

Family in Focus – Research into the Attitudes and Practices of Preschool Teachers in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Inclusive practice in education institutions implies that differences are excluded, not just by respecting and tolerating them but also by designing educational activities aimed at creating a supportive and inclusive environment, especially in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Preschool teachers who know how to communicate very well show their respect towards parents, take their worries, feelings and questions into account as important indicators which deepen the mutual understanding necessary for ensuring the child's optimal development. The role of preschool teachers thus becomes more complex and demanding, which means that they continuously need to learn new things, develop new competences, and consequently improve the partnership based on reciprocity and togetherness. The aim of this paper is to establish the specificities of inclusive practice through self-assessment of preschool teachers' (N=438) competences for cooperation with parents, and the *Questionnaire about the inclusive practise and partnership cooperation between preschool teachers and parents during the out-of-the-ordinary life circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic* was used for that purpose. The obtained results are presented in the form of basic descriptive values, the Pearson correlation coefficient and the ANOVA test were used to support them statistically, and the post-hoc analysis (Fisher's LSD test) was performed in order to establish the differences. The results have shown that the preschool teachers, who obtained more professional development, consider themselves more competent in online work and think they are better at giving instructions and feedback to parents via digital media. The study indicates the significance of preschool teachers' lifelong training, which should help them acquire new competences for the partnership with parents as viewed from the perspective of educational inclusion.

Keywords: competences of preschool teachers; contemporary forms of cooperation; inclusive practice; parents; preschool institutions

1. Introduction

“Partnership is the only way forward. This coalition is a call for coordinated and innovative action to unlock solutions that will not only support learners and teachers now, but through the recovery process, with a principle focus on inclusion and equity.”

Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO

Research has confirmed the benefits of cooperation between parents and preschool teachers, who act as partners to agree on mutual and beneficial educational goals, thus increasing potential for improving children’s learning outcomes, as well as for quality learning environment at home (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006), which all contribute to a better intellectual and social development of children (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Mitchell and Furness, 2015). Mitchell and Furness (2015) define partnership as a theory of overlapping interest spheres, emphasising that children learn more when parents, preschool teachers and other experts work together to direct and support children’s learning and development. Such cooperation is not only beneficial for the development of the child, but also for the family considering the fact that parents learn and develop social support alongside the child and its surroundings, which leads to a decrease in the stress level (Benseman, 2008) and reflects on the socioemotional development of the child. According to Mitchell and Furness (2015), the Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system of the human development explains the effect of the cooperation between preschool teachers and parents, in a way that the developmental potential of the child’s involvement increases when cooperation is present. In such a context, the importance of contemporary pedagogical practice is emphasised, and it requires competent preschool teachers who encourage the development of partnership with parents, support characteristics of each family to overcome obstacles related to the process of educational inclusion. Within the cooperation and partnership between the preschool institution and family, all members recognise variable family’s needs to allow the children’s development and education in an environment that provides conditions for health, security and learning. Mislán et al. (2009) define quality cooperation as a process which involves two or more parties who work together in order to achieve a mutual goal. Also within the scope of designing educational activities that promote differentiation, the cooperation between parents and preschool teachers serves as an underlying strategy for establishing creativity and innovation in effective educational programmes (Adams, 2005), especially the ones that are realised in the out-of-the-ordinary life circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has shown that the quality inclusive practice can be recognised as the ability of all subjects to act as a cohesive team (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010), in which preschool teachers and parents establish active communication for mutual decision making, planning and communicating about ways of improving children’s cooperation in various activities (Jurčević Lozančić, 2016). The family finds itself in a time of significant changes and preschool teachers are responsible for a new and faster way of information transfer, as well as for different ways of communicating with parents and children. The choice of contemporary modalities of cooperation between parents and preschool teachers depends mostly on preschool teachers, but also on parents and their interests and knowledge (Taylor et al., 2009; Lee & Low, 2013). Other than affecting the economy, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the education system as well, which resulted in temporary closing of education

institutions and social distancing of children. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the effect and consequences of the pandemic on learning and psychophysical development of children and youth, as well as on education system, which was directed at online communication and various internet communication apps that were meant to ensure communication between preschool teachers or teachers and children and their parents. Although such practice in the education process was not simple for children, parents, preschool teachers and teachers in Croatia, the previously commenced digitalisation of the institutions created the conditions for an easier transfer to distance learning and communication. Aimed at securing continuous care for children and for parents who will have to go back to work, the Croatian Institute of Public Health encouraged the parents to keep their children at home whenever possible, especially the children with chronic illnesses or children in contact with people with chronic illnesses, since the number of children in preschool institutions can be such that measures for physical distancing might not be enforceable (Ambasz & Brajkovic, 2020). Also, the measures for infection prevention and control can expose children to various risks. By agreeing to the stated measures, distance learning and communication replaced the values of learning, teaching and playing that children were acquainted with so far. Not only did many children and youth miss the social contact which is crucial for their learning and development, but the pandemic had, and continues to have, a temporary and a long-term effect on the education system, especially when it comes to more vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of children and their families (Bhamani et al., 2020). Moreover, stigma and discrimination can also be connected to the COVID-19 pandemic and can make the child even more vulnerable in terms of violence and psychosocial consequences. The infection control measures do not take into account the specific needs related to sex and certain vulnerabilities to which some children might be exposed and that might lead to increased risk and negative mechanisms for coping with consequences. Children and parents who are vulnerable due to socioeconomic exclusiveness or those who live in poorer conditions belong to high-risk groups. In such a context, professional development of preschool teachers, experience, attitudes and knowledge are key indicators of quality inclusive practice. Preschool teachers need to be informed and prepared for designing and implementing individualised approaches that would satisfy various needs of children in education groups (Crane-Mitchell & Hedge, 2007; Kudek Mirošević et al., 2020). It is therefore necessary to establish effective cooperation between preschool institution and parents to secure conditions for further seamless communication about safety and protection of parents and children, by preventing stress in the family, and empowering and encouraging them to respect the health and education recommendations. Moreover, it is necessary to educate preschool teachers so that they are able to recognise the signs of parents' uneasiness. That way they will be able to recognise and provide support to children who need it (UNICEF, 2020). According to UNESCO (2020), education systems need to organise quick and efficient technical support for determining the needs of children and parents, plan development and appropriate solutions related to strategies and platforms for distance learning and communication. Also, the support for coordinated planning of cooperation and development of partnership is crucial, as well as the support for quick analysis and change of effects on equity, including identification of vulnerable groups and the need for differentiated approach. The stated requires professional development and further professional training of preschool teachers, including their digital skills, content digitalisation, learning and online communication, as well as their help in establishing a support system, plan for realisation of communication and cooperation with parents. Having

that in mind, the professionals in the education system achieve assimilation process according to new circumstances and coping with newly created challenges (Espino-Díaz et al., 2020). Therefore, in order for inclusive practice to be successful, especially in out-of-the-ordinary life circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, preschool teachers require support systems, as well as functional training programmes that will provide them with appropriate knowledge, skills and experience (Akalin et. al., 2014) in strategies for learning and teaching, as well as in contemporary modalities of partnership with parents (Jurčević Lozančić et al., 2019).

1.1 AIM

The aim of this paper is to establish the specificities of inclusive practice through self-assessment of the preschool teachers’ competences for cooperation with parents, and the *Questionnaire about the inclusive practise and partnership cooperation between preschool teachers and parents during the out-of-the-ordinary life circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic* was used for that purpose.

1.2 HYPOTHESES

H1: Preschool teachers self-assess themselves as competent when it comes to cooperation with parents of children with different abilities and capabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

H2: There is a statistically significant correlation between the preschool teachers’ years of work experience and professional development and their self-assessment of the quality of cooperation with parents in an online environment.

H3: Preschool teachers’ professional development in the area of partnership with parents and in the area of inclusive practice affects their self-assessment of their competences, as well as of the achievement of cooperation with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

This sample comprised 438 preschool teachers, of which 435 were women, and 3 were men. Education-wise, 1.4% of the preschool teachers finished secondary education (secondary school graduates), 79.9% finished two- or three-year post-secondary education, and 18.7% finished four- or five-year post-secondary education (university degree). Table 1 shows the years of work experience of the preschool teachers in the sample.

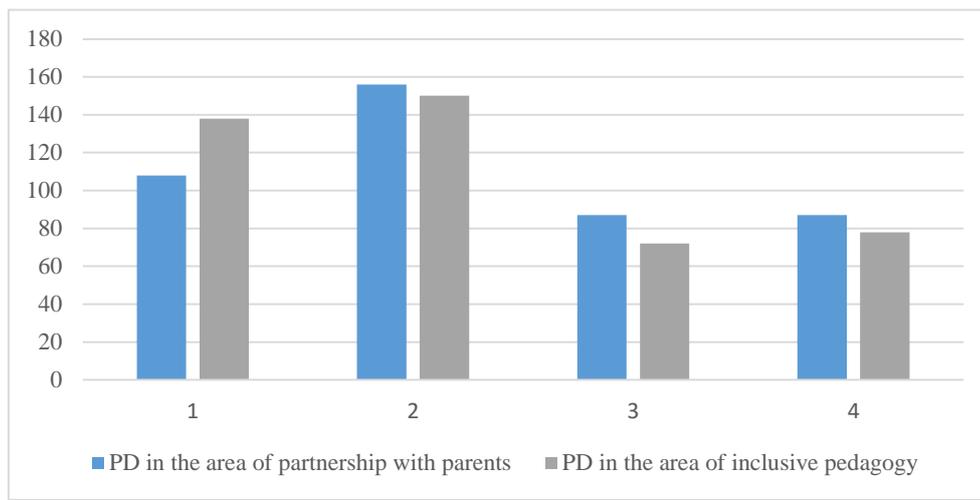
Table 1: Years of the preschool teachers’ work experience (N=438)

Years of work experience	<5	6–10	11–15	16–20	21–25	26–30	>30
Frequency	103	86	69	38	40	37	65
Percentage (%)	23.5	19.8	15.8	8.7	9.1	8.4	14.8
Cumulative	23.5	43.2	58.9	67.6	76.7	85.2	100

frequency						
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The frequencies of professional development in the area of partnership with parents and inclusive practice in the last 5 years are shown in Figure 1. The term “PD” hereinafter refers to professional development.

Figure 1: The preschool teachers’ frequencies of attending professional development trainings



By analysing the graph, it is noticeable that the highest frequency is present in preschool teachers who attended one professional development training, regardless of the fact whether the PD was in the area of partnership with parents or in the area of inclusive pedagogy. Moreover, 87 preschool teachers attended 3 or more PD trainings related to the area of partnership with parents, while 78 of them attended 3 or more PD trainings related to inclusive pedagogy.

2.2 Instrument and data collection procedure

For the purposes of this research, the *Questionnaire about the inclusive practise and partnership cooperation between preschool teachers and parents during the out-of-the-ordinary life circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic* has been constructed. The Questionnaire comprised of the first (general) part in which the statements were related to sociodemographic factors of the participants (sex, years of work experience and finished level of education), and the second part which comprised of 21 statements about cooperation with parents, for which the preschool teachers marked the level of their self-assessment of their competences on a five-item Likert scale (1–never, 2–rarely, 3–sometimes, 4–often, 5–regularly). The statements were related to their self-assessment of their competences in cooperation with parents with different abilities and capabilities, the quality of cooperation with parents in an online environment and professional development in the area of partnership with parents and in the area of inclusive practice, as well as their self-assessment of the achievement of cooperation with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Questionnaire filling out was conducted online, and the participants were preschool teachers employed at early childhood and preschool education institutions. The research was

conducted in accordance with all ethical aspects of the research, the participants were informed of the purpose and aim of the research, and they were guaranteed anonymity and secrecy of their data, as well as the ability to opt out of participation at any time. First, the descriptive statistics was calculated, including the arithmetic mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*), median (*C*) for comparison, as well as the interquartile range (*IQR*). Furthermore, to show the correlation between the years of work experience and obtaining professional development and self-assessment of the quality of cooperation in an online environment, the Pearson correlation coefficient (*r*) was used. The Levene's test of homogeneity of variances and the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test of normality were also used. Alongside everything mentioned so far, a variance analysis (ANOVA test) was also conducted to see if the attendance of professional development trainings in the area of partnership with parents and in the area of inclusive practice affects the preschool teachers' self-assessment of their competence and achievement of cooperation with parents; within the scope of the ANOVA test, the *F*-ratio and the appropriate probability (*p*-value) were analysed. To gain insight into which groups differentiate, the post-hoc analysis (Fisher's LSD test) was performed.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the statements

V No.	Variable	M	SD	C	IQR
	During the pandemic, when it comes to working with parents of children with different abilities and capabilities...				
V1	...I feel competent to provide support to parents of the children in my kindergarten class.	4.17	0.870	4.00	1.00
V2	...it is necessary to communicate with parents and guide them in order for them to perform certain activities with their child at home.	4.12	0.931	4.00	2.00
V3	...I am satisfied with the quality of their work and activities at home.	3.46	1.112	3.00	2.00
V4	...I think hard about setting goals, my way of work, communication, outcomes and results.	4.12	0.844	4.00	1.00
V5	...I get regular useful feedback about how their child is learning and developing.	3.83	1.120	4.00	2.00
V6	...I set up the time and way of getting feedback and communication.	3.79	1.070	4.00	2.00
V7	...the goals are mutually agreed upon in order to realise the best outcomes for their children.	3.80	1.073	4.00	2.00
V8	...we evaluate the progress of their child mutually.	3.87	1.091	4.00	2.00
V9	...the quality advice I give them on how to support their child's learning at home is important.	4.21	0.909	4.00	1.00
V10	...I communicate in a way so that I consider their attitudes on necessary changes in working with their child at home.	4.15	0.858	4.00	1.00
V11	...professional training that I completed, and that was dealing with cooperation, has helped me.	3.65	1.139	4.00	2.00
V12	...I find efficient online work with parents challenging.	3.52	1.273	3.00	2.00
V13	...I find that, by using digital technology, we can achieve quality communication.	3.71	1.082	4.00	2.00
V14	...I have digital skills needed for cooperation and exchange of	3.91	1.038	4.00	2.00

	information.				
V15	...I've had certain difficulties in establishing cooperation with parents in an online environment.	2.79	1.252	3.00	1.00
V16	...communication presents a greater challenge for me when it is done via digital media.	3.17	1.250	3.00	2.00
V17	...I took the steps and performed activities in an online environment in order to give them instructions for working with their child at home.	3.64	1.244	4.00	2.00
V18	...during online cooperation with them, I create environment based on mutual understanding, help, respect and encouragement of joint activities with children.	3.85	1.102	4.00	2.00
V19	...I communicate with them online in order to motivate them to work with their child, and in order to prevent their concern and/or lack of interest for favourite activities and playtime with the child.	3.72	1.193	4.00	2.00
V20	...I come across hostility and dissatisfaction when the cooperation is performed online.	2.47	1.222	2.00	2.00
V21	...I require further development of my competences in establishing online partnership with parents, as well as additional training.	3.57	1.169	4.00	2.00

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for all the questionnaire statements. This calculation provided insight into the preschool teachers' assessment of their competences and achievement of cooperation with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as into the quality of cooperation with parents in an online environment. By analysing the data, it is evident that preschool teachers on average achieve higher results in most of the statements, which means that, in general, they assess the quality of partnership cooperation during the pandemic as high. The given results show that preschool teachers on average assess their competences for providing support to children with different abilities and capabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic as very high ($M=4.17$, $SD=0.870$). Also, they emphasise that they are capable of advising parents on working with their child at home ($M=4.21$, $SD=0.909$) and that they know how to communicate with parents in a way so that they take their attitudes and ideas into account ($M=4.15$, $SD=0.858$). Online cooperation-wise, they express that they have rarely or sometimes had difficulties in establishing partnership with parents in an online environment ($M=2.79$, $SD=1.252$), even though they emphasise that communication is more challenging when performed via digital media ($M=3.91$, $SD=1.038$). By reviewing the obtained results, it is evident that they sometimes come across hostility in communication and dissatisfaction when cooperation is performed online ($M=2.47$, $SD=1.222$). However, it is important to state that the statements related to online cooperation (S12–S21) achieve slightly higher variability and that it seems the preschool teachers have different opinions on online work. By reviewing the descriptive statistics, it is evident that the hypothesis (H1) is accepted due to the fact that the preschool teachers mostly consider themselves to be competent in coping with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such results can be related to college courses dealing with partnership with parents, i.e. the inclusive practice, which the preschool teachers attended.

Table 3: Pearson correlation coefficient for the years of work experience and attendance of professional development trainings and the self-assessment of the quality of cooperation in an online environment

Variable	Years of work experience	Professional development (PD) in the area of partnership with parents	Professional development (PD) in the area of inclusive practise
T12	-0.013	0.121*	0.124*
T13	-0.016	-0.025	0.040
T14	-0.264**	0.047	0.081
T15	0.029	0.031	0.087
T16	0.013	-.026	0.029
T17	-0.096*	0.117*	0.102*
T18	-0.121*	0.088	0.095*
T19	-0.047	0.096*	0.083
T20	-0.129*	-0.061	0.021
T21	-0.040	-0.065	-0.037

* – level of significance 0.05; ** – level of significance 0.01

In order to test the second hypothesis (H2), i.e. to show the correlation between years of work experience and attendance of professional development trainings and the self-assessment of the quality cooperation in an online environment, the Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated and are shown in Table 3. Hereinafter, they are listed in brackets. Table 3 shows that years of work experience are significantly negatively correlated with 4 statements, and the most prominent one is the statement about possessing digital skills necessary for cooperation and information transfer. Namely, if preschool teachers have more years of work experience, they assess their digital skills for cooperation and information transfer as more inadequate ($r=-0,264^{**}$). Also, the preschool teachers with more years of work experience assess their own ability to create pleasant online environment and the abilities of mutual understanding as more inadequate ($r=-0,129^*$). Furthermore, when it comes to professional development related to partnership with parents in the last 5 years, it seems that the preschool teachers who attended more professional development trainings consider themselves as more competent in conducting online communication ($r=0.121^*$) and are better at giving instructions and feedback to parents via digital media ($r=0.117^*$). On the other hand, when it comes to professional development in the area of inclusive practise, it is also positively correlated to the self-assessment of the competences in online communication, i.e. the more professional development trainings the preschool teachers have attended, the more competent they find themselves in online communication ($r=0.124^*$). The same goes for the variable related to giving instructions and feedback. The preschool teachers find themselves more competent in that aspect as well ($r=0.102^*$). Considering the fact that this research was based on self-assessment of professional competences, it is possible that the preschool teachers assessed their competences as more significant, basing their decision on the preferable professional impression, which might deviate from the assessment of another observer. Despite possible limitations of this research, the scientific welfare that comes out of a more wholesome understanding of the preschool teacher’s competences for cooperation with parents, starting from the preschool teachers’ perspective, has justified using this method. Finally, even though the correlations are not high, the significant correlations still show that there is a connection between the preschool teachers’ overall knowledge and their coping with online communication, thus the second hypothesis (H2) is partially confirmed. Moreover, to see whether attending professional development trainings in the area of partnership with parents and in the area of inclusive practice in the last 5 years affects the

preschool teachers’ self-assessment of their competences and of the achievement of cooperation with parents during the pandemic, a variance analysis was conducted. It is important to note that the transformation of variables related to professional development was performed to even out the number of participants in the groups. Also, the prerequisites for the conduct of the ANOVA test were checked and it was concluded that the deviances from the normality were acceptable due to the distributions being symmetrical or asymmetrical in the same direction. As for the homogeneity of variances, Table 4 shows that the variances are homogeneous and that it is justified to use the stated parameter procedure ($p=0.52$). Even though a two-way ANOVA test was performed (professional development dealing with topics in the area of partnership with parents and professional development dealing with topics in the area of inclusive practice were independent variables, and the self-assessment of competences and of achievement of cooperation with parents was a dependent one), the interaction was not taken into account due to the fact that its interpretation was not meaningful. The following tables and the graph and their interpretation are relevant for the ANOVA test.

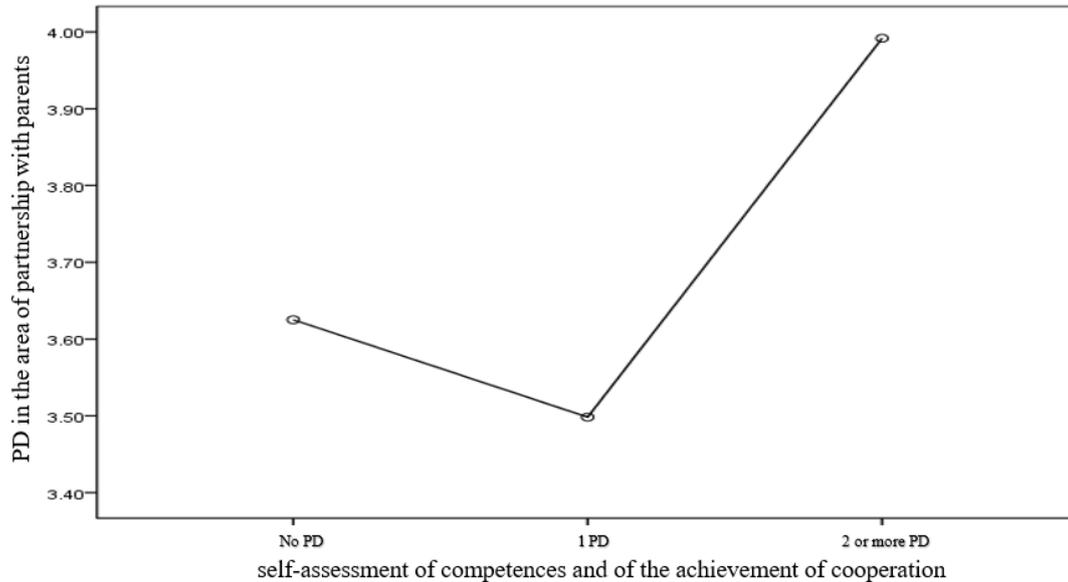
Table 4: Levene’s test of homogeneity of variances

<i>F</i>	<i>df1</i>	<i>df2</i>	<i>p</i>
2.991	8	429	0.52

Table 5: Two-way ANOVA test summary

Source of variability	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean sum of squares	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
PD in partnership	11.597	2	5.799	3.814	0.023
PD in inclusive practise	4.288	2	2.144	1.410	0.245
Within the groups / Error	652.287	429	1.520		
Total	6471.000	438			

Figure 2: Arithmetic means for self-assessment of competences and of the achievement of cooperation with parents considering the attendance of professional development trainings in the area of partnership with parents



In accordance with the results of the ANOVA test related to professional development trainings dealing with topics of partnership with parents ($F=3.814$, $df1=429$, $df2=2$, $p=0.023$), it is noticeable that there is a statistically significant difference between the self-assessments of competences and of achieved cooperation with parents during the pandemic considering the attendance of professional development trainings with contents dealing with the area of partnership. The post-hoc analysis (Fisher's LSD test) showed in detail that there is a significant difference between the preschool teachers who attended only one professional development training in the last five years and the preschool teachers who attended two or more, as shown in the graph in Figure 2. Furthermore, as for the results of the ANOVA test related to professional development trainings dealing with topics of inclusive practice ($F=1.140$, $df1=429$, $df2=2$, $p=0.245$), it is noticeable that there is no statistically significant difference between the self-assessments of competences and of achievement of cooperation with parents during the pandemic considering the attendance of professional development trainings related to the area of inclusive practice. So, as the answer to the third hypothesis (H3), it can be said that the total number of professional development trainings in the area of partnership with parents which the preschool teachers attended contributes to the development of preschool teachers' competences for working with parents.

4. Conclusion

The current life circumstances caused by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the strongest earthquake in Zagreb in the last 140 years are sudden and crisis events, and are especially disturbing and stressful for children, parents and preschool teachers. Other than synergy and cohesion, partnership implies open and clear communication between parents and preschool teachers, mutual respect and appreciation of opinions, trust and understanding. This research's aim was to determine the specificities of inclusive practice through self-

assessment of preschool teacher's competences in cooperation with parents during out-of-the-ordinary life circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that preschool teachers mostly find themselves to be competent in coping with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the preschool teachers emphasise they have rarely had difficulties in establishing partnership with parents in an online environment, even though they think communication is sometimes more challenging when performed via digital media. By analysing the results, it can be concluded that the preschool teachers with more years of work experience assess their own ability to create pleasant online environment as more inadequate. Therefore, there is a statistically significant correlation between the preschool teachers' self-assessments of competences for cooperation with parents and the preschool teachers' years of work experience. The results have shown that the preschool teachers, who obtained more professional development, consider themselves as more competent in online work and think they are better at giving instructions and feedback to parents via digital media. Also, the number of professional development trainings dealing with topics of inclusive practise and partnership with parents, which the preschool teachers attended, positively affects their self-assessment of competences, in a way that the preschool teachers who attended two or more organised professional development trainings assess their organisational skills and knowledge more significantly in comparison with the participants who did not attend professional development trainings. Therefore, it should be emphasised there is a difference between the preschool teachers' self-assessments of their competences and the frequency of attended professional development trainings. Competences in the area of partnership with parents should and need to be developed, with an emphasis on topics related to cooperation with families during out-of-the-ordinary life circumstances that present numerous professional challenges, and the preschool teachers need to know how to respond to them. We suggest that the existing forms of initial education and training continually contribute to the strengthening of preschool teachers' professional development. This paper is a part of the research project "*Research into the partnership in early childhood institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic*" (2020/2021), which builds on the aims of the project "*Research into the inclusive practice and partnership with parents from the preschool teachers and teachers' perspectives*" (2018/2019) conducted at the Faculty of Teacher Education of the University of Zagreb (2018/2019; 2020/2021, head of the project is Anka Jurčević Lozančić). This is an ongoing research issue, within which this paper was created, and the results are an incentive to improve parenting practices, as well as to improve the educational practice in early childhood and preschool institutions. The scientific contribution of the research presented in this paper is in the specific definitions of educational competences in establishing partnership with parents, in the construction of the measuring instrument that allows the measurement of the preschool teachers' competences in maintaining the partnership with parents during the out-of-the-ordinary life situations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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