia	7	35
Spastic quadriplegia	5	25
Spastic hemiplegia	4	20
Dyskinetic	3	15
Ataxic	1	5
Total	20	100

Table 3 shows the types of cerebral palsy in the study sample. Spastic forms were dominant types, with spastic diplegia (35%) and spastic quadriplegia (25%) being the most common, followed by spastic hemiplegia (20%). Non-

spastic types were less frequent, including dyskinetic cerebral palsy (15%) and ataxic cerebral palsy (5%).

Table 4. GMFCS level of the participants.

GMFCS level	n	%
Level I	3	15
Level II	4	20
Level III	5	25
Level IV	5	25
Level V	3	15
Total	20	100

Table 4 shows the distribution of functional severity according to the Gross Motor Function Classification System. The sample included children with all GMFCS levels, with the highest representation in levels III and IV (25%), showing moderate-to-severe functional limitations. Levels I and V were equally represented, while Level II represented for 20%.

Table 5. Weekly rehabilitation frequency.

Weekly rehabilitation frequency	n	%
≤ 2 sessions/week	6	30
3-4 sessions/week	9	45
≥5 sessions/week	5	25
Total	20	100

Table 5 shows the rehabilitation intensity expressed as the number of therapy sessions per week among children with cerebral palsy. Most of the participants received 3-4 sessions per week (45%), while 30% received two or fewer sessions, and 25% attended five or more sessions weekly.

Table 6. PEDI category scores before and after rehabilitation.

PEDI category	Pre-intervention Mean ± standard deviation	Post-intervention Mean ± standard deviation	Mean change	p-value (paired t- test)
Self-care	41.2 ± 9.6	48.9 ± 9.1	+7.7	0.002
Mobility	38.5 ± 10.4	45.3 ± 10.0	+6.8	0.004
Social function	44.8 ± 8.7	50.6 ± 8.2	+5.8	0.010

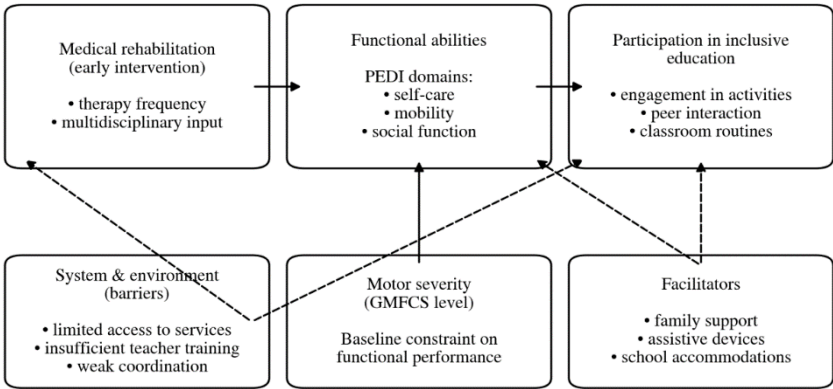


Table 6 shows the changes in Paediatric Evaluation of Disability Inventory (PEDI) category scores before and after the rehabilitation. Statistically significant improvements were found across all PEDI categories including self-care, mobility, and social function, indicating improved functional independence and participation-related skills after coordinated medical rehabilitation within early education contexts.

Table 7. Pearson correlations between weekly rehabilitation frequency and functional results.

Outcome variable	Pearson r	p-value
Change in PEDI self-care (post-pre)	0.56	0.010
Change in PEDI mobility (post-pre)	0.62	0.004
Change in PEDI social function (post-pre)	0.48	0.032
School participation score	0.59	0.006

Table 7 shows the association between weekly rehabilitation frequency and changes in functional results among the participants. Higher therapy frequency was moderately and correlated with greater improvements in PEDI categories. In addition, therapy frequency showed a positive correlation with observed school participation, suggesting that more consistent rehabilitation may support not only functional independence but also engagement within inclusive education.

Figure 1. ICF informed conceptual model for early intervention and inclusive participation in cerebral palsy.

Figure 1 shows the ICF-informed conceptual model connecting early medical rehabilitation to functional abilities and subsequent participation in inclusive education. Motor severity is represented as general constraint that influences functional performance. System and environmental barriers and facilitators are shown as contextual factors that can obstruct or support the rehabilitation-to-participation pathway.

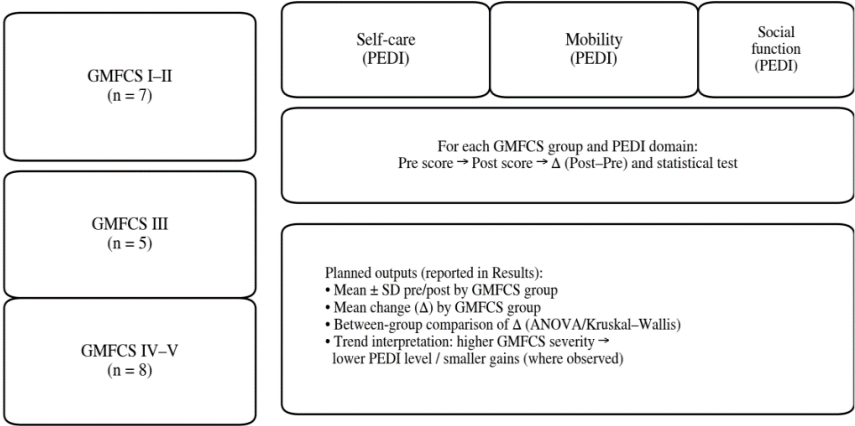


Figure 2. PEDI results stratified by GMFCS - analysis structure for pre/post comparison and change scores (Δ).

Figure 2 shows the analytical structure connecting motor severity with functional results measured by the PEDI categories. For each GMFCS and each PEDI category, pre-intervention and post-intervention scores are compared and summarized as a change score (Δ = post-pre), followed by appropriate statistical testing. The model supports interpretation of severity-related patterns, where higher GMFCS levels are associated with lower functional performance and smaller observed gains.

DISCUSSION

This research showed the role of early intervention and medical rehabilitation for children with cerebral palsy in the inclusive education in western and southwestern North Macedonia. With mixed-methods approach - quantitative functional assessment combined with qualitative observation

of school participation, the results show that coordinated therapeutic and educational support can contribute to improved functional independence and greater engagement in everyday school activities. At the same time, the results showed motor severity as an important factor forming the extent and pattern of functional gains, while also revealing important systemic barriers like limited access to multidisciplinary services, inconsistent therapy intensity, and insufficient teacher training, which may obstruct sustainable inclusion.

Hanson et al. (2024) show important point for interpreting our results - improving results in young children with cerebral palsy is not only about which early rehabilitation interventions exist, but also about how reliably evidence-based practices are implemented in clinical environments. Their co-developed, knowledge-translation approach addresses common barriers faced by rehabilitation workers when trying to adopt evidence-based early interventions. In the context of our results, this supports the argument that strengthening early intervention in inclusive education requires system-level implementation supports structured training, accessible evidence summaries, and coordinated leadership.

Buftac et al. (2020) give a useful comparison point for our research because they examined early intervention (EI) and follow-up (FU) programs in a low-/middle-resource setting and showed that coverage and referral patterns matter as much as the intervention itself. In Moldova, less than half of children with cerebral palsy were enrolled in EI/FU, and enrolment was biased toward the most vulnerable groups. While they did not find differences in several associated impairments between enrolled vs non-enrolled children, they reported important protective effect: non-walking children who were not enrolled had a markedly higher risk of developing contractures, suggesting EI/FU may reduce secondary musculoskeletal complications.

Mantilla et al. (2022) add an important family-centred perspective that connects with the inclusive education component of our research. With a bioecological framework and survey data from 98 parents in Australia, they report generally high satisfaction with inclusion when educators show positive attitudes, when there is strong communication between home and early childhood environments, and when partnerships exist between families, allied health workers, and educators. At the same time, parents stressed barriers that are not only physical or organizational, including

concerns about children's psychological wellbeing, especially anxiety (for example separation anxiety) and the emotional challenges of participating in early education environments. This defines the argument that effective inclusion for children with cerebral palsy depends on collaborative, cross-sector teamwork and not only therapy delivery, and it stress the need to address both participation and psychosocial safety within inclusive early childhood programs.

Karim et al. (2021) provide evidence from a low-/middle-resource context that structured, community-based early intervention can improve functional results in children with cerebral palsy, especially under age five. In their quasi-experimental research in rural Bangladesh, children who received a 6-month caregiver-led community program showed greater improvements in gross motor function and communication-related classifications, while the standard-care group tended to worsen or show no improvement over time.

CONCLUSION

This research shows the practical value of integrating early medical rehabilitation with inclusive early education for children with cerebral palsy in western and southwestern part of North Macedonia. Improvements observed across functional categories such as self-care, mobility, and social functioning support the premise that coordinated rehabilitation connected to everyday educational participation can improve functional independence and engagement in schools. At the same time, the results show that motor severity remains important determinant of participation capacity and should guide individualized planning and realistic goals within inclusive programs. Beyond these outcomes, our results stress that sustainable inclusion depends on system readiness. Limited access to multidisciplinary services, inconsistent therapy intensity, and insufficient training and support for educators continue to constrain the translation of rehabilitation into meaningful participation. In line with recent international evidence on knowledge translation and implementation, the development of structured collaboration pathways between physiotherapists, special educators and rehabilitators, and early childhood staff supported by practical training tools and shared intervention plans are essential for strengthening inclusivity. Future researches should expand samples, standardize participation measures, and evaluate implementation strategies that improve access, continuity, and inter-sector coordination.

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CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN ALBANIA: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES FROM KORÇA CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This paper examines the state of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for early childhood educators working with children aged 0–3 in Albania, situating the analysis within European quality frameworks for early childhood education and care (ECEC). International evidence consistently highlights CPD as a structural condition for quality, closely linked to professionalisation, pedagogical coherence, and effective governance. However, services for children under three remain among the most weakly regulated and least monitored sectors of ECEC systems across Europe, a vulnerability that is particularly pronounced in the Albanian context.

Drawing on an ongoing exploratory multi-regional case study conducted in Tirana, Korçë, Gjirokastrë, and Elbasan, with a focused case analysis in Korçë, the study adopts a qualitative-dominant design combining focus groups with nursery educators, a questionnaire administered to parents, and guided observations carried out in municipal nurseries. The findings reveal a persistent absence of structured CPD opportunities for educators, limited institutional demand for professional development from local authorities, and weak quality monitoring mechanisms.

Data further indicate a prevailing assistential framing of nursery services, characterised by the lack of pedagogically articulated educational

programmes and limited use of developmentally purposeful practices. While educators demonstrate awareness of their professional learning needs, these remain largely unsupported at the systemic level. Parents, meanwhile, report high satisfaction with services despite limited awareness of their educational content, reinforcing low societal expectations.

The paper argues that the marginalisation of CPD in nursery services reflects broader governance failures and calls for a reconceptualisation of services for children aged 0–3 as educational and developmental environments. Strengthening CPD frameworks is identified as a critical lever for improving quality, accountability, and equity in early childhood services in Albania.

Key words: Continuous Professional Development, Early Childhood Education and Care, Nursery, quality, educators

Introduction

Early Childhood Services between Care and Education

In recent decades, early childhood education and care (ECEC) has gained increasing recognition at the European and international level as a cornerstone of social equity, educational quality, and long-term societal development (European Commission et al., 2025). Extensive evidence confirms that the earliest years of life—particularly the period from birth to age three—are decisive for children’s cognitive, socio-emotional, and relational development, with long-lasting effects on later learning trajectories and social outcomes (Eurofound, 2015; Peleman et al., 2018). Consequently, the quality of services offered to this age group is inseparable from the professional competence, continuous training, and institutional support provided to early childhood educators (Goffin, 2015).

European policy frameworks and comparative research converge on a clear message: high-quality ECEC systems require a qualified, continuously supported workforce, embedded within coherent governance, monitoring, and accountability structures (European Commission et al., 2025; Peeters et al., 2018; Peleman et al., 2018). Continuous professional development (CPD), in this regard, is not an optional add-on, but a structural condition for quality, particularly in services for children under three, where care and

education are deeply intertwined and cannot be meaningfully separated (Peeters et al., 2018).

In the Albanian context, however, services for children aged 0–3—primarily delivered through municipal nurseries (çerdhe)—remain marginal within both educational and social policy agendas. This paper emerges from an ongoing exploratory multi-regional case study that seeks to examine the state of CPD for nursery educators in Albania and to interrogate how gaps in governance, professional development, and societal expectations affect the quality of services provided to the youngest children.

CPD and Quality in ECEC: Lessons from International Literature

A robust body of European research demonstrates that the quality of ECEC is strongly associated with the professionalisation of the workforce and with sustained, practice-oriented CPD systems (Eurofound, 2015; Goffin, 2015). Systematic reviews and comparative studies consistently highlight that short-term, fragmented training initiatives have limited and often short-lived effects, whereas long-term CPD embedded in daily practice—such as pedagogical coaching, reflective groups, mentoring, and guided professional dialogue—leads to measurable improvements in pedagogical quality and child outcomes (Eurofound, 2015; Peleman et al., 2018).

Crucially, contemporary approaches conceptualise CPD not merely as the accumulation of individual skills, but as a collective, reflective, and system-level process. Jensen and Iannone (2018) emphasise that innovative CPD models foster critical reflection, communities of practice, and educators' capacity to co-construct meaning within their institutional and socio-cultural contexts. Similarly, the “competent system” framework argues that individual competence is insufficient in isolation; quality emerges when educators, institutions, governance structures, and policy frameworks operate coherently and support one another over time (Peeters et al., 2018; Urban et al., 2011).

Eurydice data further reveal that across Europe, services for children under three are structurally more fragile than pre-primary education. Qualification requirements for staff are often lower, CPD opportunities are scarcer, and quality monitoring mechanisms are weaker or entirely absent (European Commission et al., 2025). This structural fragility reinforces a persistent divide between “care” and “education,” particularly for the youngest

children—a divide that international literature increasingly problematises as both pedagogically unsound and socially inequitable (Goffin, 2015; Peeters et al., 2018).

The Albanian Context: Nurseries as an Under-Researched and Under-Governed Field

Against this international backdrop, the Albanian case reveals structural vulnerabilities that place services for children aged 0–3 at the margins of public attention. Governance of nurseries falls primarily under local government, with municipalities responsible for administration, staffing, and service delivery. Yet, clear frameworks for quality monitoring, professional standards, and mandatory CPD are largely absent or inconsistently applied, leaving the quality of provision heavily dependent on individual practices rather than systemic regulation (European Commission et al., 2025).

This lack of structural clarity constitutes one of the central challenges of conducting research in this field. Data related to nurseries are administered and controlled by municipalities—the very institutions whose policies and practices are under scrutiny. As a result, researching CPD and service quality in nurseries becomes not only methodologically demanding but also politically sensitive, particularly when the aim is to identify systemic shortcomings and governance failures (Goffin, 2015).

It is within this context that the present study has been initiated, focusing on selected municipalities—Tirana, Korçë, Gjirokastër, and Elbasan—with Korçë examined in greater depth as a case study.

Methodological Approach: Giving Voice to Educators, Parents, and Practice

The study adopts a qualitative-dominant, exploratory case study design, combining multiple sources of data in order to capture the complexity of nursery services as lived, perceived, and practised, in line with international recommendations for ECEC quality research (Eurofound, 2015).

First, focus groups with nursery educators in the Municipality of Korçë were conducted to explore their perceptions of the service, their professional roles, and their experiences with CPD. These discussions reveal that educators have not participated in any structured professional development

activities for more than five years. Despite this, they articulate a wide range of perceived needs related to child development, pedagogical approaches, inclusive practices, and communication with families—needs that closely mirror those identified in European comparative studies (Jensen & Iannone, 2018; Peleman et al., 2018).

Second, a questionnaire was distributed to parents whose children currently attend or have previously attended nurseries in Korçë. The aim was to assess parental perceptions of service quality and to triangulate these perspectives with educators' accounts, as recommended by European quality frameworks emphasising partnerships with families (European Commission et al., 2025). Third, guided observations were carried out in nurseries through the involvement of students enrolled in the "Education in Early Childhood" study programme at "Fan S. Noli" University. These observations focused on pedagogical practices, the presence or absence of educational programmes, the use of didactic materials, and educators' interaction styles, allowing for an analysis of everyday practices beyond self-reported data (Eurofound, 2015).

Results

Characteristics of the participants

Twenty-four parents of children attending municipal nurseries in Korçë participated in the study. The sample was predominantly female (95.8%), reflecting the continuing tendency for mothers to be the primary respondents in matters concerning early childhood care and education. Half of the participants were between 25 and 34 years of age, while one quarter were aged between 35 and 44 years. Most participants held a university degree, with almost half reporting a Master's qualification, indicating a relatively highly educated sample.

All respondents were employed full-time and all children attended nurseries located in urban areas. Interestingly, parents reported that the principal reasons for enrolling their children in nursery were related to childcare needs rather than educational expectations. Specifically, 41.7% indicated that nursery attendance was primarily motivated by the lack of alternative childcare arrangements, while another 41.7% referred to the need for childcare during working hours. Only a small proportion of parents (8.3%)

identified children's educational development as the main reason for nursery enrolment.

These findings already suggest that nursery services continue to be perceived predominantly as childcare services rather than educational environments.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 24)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	23	95.8
	Male	1	4.2
Age	Under 25 years	1	4.2
	25–34 years	12	50.0
	35–44 years	6	25.0
	45 years or older	5	20.8
Educational level	Secondary education	1	4.2
	Vocational education	2	8.3
	Bachelor's degree	7	29.2
	Master's degree	11	45.8
	Doctoral degree	3	12.5
Employment status	Full-time employed	24	100
Nursery location	Urban	24	100
Main reason for enrolment	Childcare during working hours	10	41.7
	Lack of alternative childcare	10	41.7
	Educational development	2	8.3
	Socialisation	2	8.3

Tabela 1. Demografic Characteristics of Participants

Reliability of the instrument

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha. All six dimensions demonstrated satisfactory to excellent reliability, with alpha coefficients ranging from .803 to .962. The overall questionnaire yielded an alpha coefficient of .974, indicating excellent internal consistency.

The highest reliability coefficients were observed for the dimensions measuring the educational programme ($\alpha = .960$) and overall satisfaction (α

= .962), while the accessibility and organisation dimension also demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .803$). These results indicate that the instrument provides a reliable basis for examining parents' perceptions of nursery service quality.

Reliability Analysis of the Questionnaire

Dimension	Number of items	Cronbach's α
Accessibility and Organisation	5	.803
Physical Environment and Infrastructure	6	.914
Educational Programme and Activities	7	.960
Educators' Professionalism	7	.924
Safety and Child Well-being	4	.927
Overall Satisfaction	4	.962
Total questionnaire	33	.974

Tabela 2. Reliability analysis of the questionnaire

Parents' perceptions of nursery service quality

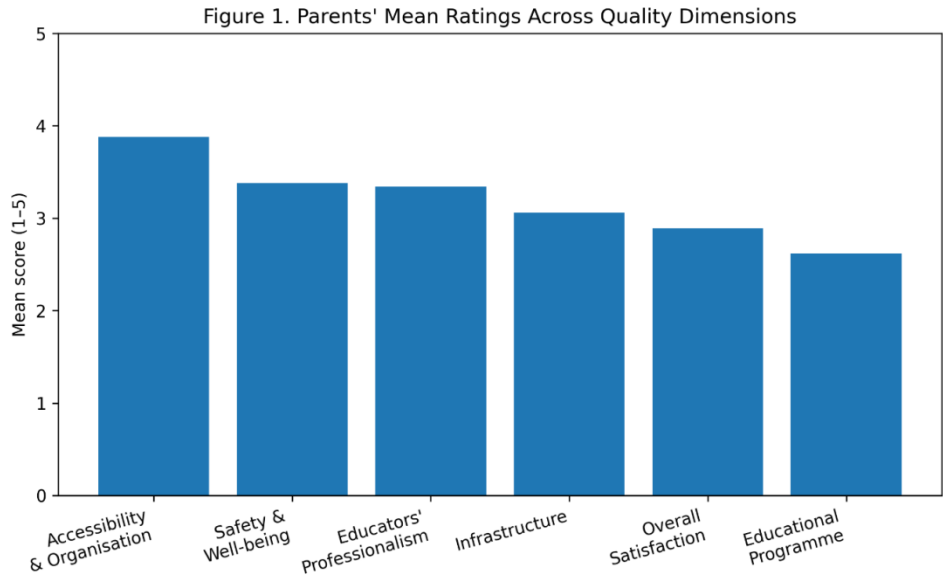
Parents generally expressed moderately positive perceptions regarding the quality of nursery services, although considerable variation emerged across different dimensions of quality.

Accessibility and organisation received the highest evaluation ($M = 3.88$), suggesting that parents were generally satisfied with practical aspects such as nursery location, opening hours, admission procedures and communication with administrative staff. Likewise, safety and children's well-being ($M = 3.38$) and educators' professionalism ($M = 3.34$) were evaluated positively.

Conversely, considerably lower ratings were obtained for infrastructure ($M = 3.06$), overall satisfaction ($M = 2.89$) and, most notably, the educational programme ($M = 2.62$), which represented the lowest-rated dimension across the questionnaire.

<i>Descriptive Statistics of the Main Quality Dimensions</i>			
<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rank</i>
<i>Accessibility and Organisation</i>	3.88	0.58	1
<i>Safety and Child Well-being</i>	3.38	0.68	2
<i>Educators' Professionalism</i>	3.34	0.60	3
<i>Physical Environment and Infrastructure</i>	3.06	0.67	4
<i>Overall Satisfaction</i>	2.89	1.01	5
<i>Educational Programme and Activities</i>	2.62	0.93	6

Tabela 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Main Quality Dimensions



This pattern indicates that parents primarily value the organisational and caregiving functions of nurseries, while expressing substantially lower confidence regarding their educational role.

Item-level analysis

The highest rated individual items further reinforce this interpretation. Parents strongly agreed that nursery opening hours were compatible with family needs ($M = 4.38$), that admission procedures were clear ($M = 4.25$),

and that communication with nursery administration was effective ($M = 4.21$). Accessibility of nursery services also received high ratings. In contrast, the lowest rated items referred almost exclusively to the educational dimension of nursery services. Parents reported limited knowledge of the educational programme implemented by the nursery ($M = 1.71$), insufficient information regarding daily educational activities ($M = 1.96$), and relatively poor evaluations of outdoor learning environments ($M = 1.96$). Similarly, parents expressed only moderate agreement that the nursery fulfilled their overall expectations ($M = 2.46$). These findings suggest that although parents appreciate the organisational quality of nursery services, they remain largely unaware of the educational processes taking place within these settings.

Highest- and Lowest-Rated Questionnaire Items

Highest-rated items

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Nursery opening hours meet family needs</i>	4.38
<i>Admission procedures are clear</i>	4.25
<i>Communication with nursery administration is effective</i>	4.21
<i>Nursery is easily accessible</i>	4.12
<i>Educators communicate effectively with parents</i>	3.79

Lowest-rated items

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<i>I am familiar with the nursery educational programme</i>	1.71
<i>I receive sufficient information about educational activities</i>	1.96
<i>Outdoor play areas are appropriate</i>	1.96
<i>The number of nursery places is sufficient</i>	2.46
<i>The nursery meets my expectations</i>	2.46

Tabela 4. Highest- and Lowest-Rated Questionnaire Items

Relationship between quality dimensions and overall satisfaction

Spearman correlation analyses revealed statistically significant positive associations between overall satisfaction and four dimensions of nursery quality.

The strongest association emerged between parents' perceptions of the educational programme and overall satisfaction ($\rho = .838$, $p < .001$), followed by infrastructure ($\rho = .791$, $p < .001$), children's safety and well-being ($\rho = .695$, $p < .001$), and educators' professionalism ($\rho = .624$, $p = .001$). Accessibility and organisation showed only a weak, non-significant relationship with overall satisfaction.

These findings suggest that, although accessibility constitutes an important prerequisite for service utilisation, parents' overall evaluations of nursery quality are primarily shaped by educational and pedagogical aspects of the service.

Correlations Between Quality Dimensions and Overall Satisfaction

Dimension	Spearman's ρ	p
Educational Programme	.838	< .001
Physical Environment	.791	< .001
Safety and Child Well-being	.695	< .001
Educators' Professionalism	.624	.001
Accessibility and Organisation	.368	.077

Tabela 5. Correlations Between Quality Dimensions and Overall Satisfaction

Parents' perceptions of educators' professional development needs

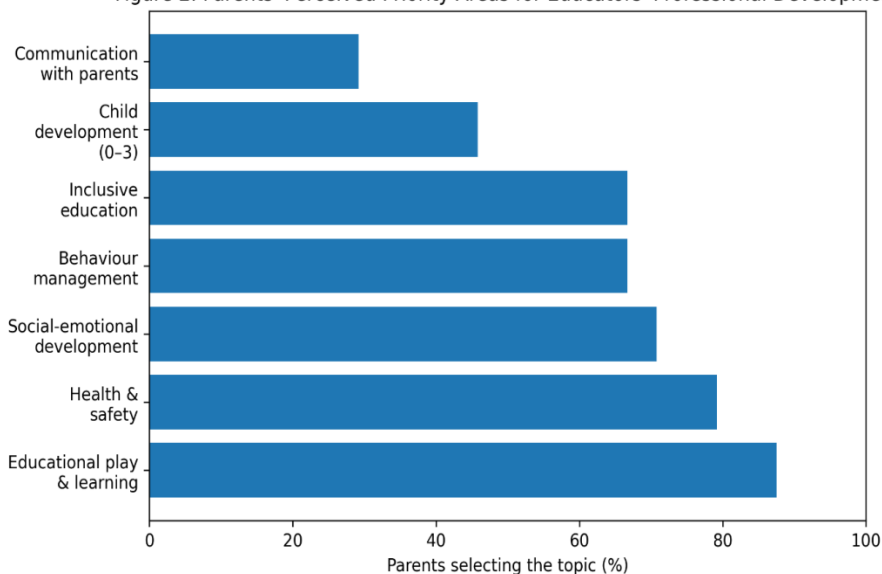
Parents were also asked to identify areas in which they believed nursery educators required further professional development.

The highest percentages were reported for educational play and learning activities (87.5%), followed by health and safety (79.2%), children's socio-emotional development (70.8%), behaviour management (66.7%), and inclusive education (66.7%).

Interestingly, despite limited awareness of the educational programme offered by nurseries, parents clearly recognised the importance of strengthening educators' pedagogical competences through continuous professional development.

This finding reinforces the argument that families value high-quality educational provision even when they are not fully informed about the pedagogical content of nursery services.

Figure 2. Parents' Perceived Priority Areas for Educators' Professional Development



Discussion

High levels of satisfaction do not necessarily reflect educational quality

One of the most significant findings of this study is the discrepancy between parents' overall satisfaction with nursery services and their limited awareness of the educational programme implemented within these settings. Although parents generally evaluated nursery services positively, the educational programme received the lowest ratings among all quality dimensions. In particular, respondents reported little knowledge of the pedagogical programme and limited information regarding the educational activities carried out with their children.

This finding suggests that parental satisfaction should not be interpreted as a direct indicator of pedagogical quality. Rather, it appears to reflect satisfaction with the caregiving, organisational and supervisory functions of nursery services. Similar concerns have been raised in European ECEC literature, where quality is increasingly conceptualised as a

multidimensional construct extending beyond parental satisfaction to include curriculum implementation, workforce competence and pedagogical interactions (European Commission et al., 2025; Goffin, 2015).

Professional commitment without institutional professionalisation

Focus group discussions revealed that nursery educators demonstrated a strong awareness of their own professional development needs. Participants consistently expressed interest in receiving training on child development, pedagogical planning, inclusive practices and communication with families. However, most educators reported that they had not participated in structured professional development activities for several years.

This finding supports the argument that the principal challenge lies not in educators' motivation, but in the absence of institutional mechanisms that sustain professional learning. The "competent systems" framework argues that workforce quality cannot rely solely on individual commitment; rather, it requires coherent governance structures, continuous learning opportunities and supportive organisational cultures (Peeters et al., 2018; Urban et al., 2011).

Governance as a determinant of service quality

A further contribution of this study concerns the relationship between governance and quality assurance. Although municipalities are formally responsible for nursery services, evidence from observations and focus groups indicates that pedagogical monitoring, curriculum supervision and CPD planning remain largely absent.

This governance gap reinforces an assistential model of nursery provision, in which organisational routines dominate over intentional educational practices. Such findings contrast with European policy recommendations emphasising integrated governance, quality monitoring and mandatory professional development as essential components of high-quality ECEC systems (European Commission et al., 2025).

Reframing nursery services from childcare to education

Taken together, the findings suggest that nursery services in Albania continue to be understood primarily as childcare services rather than educational environments. While parents enrol their children mainly for

practical reasons, they simultaneously recognise the need for stronger pedagogical competences among educators.

This apparent contradiction represents an important opportunity for policy development. Increasing the educational quality of nursery services requires not only investment in educators' professional development but also greater public awareness regarding the developmental significance of the first three years of life. Strengthening partnerships between municipalities, universities and nursery services could therefore constitute an important strategy for transforming nursery provision from a predominantly assistential model towards an educationally oriented ECEC system.



Conclusions and Directions for Future Research and Policy

This study underscores the urgent need to reconceptualise nurseries in Albania as educational and developmental environments, not merely assistential services. Continuous professional development must be positioned as a structural requirement, linked to quality assurance, institutional accountability, and the professional identity of educators, in line with European quality frameworks (European Commission et al., 2025).

From a research perspective, the findings highlight the necessity of further systematic studies on ECEC services for children aged 0–3 in Albania, combining policy analysis, ethnographic observation, and longitudinal approaches (Eurofound, 2015). From a policy standpoint, they call for stronger coordination between local and central authorities, the development of CPD frameworks aligned with European quality principles, and increased public awareness of the educational value of early childhood services.

Ultimately, investing in CPD for nursery educators is not simply an investment in professionals—it is an investment in children’s rights, social equity, and the long-term quality of the education system itself (Goffin, 2015; Peeters et al., 2018).

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**PROFESSIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING
ASSISTANTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON WORKING WITH
CHILDREN WITH AUTISM: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY WITH
TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN THE KORÇË REGION**

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Abstract

This study examines teaching assistants' perceptions regarding children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the impact of these perceptions on supportive practices in schools in the Korçë region. Using a mixed-methods approach (Likert-scale questionnaires and reflective questions), the attitudes, experiences, and professional development needs of 99 teaching assistants were analyzed. The results indicate that positive perceptions among teaching assistants are associated with more effective interventions and more individualized support for students with autism. Factors influencing perceptions include age group, place of residence, professional experience, specialized training, and employment status. Well-prepared and specially trained assistants demonstrated higher competencies in building supportive relationships, managing behavior, and promoting social and academic inclusion. However, the lack of detailed legal guidelines and gaps in professional training create challenges for inclusive education. The study recommends specialized training, continuous professional development, improvement of institutional and legal frameworks, and strengthening interprofessional collaboration. Findings contribute to understanding the key role of teaching assistants in inclusive education and provide concrete guidance for enhancing supportive practices for children with ASD in Albania.

Keywords: teaching assistants, autism, inclusive education, perception, supportive practice, Albania

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has entered the Albanian educational system as a necessity for guaranteeing the right to education for every child, regardless of abilities or special needs. The inclusion of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the educational system represents a significant challenge for schools, teachers, and educational policies. In this context, the role of teaching assistants is particularly important. They represent a key link between the child with autism and the school environment, directly influencing the child's educational experience, social development, and emotional well-being. However, the way teaching assistants understand and interpret autism influences the quality of support they provide. Their perceptions are shaped by personal experiences, professional preparation, institutional culture, and the educational system's approach to diversity. This study aims to analyze the perceptions of teaching assistants in the Korçë region regarding children with autism, exploring how these perceptions influence their daily practice. The research instrument was developed based on international literature and institutional Albanian documents regulating inclusive education.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to analyze teaching assistants' perceptions of children with ASD and evaluate how these perceptions influence the support they provide.

The main objectives include:

- Assessing the level of professional preparation among teaching assistants;
- Identifying institutional and cultural challenges affecting their role;
- Comparing subgroups of assistants with and without specialized professional training;
- Exploring the relationship between professional perception and the progress of students with ASD.

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education aims to ensure the active participation of all students in the school environment, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Children with autism face challenges in communication, social interaction, and repetitive behaviors, requiring structured and sensitive support. According to UNESCO (2020), teaching assistants are an essential part of the support team in inclusive education, particularly for children with autism whose needs require personalized approaches. Jackson et al. (2021) emphasize that positive perceptions are associated with more personalized support and greater inclusion of children in classroom activities. Giangreco (2010) warns that excessive support lacking professional coordination may limit children's independence and create unnecessary dependency. Webster and De Boer (2019) add that the perception of teaching assistants influences not only support practices but also social inclusion and academic achievement. Gómez-Marí et al. (2022) identified professional experience, specialized training, institutional support, and direct contact with children with ASD as significant factors influencing teachers' attitudes toward autism. Professional training is a determining factor in shaping sustainable and empowering perceptions regarding children with ASD. Ianes (2015) argues that teaching assistants should possess pedagogical, emotional, collaborative, and reflective competencies in order to effectively support children with autism.

3. Research Methodology

This study follows an exploratory and descriptive approach with the aim of understanding the perceptions, attitudes, and needs of teaching assistants who support children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The methodology is primarily quantitative, supported by qualitative elements through reflective open-ended questions. The research instrument was structured into thematic sections covering perceptions, professional competence, institutional support, and reflective experiences.

Participants were teaching assistants employed in public schools in the Korçe region who had experience assisting children with autism. Data collection was conducted digitally using Google Forms during September 2025. Quantitative data were analyzed statistically using

SPSS software, while qualitative responses were analyzed thematically.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles, guaranteeing anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent for all participants.

Research Questions

1. How do teaching assistants perceive children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and how does this perception influence the support they provide in the classroom?
2. What is the level of professional preparation among teaching assistants for supporting children with ASD?
3. What are the main institutional and cultural challenges experienced by teaching assistants in supporting children with ASD in schools in the Korçë region?

Research Hypotheses

H1: Teaching assistants with positive perceptions of children with autism provide more personalized and effective support during classroom instruction.

H2: Teaching assistants who have received specialized autism training demonstrate clearer perceptions and more structured support strategies.

H3: Lack of professional training negatively affects the way teaching assistants perceive and support children with autism.

4. Results

The questionnaire was completed by 99 participants, the majority of whom were women (92%). Statistical analyses demonstrated several important findings.

Age significantly influenced perceptions of professional preparedness ($F = 4.91$, $p = 0.012$), with assistants over 40 years old reporting greater confidence and competence.

School location also influenced perceptions. Participants working in urban schools reported higher levels of preparedness than those

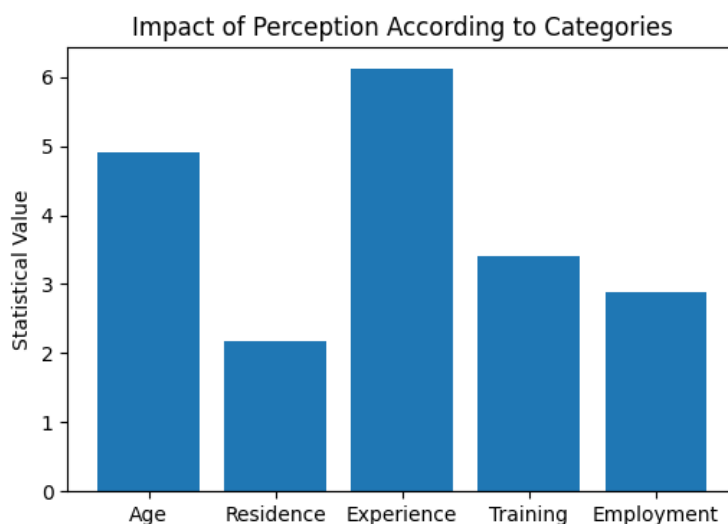
working in rural schools ($t = 2.17$, $p = 0.034$), suggesting differences in access to training, educational resources, and institutional support.

Professional experience played an important role ($F = 6.12$, $p = 0.004$). Participants with more than 10 years of experience demonstrated stronger competencies in identifying students' individual needs, implementing adapted strategies, and building supportive relationships.

Teaching assistants who had attended autism-specific training programs reported significantly greater preparedness ($t = 3.41$, $p = 0.001$), including stronger competencies in behavior management, alternative communication, and evidence-based inclusive practices.

Employment stability also influenced professional self-confidence and long-term engagement in inclusive educational practices.

Figure 1 – Impact of Perception According to Categories



Relationship Between Experience and Perception

Pearson correlation ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$) demonstrated a moderate positive relationship between years of professional experience and positive perception. This indicates that the more experience teaching assistants possess, the higher their professional self-evaluation and

confidence in providing individualized interventions for students with ASD.

Perceptions Among Newly Employed Teaching Assistants

In this analysis, “new teaching assistants” were considered those with fewer than five years of professional experience. Two subgroups were identified:

Group A: Teaching assistants without a specialized degree;

Group B: Teaching assistants with specialized training and qualifications.

The findings showed significant differences between these groups. Group B reported greater professional preparedness, stronger self-confidence, and more frequent use of structured educational strategies such as visual schedules, step-by-step task breakdowns, and supportive educational tools.

By contrast, Group A relied more heavily on intuition and personal experience, demonstrating lower confidence in managing challenging situations related to ASD.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm international literature emphasizing the importance of professional training and experience in inclusive educational settings.

Teaching assistants with structured professional preparation demonstrated greater use of evidence-based practices, including visual scheduling, structured routines, behavioral interventions, and emotional mediation strategies.

The study also highlights inequalities between urban and rural educational contexts in Albania, particularly regarding access to institutional resources and professional development opportunities.

Professional perception emerged as a central factor shaping educational practice. Teaching assistants who viewed children with ASD as capable learners were more likely to implement individualized and empowering interventions promoting social participation, communication, and independence.

6. Conclusions

The study demonstrates that teaching assistants' perceptions significantly influence the quality and effectiveness of support provided to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Positive professional perceptions are associated with:

- Greater use of individualized educational strategies;
- Improved classroom inclusion;
- Better emotional and social support;
- Increased student independence;
- More effective management of challenging behaviors.

Despite positive developments, important challenges remain regarding autism-specific training, institutional support, and educational resources in Albania.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- a) Development of specialized autism-focused training programs for teaching assistants;
- b) Continuous professional development opportunities;
- c) Improvement of institutional and legal frameworks;
- d) Strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration among educators, specialists, and families;

e) Increased structural support for rural schools and underserved communities.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF DIGITALIZATION: RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The rapid digitalisation of contemporary society has profoundly transformed Early Childhood Education (ECE), reshaping pedagogical practices, learning environments, and the roles of educators, families, and institutions. Digital technologies, including tablets, educational applications, interactive platforms, and artificial intelligence-driven tools, are increasingly integrated into early learning contexts, offering new possibilities for enhancing children’s cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development. This paper examines the opportunities and risks associated with digitalisation in ECE, emphasising the need for a developmentally appropriate, ethically grounded, and pedagogically balanced approach.

This paper argues that digitalisation in ECE should not be understood as a replacement for traditional pedagogical approaches, but rather as a complementary tool embedded within human-centred, play-based, and relational learning frameworks. By proposing a balanced and reflective model of digital integration, the study highlights the importance of educator competence, institutional policy, and family engagement in ensuring that digital technologies support holistic child development and contribute positively to educational quality and equity in early childhood education.

The paper further discusses best practices for digital integration, highlighting the roles of educators, parents, and policymakers. It argues that digitalization should not replace traditional play-based pedagogy, but rather complement it within a balanced and developmentally appropriate framework. The paper concludes by suggesting future research directions and policy considerations, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach that prioritizes children’s well-being while embracing technological innovation.

Keywords: early childhood education; digitalization; child development; screen time; edtech in preschool; education policy

Introduction

Digital transformation has become one of the defining features of 21st-century education systems. Across the globe, educational institutions are integrating digital tools into curricula, reshaping teaching methodologies and learning environments. This shift is particularly evident in Early Childhood Education (ECE), where children are increasingly exposed to digital technologies from a very young age.

On the one hand, digital tools can enrich learning experiences by supporting play-based learning, creativity, personalisation, and inclusion, particularly for children with diverse learning needs. When thoughtfully designed and guided by educators, digital resources may foster early numeracy, literacy, and problem-solving skills, while facilitating communication and collaboration between teachers and parents. Digital platforms can also support educators through professional development, formative assessment, and access to innovative teaching resources.

On the other hand, the increasing presence of digital media in early childhood raises critical concerns related to excessive screen time, reduced physical activity, potential impacts on attention and social interaction, and the risk of widening educational inequalities due to unequal access to technology. Ethical challenges such as data protection, commercialisation of childhood, and children's digital rights further complicate the integration of technology into early educational settings.

The integration of digital tools in ECE is driven by multiple factors, including technological innovation, globalization, and the demand for digital literacy. As digital competence becomes a fundamental skill for participation in modern society, it is increasingly included alongside traditional competencies such as literacy and numeracy (Nikaj, 2020). However, early childhood represents a sensitive developmental period characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social growth. The introduction of digital technologies during this stage raises fundamental questions regarding their impact on child development.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation, forcing educators and families to rely heavily on digital tools to maintain

continuity in education. While this transition demonstrated the potential of digital technologies to support learning, it also exposed significant disparities in access, digital literacy, and readiness among educators and parents.

This paper aims to critically analyse the implications of digitalization in early childhood education. Specifically, it seeks to:

- Examine the pedagogical opportunities offered by digital technologies;
- Identify developmental and ethical risks associated with early digital exposure;
- Explore best practices for effective integration;
- Propose recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers.

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1 Digitalization and Learning Theories

The integration of digital technologies in Early Childhood Education (ECE) can be critically examined through the lens of foundational learning theories, particularly constructivism and socio-cultural theory. Constructivist theory, as articulated by Piaget (1952), posits that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. In this context, digital technologies—especially interactive applications, gamified platforms, and adaptive learning systems, support experiential learning by enabling children to explore, manipulate, and engage dynamically with educational content. These tools extend traditional play-based learning approaches emphasized in the Albanian Preschool Curriculum Framework (MASH) by introducing technologically enriched environments that foster discovery and active engagement.

Complementing this perspective, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) emphasizes that learning is fundamentally mediated by social interaction and cultural tools. Digital platforms function as mediational tools that scaffold children's learning within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Features such as guided feedback, collaborative activities, and adaptive prompts provide structured support that aligns with MASH principles of teacher-guided instruction and developmental appropriateness.

However, the integration of digital technologies also presents pedagogical challenges. While digital tools can facilitate interaction, excessive reliance on screen-based activities may limit opportunities for face-to-face communication, peer collaboration, and socio-emotional development. From a socio-cultural perspective, this raises concerns about reduced opportunities for the development of communication skills, empathy, and cooperative learning. Therefore, a balanced pedagogical approach is essential, where digital technologies complement rather than replace interpersonal interactions, ensuring holistic child development.

1.2 Digital Literacy as a Core Competence

Digital literacy has become a fundamental competence in contemporary society, extending beyond technical proficiency to include cognitive, social, and ethical dimensions. In early childhood education, digital literacy encompasses the ability to engage critically and creatively with digital content, rather than merely operating devices.

Research indicates that appropriately guided exposure to digital technologies can enhance cognitive development and problem-solving skills (Palaiologou et al., 2021). Within the framework of multiliteracies theory (New London Group, 1996), literacy is understood as multimodal, incorporating visual, digital, and interactive communication forms. Digital platforms provide opportunities for children to develop these competencies through diverse and engaging modes of representation.

Moreover, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) explains how digital learning environments can enhance motivation by supporting autonomy, competence, and engagement. These dimensions are closely aligned with the key competencies outlined in the Albanian preschool curriculum, which emphasize independence, creativity, and active participation in learning processes.

At the end, digital literacy must also include ethical awareness and responsible use. Children need to be guided in understanding digital safety, appropriate behaviour, and the responsible use of technology. This aligns with both MASH guidelines for holistic child development and ASCAL standards on competency-based education,

which highlight the importance of developing critical and responsible citizens.

1.3 Enhanced Learning and Engagement

Digital technologies significantly enhance engagement by creating interactive, multimedia-rich learning environments that support diverse learning styles. Through gamification, animation, and adaptive systems, digital platforms provide stimulating learning experiences that promote active participation and sustained attention. From a constructivist perspective, these technologies enable children to engage in hands-on learning experiences, reinforcing knowledge construction through exploration and feedback (Piaget, 1952). Similarly, Vygotsky's sociocultural framework highlights the role of digital tools in facilitating guided learning and collaborative interaction, even within technologically mediated environments.

Empirical evidence suggests that well-designed digital tools contribute to improvements in vocabulary acquisition, numeracy, and problem-solving skills (Kasmiati, 2025). Additionally, adaptive learning systems allow for personalized learning, adjusting content according to the learner's pace and ability. This aligns with MASH's emphasis on individualized approaches and differentiated instruction. Furthermore, from a contemporary education perspective, such practices reflect quality standards related to:

learner-centred pedagogy

innovation in teaching methods

continuous assessment and feedback

Thus, digital technologies contribute not only to increased engagement but also to improved learning outcomes and pedagogical effectiveness.

1.4 Early Exposure to STEM Skills

Digitalization facilitates early exposure to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) concepts through interactive and exploratory learning experiences. Tools such as coding games, simulations, and digital experiments encourage logical reasoning, creativity, and analytical thinking.

This aligns with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which emphasizes learning through active experimentation and reflection, as

well as constructionism (Papert, 1980), which highlights the importance of creating and manipulating digital artefacts. Through these processes, children develop foundational computational thinking skills that support future academic success.

The Albanian preschool curriculum promotes competencies such as curiosity, problem-solving, and inquiry-based learning. Digital STEM tools directly support these objectives by providing structured opportunities for exploration and experimentation. Furthermore, this aligns with contemporary education competency-based standards, which emphasize:

critical thinking

innovation and creativity

digital competence

Early exposure to STEM through digital technologies thus contributes to both cognitive development and alignment with broader European educational priorities.

1.5 Accessibility, Inclusivity, and Equity

One of the most significant contributions of digitalization in early childhood education is its potential to promote equity and inclusion. Digital platforms enable access to high-quality educational resources for children in remote or underserved areas, supporting the principles of educational equity emphasized in MASH policies.

The concept of inclusivity is further reinforced by Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates for flexible and adaptive learning environments. Digital tools naturally support UDL principles by offering multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. Assistive technologies play a crucial role in supporting children with special educational needs, enabling full participation in educational activities. These tools align with Vygotsky's perspective on mediated learning and reflect contemporary education standards on: inclusiveness and equal opportunity social responsibility in education.

In the Albanian context, digitalization contributes to reducing disparities between urban and rural education systems and promoting equal access to learning opportunities.

1.6 Strengthening Home-School Connections

Digital technologies enhance collaboration between families and educational institutions, reinforcing a holistic approach to child development. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), children's development is influenced by interactions between multiple environments, particularly the family and school.

Digital platforms enable parents to monitor progress, communicate with educators, and actively engage in their children's learning. This reflects Epstein's framework of parental involvement (2011), which highlights communication and collaboration as key factors in educational success. In alignment with MASH curriculum principles, parental engagement is considered essential for supporting learning outcomes. Digital communication tools strengthen this relationship by providing continuous, accessible, and structured interaction. Thus, digitalization not only enhances classroom learning but also strengthens the broader educational ecosystem, contributing to more effective and inclusive education systems.

2. Risks and Challenges

2.1 Cognitive and Developmental Risks

While digital technologies offer numerous educational benefits, their excessive or unregulated use in early childhood may pose significant cognitive and developmental risks. Research has increasingly highlighted the association between prolonged screen exposure and adverse developmental outcomes, including reduced attention spans, delayed language acquisition, and impaired executive functioning (Yelizarova et al., 2025). These findings raise critical concerns regarding the appropriateness and intensity of digital engagement in early learning contexts.

From a developmental perspective, early childhood is a crucial period for sensory and motor development. Traditional forms of play—such as physical, tactile, and social interactions—support neural development by engaging multiple sensory modalities. In contrast, digital activities often provide limited sensory stimulation, potentially restricting experiential learning opportunities essential for brain development. This concern is consistent with Piaget's theory, which emphasizes the importance of concrete, hands-on experiences in the early stages of cognitive development (Piaget, 1952).

Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that excessive screen time may negatively impact sleep patterns and emotional regulation. Exposure to screens, particularly before bedtime, has been linked to disruptions in circadian rhythms, which can affect both cognitive functioning and behavioural stability. Consequently, the integration of digital tools in early childhood education must be carefully balanced to ensure that developmental needs are not compromised.

2.2 Social and Emotional Development

Digitalization also raises important concerns regarding children's social and emotional development. Early childhood is characterized by the development of interpersonal skills, including empathy, cooperation, and communication. These competencies are primarily cultivated through direct, face-to-face interaction with peers and adults.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), social interaction is fundamental to cognitive and emotional development. Learning occurs through dialogue, collaboration, and shared experiences within a social context. Excessive reliance on digital devices may reduce opportunities for such interactions, limiting children's ability to develop essential social skills.

Children who frequently engage with digital technologies in isolation may experience challenges in communication and relationship-building. The absence of real-time feedback, non-verbal cues, and emotional exchange in digital environments can hinder the development of social awareness and empathy. Moreover, reduced peer interaction may affect cooperative learning and the development of conflict-resolution skills.

Therefore, while digital tools can supplement learning, they cannot replace the richness of human interaction. Educational practices must ensure that digital engagement is complemented by meaningful social experiences that support emotional and relational development.

2.3 Privacy and Cybersecurity

The increasing use of digital technologies in early childhood education introduces significant concerns related to privacy and cybersecurity. Young children are particularly vulnerable in digital environments, as they lack the cognitive maturity to recognize and respond to online risks. Educational platforms often collect personal

data, including usage patterns and behavioural information, raising ethical concerns about data protection and digital surveillance.

Regulatory frameworks such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA, 2025) provide safeguards by requiring parental consent for data collection and limiting the use of children's personal information. However, rapid technological advancements and the proliferation of digital platforms continue to challenge the effectiveness of existing regulatory mechanisms. From an ethical perspective, the responsible use of digital technologies in early childhood education must prioritize data security, transparency, and accountability. Educators and institutions must ensure that digital tools comply with data protection standards and that parents are fully informed about data practices.

In addition, digital literacy education should include awareness of privacy and safety, even at early stages, fostering a culture of responsible and secure digital engagement. This aligns with broader international principles advocating for child rights in digital environments, as emphasized by UNESCO and OECD frameworks. Despite its potential to enhance educational access and inclusion, digitalization, also, may also exacerbate existing inequalities if access to technology is uneven. Digital inequality remains a significant challenge, particularly in contexts characterized by socio-economic disparities and limited technological infrastructure. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds may face barriers such as a lack of access to digital

3. Best Practices for Digital Integration

3.1 Balanced Screen Time

A balanced and pedagogically grounded approach to screen use is essential in early childhood education. Rather than focusing exclusively on limiting screen time, contemporary perspectives emphasize the importance of content quality, learning context, and interactive engagement (AAP, 2026). This shift reflects a growing recognition that not all screen use has the same developmental impact; educational, interactive, and socially mediated digital activities can support learning when thoughtfully integrated.

From a developmental standpoint, digital tools should complement—not replace—traditional play-based learning experiences. Physical

play, social interaction, and creative activities remain fundamental to children's cognitive, emotional, and motor development. In alignment with constructivist principles and the Albanian Preschool Curriculum (MASH), children benefit from diverse learning environments where digital engagement is balanced with hands-on exploration and peer interaction. A balanced approach therefore involves integrating digital tools into a broader pedagogical framework that prioritizes holistic development. This includes ensuring that screen-based activities are purposeful, time-bound, and embedded within interactive and socially meaningful contexts.

3.2 Developmentally Appropriate Design

The effectiveness of digital technologies in early childhood education largely depends on their alignment with children's developmental stages. Developmentally appropriate digital design requires that educational content be intuitive, interactive, and responsive to children's cognitive and emotional needs. Tools that incorporate age-appropriate challenges, clear feedback, and engaging visual elements are more likely to support meaningful learning outcomes. Theoretical perspectives, particularly those of Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978), emphasize that learning must correspond to children's developmental readiness and be supported through appropriate scaffolding. Digital tools that provide guided interaction and adaptive learning pathways can effectively support these processes. International frameworks, including UNESCO & UNICEF (2024), highlight the importance of aligning technological applications with pedagogical objectives. This implies that digital tools should not be adopted solely for their technological capabilities, but for their ability to enhance learning outcomes, foster engagement, and support developmental goals. In the Albanian context, this principle aligns with MASH guidelines emphasizing individualized learning, developmental appropriateness, and child-centred pedagogy standards requiring coherence between curriculum objectives and teaching methods.

3.3 Teacher Training and Professional Development

Effective integration of digital technologies in early childhood education requires well-prepared and digitally competent educators. Teachers play a central role in mediating digital learning experiences,

selecting appropriate tools, and ensuring that technology use aligns with pedagogical goals. Continuous professional development is therefore essential. Training programs should focus on the development of:

digital pedagogical competencies,
classroom management in technology-rich environments,
ethical and responsible use of digital tools,
critical evaluation of digital content and applications.

From a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), teachers act as mediators who guide children's learning experiences, including digital interactions. Their ability to scaffold learning and create meaningful learning opportunities is critical in ensuring that digital tools are used effectively. In line with contemporary education quality standards, teacher competencies are a key indicator of educational quality. Institutions are expected to support continuous professional development and innovation in teaching practices. Similarly, MASH policies emphasize the importance of building teachers' capacities to adapt to evolving educational technologies. Thus, investing in teacher training is a prerequisite for the successful and sustainable integration of digital technologies in early childhood education.

3.4 Collaborative Approach

The successful integration of digital technologies in early childhood education requires a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach involving educators, parents, technology developers, and policymakers. Each stakeholder plays a distinct yet interconnected role in shaping children's digital learning environments. From a theoretical perspective, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) underscores the importance of interconnected systems in child development. Digital education is most effective when there is coherence and collaboration across these systems, particularly between the home and educational institutions. Parents play a crucial role in guiding children's digital experiences, reinforcing learning at home, and ensuring appropriate use of technology. Educators, in turn, provide structured learning environments and pedagogical expertise. Developers are responsible for creating age-appropriate and ethically sound digital tools, while policymakers establish regulatory frameworks that ensure safety, quality, and equitable access. This

collaborative model is consistent with MASH principles, which emphasize parental involvement and community engagement, as well as contemporary modern standards of education that highlight stakeholder participation and accountability in educational processes. A coordinated and collaborative approach ensures that digital technologies are used in ways that support not only academic development but also the social, emotional, and ethical growth of children. Ultimately, such an approach contributes to a more holistic, inclusive, and sustainable model of digital integration in early childhood education.

5. Role of Educators and Parents in Digital Learning

The effective integration of digital technologies in early childhood education depends significantly on the active and complementary roles of both educators and parents. As primary agents in children's learning environments, they collectively shape the quality, purpose, and outcomes of digital engagement. Their involvement is essential in ensuring that digital tools are used in developmentally appropriate, pedagogically sound, and ethically responsible ways.

Educators play a central role in designing, implementing, and evaluating digital learning experiences. From a pedagogical perspective, teachers act as facilitators who mediate children's interactions with digital tools, ensuring alignment with learning objectives and developmental needs. Drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), educators provide scaffolding that supports children's learning within their Zone of Proximal Development, guiding them toward higher levels of understanding. In digital contexts, this involves selecting appropriate applications, structuring meaningful activities, and providing guidance that transforms technology from a passive medium into an active learning resource.

Moreover, educators are responsible for integrating digital tools within a broader child-centred and play-based curriculum, consistent with the principles of the Albanian Preschool Curriculum (MASH). Digital technologies must be purposefully embedded into learning experiences that promote exploration, creativity, and interaction, rather than used as isolated or purely entertainment-based activities. This reflects contemporary quality standards, which emphasize

learner-centred pedagogy, innovation in teaching, and alignment between instructional methods and educational outcomes.

In parallel, parents play a crucial role in shaping children's digital habits within the home environment. Their influence extends beyond monitoring screen time to actively guiding how children interact with digital content. Strategies such as co-viewing, setting clear boundaries, and modelling responsible digital behaviour are essential in fostering healthy and productive digital engagement. Co-viewing, in particular, allows parents to engage in shared learning experiences with their children, facilitating discussion, reflection, and deeper understanding of digital content.

Research indicates that parental involvement in children's digital learning significantly enhances educational outcomes while mitigating potential risks associated with excessive or inappropriate technology use. When parents provide active guidance and supervision, children are more likely to develop critical thinking skills, responsible digital habits, and positive learning attitudes. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), which highlights the interconnected influence of family and educational environments on child development.

Furthermore, effective collaboration between educators and parents strengthens the continuity of learning across home and school contexts. Regular communication, shared digital platforms, and mutual understanding of pedagogical goals ensure consistency in children's digital experiences. This collaborative approach supports not only academic development but also social, emotional, and ethical growth.

In conclusion, the successful integration of digital technologies in early childhood education requires a shared responsibility between educators and parents. While educators provide structured, pedagogically grounded learning experiences, parents reinforce these experiences through guided engagement at home. Together, they form a cohesive support system that maximizes the benefits of digitalization while safeguarding children's holistic development.

6. Policy and Regulatory Implications of Digitalization in Early Childhood Education

Policymakers play a critical role in shaping the development, implementation, and sustainability of digital education systems in early childhood contexts. As digital technologies become increasingly embedded in educational environments, the need for comprehensive and forward-looking policy frameworks has become more urgent. Effective policies must address multiple dimensions, ensuring that digital integration supports educational quality while safeguarding children's rights and well-being.

One of the primary areas of policy concern is data protection and privacy. Young children are particularly vulnerable in digital environments, as they lack the capacity to understand the implications of data sharing and online interactions. Educational technologies often involve the collection and processing of personal data, making it essential for policymakers to establish clear regulations that govern data use, storage, and access. Policies should ensure transparency, parental consent, and strict limitations on data exploitation, thereby protecting children from potential misuse of their personal information.

Equally important is the regulation of content quality and accreditation. Digital educational materials must meet established pedagogical standards and align with developmental objectives appropriate for early childhood learners. Regulatory bodies are responsible for evaluating and certifying digital content to ensure that it is educationally meaningful, age-appropriate, and free from harmful or misleading information. This aligns with broader educational quality assurance principles, which highlight the importance of coherence between curriculum objectives, teaching methodologies, and learning outcomes (Nikaj, I 2026).

Another key dimension involves infrastructure development, particularly in ensuring equitable access to digital technologies. We must address disparities in technological infrastructure by investing in reliable internet connectivity, digital devices, and educational platforms, especially in underserved or rural areas. Without such investments, digitalization risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than reducing them. In this regard, international organizations such as UNESCO & UNICEF (2024) advocate for inclusive digital education policies that guarantee equal access to learning

opportunities for all children, regardless of socio-economic background.

Furthermore, effective digital integration requires sustained investment in teacher training and professional support. We must ensure that educators are equipped with the necessary competencies to integrate digital tools into their pedagogical practices. This includes not only technical skills but also digital pedagogy, ethical awareness, and the ability to critically evaluate educational technologies. Continuous professional development programs are therefore essential for maintaining quality and innovation in digitally enriched learning environments. Beyond these structural aspects, ethical considerations must remain at the core of all policy initiatives. There is a growing concern that digital technologies in education may be driven by commercial interests rather than educational goals. Policymakers must therefore establish safeguards to ensure that technological adoption prioritizes children's developmental needs, learning outcomes, and well-being. This includes regulating commercial influences, preventing the commercialization of educational data, and promoting transparency in the design and use of digital educational tools. From a broader perspective, policy frameworks must adopt a child-centred and rights-based approach to digitalization. This involves balancing innovation with protection, ensuring that digital technologies enhance learning while minimizing risks. Effective policies should promote ethical standards, inclusivity, and sustainability, thereby supporting the holistic development of children in digitally mediated learning environments.

In conclusion, the successful integration of digital technologies in Early Childhood Education depends not only on pedagogical practices but also on holistic and coherent policy frameworks. By addressing issues of privacy, quality, access, and ethics, policymakers can create an enabling environment in which digitalization contributes positively to educational development, equity, and long-term societal progress.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this paper highlight the complexity of digitalization in early childhood education. While digital tools offer significant advantages, their effectiveness depends on how they are implemented. A key insight is that digitalization is not inherently beneficial or

harmful; rather, its impact is shaped by contextual factors such as usage patterns, content quality, and socio-economic conditions. The challenge for educators and policymakers is to strike a balance between innovation and tradition. Digital tools should be integrated in ways that enhance, rather than replace, play-based learning. Digitalization presents a transformative opportunity for early childhood education, offering innovative tools to enhance learning and inclusion. However, its implementation must be guided by developmental science, equity considerations, and ethical standards. A child-centred, balanced approach is key to harnessing the benefits of digitalization while mitigating its risks.

The digitalization of early childhood education presents a complex landscape of possibilities and challenges. On one hand, digital tools offer innovative ways to enhance learning, personalize instruction, and promote inclusion. On the other hand, they raise concerns about developmental appropriateness, equity, and safety. A balanced integration of technology, guided by developmental science, pedagogical principles, and ethical standards, is essential. Digital tools should complement, not replace, traditional play-based and social learning experiences. Educators and parents play a critical role in mediating children's digital interactions, ensuring that technology supports rather than hinders holistic development. Moreover, policy and regulation must evolve to address the unique needs of young learners in the digital age. This includes safeguarding data privacy, ensuring equitable access, and providing clear guidelines for responsible use.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a digital learning ecosystem that is inclusive, safe, and developmentally enriching, one that prepares children not only for academic success but also for thoughtful, responsible participation in a digital society. Digitalization presents both opportunities and challenges for early childhood education. While it offers innovative solutions for enhancing learning and promoting inclusivity, it also raises significant concerns related to development, equity, and privacy. A holistic approach, combining balanced use, quality design, stakeholder collaboration, and strong policy frameworks is essential for maximizing benefits and minimizing risks. We think that future research should focus on long-term developmental impacts and explore innovative pedagogical

models that integrate digital and traditional learning approaches within the frame of the Albanian education system.

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INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Inclusive education provides children with special educational needs with the opportunity to receive education within mainstream compulsory education settings. Their right to education represents a fundamental human right, guaranteed by both national and international legal frameworks.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the personal experiences of primary school teachers to assess whether the everyday reality of including children with mild intellectual disabilities in public education corresponds with contemporary inclusive education policies. The study presents the current situation of primary education in schools in the city of Tirana, focusing on the needs, attitudes, and capacities of schools and families in addressing this educational reality. Furthermore, the paper examines the evolution of the concept of inclusion and discusses both the benefits and challenges associated with educating children with special educational needs.

The methodology of this research is based on a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Data collection relied on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through questionnaires administered to primary school teachers, while secondary

data were collected from scientific publications and previous studies in the field.

The main finding of the study indicates that the inclusion of children with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms benefits not only these children but also contributes to the humanistic development of all students within the classroom environment. Moreover, inclusive practices provide teachers with opportunities to enhance their professional competencies and improve their teaching approaches.

The study provides recommendations for teachers, parents, and school administrators regarding feasible improvements in the implementation of inclusive education policies for children with special educational needs within primary education.

Keywords:

students with special educational needs; inclusive education; individualized education plans; teaching assistants; teacher professional development.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is recognized as one of the key paradigms embodied in the fundamental principles of contemporary educational curricula. At the same time, it remains a complex issue that generates significant debate regarding its practical implementation within teaching and learning processes. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that the inclusion of children with special educational needs is implemented appropriately to achieve the most productive educational outcomes for them (Santos et al., 2010).

Children with special educational needs have the right to education, inclusion, and personal development alongside their peers, without experiencing exclusion or segregation. Inclusive education provides numerous benefits by creating opportunities for children's socialization and supporting their holistic development according to their individual potential (Sunko, Rogulj, & Živković, 2018).

The inclusive education approach is based on the fundamental principle that all children should learn together, regardless of their individual differences and challenges. Children should participate together not only in classroom instruction and learning activities but also in extracurricular activities and educational visits. Shared experiences, both inside and outside the

classroom, create opportunities for social and academic development for all students (Chen, Huang, Liu, & Wang, 2022, p. 3).

Inclusive education extends beyond simply placing children with special educational needs in the same classroom as their typically developing peers. Rather, it aims to create an educational environment in which every child feels valued, independent, supported, and encouraged to achieve their full potential across different areas of development (Aykir & Çifci Tekinarslan, 2020).

The Albanian state, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and European legislation on education, through its central and local institutions, provides opportunities for the education of children with disabilities. This commitment is also reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of Albania and in Law No. 69/2012 on the Pre-University Education System, particularly Articles 63–64. The increasing number of children with special educational needs enrolled in mainstream schools demonstrates a growing social awareness regarding their rights and educational needs.

Historically, different attempts have been made to define and categorize children with special educational needs. The literature has included various terms such as handicapped students, disabled students, students with developmental delays, students with learning difficulties, students facing social barriers, and students experiencing educational difficulties (Qoku, 2005).

Currently, within academic and professional communities, greater emphasis is placed on the use of the concept “children with special educational needs,” which reflects a more inclusive and rights-based perspective. A child or student with special educational needs is considered one who differs from the average learner in terms of cognitive characteristics, sensory abilities, communication skills, social behaviour, or physical characteristics (Chiapasco, 2010).

Children with mild intellectual disabilities require support through specialized and clearly structured interventions. To facilitate their development, individualized education plans are often designed and implemented, adapted to their specific educational needs. Parents have the right to participate in discussions and decision-making processes related to their child’s education and development.

Teachers, on the other hand, demonstrate interest and willingness to support this process (Sugden, 1989; Petley, 1994; Chen et al., 2022). Therefore, both

parents and teachers share a common objective: to assist children in adapting, integrating, and developing the necessary abilities to participate in learning and socialization processes. Parents and teachers, particularly teaching assistants, should consider each other as equal partners in decision-making and educational planning.

Teaching assistants collaborate with teachers, parents, and other professionals to address individual needs and to create a positive and inclusive learning environment for all students in the classroom (Giangreco et al., 2014; Sharma & Salend, 2016; Kokoshi, 2022).

According to Eden Training Solutions (2025), the role of the teaching assistant is essential in providing additional specialized support and ensuring equal learning opportunities for all categories of students within inclusive classrooms. The contribution of teaching assistants is particularly important in curriculum adaptation and instructional planning according to the educational needs of children requiring additional support. Their involvement also helps prevent bullying and discriminatory attitudes among peers, while promoting children's emotional well-being within the educational environment.

Furthermore, teaching assistants support cooperation among teachers, parents, and other professionals in order to address individual educational needs and establish an effective and supportive learning environment for all students. Their contribution positively influences language development, literacy improvement, student engagement, and motivation. It should be emphasized that the presence of teaching assistants supports not only children with special educational needs but also classroom teachers and all students by fostering a more inclusive educational culture (Fisher et al., 2014; Sharma & Salend, 2016).

The development of concepts and representations, students' perception and understanding of learning materials, identification of essential elements of phenomena, and effective knowledge acquisition become easier and more successful through the systematic use of concrete, visual, and technological learning materials (Sina & Lutaj, 2023).

2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. A review and analysis of previous

studies in the field contributed to the identification of the main theoretical principles and key research variables. Meanwhile, questionnaires administered to teachers provided quantitative data regarding teachers' pedagogical and instructional experiences and practices related to the inclusion of children with special educational needs within primary schools in the city of Tirana.

The main object of this study is the inclusion of students with special educational needs in primary education in the city of Tirana. Particular attention was given to children with mild intellectual disabilities as the focus group of the research.

The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected through questionnaires administered to teachers and parents, while secondary data were obtained through the analysis of scientific books, research articles, and academic publications related to inclusive education and human resource development. Statistical software applications were used to facilitate data processing and analysis.

The quantitative component of the research was based primarily on the use of questionnaires, which enabled the collection of empirical data from the selected population. This approach was considered appropriate due to its effectiveness in gathering information regarding participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward inclusive education practices.

The questionnaire was designed as a survey instrument consisting of 11 questions divided into two main sections. The first section collected demographic information about the participants, while the second section focused on teachers' perceptions regarding the level of inclusion of children with special educational needs in primary education.

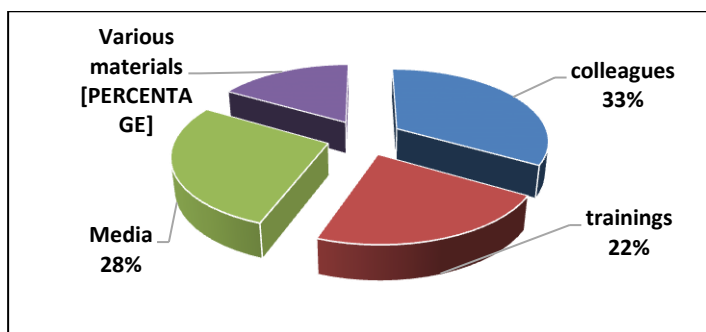
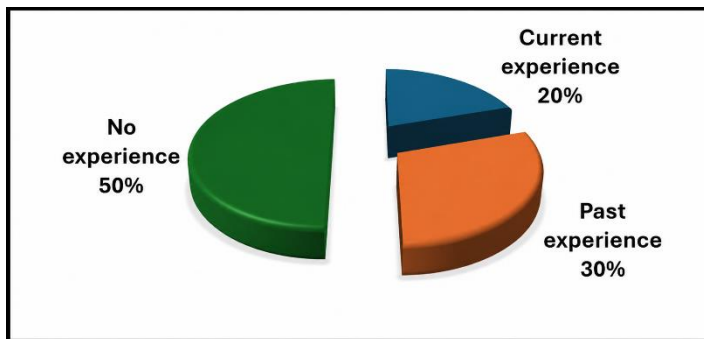
A total of 212 respondents participated in the survey, of whom 199 valid responses were classified and included in the final data analysis.

3. Results of the Study

The research collected responses from 199 primary school teachers in the city of Tirana. Regarding educational qualifications, 137 participants (70%) reported holding a Professional Master's degree, 51 participants (27%) held a Master of Science degree, and 11 participants (5.5%) had completed a Bachelor-level qualification.

Teachers' experience in working with children with mild intellectual disabilities represents an important variable influencing their professional performance and readiness to implement inclusive practices. For this reason, participants were categorized into three groups: teachers with no previous experience, teachers with previous experience, and teachers currently working with children with special educational needs.

The findings indicate that approximately half of the participating teachers had no previous experience teaching children with disabilities. Teachers who had previous experience working with children with disabilities represented approximately 30% of respondents, while those currently working with such children represented approximately 20% of the total sample.



The education and support of children with special educational needs require continuous professional development and adequate teacher preparation. Therefore, teachers were asked about the availability of

qualitative resources, professional guidance, and mentoring opportunities related to inclusive education.

The findings show that more than half of the teachers had received information about children with disabilities during their university studies, particularly through courses and specific training related to special education.

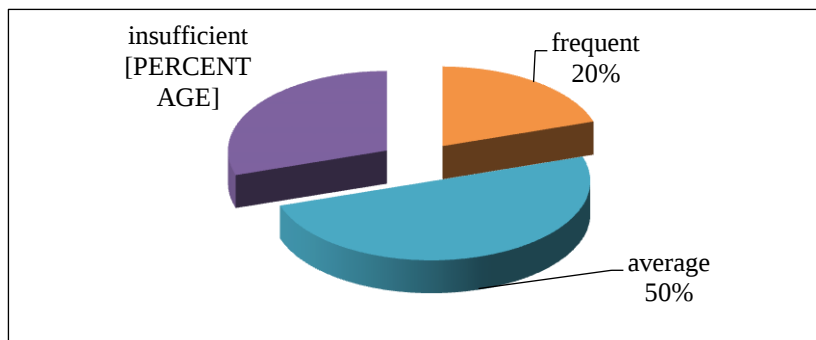
Regarding sources of information, the results indicate that a considerable number of teachers obtained knowledge about inclusive education policies through different professional training programs organized by educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the Ministry of Education. This suggests that professional training represents one of the primary mechanisms for disseminating essential information among education professionals.

Another important source of information regarding students with disabilities was the parents themselves. However, the level of parental support and cooperation was assessed by teachers as varying considerably, ranging from regular cooperation to occasional communication.

Approximately 70% of teachers reported having collaborative relationships with parents of children with disabilities. This indicates that parents and teachers maintain frequent and periodic communication, support each other's work, and cooperate to assist children in achieving educational objectives and developing social skills.

These findings suggest that teachers' and parents' expectations regarding the role of school and family, as well as the educational achievements of children with disabilities, share common points of agreement. Furthermore, the level of awareness regarding the importance of effective family-school partnerships appear to be relatively high.

In conclusion, teachers reported that parents supported the integration of children with disabilities mainly through participation in the assessment of children's individual needs, showing interest in their education, and attending consultations with teachers. However, the research also revealed that parents were less active in participating in broader school community activities and in proposing initiatives aimed at improving the education and inclusion of children with disabilities.



Cooperation between teachers and social service professionals is essential for establishing multidisciplinary support teams. Therefore, teachers were also asked about their collaboration with school psychologists and other specialists.

The findings indicate that approximately 30% of teachers cooperate with school psychologists in implementing inclusive education practices for children with disabilities. In a broader sense, these teachers communicate with psychologists, allow their participation in classroom activities and extracurricular activities, seek professional expertise from psycho-social support services, exchange information regarding students with disabilities, and consider their recommendations and guidance.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the study indicate that most teachers participating in the research have had experience working with students with special educational needs in their classrooms. This demonstrates that the number of children requiring additional educational support within mainstream schools is increasing and that inclusive education is becoming an increasingly important component of the Albanian pre-university education system.

The main needs identified by teachers are related to practical guidance, continuous professional support, and effective strategies adapted to the specific characteristics of each child, as every student with special educational needs represents an individual case requiring personalized approaches. Teachers emphasized that classrooms and school environments

are still not fully adapted to adequately meet the needs of these children. Although teaching assistants are present in some educational settings, their role remains unclear, insufficiently structured, and limited in terms of professional support.

Teachers also expressed concerns regarding the sustainability of support provided to children with special educational needs as they progress to higher educational levels. According to teachers' experiences, support mechanisms tend to decrease over time, while social and institutional structures remain insufficient to guarantee these children opportunities for independent and meaningful participation in society. Consequently, the primary responsibility for long-term support often remains with families.

Students experiencing learning difficulties represent an important category within the broader group of children with disabilities and special educational needs. This category includes children and young people who demonstrate one or more difficulties or impairments related to reading, mathematical skills, written expression, or other learning processes that significantly affect academic achievement and everyday functioning.

Children with learning difficulties may have average or above-average intellectual abilities; however, they may experience challenges in acquiring, selecting, organizing, and retaining information. There are two fundamental reasons why these children should receive education within mainstream schools alongside their peers. First, social interaction contributes significantly to their personal and academic development. Second, inclusive environments reveal and strengthen their individual abilities and potential.

Every child, regardless of whether they have special educational needs or not, should have the opportunity to learn together with other children. No educational method, technique, or instructional strategy can replace the importance of human relationships and social interaction. Therefore, every education professional should actively support the process of inclusion.

Even when a child does not achieve the expected academic outcomes, their efforts and progress should be recognized and encouraged. Positive reinforcement helps children develop confidence, motivation, and the belief that they are capable of further improvement.

Teachers should attempt to understand the perspective of children with learning difficulties in order to identify the most appropriate learning approaches that facilitate comprehension and encourage children to express themselves through different forms of communication. Teachers must

recognize that assessment and encouragement have a significant motivational impact on these students and should continuously provide emotional and academic support.

Respecting the abilities and potential of children with special educational needs requires society and educational institutions to assume greater responsibility in decision-making processes concerning their education and development. Schools should take appropriate measures to create inclusive learning environments, ensure equal opportunities, and encourage children to participate actively with their peers in acquiring new knowledge and social experiences.

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations can be proposed:

- **For teachers:** Continuous professional development programs should be strengthened, focusing on practical strategies for inclusive teaching, differentiated instruction, classroom management, and individualized educational planning.
- **For schools and educational administrators:** Schools should develop clearer structures and responsibilities for teaching assistants, strengthen multidisciplinary cooperation, and ensure that educational environments are physically, socially, and pedagogically accessible for all students.
- **For parents:** Family participation should be expanded beyond individual communication with teachers toward active involvement in school life and decision-making processes related to inclusive education.
- **For educational policymakers:** Sustainable support mechanisms should be established to ensure continuity of assistance for children with special educational needs throughout all stages of education and beyond school.

Inclusive education should not be understood merely as the physical placement of children with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms. It represents a broader educational philosophy based on equality, participation, dignity, and respect for individual differences. The successful implementation of inclusive education requires cooperation among teachers, families, schools, professionals, and society as a whole in order to guarantee that every child could develop and achieve their full potential.

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PARENTAL STRESS, FAMILY RESILIENCE, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between parental stress, family resilience, and psychological well-being in families of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Greece. A total of 300 parents participated by completing standardized self-report measures assessing parental stress, family resilience, and psychological well-being. Descriptive and correlational analyses were conducted to explore levels and associations among the examined variables. The findings indicate that most parents experience moderate levels of parental stress, while family resilience appears at relatively moderate to high levels. Psychological well-being was found to vary across participants. Family resilience was positively associated with psychological well-being and negatively associated with parental stress. Additionally, differences emerged according to place of residence, suggesting the relevance of contextual factors in parental experiences. The results highlight the importance of examining parental stress and family resilience jointly when considering parental well-being in families of children with SEN, particularly within the Greek context, where access to specialized family support services remains uneven.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education and Care; Family resilience; Parental stress; Psychological well-being; Special educational needs

INTRODUCTION

Families of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) often face long-term and multifaceted challenges that extend beyond educational contexts and permeate everyday family life. Parenting a child with SEN has been widely associated with increased caregiving demands, heightened emotional involvement, and continuous interaction with health, educational, and social support systems, resulting in elevated levels of parental stress and sustained caregiving strain (Cheng & Lai, 2023; Hastings, 2002; Hayes & Watson, 2013). In practice, these demands often extend beyond formal caregiving roles, shaping parents' everyday routines, decision-making, and long-term expectations. As such, parental stress has emerged as a central construct in research examining family adaptation in the context of disability and special educational needs.

In parallel, growing attention has been given to family resilience as a key process through which families respond to and manage adversity. Rather than being viewed as a fixed trait, resilience is increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic and relational process that enables families to adapt, reorganize, and maintain functioning under conditions of sustained stress (Aivalioti & Pezirkianidis, 2020; Walsh, 2003). Within this framework, resilience is understood as a protective process that may buffer the negative effects of stress and support adaptive family functioning, particularly in families facing long-term caregiving demands (Aivalioti & Pezirkianidis, 2020).

Psychological well-being represents an important outcome in families of children with SEN, as it reflects parents' capacity to sustain meaning, emotional balance, and functional engagement over time. Conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing aspects such as purpose in life, environmental mastery, and positive relations, psychological well-being captures long-term adaptation rather than transient emotional states (Ryff, 1989). Research has consistently shown that elevated parental stress is associated with poorer psychological outcomes, while resilience-related

processes may support more adaptive functioning under demanding conditions (Lysikatoú & Georgiadou, 2023; Ryff, 1989)

However, despite the growing body of literature addressing parental stress, family resilience, and psychological well-being, these constructs are often examined in isolation, limiting a comprehensive understanding of how they interact as part of a broader system of family adaptation. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining parental stress, family resilience, and psychological well-being simultaneously in a sample of parents of children with SEN in Greece (Aivalioti & Pezirkianidis, 2020; Platsidou, 2025). By exploring levels and associations among these variables, the study aims to contribute empirical evidence supporting a more integrated understanding of family adaptation in the context of special educational needs. Additionally, attention is given to contextual factors, such as place of residence, in order to highlight potential structural influences on parental experiences.

In the context of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), parents of young children with Special Educational Needs are in continuous interaction with early intervention services, kindergarten settings, and multidisciplinary ECEC professionals, placing families at the intersection of educational, psychological, and support systems during a critical developmental period. Examining parental stress, family resilience, and psychological well-being within early childhood therefore provides insights that are directly relevant to ECEC practices and family-centered early intervention.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study involved a sample of 300 parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) residing in Greece. Participants were recruited at a national level, allowing the inclusion of families from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. The majority of participants were mothers, reflecting common caregiving patterns in Greece, where mothers continue to assume primary responsibility for daily child care. Children were of early childhood age, in line with the focus on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Instruments

Parental stress was assessed using the Parental Stress Scale (PSS), a self-report instrument designed to measure perceived stress related to the parenting role. Family resilience was measured with the Family Resilience Assessment Scale (FRAS), which evaluates key dimensions of family resilience consistent with systemic and relational approaches. Psychological well-being was assessed using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWB), grounded in a eudaimonic conceptualization of well-being and assessing multiple dimensions of optimal psychological functioning. All instruments are widely used in international research and have demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties in previous studies.

Procedure

Data were collected through an online questionnaire, which was disseminated nationally to parents of children with SEN. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study prior to completing the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and no identifying information was collected.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using standard quantitative statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics were computed to examine levels of parental stress, family resilience, and psychological well-being. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to explore associations among the main variables. Additionally, group comparisons were performed to examine differences according to selected demographic and contextual factors, including place of residence.

RESULTS

Levels of Parental Stress, Family Resilience, and Psychological Well-Being

Parents reported moderate levels of parental stress, with 67.3% of the sample falling within the moderate stress category. This pattern suggests sustained everyday strain rather than acute psychological distress among parents of young children with Special Educational Needs.

Family resilience levels were predominantly moderate to high, with 57.7% of parents reporting high family resilience, indicating the presence of adaptive family processes despite ongoing caregiving demands.

Psychological well-being scores were distributed across low, moderate, and high levels. The overall mean score for psychological well-being was $M = 86.39$ ($SD = 17.30$), reflecting moderate to high levels of psychological well-being among parents in the sample.

Associations among Study Variables

Correlation analyses revealed a statistically significant negative association between parental stress and psychological well-being ($r = -0.52$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of perceived parental stress were associated with lower levels of psychological well-being. Parental stress was also negatively correlated with family resilience ($r = -0.45$, $p < .001$).

In contrast, family resilience showed a strong positive association with psychological well-being ($r = 0.60$, $p < .001$), suggesting that resilient family processes are linked to more adaptive psychological functioning under conditions of sustained caregiving demands.

Group Differences According to Contextual Characteristics

Statistically significant differences were found according to place of residence. Parents living in rural and semi-urban areas reported higher levels of parental stress and lower levels of psychological well-being compared to parents residing in urban areas.

These findings underscore the role of geographic context in shaping parental experiences and reflect inequalities in access to early intervention and support services within the framework of Early Childhood Education and Care.

DISCUSSION

The present findings are highly relevant for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) systems working with families of young children with Special Educational Needs. By examining parental stress, family resilience, and psychological well-being within an early childhood context, the study highlights key psychosocial processes that shape family - ECEC interactions during a critical developmental period.

The coexistence of moderate parental stress with relatively high levels of family resilience suggests that families develop adaptive coping processes while continuing to experience sustained caregiving demands. For ECEC professionals, this finding underscores the importance of recognizing parental stress not as an indicator of dysfunction, but as a common and ongoing aspect of family life in early childhood disability contexts.

The differences observed according to place of residence further emphasize the role of contextual factors in shaping parental experiences. Parents living in rural and semi-urban areas may encounter additional challenges related to access, availability, and continuity of early intervention and ECEC services (Kirbas & Sahin, 2024; Tsibidaki, 2021). These findings highlight the need for ECEC systems to adopt flexible and context-sensitive approaches when working with families across diverse geographic settings.

Overall, the findings point to the importance of family-centered practices within Early Childhood Education and Care, emphasizing collaboration between parents and ECEC professionals. Supporting parental well-being and acknowledging resilience processes may contribute to more effective partnerships and improved outcomes for young children with Special Educational Needs (Fong & Iarocci, 2020; Yildirim et al., 2025).

LIMITATIONS

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences regarding the relationships among parental stress, family resilience, and psychological well-being. Although meaningful associations were identified, longitudinal research would be required to examine changes over time and to better understand directionality among the studied variables.

Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be influenced by subjective perceptions or social desirability bias. While all instruments used are well-established and widely validated, future research could benefit from combining quantitative data with qualitative approaches to capture more nuanced aspects of family experiences.

Finally, the sample consisted predominantly of mothers, reflecting common caregiving patterns in families of children with SEN but limiting the generalizability of the findings to fathers and other caregivers. The underrepresentation of fathers highlights the need for future studies to

explore gender-diverse caregiving perspectives and family dynamics more comprehensively.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined parental stress, family resilience, and psychological well-being in families of young children with Special Educational Needs within the context of Early Childhood Education and Care. The findings indicate that parental stress is commonly experienced at moderate levels, while family resilience and psychological well-being vary across families, reflecting diverse caregiving experiences during early childhood.

By highlighting associations among key psychosocial factors and differences related to place of residence, the study contributes empirical evidence that may inform everyday practice within ECEC settings. Understanding parental experiences in this context can support ECEC professionals in fostering constructive collaboration with families and in responding more effectively to the needs of parents raising young children with Special Educational Needs.

Overall, the study emphasizes the value of considering family experiences as part of inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care practices and underscores the importance of continued research focusing on family well-being during early childhood.

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STEAM APPROACH IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION THROUGH TALES

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Abstract

This paper presents a methodological model for integrating the STEAM approach (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics) in preschool education, taking as a contextual framework the rich universe of Albanian tales. This paper argues that successfully introducing STEAM in early childhood depends heavily on the natural, emotional connections children form with scientific concepts through storytelling. Through a modeled analysis of the tales "The mouse, the ant, and the cat" and "The rabbit and the hedgehog", a didactic guide is proposed where the narrative serves as an incentive for the first construction processes, the intuitive understanding of space, and the observation and imitation of nature. The intended results of this model demonstrate the development of critical and creative thinking in children, intertwining sensitivity towards characters with the practical ability to solve problems.

Keywords: STEAM, preschool education, nature imitation, logical thinking, Albanian tales.

Problem statement

In current pedagogical practice in preschool education, a clear disconnection is often observed between literary and scientific activities. Folktales, while serving as a primary means of communication with young children, are typically restricted to linguistic development or moral instruction, relegating the child to the role of a passive listener. As Egan

(2005, p. 94) emphasizes, when narrative is used only for moralizing, the opportunity to stimulate the child's cognitive imagination, which is vital for understanding the surrounding world, is lost. On the other hand, activities related to science or mathematics are often treated as isolated technical processes, stripped of the emotional element, which, according to Maeda (2013, p.3), hinders the full creative development that comes from the intertwining of arts with science (STEAM). This methodological disconnection creates two main obstacles:

Lack of context: Children struggle to connect abstract concepts (such as sizes, force, or shapes) with their reality. Bruner (1986, p. 11) argues that the human mind functions through narrative structures; without an event or storytelling context, scientific concepts remain foreign and difficult for the child to assimilate.

Underestimation of narrative: The potential of Albanian tales remains untapped as a simulating environment, in which the child can experiment and solve real problems through the imitation of nature models.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to propose an integrated framework that transforms folktales from simple stories into active research "laboratories." The primary goal is to demonstrate how, through STEAM elements, the child can be transformed into an active participant in problem solving (Yakman, 2008, p. 19), effectively combining human empathy with logical reasoning. According to Katz (2010, p. 5), the approach through projects that link natural curiosity with practical research is the most effective way for early education.

Methodology of study

This paper is based on a qualitative methodology, using a theoretical case study design. The paper does not aim to collect statistical data, but to analyze the process of how literary knowledge turns into scientific and creative actions. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2011, p. 3), this approach allows for a broader understanding of educational phenomena within their natural environment.

The instruments used for building this model are:

Documentary analysis: Review of contemporary literature on the STEAM approach and the psychology of child development, relying on Piaget's theory (1952, p. 45) for the construction of knowledge through action.

Analytical review of the text: Analysis of Bedri Dedja's tales to identify challenging situations that serve as incentives for scientific research in children.

Pedagogical modeling: Drafting an integrated didactic guide, which offers a step-by-step structure that can be applied by educators in kindergarten settings (Katz & Chard, 2000, p. 12).

Literature review

Contemporary studies on preschool education emphasize that children aged 5-6 learn more effectively through active exploration rather than through passive methods of information transmission. The integration of arts (A) into the core of science and technology is not considered merely an aesthetic addition, but a tool for developing 21st-century competencies, such as problem solving and critical thinking (Hadinugrahaningsih et al., 2020, p. 5). Modern educational approaches suggest that narrative acts as a catalyst, encouraging the ability to see interdisciplinary connections across different fields of knowledge.

Research on *Story-based STEAM* suggests that the tale serves as an environment in which abstract concepts come to life (Colucci-Gray et al., 2021, p. 14). For young children, notions of force, weight, or space are difficult to grasp in isolation. However, when these concepts are placed within a contextual framework, they transform into challenges that the child desires to solve (Wan et al., 2023, p. 8). This type of emotional engagement increases concentration and makes the research process more meaningful, creating a link between imagination and formal logic.

Within the Albanian context, traditional tales illustrate a strong link between storytelling and developmental psychology. Bedri Dedja's narrative structures are designed not only for linguistic enrichment but to actively provoke creative problem-solving. His characters frequently face dilemmas requiring acute environmental observation and the imitation of natural models to succeed. Dedja's visionary approach aligns closely with modern philosophies of preschool engineering, where design and planning are

recognized as vital tools for understanding the physical world (Li et al., 2022, p. 3).

The imitation of nature models, known as biomimicry, is proposed as a bridge between the knowledge of the living world and the first construction processes. At the age of 5-6, children possess a natural curiosity about living things, which makes them excellent observers of adaptation models. When children are encouraged to see how the hedgehog's quills or the structure of the ant's storehouse are optimal solutions for protection or living, their creative inspiration is stimulated (Aras, 2021, p. 212). This process helps them understand that the objects we build are often a clever reproduction of natural solutions, developing both logic and environmental sensitivity at the same time.

From storytelling to practical creation

To bring the integrated STEAM model to life, two work cycles based on Bedri Dedja's tales have been selected. Each cycle follows the research steps: Listening - Observation of nature - Sketching - Construction.

Cycle I: The mouse, the ant, and the cat – Exploration of space and stability

In this activity, children become “helpers” of the hardworking ant, moving from passive listening to concrete action. According to Wan et al. (2023, p. 12), this type of character transposition into a real challenge is essential for cognitive engagement in preschool age.

The Narrative Challenge: The ant requires a secure storehouse to protect its winter food reserves from mice and moisture.

Observation of nature's model: The teacher discusses with the children how ants build their nests underground to be strong and not collapse, and how they divide the rooms. This phase encourages keen observation, which, according to Aras (2021, p. 214), is the first step toward scientific thinking.

Practical activity

Measurement and mathematics: Children use containers of different sizes (baskets) to measure reserves. They experiment: "Which container holds more? How many cups of sand do we need to fill the storehouse we are building?" This process of informal measurement helps in building the first mathematical concepts of capacity.

Construction process: Using cardboard boxes and paper rolls, children build the storehouse model. Here they face the first problem: "How can we make the base so the structure doesn't fall?". This phase represents the Engineering (E) element in STEAM, where children test stability through trial and error (Li et al., 2022, p. 7).

Creative Solution: Children might suggest paper lids or "locks" to secure the entrance. This highlights the integration of Art and Design (A), where functional engineering meets creative problem-solving.

Cycle II: The rabbit and the hedgehog – Exploration of protection and movement

This cycle focuses on the way nature offers solutions for the slowest living beings, integrating concepts of biological adaptation with those of simple mechanics.

The Narrative Challenge: The hedgehog must compete with the rabbit's speed. He succeeds using his intellect and his unique physical attributes.

Observation of nature's model: Children observe images of the hedgehog and discuss the function of the quills and the spherical shape it takes to protect itself. According to Aras (2021, p. 215), this process of observing protective structures in nature develops in the child "biomimetic awareness" (learning from nature).

Practical activity

Modeling and science: Children create a hedgehog with plasticine and use pins or straws to imitate the quills. They test the "protection" by trying to touch it lightly with their hand, understanding the relationship between form and function.

The first elements of movement: The challenge evolves: "How can we help the hedgehog move faster?". Children build a simple vehicle with wheels (bottle caps). This phase encourages engineering thinking, where the child must design a solution for a movement problem (Li et al., 2022, p. 10).

Testing: Children test their vehicles on an inclined board (inclined plane). Through experimentation, they discover intuitively how wheels and slope affect speed. As emphasized by Hadinugrahaningsih et al. (2020, p. 7), testing prototypes in real conditions helps children understand basic

principles of physics (gravity and friction) without the need for theoretical formulas.

Expected results and discussion

Implementing this integrated model, which merges Bedri Dedja's literary heritage with the STEAM framework, aims to produce these results in children of preschool age:

Development of Critical and Creative Thinking: Moving beyond passive listening, children are challenged to devise practical solutions for narrative dilemmas. This fosters the ability to analyze variables and test hypotheses until a viable result—such as structural stability—is achieved. As Li et al. (2022, p. 13) state, this "design thinking" process forms the bedrock of practical intelligence in early childhood.

Strengthening Empathy and Research Ethics: Because the engineering task originates from a story, children are not just building technical objects; they are creating human-centric solutions to assist a character they care about. This frames science and technology as tools for well-being rather than sterile, mechanical processes (Colucci-Gray et al., 2021, p. 22).

Intuitive Grasp of Biomimicry: By imitating nature, children learn that highly efficient engineering solutions already exist in the biological world. This heightens their environmental curiosity, turning them into careful observers of their ecosystem—a skill Aras (2021, p. 218) terms "ecological literacy."

Foundational Skills in Measurement and Physics: Without relying on academic jargon, children discover how an incline dictates speed or how a container's dimensions determine its volume. This demonstrates that integrating art and narrative (A) does not dilute scientific rigor; rather, it makes scientific concepts more accessible and memorable (Wan et al., 2023, p. 18).

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that Albanian folktales, particularly the literary works of Bedri Dedja, hold untapped potential for meeting the demands of modern preschool education. The main conclusions of this study are:

Interdisciplinary integration: Literature and the STEAM approach should not be seen as isolated fields, but as interacting systems. In this model, the narrative provides the contextual framework and emotional motivation ("the reason"), while science and technology provide the tools for practical intervention on reality.

The author's visionary value: Bedri Dedja emerges as a visionary author whose narratives organically promote logical reasoning, problem-solving, and analytical observation of the natural world. His literary universe functions as an ideal incubator for early scientific literacy.

Action-based teaching: The proposed model shifts the classroom dynamic from passive absorption to active experimentation. Children learn through an iterative process of trial, error, and refinement, acquiring both technical knowledge and cognitive resilience. Consistent with recent pedagogical frameworks (Colucci-Gray et al., 2021), combining creative storytelling with scientific inquiry equips young learners with the foundational skills necessary to navigate the complexities of the 21st century.

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THEORETICAL MODEL OF INTEGRATED DIGITAL FOLKLORE (IDFM)

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Abstract

Education in the digital era faces a distinct challenge: as technological tools multiply, traditional cultural heritage risks slipping away from younger generations. For Generation Alpha—a cohort defined by its native relationship with virtual environments (McCrindle & Fell, 2021, pp. 18-22)—conventional methods of teaching folklore are often ineffective. This paper introduces the Integrated Digital Folklore Model (IDFM), a theoretical and practical framework designed to help primary school teachers bring cultural heritage back to life. Grounded in the TPACK framework and Multimodal Literacy theory, the model outlines a three-stage instructional cycle: Curation, Experience, and Creation. The article examines the teacher's evolving role as a critical curator and provides a comprehensive catalog of Web 2.0 tools to support this process.

Keywords: Education, folklore, pedagogy, Generation Alpha, theoretical model.

Introduction: Grounding the IDFM in the TPACK Framework

The Integrated Digital Folklore Model (IDFM) is a teaching framework designed to revitalize cultural heritage within the digital landscape of primary education. To successfully merge technology with the study of folklore, this model is rooted in the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework. According to Mishra and Koehler (2006, pp. 1017–1054), a teacher's effectiveness in the digital era relies on more than just tech-savviness; it requires finding the optimal intersection of content, pedagogy, and digital tools.

IDFM does not treat technology as a mere add-on; rather, it serves as a catalyst that empowers active pedagogy and enables an in-depth exploration of folkloric content. It is structured upon three core pillars:

- Content Knowledge (CK): Focuses on the subject of folklore (utilizing the richness of legends and cultural artifacts).
- Pedagogical Knowledge (PK): Guides the teacher toward discovery-based methods, storytelling, and gamification.
- Technological Knowledge (TK): Facilitates the use of 360° spherical platforms, Canva, Padlet, etc., to reify abstract knowledge.

Content Curation and Resource Accessibility

The IDFM serves as a theoretical framework for cultural sustainability within the contemporary educational environment. This process relies on active didactic curation, where the teacher acts as a facilitator between historical heritage and the digital-native approach of Generation Alpha. According to Geneva Gay, culturally responsive pedagogy requires the learning process to integrate elements that reflect the student's identity, transforming folklore into a dynamic resource for individual inquiry (Gay, 2021, p. 45).

Through multimodal formatting, this model enables the ontological revitalization of cultural material, turning it into a functional asset for developing civic and technological competencies (UNESCO, 2024, p. 12). Consequently, the student is no longer a passive recipient of information but becomes an active participant in heritage valuation through platforms aligned with their inherent learning styles (Sari et al., 2024, p. 89).

Multimodality as a Tool for Developing Functional Linguistic Competence

The selection of resources during this stage of the IDFM model is grounded in Multimodal Literacy Theory. According to Ashadi Sari, this theoretical framework posits that knowledge acquisition is more sustainable and comprehensive when information is conveyed through the integration of linguistic, visual, auditory, and spatial channels (Sari et al., 2024, p. 92). In the context of folklore, this implies that the plain text of a legend or the description of traditional attire acquires new layers of meaning when accompanied by interactive digital stimuli that develop the student's functional competencies.

From a practical perspective, the use of digital libraries such as Europeana (Europeana Cultural Heritage) or Open Educational Resources (OER) enables students to transition from passive readers to active explorers. For instance, access to high-resolution images of folk costumes allows for detailed observation of textures and symbols, fostering what contemporary pedagogy defines as agentic engagement. This process encourages students to actively contribute to the instructional flow by posing questions and proposing new perspectives (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, pp. 257–267).

According to Sari, this form of engagement emerges when students take a leading role in their own research process, personalizing their journey of discovering elements of heritage (Sari et al., 2024, p. 98). In this sense, technology does not replace folkloric material; rather, it acts as a lens that makes it more accessible and meaningful for students' cognitive structures.

Critical Curation: The Teacher as an Architect of the Learning Environment

A persistent challenge in technology integration is the risk of cognitive overload—a condition in which students may feel overwhelmed when confronted with an uncontrolled volume of information. To address this, the IDFM model proposes the concept of critical curation, an approach advocated by Keith Sawyer and colleagues (Sawyer et al., 2024, p. 112). Within this framework, the teacher does not function as a mere transmitter of resource links but as an architect of the learning environment, carefully selecting and filtering materials that align with pedagogical objectives and students' developmental levels.

This critical curation is implemented through two primary filters:

- **Local contextualization:** To enhance emotional relevance and meaningful connection, the teacher selects resources that reflect the student's immediate environment. This process, referred to in pedagogy as cultural scaffolding, helps build bridges between prior knowledge and new digital information. Originally conceptualized by Bruner as a form of graduated assistance toward cognitive independence, this concept is revitalized in the present model through its adaptation to contemporary digital environments (Bruner, 1976; Hammond & Gibbons, 2024, p. 56).

- **Developmental appropriateness:** Through platforms such as FlipHTML5 or AnyFlip, teachers can transform narrative materials into interactive digital flipbooks. This format not only makes reading more engaging but also facilitates information processing by structuring content into manageable units. Such curation enhances students' sense of security during digital navigation and reinforces the teacher's role as a guide in the learning process (Sawyer, 2024, p. 115).

Classification of digital resources and verification of authenticity

To minimize the risk of misinformation or distortion of folkloric elements in digital environments, the IDFM model proposes a structured protocol for resource verification. According to Steven Higgins and Richard Smith, the effectiveness of a digital didactic model depends on the use of certified resources that ensure both scientific accuracy and cultural integrity (Higgins & Smith, 2024, p. 78). This process relies on two key mechanisms:

- **Authentic selection:** Teachers guide students toward institutional archives—such as platforms managed by cultural institutions, national libraries, or digital museums—ensuring that materials (e.g., tales, myths, or images of traditional attire) are credible representations of tradition. This prevents reliance on sources with unclear origins or distorted content commonly found in open search environments.
- **Development of critical competence:** Through this filtering process, students begin to distinguish authentic evidence from superficial reinterpretations. This stage functions as an early exercise in critical thinking, preparing primary students to become responsible users of information in the age of Artificial Intelligence (Luckin, 2025, p. 34). It also reinforces what has been previously defined as functional linguistic competence, particularly in the domain of information evaluation.
- **Integrated experience and multisensory exploration**

This component is grounded in the principle of digital presence (telepresence), whereby technology enables students to experience a sense of being physically present in a different environment, regardless of

geographical or temporal distance (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). According to Chris Dede and John Richards, immersive environments enhance intrinsic motivation, transforming learning from a mechanical process into an emotionally meaningful experience (Dede & Richards, 2025, p. 14).

Within the IDFM model, this is implemented through two complementary approaches:

- **Close observation:** The use of high-resolution imagery allows students to observe details beyond the limits of the naked eye. Through platforms such as Google Arts & Culture, students can explore intricate elements of garments such as the xhubleta or the embroidery of a fustanella. Zooming into the fabric enhances understanding of craftsmanship and symbolic meaning, fostering a deeper appreciation of cultural heritage (Pietro, 2024, p. 65).
- **360° narrative space:** Spherical technologies enable the presentation of environments in a full circular field of view, allowing students to virtually enter the setting of a legend. For example, through platforms like ThingLink, teachers can design virtual tours of sites such as Rozafa Castle, where students explore the environment while interacting with embedded narrative elements. As Keith Miller notes, spatial immersion can increase retention of folkloric elements by up to 40% (Miller, 2024, p. 92). This approach fosters both emotional engagement and spatial understanding, transforming storytelling into an immersive learning experience.

Interaction and personalization: The student as an active discoverer

At this stage, technology becomes an interactive environment that stimulates students' natural curiosity. The IDFM model aligns with discovery-based learning, a pedagogical approach in which students actively construct knowledge through exploration. According to Bruner, this model positions learners as active participants who build new knowledge upon prior experiences, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation and critical thinking (Bruner, 1961, pp. 21–32).

Similarly, Barron and Darling-Hammond emphasize that when students take ownership of their learning process, information is transformed into durable knowledge (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2025, p. 118). This is operationalized through:

- **Detailed exploration of objects:** Students investigate specific elements of cultural heritage using interactive features such as hotspots. For example, isolating a musical instrument may trigger audio playback or visual demonstrations of its use, promoting deeper engagement and autonomy.
- **Personalization of the experience:** Students are free to focus on aspects that capture their interest. This transforms the classroom into an individualized research space, where each learner forms a unique connection with cultural heritage, strengthening both identity and a sense of belonging (Smith, 2024, p. 205).

Gamification as a driver of curiosity and engagement

To ensure that virtual exploration is transformed into active knowledge, the IDFM model integrates the strategy of gamification. According to Karl Kapp, this approach does not aim for mere entertainment but uses game mechanics and aesthetics to foster cognitive engagement and problem-solving (Kapp, 2012, p. 10). Within the IDFM model, this is achieved through a logical progression: observe → interact360° → play, where the student moves from passive perception to concrete action upon the folkloric material. James Paul Gee asserts that playing enables students to experiment with their knowledge in a supportive environment, where error is seen as part of the growth process rather than failure (Gee, 2007, p. 37).

Practical implementation is carried out through platforms such as Wordwall1 or LearningApps2:

1 **Wordwall** – An interactive educational platform that enables the creation of gamified learning activities such as quizzes, labeled games, wheels of fortune, and word cards. It provides interactivity for the student, turning assessment into a motivating and fun experience. Accessed at: <https://wordwall.net>

2 **LearningApps** – A digital tool (Web 2.0) created to support learning and teaching processes through interactive modules. It offers a wide range of templates such as: chronological sequencing, matching pairs, or fill-in-the-blanks, which facilitate knowledge acquisition. Accessed at: <https://learningapps.org>

Assessment through challenge: After exploring a legend or observing traditional attire, the teacher does not use traditional questionnaires but interactive quizzes. For example, through the match-up template, the student can link a legendary figure like Muji to his strength (the source of strength from the fairies' milk) or pair the names of folk instruments with their images.

Promoting well-being in learning: By turning questions into a game with colors, sounds, and immediate feedback, the student feels more at ease and liberated from the pressure of formal assessment. For instance, instead of a written test on folk costumes, the student completes an interactive map on LearningApps3, where every correct answer is accompanied by a celebratory sound or the discovery of a new artistic detail. This transforms the classroom into a play laboratory, where the teacher creates personalized materials that stimulate the desire to discover more about folklore, making the learning process as challenging as it is enjoyable.

Expression and creation (Digital product)

This stage represents the fulfillment of the IDFM model, where the student transitions from an attentive user of information to a co-creator of heritage. This is based on the principle of constructionism (Papert, 1980), according to which the best and most sustainable learning occurs when an individual is engaged in building a tangible and meaningful product.

Digital storytelling and creative reshaping

Students use digital tools to reinterpret folkloric elements they have previously researched. This process is not a mechanical repetition but a new expression of their identity. According to Bernard Robin, digital storytelling

3 **LearningApps** – An educational platform based on interactive modules (Learning Objects), which facilitates the creation of specific exercises like chronological sequencing, matching pairs, fill-in-the-blanks, and interactive maps. Through its intuitive structure, it encourages self-correction and independent learning, providing students with a practical environment to test their knowledge of folklore dynamically. Accessed at: <https://learningapps.org>

develops linguistic, digital, and artistic competencies in an integrated manner (Robin, 2008, p. 224).

Digital talking book: Through platforms like Book Creator⁴ or Canva⁵, the student creates an illustrated book about a legendary figure (e.g., Muji). They select backgrounds that evoke antiquity and, through the recording option, give voice to the character, narrating parts of the epic. This final product is not merely an assignment but an audio-tale where the student interprets the characters, giving them a modern and personal spirit.

Collaborative projects and the class digital archive

To foster teamwork and a sense of belonging, the model proposes the creation of a shared research space through Google Classroom⁶. This platform serves as a living archive where the teacher organizes materials by theme (e.g., legends, music, attire), allowing students to access certified resources at any time.

Heritage map on Padlet: Students within a class pin photos, texts, audio recordings, or details of local folk costumes onto this digital board. This process, integrated within the umbrella platform of Google Classroom,

4 Book Creator – An open digital platform that allows students and teachers to create their own interactive books. It enables the integration of text, images, drawings, videos, and voice recordings, making it an ideal tool for documenting cultural heritage research. Accessed at: <https://bookcreator.com>

5 Canva – A powerful graphic design tool providing professional templates for creating posters, presentations, infographics, and videos. In education, it is used to develop artistic and visual competence, allowing students to present folkloric elements in a modern and aesthetic format. Accessed at: <https://www.canva.com>

6 Google Classroom – A free learning management system (LMS) that enables the creation, distribution, and assessment of assignments in a secure digital environment. It serves as a command center where all other tools are integrated, facilitating student–teacher communication and the organization of educational resources. Accessed at: <https://classroom.google.com>

transforms the classroom into a small cultural editorial office, where collaboration fosters civic competence and respect for cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2017, p. 12).

In this manner, Google Classroom does not function merely as an administrative tool, but as a digital portfolio that documents the student's cultural growth throughout the school year.

The IDFM model as a symbiosis of tradition and innovation

The proposed model does not aim to replace traditional methods, but rather to enrich and revitalize them through a blended learning approach. According to Charles Graham, this framework integrates the traditional classroom environment with online learning opportunities, creating a more flexible experience that increases learning effectiveness and student engagement (Graham, 2006, pp. 3–21).

By integrating collaborative tools such as Padlet⁷ and creative ones like Canva, the model transforms folklore into an active process of experience and creation. This process ensures that cultural heritage remains alive and relevant for students of the digital age, harmoniously developing both national identity and technological competence (Selwyn, 2016, p. 62). In this form, the IDFM model serves as a bridge between generations, where technology does not alienate folklore but becomes the medium that preserves its spirit and adapts it to the language of the 21st century.

Digital Resource Catalog

This section is conceived as practical support for primary school teachers wishing to implement the IDFM model. This catalog is not merely a list of tools but an invitation to explore the 21st-century digital laboratory, where Albanian tradition can be preserved and promoted through advanced

⁷ **Padlet** – A virtual wall board where students can post their thoughts, photos, and research in real-time. Ideal for the Heritage Map. Accessed at: <https://padlet.com>

technologies, transforming the student from a passive listener into a cultural co-creator.

Nearpod: Allows teachers to create interactive presentations where students can draw, take quizzes, and view VR (virtual reality) environments within the presentations. Access: <https://nearpod.com>

Mentimeter: Used to gather immediate feedback through key concepts. e.g., "What is the first word that comes to mind when you hear the name Muji?" Access: <https://www.mentimeter.com>

Genially: A platform for creating presentations, infographics, and digital "escape rooms" that are fully interactive and animated.

Storyboard That: A tool that allows students to create graphic narrative sequences to illustrate legends or the Cycle of the Kreshniks. Access:

ChatterPix Kids: A fun application where students can give voice to a photo (e.g., making a traditional costume or an instrument speak and tell its own story). Access: (Available on App Store / Play Store)

Edpuzzle: Allows the teacher to take a video from YouTube (e.g., a folk costume, a lahuta song, or a film adaptation of a tale) and insert stop-questions within the video that the student must answer to proceed. Access: <https://edpuzzle.com>

Anchor (Spotify for Podcasters): A simple tool for creating the class folklore podcast (audio-tale), where students record their stories or interviews. Access: <https://podcasters.spotify.com>

Vocaroo: A simple online tool for recording and sharing voice messages. In the context of folklore, it serves as a digital voice recorder for students to document oral heritage (tales, songs, testimonies) from tradition bearers in their families. Access: <https://vocaroo.com>

Suno AI: An artificial intelligence-based platform for generating musical compositions. It enables students to transform epic verses or folk poetry into songs across various genres, fostering an understanding of rhythm and poetic structure through a new form of creation. Access: <https://suno.com>

Wakelet: A curation platform that allows teachers to collect articles, YouTube videos, images, and PDF documents in a single space (collection). It is the ideal tool for creating the class digital library for specific topics like the Cycle of the Kreshniks or folk costumes. Access: <https://wakelet.com>

Quizizz: A knowledge assessment platform that offers a calmer environment than fast-paced games. It allows students to answer questions at their own pace, providing detailed reports for the teacher on each student's progress. Access: <https://quizizz.com>

MindMeister: A digital tool for building conceptual maps and mind diagrams. It helps students visualize complex connections between mythological characters, genealogical trees, or the geographical distribution of customs and traditions. Access: <https://www.mindmeister.com>

Coggle: An excellent tool for creating colorful mind maps. The teacher can use it to analyze the structure of an epic song (e.g., characters, setting, code of honor). Access: <https://coggle.it>

Sutori: A platform that creates interactive timelines. Ideal for presenting the evolution of folk costumes or the periods of Albanian folklore collection. Access: <https://www.sutori.com>

Loom: Allows the teacher to record their screen and themselves simultaneously. It can be used to create short video tutorials on how students should use the other platforms. Access: <https://www.loom.com>

Pixton: A platform for creating avatars and comics. Students can create themselves as legendary characters and build dialogues using the language of the period. Access: <https://www.pixton.com>

Plickers: Ideal for classrooms with limited technological devices. The teacher uses coded cards and their phone to scan students' answers live. Access: <https://get.plickers.com>

Symbaloo (Digital Bookmarking Panel): An organizing environment that serves as a resource guide, where the teacher curates and archives all important links regarding folklore. Through simple and clear icons, students can access study materials with a single click, creating a personalized digital library. Access: <https://www.symbaloo.com>

Wizer.me: Enables the creation of interactive worksheets. Instead of the classic paper-and-pencil sheet, the student completes videos, audio, and images within the assignment. Access: <https://wizer.me>

CoSpaces Edu: Allows students to create their own 3D environments and view them in VR. A group of students can build Rozafa Castle in a digital format. Access: <https://cospaces.io/edu>

AnswerGarden: The fastest tool for brainstorming. The teacher asks a question, and all student answers immediately appear on the screen as a word cloud. Access: <https://answergarden.ch>

Adobe Express: Similar to Canva but with a strong focus on short videos and simple web pages. Ideal for students to present a mini-documentary about a regional festival. Access: <https://www.adobe.com/express>

Conclusions and recommendations

The selection of these platforms is not intended merely for the technological modernization of the lesson but aims to create a communicative bridge between the past and the future. Through the IDFM model, the teacher does not simply teach students how to use software; rather, they provide them with the necessary tools to protect, document, and promote our national identity in the global digital space. By giving voice to legends through Vocaroo, visualizing castles in VR, or encoding epic cycles in Sutori, the student becomes a promoter of heritage in the digital era of folklore. In this manner, technology ceases to be an end and becomes an empowering tool that ensures our spiritual wealth will survive and shine even in the age of artificial intelligence.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions presented, the following concrete measures are recommended for the effective implementation of the IDFM model and the integration of digital platforms into teaching:

Systematic teacher training in digital pedagogy. Professional development sessions should be organized, focusing not only on the technical use of platforms (Vocaroo, VR, Sutori) but on the didactics of their integration to develop students' cultural, digital, and civic competencies.

Creation of interdisciplinary projects. Collaboration between subjects should be promoted to realize projects that intertwine literary analysis, historical context, and digital production. This approach strengthens meaningful learning and transforms cultural heritage into an active experience.

Building a school digital archive. Products created by students (voice recordings, visualizations, digital timelines) should be preserved in an institutional online archive. This ensures long-term documentation, public promotion, and the construction of a school identity in the digital space.

Empowering the student's role as creator and promoter. The instructional process should be oriented toward active methodologies (project-based learning, digital storytelling, virtual exploration), where the student

transitions from an information consumer to a producer of culturally valuable content.

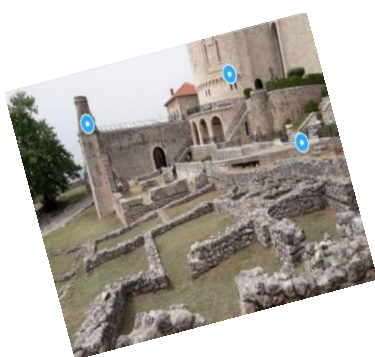
Guaranteeing infrastructure and equal access. Educational institutions must invest in hardware, stable internet connections, and VR tools to ensure that digital transformation does not remain solely at a conceptual level.

Promotion of products in digital public spaces. Social media, official school websites, and educational platforms should be used to publish high-quality projects, making cultural heritage an active part of global communication.

The implementation of these recommendations will ensure that technology is used as a strategic tool for the preservation, transformation, and transmission of cultural heritage within the context of the digital society.

EXAMPLES: Implementation of the model in the classroom

The IDFM model can be illustrated through two practical applications that link traditional instruments with historical spaces. In the first example, students use tools such as Vocaroo and Suno AI to explore the sound of the lahuta, integrating epic verses with modern interpretations that preserve the original rhythm. In the second example, through 360° technology, students virtually enter the hidden castle of Skanderbeg (Cape of Rodon), where interactive elements allow them to discover the architecture and legends of the fortification within an immersive environment. These cases demonstrate how technology serves as a bridge to make the symbols of our resilience and identity tangible.



<https://www.thinglink.com/scene/2074772463614427622>

<https://www.thinglink.com/scene/2074652338282299878>

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PROFESSIONAL PROFILE OF THE PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD (AGES 0–6)

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Abstract

Physical education in the age range of 0–6 years represents a fundamental component of children’s holistic development, directly influencing motor, cognitive, social, and emotional growth. The profile of the physical education teacher for this age group requires an integration of professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, and psycho-social competencies tailored to early childhood development. This paper aims to analyse and describe the main characteristics of the professional profile of the physical education teacher working with children aged 0–6 years, emphasizing academic training, knowledge of child developmental stages, the ability to plan playful motor activities, and the creation of a safe, motivating, and inclusive environment. Furthermore, the role of the teacher is highlighted as a facilitator of learning through play, a promoter of an active lifestyle, and a collaborator with families and educational staff. Ultimately, the profile of the physical education teacher in early childhood education is considered crucial for establishing the foundations of health, mobility, and well-being in later stages of life.

Keywords: physical education, early childhood education, ages 0–6, teacher profile, pedagogical competencies, active lifestyle

Introduction

Early childhood, particularly the age range of 0–6 years, represents a critical period for the holistic development of children. During this stage, physical activity plays a fundamental role in supporting motor development, cognitive growth, emotional balance, and social interaction. Physical education in early childhood education is not merely focused on movement, but serves as a foundation for healthy lifestyles, body awareness, and positive attitudes toward physical activity throughout life.

The effectiveness of physical education at this stage is closely linked to the professional profile of the physical education teacher. Teaching young children requires specialised knowledge of developmental stages, age-appropriate motor skills, and pedagogical strategies based on play, exploration, and creativity. The physical education teacher for children aged 0–6 must combine professional competencies with sensitivity, patience, and the ability to create a safe, inclusive, and motivating learning environment.

This paper aims to analyse and define the professional profile of the physical education teacher working with children aged 0–6 years. It focuses on the required academic background, pedagogical and didactic competencies, psychomotor knowledge, and social-emotional skills necessary to support early childhood development. By examining theoretical perspectives and contemporary educational practices, this study emphasizes the essential role of the physical education teacher in early childhood education and highlights the importance of quality teaching in promoting children's well-being and long-term development.

Theoretical Framework

Basic Concepts of Physical Education in Early Childhood

Physical education in early childhood is a structured educational process that promotes children's holistic development through purposeful movement activities. During the preschool years, physical education emphasizes the development of fundamental movement skills such as balance, coordination, locomotion, and body awareness rather than performance or competition.

Research highlights that movement experiences during early childhood are closely connected to brain development, physical health, and learning readiness (OpenStax, 2023). A developmentally appropriate physical education programme encourages exploration, enjoyment, and creativity while supporting the formation of healthy habits and lifelong engagement in physical activity (Zeng et al., 2017).

Theories of Motor and Psychomotor Development (Ages 0–6)

Theories of motor and psychomotor development provide a scientific foundation for understanding children's growth during early childhood. Motor development in children aged 0–6 follows a sequential and predictable pattern influenced by neurological maturation, environmental stimulation, and learning opportunities (OpenStax, 2023). Psychomotor development integrates motor skills with cognitive, emotional, and social processes, emphasizing that movement is essential for language acquisition, attention, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills (Rojo-Ramos et al., 2022). Studies consistently demonstrate that well-structured physical activity programmes significantly improve both motor proficiency and cognitive functioning in young children (Zeng et al., 2017).

The Role of Play in Physical Education

Play represents the core methodological approach in physical education during early childhood. Through play, children naturally engage in movement, experimentation, and social interaction, making learning meaningful and enjoyable. Research confirms that play-based physical activities enhance motor competence while also supporting emotional regulation, creativity, and social skill development (Trawick-Smith, 2014). Furthermore, play reduces stress and anxiety, allowing children to develop physical skills in a safe, pressure-free environment (Yogman et al., 2018). Both structured and free play are essential components of effective physical education, contributing to children's overall well-being and motivation to remain physically active.

Contemporary Standards and Guidelines for Early Childhood Education

Contemporary international standards emphasize physical activity as a fundamental component of early childhood education. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019; 2021) recommends daily opportunities for age-appropriate physical activity and limited sedentary behaviour for children under five years of age. Similarly, UNESCO highlights the right of all children to participate in inclusive, safe, and developmentally appropriate physical education and physical activity programmes (UNESCO, 2015). These standards stress the importance of qualified educators, child-centred teaching approaches, and collaboration with families to support children's holistic development and long-term health (WHO, 2021).

The Profile of the Physical Education Teacher for Children Aged 0–6 Years

Professional and Academic Training

The physical education teacher working with children aged 0–6 years must possess comprehensive professional and academic training that combines physical education, early childhood pedagogy, developmental psychology, and health sciences. Research emphasizes that early childhood educators require specialized preparation to understand motor development milestones and the relationship between movement, cognition, and emotional growth (Gallahue, Ozmun, & Goodway, 2012; OpenStax, 2023). Academic training should also include knowledge of safety regulations, inclusive education, and age-appropriate physical activity guidelines. Continuous professional development is essential, as it enables teachers to apply evidence-based practices and adapt to contemporary educational approaches (UNESCO, 2015). A well-prepared teacher is therefore fundamental to ensuring quality physical education in early childhood settings.

Pedagogical and Didactic Competencies

Pedagogical and didactic competencies play a central role in the effectiveness of physical education for young children. Teachers must be capable of designing, implementing, and evaluating developmentally

appropriate movement activities that address individual differences among children (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2019). Early childhood physical education should emphasize play-based, experiential learning rather than formal instruction or performance-based outcomes. Effective didactic practices allow children to acquire fundamental motor skills, develop creativity, and experience enjoyment while participating in physical activity (Zeng et al., 2017). Adaptability, observation skills, and reflective teaching are therefore essential pedagogical qualities for physical education teachers at this stage.

Communication and Socio-Emotional Skills

Communication and socio-emotional skills are essential for teachers working with children in early childhood. Young children depend on clear instructions, positive reinforcement, and emotional support to feel safe and motivated during physical activity sessions (Yogman et al., 2018). Teachers must communicate using simple, encouraging language and demonstrate empathy, patience, and sensitivity to children's emotional and social needs. Through active listening and responsive interaction, teachers support children's self-esteem, cooperation, and emotional regulation (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Consequently, socio-emotional competence is a critical aspect of the physical education teacher's professional profile.

The Teacher's Role in Creating a Safe and Inclusive Learning Environment

Ensuring a safe and inclusive learning environment is a fundamental responsibility of the physical education teacher in early childhood education. Safety includes both physical factors, such as appropriate equipment, space management, and supervision, and emotional factors, including respect, trust, and positive social interactions (WHO, 2021). Inclusivity requires adapting activities to meet diverse abilities, developmental levels, and cultural backgrounds, ensuring that all children have equal opportunities to participate (UNESCO, 2015). A safe and inclusive environment fosters positive attitudes toward movement and promotes long-term engagement in physical activity, contributing significantly to children's overall well-being.

Collaboration with Families and Educational Institutions

Collaboration with families and educational institutions is a key aspect of the physical education teacher's role. Effective communication with families supports consistency between school and home environments, reinforcing healthy habits and active lifestyles (WHO, 2019). Teachers should inform parents about children's progress, the benefits of physical activity, and ways to support movement at home. Additionally, collaboration with other educators and specialists enables an interdisciplinary approach to early childhood education, ensuring that physical education aligns with broader educational goals (NAEYC, 2020). Such cooperation strengthens the quality and impact of physical education programmes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of the Main Findings

This paper has examined, in general, the professional profile of the physical education teacher working with children aged 0–6 years, highlighting the complexity and importance of this role within early childhood education. The analysis confirms that physical education in early childhood is a fundamental component of children's holistic development, influencing motor, cognitive, social, and emotional domains. The findings emphasize that the effectiveness of physical education at this stage depends largely on the teacher's academic preparation, pedagogical competencies, communication abilities, and understanding of child development. In addition, the study underlines the central role of play-based, developmentally appropriate approaches in promoting meaningful learning experiences and positive attitudes toward physical activity from an early age.

The Importance of the Teacher's Profile for Children's Development

The profile of the physical education teacher is shown to be a key factor in supporting children's healthy growth and development during the preschool years. A well-qualified teacher can design safe, inclusive, and engaging movement experiences that foster fundamental motor skills and body

awareness while also supporting emotional security and social interaction. The teacher's ability to communicate effectively, demonstrate empathy, and respond sensitively to individual differences contributes significantly to children's motivation and participation. Moreover, a strong professional profile enables the teacher to act as a facilitator of learning through play, encouraging creativity, cooperation, and self-regulation. Consequently, the physical education teacher plays a crucial role in laying the foundations for lifelong physical activity, health, and overall well-being.

Recommendations for Training, Educational Policies, and Further Research

Based on the findings of this paper, several recommendations can be proposed:

First, teacher education programmes should place greater emphasis on early childhood physical education, ensuring that future teachers receive specialised training in motor development, psychomotor learning, and play-based pedagogical strategies. Ongoing professional development opportunities should also be provided to support teachers in updating their knowledge and skills in line with current research and international standards.

Second, educational policies should recognise physical education as a core element of early childhood curricula and ensure adequate resources, facilities, and qualified personnel in preschool settings. Policymakers should promote inclusive and child-centred approaches that guarantee equal participation opportunities for all children, regardless of ability or background.

Finally, further research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of early childhood physical education and the role of teacher competencies in shaping children's physical activity behaviours. Future studies could also investigate effective training models, cross-cultural perspectives, and innovative practices that strengthen the quality of physical education in early childhood education systems.

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**BUILDING COMPETENT EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE:
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING
INNOVATIONS**

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Abstract

Developing a competent early childhood workforce requires a professional learning system that is dynamic, practice-centered, and aligned with contemporary training innovations. Albania's 2024 National Guideline on Professional Development establishes a unified framework that positions continuous learning as both a professional obligation and a key mechanism for improving the quality of teaching and leadership in preschool settings. Within this system, the Professional Standards for Preschool Teachers and Principals outline the competencies, expectations, and responsibilities that guide workforce development.

Innovative professional development practices—such as coaching, mentoring, professional learning communities (PLCs), lesson study, video-based reflection, and competency-based micro-training—are increasingly recognized as essential for strengthening pedagogical practice. These models move beyond traditional training formats by embedding learning directly into the daily work of teachers. Coaching and mentoring support individualized growth, PLCs encourage joint problem-solving and peer learning while video-reflection enhances self-awareness and instructional decision-making.

Preschool principals play a central role in enabling these innovations by fostering a culture of reflection, modeling pedagogical leadership, using data to guide improvement, and ensuring coherence between professional standards, curriculum, and daily practice. Their leadership directly influences teacher motivation, collaboration, and engagement in professional learning.

Keywords: ECEC workforce, Professional development, Professional standards, Kindergarten principals and teachers

INTRODUCTION

The development of a competent early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce has emerged as a central priority in international education policy, given the decisive influence of early learning experiences on children's cognitive, social-emotional, and long-term developmental outcomes. High-quality ECEC systems contribute not only to school readiness and lifelong learning, but also to equity, social inclusion, and broader societal wellbeing. Across Europe, policy analyses emphasize workforce quality, curriculum coherence, governance, monitoring, and access as interrelated dimensions of effective ECEC provision (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025).

Within this context, continuous professional development (PD) for preschool teachers and principals is increasingly recognized as a key mechanism for improving pedagogical quality and institutional effectiveness. Research demonstrates that well-qualified and professionally supported ECEC staff are more capable of creating stimulating learning environments, sustaining meaningful interactions with children and families, and promoting equitable participation—particularly for vulnerable groups (First Years First Priority, 2022). At the same time, European education systems continue to face persistent challenges, including staff shortages, uneven qualification requirements, and limited access to sustained professional learning opportunities, all of which affect the quality and consistency of early childhood provision (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025).

Contemporary perspectives on professional development move beyond traditional one-off training toward practice-embedded, collaborative, and reflective learning models. Approaches such as coaching, mentoring, professional learning communities (PLCs), lesson study, and video-based reflection embed learning within teachers' daily work and support continuous pedagogical improvement. Evidence indicates that structured PD forms—including in-service training, individualized coaching, and targeted workshops—have statistically significant effects on early childhood teachers' effectiveness (Okeke & Akobi, 2024). Furthermore,

preschool leadership plays a decisive role in enabling these innovations by fostering reflective cultures, aligning professional standards with practice, and supporting collaborative learning environments that enhance teacher motivation and instructional quality.

Given these developments, strengthening professional development systems for both teachers and preschool leaders is essential for building a competent ECEC workforce capable of responding to contemporary educational demands.

Research questions

Guided by these considerations, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the principal professional development needs of preschool teachers and principals in contemporary ECEC contexts?
2. Which innovative professional development approaches demonstrate the strongest impact on pedagogical quality and teacher effectiveness?
3. How does preschool leadership support the implementation and sustainability of innovative professional learning practices?
4. What implications do these findings have for strengthening national professional development systems in ECEC?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of professional development in early childhood education

A substantial body of research confirms that early childhood teachers' knowledge, skills, and professional practices significantly influence children's learning outcomes, school readiness, and long-term development. Consequently, professional development is considered a systemic requirement for ensuring quality and accountability within early childhood programs (Sheridan et al., 2009). Broader analyses of the global early childhood workforce further highlight that, despite increasing recognition of ECEC's importance, limited evidence exists regarding how professional learning systems effectively support

teachers across diverse contexts, underscoring the need to strengthen training pathways and continuous learning opportunities (Mitter & Putcha, 2018). Professional development also contributes to teacher motivation, reflective practice, and improved learning experiences for children, reinforcing its central role in educational improvement and institutional effectiveness (Mizell, 2010).

Characteristics of effective professional development

Research syntheses consistently identify several core features of effective professional development: a strong content focus linked to pedagogy, active learning opportunities, collaboration among teachers, coaching and expert support, structured feedback and reflection, and sustained duration over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These characteristics are associated with measurable improvements in teaching practice and children learning outcomes. Complementary evidence indicates that job-embedded professional learning—such as mentoring, team teaching, video reflection, and participation in professional learning communities—enhances teacher engagement and facilitates the meaningful integration of new knowledge into classroom practice. Teachers also perceive PD as more impactful when they participate in planning and implementing learning experiences and when professional learning is sustained rather than episodic. Empirical studies within early childhood contexts further demonstrate that comprehensive PD programs can improve children’s social-emotional adjustment and school readiness while simultaneously transforming teachers’ pedagogical perspectives and reflective practices (Dinler & Cevher-Kalburan, 2025).

Professional development needs and pedagogical leadership

Research examining teachers’ professional learning needs identifies recurring priorities, including classroom management, communication skills, instructional material use, and assessment competence. These findings highlight the importance of practice-oriented preparation and extended teaching experience within teacher education programs (Toklu & Hursen, 2021).

At the institutional level, professional development is closely connected to pedagogical leadership. Long-term training initiatives can reshape teachers’ pedagogical thinking and strengthen leadership-

related competencies required to manage educational change within early childhood settings (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). Such leadership is essential for sustaining collaborative cultures of learning and embedding innovation in everyday practice.

Overall, international literature indicates that effective professional development in ECEC is systemic, sustained, collaborative, and leadership-supported, rather than fragmented or limited to short-term training. Strengthening these dimensions is therefore fundamental to improving workforce competence and educational quality in early childhood systems.

Evolution of national policy on professional development of educational staff in Albania

Beyond international evidence, understanding professional development (PD) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) also requires examining national regulatory frameworks that shape implementation. In Albania, the Ministry of Education has issued successive policy guidelines regulating the organization, accreditation, monitoring, and participation in professional development activities for educational staff. A comparative analysis of the three key guidelines issued in 2014, 2017, and 2024 reveals a clear trajectory from training-centered regulation toward a systemic, competency-based, and institution-embedded professional development model.

The 2014 guideline: a training-oriented and centralized framework

The 2014 ministerial guideline established the foundational legal and organizational structure for professional development of educational staff. Its primary focus was on defining training programs, accreditation procedures, and participation requirements, emphasizing modules delivered by accredited training agencies and the certification of teachers through testing and portfolio evaluation. The framework positioned professional development mainly as participation in structured training sessions, short courses, and professional networks coordinated by national and regional education authorities. Needs identification and module accreditation were largely centralized, involving ministerial bodies and specialized

agencies responsible for curriculum, assessment, and inspection. Professional learning was therefore conceptualized predominantly as externally provided training linked to credit accumulation and certification, reflecting an early stage of system organization.

The 2017 guideline: strengthening accreditation, monitoring, and professional networks

The subsequent 2017 regulation expanded the 2014 framework by reinforcing quality assurance mechanisms, clarifying procedures for module evaluation, accreditation, and monitoring of training agencies, and strengthening the role of professional networks and institutional participation. This stage introduced more structured processes for evaluating training effectiveness, documenting participation, and ensuring accountability in the delivery of professional learning activities.

Compared with the 2014 approach, the 2017 policy signaled a shift toward greater institutional responsibility and system coherence, while still maintaining a strong emphasis on formal training modules and accreditation structures.

The 2024 guideline: a systemic, continuous, and competency-based PD model

The most recent guideline (2024) represents a substantial conceptual and structural transformation of the PD system. Rather than focusing primarily on training modules, it defines professional development as a continuous, institution-embedded process aimed at improving professional competencies and ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes.

Several major innovations distinguish the 2024 framework:

- Diversification of PD activities, including mentoring, professional networks, conferences, workshops, and innovation projects, moving beyond traditional training formats.
- Credit-based continuous learning requirements, obligating educational staff to complete a minimum number of training days and professional development credits over defined periods.

- Systematic identification of professional learning needs through national curriculum analysis, external evaluation findings, and teacher performance data.
- Integration of institutional roles, particularly the responsibilities of school leaders and teacher coordinators in planning, monitoring, and evaluating PD at the school level.
- Digitalization and centralized management of PD activities through national portals, reporting systems, and annual monitoring procedures.

These elements reflect alignment with contemporary international perspectives that conceptualize professional development as ongoing, collaborative, data-informed, and leadership-supported rather than episodic training.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative policy and document analysis complemented by descriptive quantitative evidence to investigate professional development (PD) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and to provide evidence-based responses to the four research questions concerning:

- the professional development needs of preschool teachers and leaders;
- innovative forms of PD influencing pedagogical quality;
- the role of leadership in sustaining professional learning; and
- implications for strengthening national PD systems.

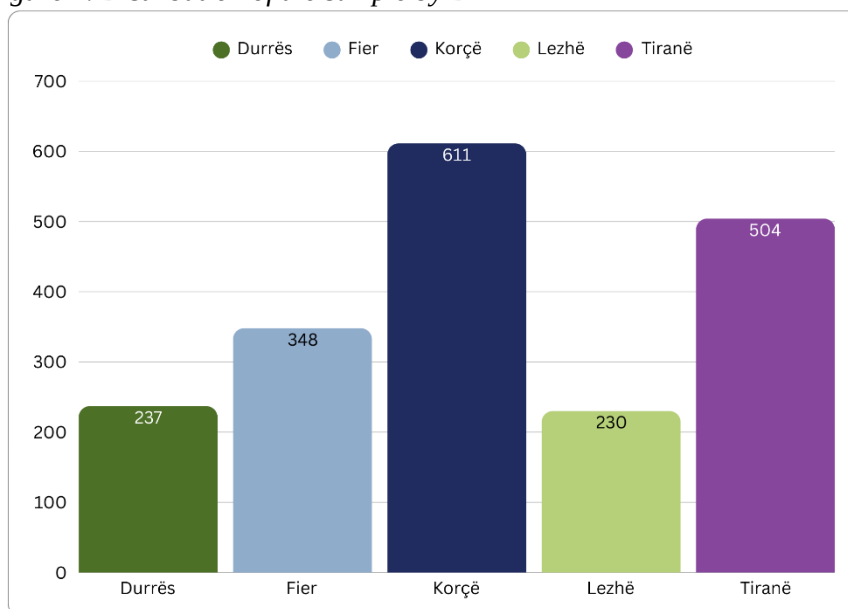
To address these questions, the research design integrates three complementary analytical dimensions:

- synthesis of international research literature on effective PD in ECEC;
- comparative analysis of Albanian policy and regulatory frameworks governing PD;
- secondary analysis of national self-evaluation data needs collected through the large-scale surveys for 1,930 preschool teachers, including preschool teachers working in kindergartens and preparatory classes, as well as principals of public and private kindergartens distributed across five

Regional Directorates of Pre-University Education (DRAPs). Descriptive statistical analysis was used to summarize frequency distributions and participation patterns in professional development activities.

This triangulated design enables the examination of relationships between global evidence, national reform trajectories, and empirically identified professional learning needs, thereby strengthening analytical validity and interpretive depth.

Figure 1. Distribution of the sample by DRAP



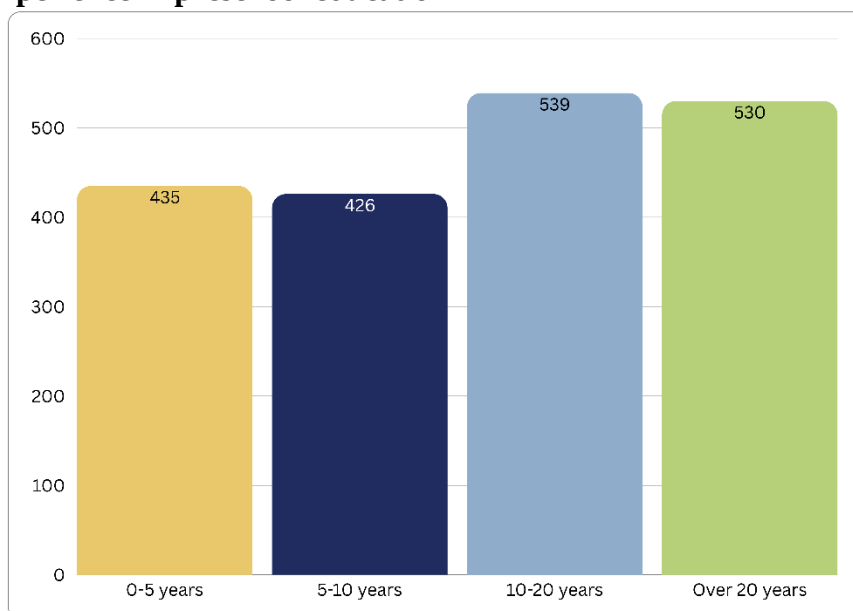
Teaching Experience in Preschool Education

The data in Figure 2 indicate that participants represent a balanced distribution across all levels of professional experience, ranging from novice teachers to those with more than 20 years of experience, enabling the identification of professional development needs that vary across different career stages.

The largest group consists of 539 teachers (27.9%) with 10–20 years of experience, followed closely by teachers with more than 20 years of experience (530 teachers, 27.5%). A substantial proportion is also represented by early-career teachers with fewer than 5 years of

experience (435 teachers, 22.5%) and those with 5–10 years of experience (426 teachers, 22.1%).

Figure 2. Distribution of the sample according to teaching experience in preschool education



DATA SOURCES

International literature on professional development in ECEC

Peer-reviewed studies, global workforce analyses, and policy reports were reviewed to identify the defining characteristics, impacts, and emerging trends of effective PD. International evidence consistently indicates that continuous professional learning—encompassing both pre-service preparation and in-service development—is essential for strengthening workforce competence and improving child development outcomes in early childhood systems.

Research further demonstrates that specialized training, coaching, mentoring, and practice-based collaborative learning significantly enhance teachers' pedagogical knowledge, professional skills, and reflective capacity, supporting meaningful transfer of learning into classroom practice.

These findings provided the conceptual and analytical framework for interpreting national PD developments.

National policy and regulatory framework

A structured document analysis was conducted on key Albanian policy instruments regulating PD for educational staff, including successive ministerial guidelines (2014, 2017, 2024) and the National Program for Teachers' Professional Development 2026–2028.

The analysis examined: evolving conceptualizations of PD as a continuous competency-building process, institutional responsibilities for planning, monitoring, and evaluating PD, accreditation and credit-based participation mechanisms, diversification of PD formats beyond traditional training, alignment with international PD principles. This longitudinal policy trajectory illustrates a systemic shift from centralized, episodic training provision toward continuous, institution-embedded professional learning ecosystems.

National needs-assessment report for preschool teachers

A central empirical component of the study is the “National Report on the Identification of Training and Professional Development Needs of Preschool Teachers”, administered by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ASCAP), which provides large-scale quantitative evidence on teachers' professional learning priorities and participation patterns. The report conceptualizes PD as a career-long developmental process aimed at strengthening competencies and ensuring high-quality educational services for young children. The underlying study employed a self-assessment instrument aligned with professional teaching standards, administered electronically to a nationwide sample of preschool teachers and leaders.

Findings indicate that teachers' professional learning engagement is primarily associated with: participation in accredited training programs, and involvement in professional networks and collaborative learning structures. These empirical results directly inform the analysis of professional learning needs and forms of PD, corresponding to the first two research questions.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through standardised, anonymous online questionnaire administered nationally. Participation was voluntary,

and respondents completed the self-evaluation instruments within a defined data collection period as part of national quality assurance processes and professional development. The large sample sizes and nationwide coverage enhance the representativeness and robustness of the datasets, allowing for system-level analysis rather than institution-specific conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

The study is based on secondary analysis of anonymised data collected for quality assurance and policy development purposes. No personal identifiers were included in the datasets, and the analysis adheres to ethical principles of confidentiality, transparency, and responsible data use.

As recommended in international evaluation guidelines, the data are used to support learning-oriented analysis and continuous improvement rather than individual accountability (Vlasov et al., 2019; Council of the European Union, 2019).

Data analysis procedures

Data were analyzed using an integrated approach combining qualitative thematic analysis, comparative policy analysis, and descriptive interpretation of quantitative national evidence. Findings from document analysis were triangulated with national needs-assessment data to enhance interpretive validity and ensure that conclusions reflect both policy design and empirically identified professional learning realities. This integrative analytical process supports a comprehensive understanding of PD development within the Albanian ECEC context.

Trustworthiness and limitations

Credibility and reliability were strengthened through data triangulation across international literature, national policy documents, and large-scale empirical evidence; transparent thematic coding procedures aligned with research questions, grounding interpretations in system-level national data. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged: reliance on secondary data rather than primary fieldwork, absence of direct classroom observation or

qualitative interviews, potential divergence between policy intentions and implementation practices.

RESULTS

Professional development needs of preschool teachers and leaders (RQ1)

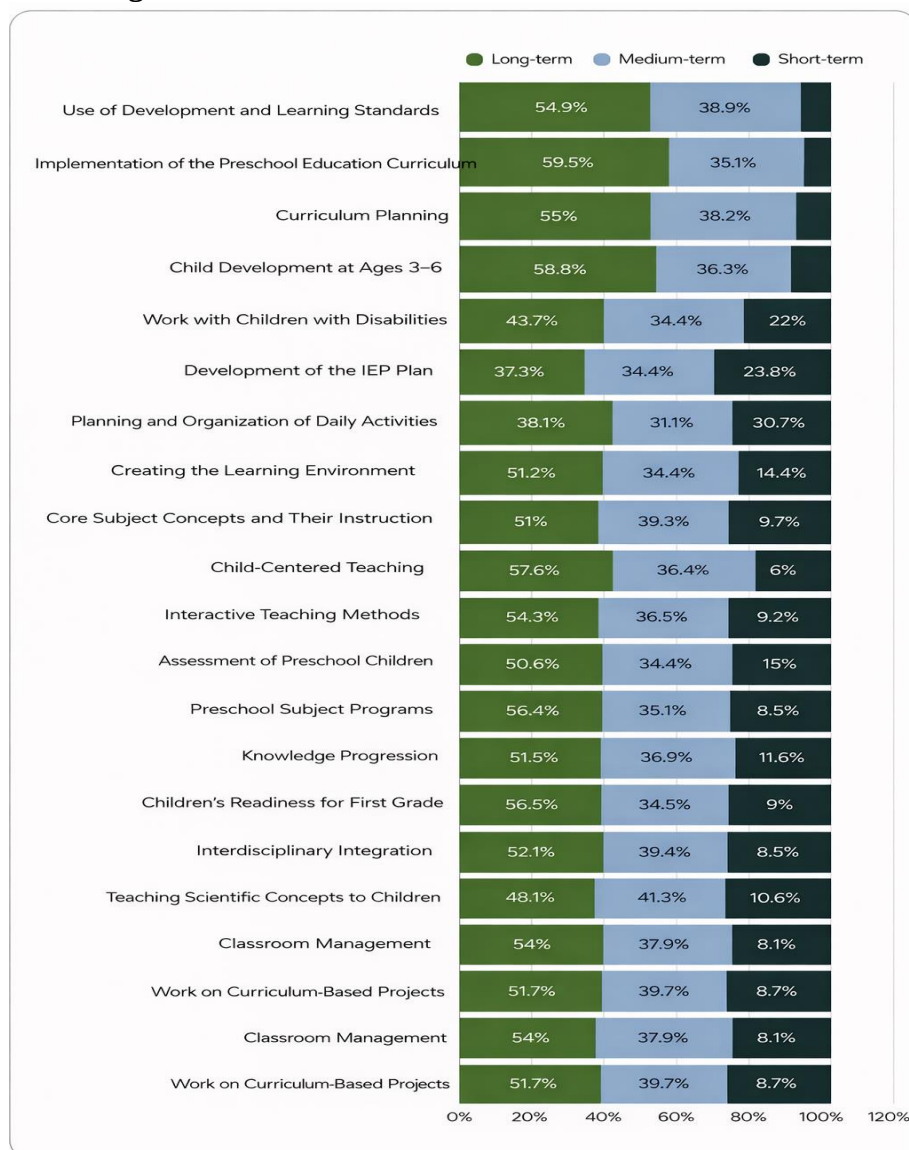
The data presented in Figure 3 provide a clear overview of preschool teachers' professional development needs across different domains of educational and pedagogical practice. The three categories of priorities—short-term, medium-term, and long-term—reflect not only the intensity of need but also institutional coherence in relation to reform and modernization in early childhood education.

There is a clear need for sustained professional development related to curriculum implementation, curriculum planning, and child-centered teaching. Topics connected to inclusion, individualization, and assessment are emphasized within short- and medium-term interventions, indicating that the practical dimensions of inclusive education remain challenging. Teachers also express a need for further guidance in addressing scientific concepts, interdisciplinary connections, and alignment with children's developmental progression, pointing to the importance of an integrated, development-based pedagogical approach. International literature consistently highlights the importance of effective teaching strategies, inclusive pedagogy, assessment competence, and reflective practice as core areas of professional learning for early childhood teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2009). These competencies are closely associated with improved classroom interactions and positive developmental outcomes for children.

National empirical evidence confirms similar patterns. The national needs-assessment of preschool teachers identifies priority areas including competence-based curriculum planning and assessment, inclusive and child-centered teaching methodologies, digital pedagogy and responsible technology use, communication and collaboration with families and communities, classroom management and socio-emotional support for children. These results demonstrate strong convergence between international PD priorities and nationally identified professional learning needs, indicating that Albanian

preschool education is facing challenges comparable to those observed across European ECEC systems.

Figure 3. Priorities in teachers' professional development needs according to standards

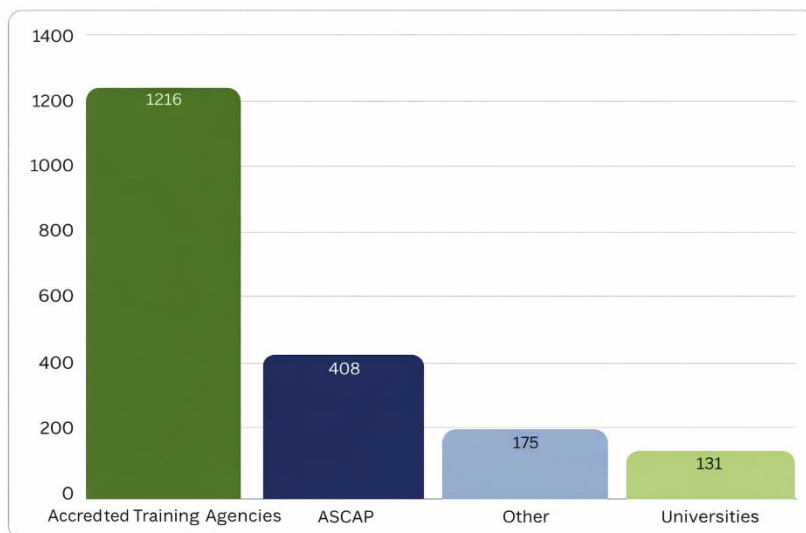


Forms of professional development influencing pedagogical quality (RQ2)

The data presented in Figure 4 show that accredited training agencies have been the primary providers of credit-based training for preschool teachers during the last four years. Specifically, 63.0% of participants (1,216 teachers) reported attending credit-bearing training delivered by accredited agencies. Additionally, 21.1% of participants attended training offered by ASCAP—the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education—demonstrating the increasingly important role of this institution in promoting standards and professional development.

A smaller proportion of teachers (9.1%) participated in training from other unspecified sources, while only 6.8% attended training provided by universities, reflecting the still limited involvement of higher education institutions in the continuous professional development of preschool teachers. At the same time, diversification of training providers and monitoring of training quality remain key elements in ensuring that professional development activities not only meet formal credit requirements but also produce a real impact on teaching practice.

Figure 4. Training providers



Results show that participation in PD is primarily structured around accredited training programs and professional learning networks, which constitute the dominant forms of professional engagement

within the Albanian context. International evidence suggests that sustained, collaborative, and practice-embedded PD models—such as mentoring, coaching, and professional learning communities—have the strongest impact on teaching quality and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Mizell, 2010). National findings align with this perspective. Teachers report that structured training activities delivered by accredited institutions provide foundational knowledge, while professional networks support peer collaboration, exchange of practices, and reflective learning.

However, the results also reveal a partial gap between traditional training-centered participation and the broader range of innovative PD approaches promoted in international literature, particularly regarding coaching, classroom-embedded mentoring, and practitioner research. This suggests that while the institutional PD infrastructure is established, further diversification toward collaborative and practice-based learning models remains necessary.

However, the persistence of training-centred participation patterns suggests that structural reform alone is insufficient without sustained institutional support for practice-embedded professional learning.

The role of leadership in sustaining professional learning (RQ3)

The analysis indicates that pedagogical leadership is a critical enabling factor for effective PD implementation. International studies emphasize that school and preschool leaders play a central role in fostering collaborative professional cultures, aligning PD with institutional goals and curriculum reforms, and supporting reflective teaching practices that improve learning outcomes (Day et al., 2016; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). National policy developments reinforce this leadership dimension. Recent Albanian PD frameworks assign increased responsibility to institutional leaders for planning and monitoring PD activities, facilitating participation in professional networks, linking PD outcomes with school improvement processes. These findings demonstrate a growing alignment between leadership-centered international PD models and national policy orientation, indicating a transition toward instructional and transformational leadership in ECEC.

Implications for strengthening national PD systems in ECEC (RQ4)

The combined results from literature, policy analysis, and national empirical evidence point toward several systemic implications. First, PD must be understood as a continuous professional learning process, rather than episodic training. This aligns with both international research and the most recent Albanian policy framework. Second, strengthening collaborative and practice-embedded PD models—including mentoring, coaching, and professional learning communities—is essential for improving pedagogical quality. Third, effective PD requires strong pedagogical leadership capable of integrating professional learning with institutional development and child-centered educational improvement. Finally, national PD systems benefit from evidence-based planning grounded in large-scale needs assessment, ensuring that professional learning priorities reflect real classroom challenges. Overall, the results indicate that Albania is progressing toward a systemic, competency-based, and leadership-supported PD model, broadly aligned with contemporary European and international directions in early childhood education.

DISCUSSIONS

Convergence between international evidence and national professional development needs

The findings of this study reveal a strong convergence between internationally identified priorities for professional development (PD) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and the empirically documented needs of preschool teachers in Albania. International research consistently emphasizes the importance of inclusive pedagogy, competence-based assessment, reflective teaching, and socio-emotional classroom support as central domains of professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2009).

Similarly, national needs-assessment data highlight multidimensional competency gaps in curriculum planning, digital pedagogy, inclusive methodologies, collaboration with families, and classroom climate. This alignment suggests that the Albanian ECEC workforce is experiencing structural professional learning challenges comparable to those documented across European education systems, reinforcing

the relevance of international PD frameworks for national reform design.

At the same time, the breadth of identified needs indicates that PD must extend beyond subject knowledge toward holistic professional competence, integrating pedagogical, technological, relational, and emotional dimensions of teaching.

Persistence of training-centered participation and the need for practice-embedded models

Although national reforms increasingly promote continuous and collaborative professional learning, the results demonstrate that participation in PD remains largely concentrated in accredited training programmes and professional networks. This pattern reflects a transitional stage in PD system development. Traditional training models provide important foundational knowledge; however, international evidence shows that sustained, job-embedded, and collaborative PD approaches—such as coaching, mentoring, and professional learning communities—produce stronger and more durable improvements in teaching quality and child outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Mizell, 2010). The limited presence of mentoring and coaching within the Albanian PD landscape therefore represents a critical developmental gap. Addressing this gap requires systemic support for kindergarten-based professional learning cultures, where reflection, observation, and peer collaboration become routine elements of professional growth rather than supplementary activities.

Expanding the role of pedagogical leadership in ECEC professional learning

Another central finding concerns the growing importance of pedagogical leadership in sustaining effective PD. International literature demonstrates that leaders who foster collaborative cultures, align PD with institutional goals, and support reflective practice significantly influence teaching quality and student outcomes (Day et al., 2016; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). Recent Albanian policy developments mirror this leadership-centered perspective by assigning increased responsibility to preschool and school leaders for planning, monitoring, and evaluating professional learning processes.

This shift signals movement toward instructional and transformational leadership models, in which leaders act not only as administrators but also as facilitators of professional learning communities. However, effective implementation depends on leaders' own access to specialized leadership-oriented PD, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between teacher learning and leadership development within ECEC systems.

Systemic implications for strengthening professional development in Albania

Taken together, the findings indicate that Albania is undergoing a systemic transition from episodic, training-based PD toward a continuous, competency-based professional learning ecosystem aligned with contemporary European policy directions.

Four key implications emerge:

1. Professional development must be continuous and career-long, embedded in everyday pedagogical practice rather than limited to periodic training events.
2. Collaborative and practice-based PD models—including mentoring, coaching, and professional learning communities—should be expanded to complement accredited training structures.
3. Pedagogical leadership capacity must be strengthened to sustain institutional learning cultures and connect PD with child-centered educational improvement.
4. Evidence-based planning, grounded in national needs assessment and ongoing evaluation, is essential for ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of PD investments.

These implications position Albania within broader international efforts to build competent, reflective, and adaptive early childhood workforces, capable of responding to rapid social, technological, and educational change.

Contribution of the study to international ECEC research

Beyond its national relevance, this study contributes to international scholarship by providing empirical evidence from a Southeast European context, illustrating the policy transition from training provision to systemic professional learning, demonstrating the value

of integrating policy analysis with large-scale needs assessment data, and reinforcing the global importance of leadership-supported, collaborative PD ecosystems in ECEC. Such evidence is particularly important for countries undergoing education system transformation, where aligning national reform with international research remains a central challenge.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined professional development (PD) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) through the integration of international research evidence, national policy evolution, and large-scale empirical data on preschool teachers' professional learning needs. The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how PD systems are transforming within the Albanian educational context and how these developments align with contemporary approaches to teacher development.

A central conclusion is that PD in Albania is undergoing a systemic transformation from episodic, training-oriented provision toward a continuous and competency-based professional learning framework. The 2024 national guideline establishes a unified structure that positions continuous professional learning as both a professional obligation and a key mechanism for improving teaching quality and pedagogical leadership in preschool settings.

The study also confirms that professional learning needs among preschool teachers are multidimensional, extending beyond instructional knowledge to include inclusive pedagogy, competence-based assessment, digital literacy, socio-emotional classroom support, and collaboration with families and communities. These priorities closely mirror international evidence on effective ECEC professional development, demonstrating strong alignment between national reform trajectories and global educational trends.

Another major conclusion concerns the growing importance of innovative professional development models. Practices such as coaching, mentoring, professional learning communities, lesson study, video-based reflection, and competency-based micro-training are increasingly recognized as essential for strengthening pedagogical practice because they embed learning directly within teachers' daily professional activity.

Finally, the findings highlight the central role of preschool principals as pedagogical leaders in enabling effective professional learning. Leaders who foster reflective cultures, model professional standards, use data for improvement, and ensure coherence between curriculum, standards, and daily practice significantly influence teacher motivation, collaboration, and engagement in PD.

Together, these conclusions indicate that strengthening PD in ECEC is fundamentally linked to systemic coherence, innovative learning models, and leadership capacity, positioning Albania within broader international movements toward high-quality early childhood workforce development.

Policy recommendations

Based on these conclusions, several evidence-informed recommendations emerge for strengthening professional development in ECEC.

Institutionalizing continuous professional learning. Professional development should be embedded within daily pedagogical practice and institutional culture, ensuring sustained learning rather than isolated training events. This requires integrating reflection, peer collaboration, and classroom-based inquiry into routine professional activity.

Expanding collaborative and practice-based PD models. National PD systems should prioritize the development of mentoring and coaching programmes, professional learning communities, classroom observation and feedback cycles, practitioner research and reflective inquiry. These approaches are strongly associated with long-term improvements in teaching quality and child outcomes.

Strengthening pedagogical leadership capacity. Preschool and school leaders require specialized leadership-oriented PD focused on instructional leadership, facilitation of collaborative professional cultures, data-informed school improvement, support for inclusive and child-centered pedagogy. Leadership development is essential for sustaining systemic PD reform.

Ensuring evidence-based planning and evaluation. Professional development policies should continue to rely on large-scale needs assessment, continuous monitoring, and impact evaluation to ensure

relevance, efficiency, and measurable improvement in teaching and learning.

Aligning national reforms with international ECEC frameworks. Sustained alignment with European and global PD standards will support the development of a competent, adaptive, and future-oriented early childhood workforce capable of responding to rapid social and technological change.

Implications for future research

Future studies should extend this work by conducting longitudinal mixed-methods research on PD implementation in classrooms, examining direct links between PD participation and child developmental outcomes, exploring leadership practices that sustain professional learning cultures in ECEC, comparing PD system reforms across regional and international contexts.

Final reflection

Strengthening the professional development of early childhood teachers is not merely a technical reform but a strategic investment in children, families, and society. Building competent, reflective, and collaborative ECEC workforces represents one of the most powerful pathways toward equitable and high-quality education systems. The Albanian experience illustrates both the complexity and the promise of this transformation—demonstrating that sustained policy commitment, evidence-based planning, and leadership-supported professional learning can collectively advance the quality of early childhood education in alignment with global educational priorities.

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TOWARDS GLOBAL STANDARDS: MEASURING AND ENSURING QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Ensuring high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) requires systematic monitoring and evaluation aligned with global quality standards. International frameworks from OECD, UNICEF, and the European Quality Framework emphasize that quality must be assessed across multiple domains. The paper highlights three interdependent dimensions of quality: structural quality, process quality, and system quality.

***Structural quality** includes regulated elements such as staff qualifications, child-to-teacher ratios, group size, and the physical environment. These components create the foundation for provision but do not guarantee effective practice. **Process quality**—widely acknowledged as the strongest predictor of child outcomes—refers to the quality of interactions, instructional strategies, emotional climate, and the pedagogical use of play and exploration. **System quality** encompasses leadership, governance structures, monitoring mechanisms, and continuous professional development. Together, these dimensions define the coherent ecosystem necessary to achieve high-quality ECEC. They form an integrated model through which early childhood programs can be internally and externally evaluated.*

Internal evaluation enables kindergartens to reflect on their practice, identify strengths, track progress, and design improvement plans based on evidence. External evaluation—conducted by inspectors, agencies, or accredited bodies—ensures accountability, transparency, and alignment with national and international standards. Together, these processes promote a cycle of continuous improvement and a shared culture of kindergarten quality.

Using standardized tools of National Kindergarten Assessment Framework allows systems to collect consistent data and focus on indicators that matter

most: interaction quality, child engagement, safety, inclusion, and pedagogical intentionality. By linking monitoring with professional development, kindergartens strengthen both daily practice and overall service effectiveness. Advancing toward global standards means using evaluation not as control, but as a developmental tool that supports equitable, enriching, and high-quality learning experiences for all kindergarten children.

Keywords: *ECEC quality framework, structural, process and system quality*

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is widely recognised as a cornerstone of lifelong learning, social inclusion, and sustainable development. Research and policy consensus emphasise that high-quality ECEC has lasting positive effects on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Consequently, the focus has gradually shifted from expanding access alone to ensuring and sustaining quality across ECEC systems.

International frameworks conceptualise ECEC quality as a multidimensional construct, typically encompassing structural, process, and system-level dimensions. *Structural quality* refers to regulated and relatively stable conditions such as staff qualifications, child-to-staff ratios, group size, and the physical learning environment. *Process quality* focuses on the everyday experiences of children, including interactions with teachers, pedagogical practices, emotional climate, and the intentional use of play and exploration. *System quality* includes governance arrangements, leadership, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and opportunities for continuous professional development that enable and sustain quality practices over time.

While structural quality provides the necessary foundation for ECEC provision, a substantial body of research identifies process quality as the strongest predictor of child outcomes, highlighting the central role of teacher–child interactions and pedagogical intentionality. At the same time, evidence increasingly shows that high process quality cannot be achieved or sustained without supportive system-level

conditions, such as coherent governance, professional leadership, and meaningful evaluation practices.

Across Europe and beyond, policy developments have reinforced the importance of quality assurance and self-evaluation as tools for continuous improvement rather than mere compliance. The European Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019) explicitly calls on countries to establish coherent quality frameworks that integrate monitoring, evaluation, and professional learning within a child-centred and rights-based approach. Similarly, international experiences such as the Australian National Quality Framework demonstrate how systematic self-evaluation and external review can be combined to drive sustained quality improvement across diverse ECEC settings.

In this context, Albania has recently undertaken a significant reform by adopting the "National Framework for Kindergarten Quality Evaluation" (2024), which aligns national quality assurance processes with European and international standards. The framework emphasises four interrelated areas—*leadership and management*, *educational practice*, *child development and well-being*, and *partnerships with families and communities*—placing self-evaluation at the core of institutional quality development.

This article contributes to the international discussion on ECEC quality by analysing national self-evaluation data collected from 319 kindergarten leaders⁸ and 1,930 preschool teachers⁹ in Albania. By examining how structural, process, and system quality are reflected in large-scale national self-evaluation practices, the study provides empirical evidence from a system undergoing alignment with global quality standards.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this article is to examine how the three core dimensions of ECEC quality—structural, process, and system quality—are represented and interconnected within national self-evaluation data. Specifically, the study aims to:

¹Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education. (2024). *National self-evaluation report of kindergarten leaders*. Albania.

²Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education. (2024). *National self-evaluation report of preschool teachers*. Albania.

1. Analyse the perceived levels of structural, process, and system quality in preschool settings.
2. Explore the relationship between system-level conditions (leadership, evaluation, professional development) and process quality.
3. Compare perspectives of kindergarten leaders and preschool teachers regarding quality dimensions.
4. Contribute empirical evidence to international debates on using self-evaluation as a tool for continuous quality improvement.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are structural, process, and system quality reflected in national self-evaluation data from preschool institutions?
2. What relationships emerge between system quality and process quality?
3. Are there significant differences between leaders' and teachers' perceptions of ECEC quality?
4. To what extent can national self-evaluation data inform policy and practice aligned with global quality standards?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care

Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is widely recognised as a multidimensional and context-sensitive concept. Earlier research distinguished primarily between *structural quality* and *process quality*, emphasising that regulated inputs such as staff qualifications, group size, and physical environments create necessary conditions, while the quality of everyday pedagogical interactions determines children's learning and well-being (Vlasov et al., 2019). More recent policy and research frameworks extend this conceptualisation by incorporating *system quality*, highlighting the role of governance, leadership, monitoring, and professional development in sustaining quality over time. The European Quality Framework for ECEC explicitly positions quality as being "informed by high expectations" and realised through the interaction of access,

workforce, curriculum, evaluation, and governance (European Commission, 2015).

This systemic understanding reflects a shift from viewing quality as a static set of standards to understanding it as a dynamic process embedded within institutional and policy environments.

Structural Quality: Necessary but Insufficient Conditions

Structural quality refers to relatively stable and regulated aspects of ECEC provision, including staff qualifications, child-to-staff ratios, group size, and physical learning environments. Comparative European data show substantial variation across countries in these structural conditions, particularly in workforce qualifications and staffing arrangements (European Commission/Eurydice, 2025).

While research consistently demonstrates that minimum structural standards are essential for ensuring children's safety and access to learning opportunities, evidence also suggests that structural quality alone does not guarantee effective pedagogical practice. The Finnish evaluation framework, for instance, characterises structural factors as necessary but relatively permanent conditions that require complementary process-related practices to generate impact on children's experiences (Vlasov et al., 2019).

Similarly, the Australian National Quality Framework treats structural requirements as foundational, but emphasises that meaningful quality improvement depends on reflective practice, leadership, and continuous evaluation beyond compliance (ACECQA, 2023).

Process Quality and Children's Everyday Experiences

Process quality is widely acknowledged as the strongest predictor of child outcomes in ECEC. It encompasses teacher–child interactions, emotional climate, instructional strategies, and the pedagogical use of play and exploration. International research consistently links high-quality interactions with improved cognitive, social, and emotional development (OECD, 2025).

Findings from TALIS Starting Strong 2024 underline that settings characterised by warm relationships, intentional pedagogy, and active child engagement are associated with stronger emerging literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills. At the same time, the survey highlights variability in how intentional teaching practices are

implemented, pointing to the importance of professional support and system-level conditions (OECD, 2025).

Practice-oriented frameworks such as “Five Steps to Quality” and the “High Five Quality Scan” operationalise process quality by supporting reflective dialogue among teachers and teams. These tools emphasise that quality emerges through collective reflection, professional learning, and alignment with shared pedagogical values rather than through prescriptive checklists alone (ISSA, 2016; ISSA, 2017).

System Quality: Governance, Evaluation, and Professional Learning

System quality has gained increasing attention as a critical enabler of sustainable ECEC quality. Governance coherence, leadership capacity, and evaluation mechanisms shape the conditions under which teachers can deliver high-quality practice. The Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems stresses that quality assurance systems should be transparent, child-centred, and oriented towards continuous improvement rather than sanction-based accountability (Council of the European Union, 2019).

The Finnish model of enhancement-led evaluation provides a prominent example of how system quality can support pedagogical development. In this model, evaluation is understood as a shared responsibility across national, local, and institutional levels, with self-evaluation positioned as a central driver of quality improvement (Vlasov et al., 2019).

Similarly, international evidence indicates that leadership practices that promote collaboration, trust, and professional learning are closely linked to higher levels of process quality, reinforcing the interdependence between system and pedagogical dimensions (OECD, 2025).

Albanian Quality Frameworks and the Role of Internal and external Evaluation

National quality frameworks increasingly align with international principles while reflecting local contexts and policy priorities. Albania’s “National Framework for Kindergarten Quality Evaluation”

represents a significant step in this direction, integrating leadership and management, educational practice, child development and well-being, and partnerships with families and communities within a coherent quality assurance model (MA & ASCAP, 2024).

A distinctive feature of the Albanian framework is its emphasis on self-evaluation as a developmental tool, mirroring international trends that frame evaluation as a learning-oriented and participatory process. This approach aligns with European and OECD recommendations that advocate for evaluation systems capable of generating meaningful feedback for practice and policy (Council of the European Union, 2019; European Commission/Eurydice, 2025).

Despite the growing prominence of self-evaluation in ECEC quality frameworks, empirical analyses of large-scale national self-evaluation data remain limited. This gap highlights the need for studies that examine how self-evaluation data can illuminate the relationships between structural, process, and system quality within real-world educational systems.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

Research Design

The study is based on secondary analysis of national self-evaluation data collected through two large-scale surveys:

- **319 kindergarten leaders**, and
- **1,930 preschool teachers**.

Both instruments were aligned with the **National Framework for Kindergarten Quality Evaluation** and covered indicators corresponding to structural, process, and system quality. Data were analysed descriptively and comparatively to identify patterns across professional roles and quality dimensions.

The methodological approach aligns with international recommendations that encourage the use of system-level data to inform quality development and policy learning, particularly in contexts where national evaluation frameworks have recently been introduced or reformed (Council of the European Union, 2019; Vlasov et al., 2019).

Data Sources

The study draws on two national datasets generated through structured self-evaluation instruments administered by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ASCAP).

Dataset 1: Kindergarten Leaders

The first dataset consists of responses from 319 kindergarten leaders, representing public and private preschool institutions across Albania. The instrument used for this survey was aligned with national professional standards for school leadership and focused on dimensions related to:

- leadership and management,
- governance and organisational culture,
- internal evaluation and quality assurance,
- professional development and staff support,
- collaboration with families and communities.

These dimensions correspond primarily to system quality, as conceptualised in international ECEC quality frameworks.

Dataset 2: Preschool Teachers

The second dataset includes responses from 1,930 preschool teachers working in diverse institutional and geographical contexts. The teacher self-evaluation instrument focused on:

- pedagogical practices and curriculum implementation,
- teacher–child interactions,
- emotional climate and inclusion,
- use of play and child-centred approaches,
- assessment and documentation of children’s learning.

This dataset provides robust empirical evidence related primarily to process quality, which is widely recognised as the most influential dimension for children’s learning and well-being (OECD, 2025).

Alignment with the National Quality Framework

Both instruments were designed in accordance with the National Framework for Kindergarten Quality Evaluation (MAS & ASCAP, 2024), which structures quality across four interrelated areas:

1. Leadership and management of the kindergarten,
2. Educational and pedagogical practice,

3. Child development and well-being,
4. Partnerships with families and the community.

For the purposes of this study, these areas were analytically mapped onto the three internationally recognised dimensions of ECEC quality:

- Structural quality (contextual and organisational conditions),
- Process quality (pedagogical interactions and practices),
- System quality (leadership, governance, evaluation, and professional learning).

This mapping enables meaningful dialogue between national evaluation practices and global quality frameworks.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through standardised, anonymous online questionnaires administered nationally. Participation was voluntary, and respondents completed the self-evaluation instruments within a defined data collection period as part of national quality assurance processes and professional development.

The large sample sizes and nationwide coverage enhance the representativeness and robustness of the datasets, allowing for system-level analysis rather than institution-specific conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

The study is based on secondary analysis of anonymised data collected for quality assurance and policy development purposes. No personal identifiers were included in the datasets, and the analysis adheres to ethical principles of confidentiality, transparency, and responsible data use.

As recommended in international evaluation guidelines, the data are used to support learning-oriented analysis and continuous improvement rather than individual accountability (Vlasov et al., 2019; Council of the European Union, 2019).

Analytical Approach

Data analysis focuses on:

- descriptive statistics to examine perceived levels of structural, process, and system quality,
- comparative analysis between leaders' and teachers' perspectives,

- exploratory examination of relationships between system quality and process quality indicators.

This analytical strategy is consistent with international studies that use large-scale survey data to investigate quality dimensions and their interconnections within ECEC systems (OECD, 2025).

Methodological Contribution

By utilising national self-evaluation data from both leaders and teachers, this study contributes to the limited empirical literature examining how system-level evaluation practices can illuminate the dynamics between structural, process, and system quality in early childhood education systems undergoing reform.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in internationally recognised models of quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which conceptualise quality as a multidimensional and interdependent construct comprising structural, process, and system quality (European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2025; Vlasov et al., 2019).

Within this framework, *structural quality* represents the foundational conditions of ECEC provision, including organisational arrangements, regulated standards, and contextual resources. These conditions shape the environment in which pedagogical work takes place but do not, in themselves, ensure high-quality experiences for children.

Process quality refers to the core of children's everyday experiences in ECEC settings, encompassing teacher–child interactions, emotional climate, pedagogical strategies, and the intentional use of play and exploration. Extensive research identifies process quality as the strongest predictor of child outcomes, highlighting its central role in effective early childhood education (OECD, 2025).

System quality captures the broader institutional and governance conditions that enable, sustain, and improve practice over time. This includes leadership and management, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, professional development opportunities, and collaborative cultures within and across institutions. International policy frameworks emphasise that without strong system-level support, high process quality is difficult to achieve and sustain

(Council of the European Union, 2019; European Commission/Eurydice, 2025).

The framework adopted in this study assumes a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between these three dimensions. Structural quality provides the necessary conditions, system quality creates the enabling and regulatory environment, and process quality reflects how these conditions are translated into meaningful pedagogical practice.

Linking the Conceptual Framework to the National Context

The conceptual model is closely aligned with Albania's "National Framework for Kindergarten Quality Evaluation" (MAS & ASCAP, 2024), which structures quality across leadership and management, educational practice, child development and well-being, and partnerships with families and communities.

For analytical purposes, these national quality areas were mapped onto the three broader international dimensions:

- leadership, governance, evaluation, and professional development → system quality;
- pedagogical practice, interactions, and learning processes → process quality;
- organisational and contextual conditions → structural quality.

This alignment allows national self-evaluation data to be interpreted within a global quality discourse while remaining sensitive to the local policy and institutional context.

Analytical Model

Based on the conceptual framework, the analytical model guiding this study assumes that system quality plays a central mediating role between structural conditions and pedagogical processes. Specifically, the model explores how leadership, evaluation practices, and professional learning opportunities are associated with perceived levels of process quality as reported by preschool teachers. The analysis is structured around three core assumptions:

1. Structural quality constitutes a necessary foundation for ECEC provision.
2. Process quality represents the primary dimension influencing children's experiences and learning.

3. System quality enables and strengthens process quality by shaping professional practices, organisational culture, and continuous improvement processes.

Empirically, the model draws on:

- self-evaluation data from kindergarten leaders to capture system quality indicators;
- self-evaluation data from preschool teachers to capture process quality indicators;
- selected contextual indicators related to structural conditions.

This approach reflects international evaluation models that position self-evaluation as a learning-oriented mechanism capable of generating evidence for both institutional improvement and policy development (Vlasov et al., 2019; Council of the European Union, 2019).

Preparing the Ground for the Results

By integrating international quality frameworks with national self-evaluation data, the conceptual and analytical model provides a clear structure for interpreting the empirical findings presented in the following section. The results are therefore examined not as isolated indicators, but as interrelated dimensions within a coherent quality system, contributing to ongoing discussions on aligning national ECEC systems with global quality standards.

RESULTS AND PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

Descriptive Overview of Quality Dimensions

The analysis of national self-evaluation data reveals a differentiated picture across the three dimensions of quality: structural, process, and system quality.

Overall, respondents report that structural conditions provide a relatively stable foundation for ECEC provision. Organisational arrangements, basic resources, and regulated conditions are generally perceived as being in place, reflecting the role of national standards and regulatory frameworks in ensuring minimum quality thresholds. However, these conditions are not consistently perceived as sufficient to guarantee high-quality pedagogical practice, reinforcing findings

from international research that structural quality alone does not ensure effective learning experiences for children.

In contrast, process quality shows greater variability across settings. Preschool teachers' responses indicate that while child-centred approaches, play-based learning, and positive emotional climates are widely valued, their implementation differs depending on contextual and organisational factors. This variation aligns with international evidence highlighting that process quality is highly sensitive to professional support, working conditions, and institutional culture (OECD, 2025).

System quality emerges as a critical dimension shaping both structural and process-related aspects of ECEC. Leaders' self-evaluations point to differences in leadership practices, internal evaluation processes, and professional development opportunities, suggesting that system-level capacity plays a key role in enabling consistent quality across settings.

Structural Quality: Conditions for Practice

Teachers' self-evaluations suggest that structural conditions provide a relatively stable but uneven foundation for pedagogical work. As shown in **Figure 1**, which presents data on group size, **24.7% of teachers report working with groups exceeding 26 children**, a level that exceeds recommended standards in many European quality frameworks. This finding points to persistent structural constraints that may limit opportunities for individualised interaction and inclusive practice.

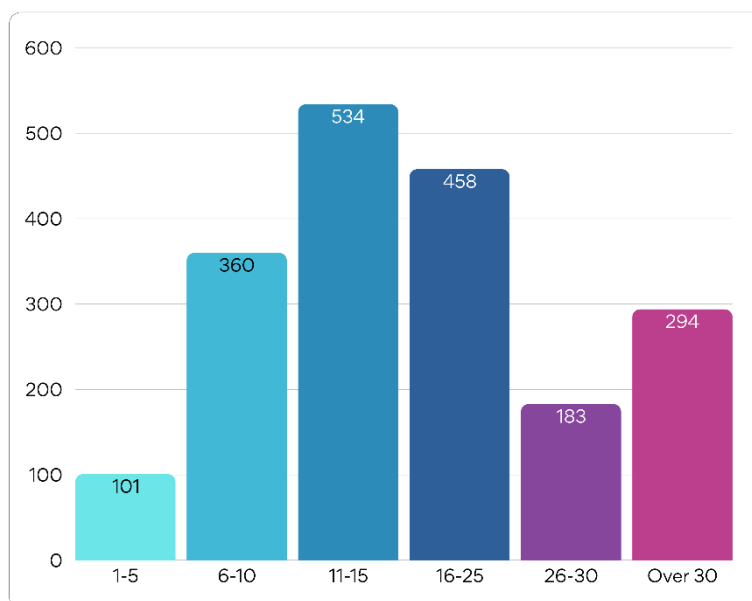


Figure 1. Teachers' reports on group size (Structural quality)
(Source: National self-evaluation report – Teachers)

Although a majority of teachers report adequate physical environments, the variability in group size highlights a key tension between formal standards and daily realities, suggesting that structural quality remains a necessary but insufficient condition for high-quality ECEC.

Process Quality: Pedagogical Practice and Professional Needs

Process quality emerges as a differentiated dimension, strongly shaped by professional capacity and institutional support. Teachers report generally positive pedagogical orientations; however, significant proportions indicate unmet professional needs.

As illustrated in **Figure 2**, about **38.3% of teachers report a high or partial need for professional support related to continuous professional development**. This finding suggests that while core pedagogical principles are widely endorsed, their consistent and high-quality implementation requires targeted and sustained professional learning opportunities.

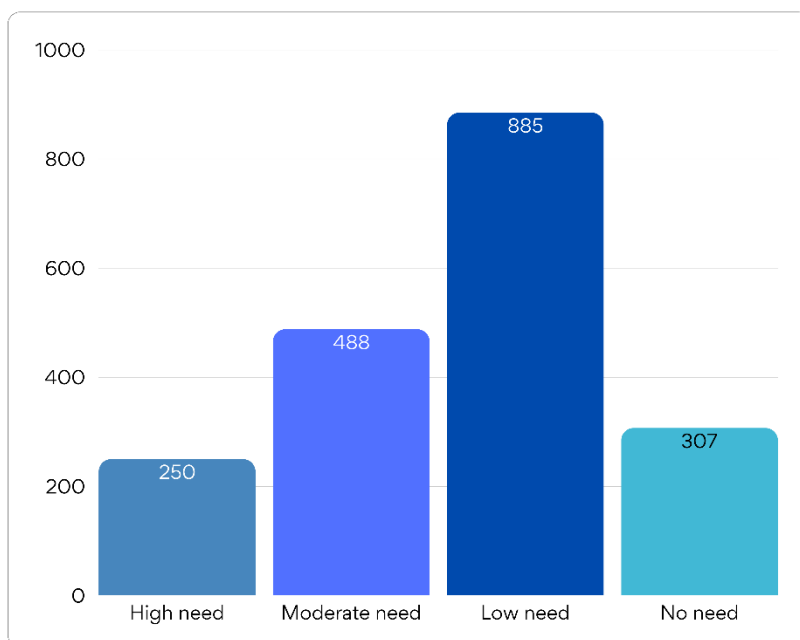


Figure 2. Teachers' reported need for professional development (Process quality)

Similarly, **Figure 3** shows that **35.4% of teachers identify a need for training related to the application of curricular documentation**, indicating challenges in translating curricular frameworks into daily pedagogical practice. These findings reinforce international evidence that process quality depends not only on individual competence but also on system-level support mechanisms.

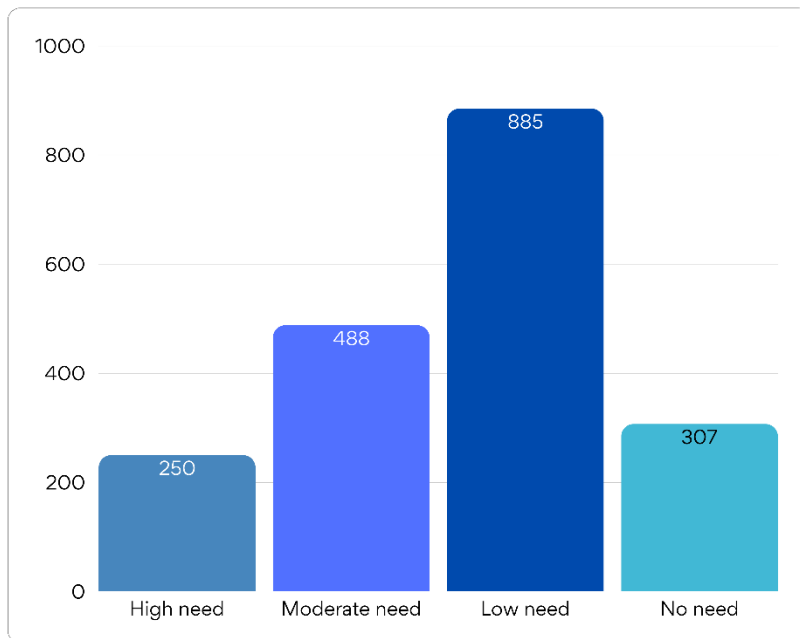


Figure 3. Teachers' need for support in applying curricular documentation (Process quality)

System Quality: Leadership, Evaluation, and Professional Support

Leaders' self-evaluations provide insight into system quality and its enabling role. As shown in **Figure 4**, about **93.4% of kindergarten leaders rate professional development as important or very important**, underscoring strong normative commitment to staff development. However, this commitment contrasts with teachers' reported needs, pointing to a gap between strategic intentions and perceived impact.

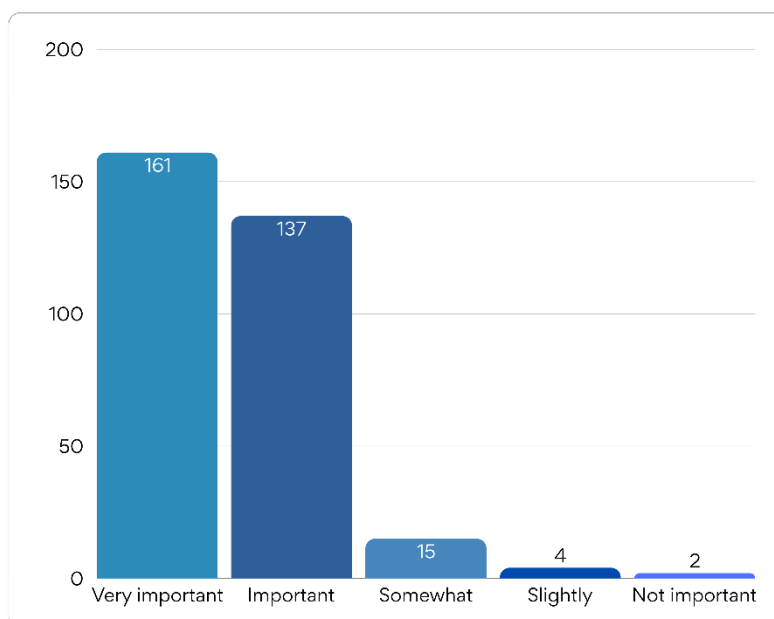


Figure 4. Leaders' perceptions of the importance of professional development (System quality)

Leadership practices related to motivation and staff support are particularly salient. **97.5% of leaders agree or strongly agree on the importance of motivating staff**, highlighting motivation as a central leadership function within ECEC institutions. These findings suggest that while system-level orientations toward quality are strong, their effectiveness depends on how leadership practices are operationalised and perceived by teachers.

Figure 5 indicates that **94% of kindergarten leaders** emphasise the importance of training related to leading and managing change, motivating staff, fostering a collaborative learning climate, and safeguarding children's rights. This finding indicates a strong recognition among leaders that effective change management and innovation are not intuitive processes but require continuous professional development.

These results suggest that leaders perceive change leadership as closely linked to pedagogical improvement and child development outcomes, reinforcing the role of **system quality** as a key enabler of **process quality**.

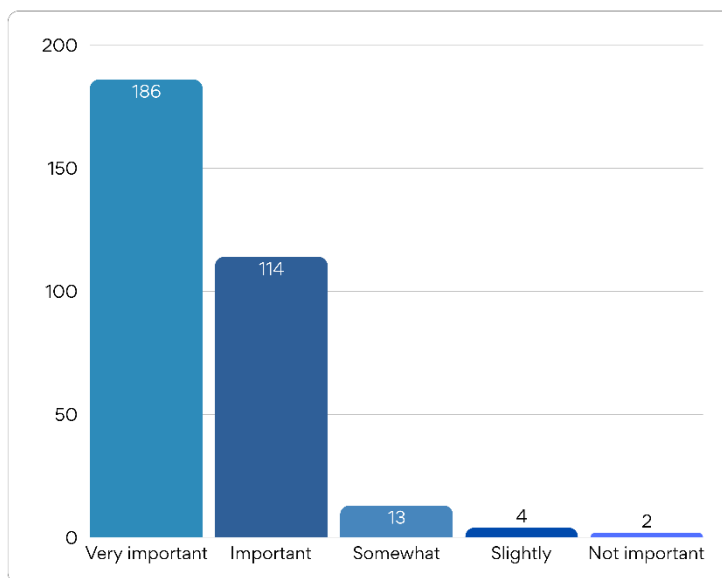


Figure 5. Leaders' views on changes within the institution (System quality)

(Source: National self-evaluation report – Leaders)

Comparative Perspectives: Leaders and Teachers

A comparative analysis between kindergarten leaders and preschool teachers highlights notable differences in perceptions of quality.

Leaders tend to report higher levels of system quality, particularly in areas related to leadership effectiveness, internal evaluation, and organisational coherence. This may reflect leaders' strategic perspective and their direct involvement in planning and monitoring quality processes.

Teachers, on the other hand, provide more nuanced assessments of process quality, drawing attention to the everyday realities of pedagogical practice, interaction with children, and the emotional and instructional demands of classroom work. In some areas, teachers' perceptions suggest gaps between policy intentions and practical implementation, particularly where system-level support is perceived as limited.

These differences underline the importance of integrating multiple professional perspectives when evaluating ECEC quality, as relying on a single viewpoint risks obscuring critical aspects of practice.

Relationships Between System Quality and Process Quality

Preliminary analysis suggests a meaningful relationship between system quality and process quality. Settings where leaders report stronger leadership practices, more systematic self-evaluation, and greater access to professional development also tend to be associated with more positive perceptions of pedagogical processes among teachers.

This finding supports international research emphasising that high-quality interactions and pedagogical practices are unlikely to be sustained without enabling system-level conditions (Council of the European Union, 2019; Vlasov et al., 2019). Rather than operating independently, system quality appears to function as a key enabler that translates structural conditions into effective pedagogical processes.

Preliminary Discussion: Interpreting the Findings

Taken together, the results reinforce the conceptual assumption that ECEC quality is best understood as an integrated system, rather than as a set of isolated indicators. Structural quality provides the necessary baseline, but it is the interaction between system quality and process quality that ultimately shapes children's daily experiences in ECEC settings.

The variability observed in process quality highlights the importance of leadership, evaluation, and professional learning as levers for improvement. Self-evaluation data reveal not only strengths but also areas where support structures may be insufficient to ensure consistent quality across settings. This finding resonates with international frameworks that frame evaluation as a developmental and capacity-building process rather than a compliance-driven exercise.

From a policy perspective, the results suggest that investments in ECEC quality should prioritise strengthening system-level capacities, including leadership development, collaborative cultures, and

meaningful professional development, in order to maximise the impact of structural investments.

Contribution to the Global Quality Discourse

By drawing on large-scale national self-evaluation data from both leaders and teachers, this study contributes empirical evidence to ongoing international debates on how quality frameworks operate in practice. The findings illustrate how national self-evaluation systems can serve as valuable tools for understanding the interplay between structural, process, and system quality, thereby supporting alignment with global quality standards while remaining responsive to local contexts.

Conclusion and implications

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how structural, process, and system quality are reflected and interconnected within national self-evaluation data in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Drawing on large-scale datasets from 319 kindergarten leaders and 1,930 preschool teachers, the findings provide empirical evidence from a national system aligning its quality assurance framework with global standards.

The results confirm that structural quality provides a necessary baseline for ECEC provision, ensuring minimum conditions related to organisation, resources, and regulated standards. However, the analysis demonstrates that structural conditions alone do not guarantee high-quality educational experiences for children. Variability in pedagogical practices and interactions indicates that structural quality must be complemented by strong system-level support.

Consistent with international research, process quality emerges as the most differentiated and pedagogically significant dimension. Teachers' self-evaluations reveal that while child-centred approaches, play-based learning, and positive emotional climates are widely endorsed, their consistent implementation depends heavily on contextual and organisational factors.

Crucially, the study highlights the central role of system quality as an enabling and mediating dimension. Leadership practices, internal self-

evaluation processes, and professional development opportunities reported by kindergarten leaders are meaningfully associated with teachers' perceptions of pedagogical quality. This finding reinforces the view that system quality is not a peripheral component, but a key mechanism through which structural conditions are translated into effective pedagogical processes.

By integrating national self-evaluation data with internationally recognised quality frameworks, the study demonstrates the analytical value of self-evaluation systems for understanding quality as a coherent and dynamic whole, rather than as a set of isolated indicators.

Implications for Policy

The findings carry important implications for ECEC policy development. First, they suggest that policy efforts should move beyond an exclusive focus on structural standards and place greater emphasis on strengthening system-level capacities, particularly leadership development, institutional self-evaluation, and continuous professional learning.

Second, the results support international recommendations that frame quality assurance as a developmental and improvement-oriented process, rather than a compliance-driven mechanism. National self-evaluation systems can serve as powerful tools for identifying strengths, revealing variability, and informing targeted policy interventions.

Finally, the alignment between Albania's national quality framework and global quality principles illustrates how national systems can contextualise international standards while remaining responsive to local needs. This alignment enhances the comparability of national data and contributes to international learning on ECEC quality systems.

Implications for Practice

For practitioners and institutional leaders, the study underscores the importance of leadership that actively supports pedagogical quality. Effective leadership practices—such as fostering collaborative cultures, using self-evaluation results for reflection, and prioritising

professional learning—are shown to be closely linked to higher perceived process quality.

For preschool teachers, the findings highlight the value of reflective practice and professional dialogue as means of strengthening pedagogical interactions. Self-evaluation, when embedded within a supportive system, can empower teachers to critically examine their practice and engage in continuous improvement.

Implications for Research

From a research perspective, this study contributes to the limited empirical literature using large-scale national self-evaluation data to examine ECEC quality. It demonstrates the potential of such data to inform both system-level analysis and international comparative discussions.

Future research could extend this work by:

- conducting longitudinal analyses to examine changes in quality over time,
- exploring links between self-evaluation results and child-level outcomes,
- applying more advanced statistical modelling to further investigate the mediating role of system quality.

Final Remarks

In the context of growing international attention to quality in early childhood education, this study provides timely empirical evidence on how national self-evaluation systems can support alignment with global standards while fostering continuous improvement. By highlighting the interdependence of structural, process, and system quality, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of what it means to measure and ensure quality in early childhood programs.

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**CIP Katalogimi në botim BK Tiranë
Early childhood education and care : 4th international
scientific conference : challenge and perspectives : proceedings
book . - Korçë : Universiteti Fan S. Noli Korçë,
2026.**

1 burim në linjë

ISBN 9789928490513

1.Edukimi 2.Konferenca

37 (062)