

# Educators' attitudes toward using theatre puppets in early childhood education and care

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**Aim:** To explore the attitudes of early childhood educators (n = 100) in Split-Dalmatia County (Southern Croatia) toward the relevance of theatre puppets in teaching and their self-assessment about the use of puppets in their own pedagogical practice.

**Methods:** Data were collected through the Early Childhood Educators' Attitudes toward the Use of Theatre Puppets in Teaching Questionnaire, using the snowball method (online). Correlations were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient, whereas differences between subgroups were explored using the t-test. The factor structure was examined using a Scree plot and component matrix. ANOVA was used to investigate potential correlations between the assessment of the relevance of theatrical puppets and certain independent variables.

**Results:** Most teachers (N=100) in the sample recognized the potential and importance of puppetry for the holistic development of children (mean = 4.76, standard deviation = 0.45). They agreed that puppets can contribute to the development of positive self-image ( $4.69 \pm 0.54$ ) and learning ( $4.65 \pm 0.54$ ) in children. The greatest dispersion was observed in questions evaluating puppets as a limiting factor for play ( $1.64 \pm 1.04$ ) and children's creativity ( $1.61 \pm 1.24$ ), as well as about the use of performing arts to learn about new real-life situations ( $1.57 \pm 0.95$ ). A slight but statistically significant positive correlation was found between the favorable assessment and the length of service ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $P = 0.032$ ). No significant difference was observed between participants who had attended relevant training and those who had not ( $t = 1.903$ ,  $df = 98$ ,  $P = 0.061$ ).

**Conclusion:** Early childhood educators recognize the important role of puppetry in ECEC, but puppets are not employed frequently in direct work with children. Reasons may include unclear public education policies, inadequate working conditions, insufficient opportunities for professional development, or a lackluster attitude towards professional growth. Although there is no available research to confirm these assumptions, they may serve as a guidepost for further research.

**Keywords:** early childhood education and care (ECEC); child well-being; theatrical puppets; language and speech development; social competencies; early childhood educator professional development

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## Introduction

From children's play to performing arts, puppets have numerous applications. They are a purposeful tool in education, psychological support, and counseling, as well as various therapeutic techniques (1). According to Bastašić (2), they play an important role as a didactic tool for developing cultural, traditional, social, aesthetic, and moral values in children and adolescents.

A puppet is any figure that children manipulate to express themselves during their play (3). When children's play is viewed as an interplay between reality and imagination (4), the puppet acts as a bridge between the two worlds. For Karaolis (5), a puppet is a transitional object that provides a sense of security while also being used for the "play of meaning" (6).

In the context of institutional early childhood education and care (ECEC), puppets have several uses. Their positive impact on children's language and speech development, cognitive, social, and emotional competencies, creativity, and expression is well recognized (7–12). This may be attributed to children's perception of the puppet as a peer and equal playmate (12).

*Nacionalni kurikulum ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja* (hereafter referred to as the "National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education"), lists basic competencies, including language and speech development, as desired educational outcomes (13). Although play is listed as one way of learning and developing children's skills, puppets are not recognized as a means of stimulation.

## The pedagogical potential of puppets

Puppets and puppetry have multiple roles, applications, and justifications for use in the educational process. They encourage or help with the development of social skills or learning, the formation of expectations in the group, and the implementation of interventions to address and reduce challenging behaviors (14, 15), as well as support the modeling of affirmative interactions between children (16). Forsberg Ahlcrona (17) highlights the communicative potential of puppets and the starting point for children's interactions, while Ivon (18) explains how puppets facilitate the understanding of social situations and learning for early and preschool children. This can also be explained by the sociocultural theory that stems from the work of Vygotsky and Bandura (19). According to Vygotsky, learning is integrated into social events and takes place during interaction with other people, objects, and events in their environment. This interaction helps children learn what is important in their culture. Similarly, Bandura emphasized the importance of observational learning, through which children model the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others, based on their observations of the benefits and harms of a particular behavior. Sociocultural theory, therefore, suggests that individuals' cognitive and learning processes are products of their society and culture (19).

Puppets can facilitate modeling positive peer interactions and child-adult relationships (16). They foster the development of social and emotional skills, promote caring, negotiating, and responsible behaviors, and encourage problem-solving (15, 19). Puppets can also

mediate the learning process, assist in understanding abstract ideas, demonstrate processes and concepts, and motivate children to learn and excel. Through this process, children transition from being observers to becoming active participants, developing and expressing their creativity, as well as social, emotional, and cognitive competencies (10, 15).

Pokrivka (20) highlights the communicative “ability” of puppets: children use puppets as a means of personal expression, while retaining awareness about the imaginative quality of such play, *i.e.*, its hypothetical “as if” nature. If a child truly fails to recognize or understand this process, depersonalization or more complex psychological disorders may be suspected (2).

Puppets can be particularly beneficial for children at risk of social exclusion who require special pedagogical support, as they can facilitate their engagement in social interactions and foster the development of self-concept and self-esteem, social cohesion, and prosocial behavior (6, 11). Dunst (16) also reports a shift in children’s and adults’ attitudes toward children with special educational needs. Overall, the application of puppetry may help facilitate the understanding of emotions and relationships and drive interventions in attitudes toward children with special educational needs. It is reasonable to conclude that the use of puppetry supports inclusive practices and the development of cooperative and caring behaviors.

For early childhood educators, the puppet can become a kind of “assistant”, helping them with breaking the ice and getting to know their children, while also encouraging the children’s engagement, expression, and holistic development (21). Observing children’s reactions can help educators to better understand their worlds. At the same time, using theatrical puppetry can boost educators’ confidence, acting as a “shield” and a transactional tool, as noted by Remer and Tzuriel (1).

## Theoretical starting points

Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (22) believe it is difficult to distinguish play and learning in early and preschool children. However, McArdle, Groeshaber, and Sumsion (23) warn that favoring learning narrows the scope of play. Using a stage puppet can expand children’s play and indirectly contribute to learning. For most children, a puppet is part of their world and can be a communication mediator, a means of learning and teaching through play (17).

Tzuriel and Remer (24) highlight three ways to use puppets in education, each having different goals. Puppets can be used by teachers during teaching and by children in free play and learning, while in puppet shows, they can serve as mediators in understanding relationships and problem situations. One study previously showed that the use of puppets in learning processes effectively increases children’s motivation (25). Forsberg Ahlcrona (17) pointed out how puppets create opportunities for play and interaction between children and adults, enabling communication and the creation of trusting relationships. Mujahidaha, Damayantija, and Afiife (7) emphasize the potential of puppets to stimulate children’s creativity and expression, while Kroger and Nupponen (9) explain their

importance as a communication stimulus in the educational process, supporting a positive atmosphere in the group, encouraging creativity, encouraging cooperation and integration, and changing attitudes.

Pokrivka (20) argues that puppets are underrepresented and under-researched in ECEC. Accepting early childhood educators as expert-practitioners who plan, initiate, organize, and evaluate the educational process and design material and social incentives indicates the relevance of examining their opinions on the possibilities of using puppets, justifying the need to explore early childhood educators' attitudes and self-assessment of their practices. This study, therefore, focused on educators' self-assessments regarding how and how often they use puppets in the classroom. We assumed there would be no statistically significant correlation between the educators' educational attainment, age, or length of service and how highly they value the use of theatrical puppetry in teaching. However, we expected to find a statistically significant correlation between educators' assessments and their participation in training focused on puppetry and current pedagogical practices.

## Methods

### *Sample*

We included 100 female early childhood educators from Split-Dalmatia County (SDC) in Southern Croatia, gathered through convenience sampling, making it irrepresentative of the size or structure of their population in SDC ( $n = 1511$ ) (26, 27). No male educators were included in the sample.

A relative majority of the participants (47%) had a bachelor's degree in ECEC. Only 18% had a master's degree, while 35% were currently attending a master's ECEC program at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Split. According to the CBS (26), only 16.6% ( $n = 2522$ ) of early childhood educators in Croatia hold a master's degree. Most participants ( $n = 90$ , 90%) worked in institutions founded by local governments, 7 (7%) worked in institutions established by a private or legal entity, while 3 (3%) worked in institutions founded by religious organizations. The average age of the participants was 38.8 years (standard deviation (SD) = 10.1), ranging from 22 to 64 years, with a mode of 32 years ( $n = 8$ ). The average length of service was 13.3 years (SD = 10.08), ranging from 8 months to 41 years.

### *Research instrument*

We used the Early Childhood Educators' Attitudes toward the Use of Theatre Puppets in Teaching Questionnaire (UTPT-QU), which we developed in the Croatian language specifically for this study based on relevant literature (5, 7, 9, 12, 15, 16, 19). The introduction of the survey explained that participation was fully anonymous and detailed the purpose and objectives of our research. The first part covered the respondents' socio-demographic data (sex, age, length of service, educational attainment, place of work, and type of ECEC institution by founder). The second part required participants to self-report on typical practices: the types of puppets used in teaching and the frequency of their use, how chil-

dren's interactions with puppets are documented, and the frequency of participation of educators in puppetry training, if any.

We assessed educators' attitudes toward the importance and expediency of theatrical puppetry in the educational process through 18 items to which they responded on a five-point Likert scale with a neutral value (1=strongly disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 5=strongly agree). We verified the reliability of the measuring instrument using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha=0.622$ , 23 items). The instrument also included an open-ended question, where participants could express their opinions in more detail.

### *Research procedure*

We conducted this research in May and June 2023. Using the snowball method, we sent the link to the Google Forms questionnaire to the e-mail addresses of educators whom one author (AV) knew personally with a request to forward the link to other teachers. We did not track the respondents' email addresses.

### *Ethical considerations*

The field work in educational institutions was approved by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth (Class No.: 601-02/20-03/00109, Reg. No.: 533-05-20-0006) as a part of the research project "Models of Response to Educational Needs of Children at Risk of Social Exclusion in ECEC Institutions (MORENEC)" funded by the Croatian Science Foundation (IP-2019-04-2011). The participants in the study were informed about the study and gave informed consent.

### *Statistical analysis*

We processed the data in SPSS, version 20 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). For general descriptive purposes, we used arithmetic mean and standard deviation or frequency. A normal distribution of the data was observed. We used Pearson's correlation coefficient to explore correlations between variables and *t*-tests to explore differences between subgroups. We examined factor structure using a Scree plot and component matrix. Lastly, we used one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to investigate potential correlations between the assessment of the relevance of theatrical puppets and certain independent variables.

## **Results**

Most educators in our sample ( $N=100$ ) reported having a designated space for children's theatrical and puppetry activities in their classrooms ( $n=78$ ), while the remainder did not have a clearly organized and recognizable setup for such play. Only a quarter of the participants ( $n=25$ ) had attended some form of training in puppetry and theatrical arts.

Most participants (98%) claimed to use theatrical puppets in their teaching practices, with a majority using puppets frequently (at least once a week; 49%), or regularly (2–3 times a month; 18%). A third of the participants (31%) used puppets only occasionally (once a year), while 2% never used them. The most frequently used types of puppets were stick

puppets (n = 67), finger puppets (n = 53), and hand puppets (n = 43). Marionettes were seldom used (n = 5), likely because they are difficult to handle.

Most educators documented children's achievements using various methods. The most common ways of documenting and evaluating children's experiences with puppetry were the so-called "pedagogical documentation books", legally mandated records for early childhood cohorts (n = 85), followed by photographs (n = 83) and videos (n = 53). A third of the sample (n = 34) maintained developmental portfolios to track children's progress and achievements. Thirteen educators used interactive boards to involve children in the documentation process, while only one teacher kept a separate log about the unique features of her teaching process.

When asked to assess the relevance and potential uses of puppetry in the educational process, educators highlighted the positive impact on children's holistic development as the most significant factor ( $4.83 \pm 0.45$ ). However, a few participants (n = 7) disagreed with this assessment. There were no conflicts in scores concerning the importance of puppets for language and speech, the development of a positive self-image, encouraging learning, and fostering active participation. While some participants (n = 11) had neutral attitudes, most agreed that the use of puppetry in the classroom may also have a beneficial effect on their professional development (**Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Educators' attitudes toward the relevance and potential uses of puppets in ECEC\*

| Educators' attitudes toward puppets in teaching  | Mean (SD)   | Range |
|--|-------------|-------|
| Theatre puppets are a valuable stimulus for fostering the holistic (emotional, social, and cognitive) development of children. | 4.83 (0.45) | 2 – 5 |
| Improvising with puppets stimulates the development of children's linguistic creativity.                                       | 4.76 (0.45) | 3 – 5 |
| Theatre puppets support the development of a positive self-image.  | 4.69 (0.54) | 3 – 5 |
| Puppets encourage children to learn.   | 4.65 (0.54) | 3 – 5 |
| Children are active participants in the creative process, not just performers.   | 4.64 (0.56) | 3 – 5 |
| Systematic observation of children's puppet play enhances educators' professional competencies.                                | 4.51 (0.68) | 3 – 5 |
| Rehearsing lines for plays contributes to children's artistic expression.  | 3.66 (0.97) | 1 – 5 |
| Puppet-based activities that limit children's freedom of expression stifle creativity.   | 3.63 (1.14) | 1 – 5 |
| Empathic educators are more likely to use puppets in their educational work.   | 3.39 (1.02) | 1 – 5 |
| Having appropriate materials (such as puppets and stage elements) is not a prerequisite for children's puppet play.            | 3.15 (1.25) | 1 – 5 |
| It doesn't matter how the educator uses the theatre puppet.  | 2.25 (0.97) | 1 – 5 |
| Puppetry doesn't contribute to children's speech development.  | 1.95 (1.53) | 1 – 5 |
| Storytelling and reading with a puppet don't promote pre-reading skills.   | 1.89 (1.37) | 1 – 5 |
| Observing, evaluating, and documenting children's puppet play doesn't improve the educational process.                         | 1.78 (1.19) | 1 – 5 |
| Improvising with puppets is no proof that children are transforming acquired knowledge.  | 1.67 (0.86) | 1 – 5 |
| Puppets limit children's play.   | 1.64 (1.04) | 1 – 5 |
| Puppets don't foster creativity in children.   | 1.61 (1.24) | 1 – 5 |
| Performing arts don't provide opportunities for children to test real-life situations through role-play.                       | 1.57 (0.95) | 1 – 5 |

\*ECEC= (institutional) early childhood education and care

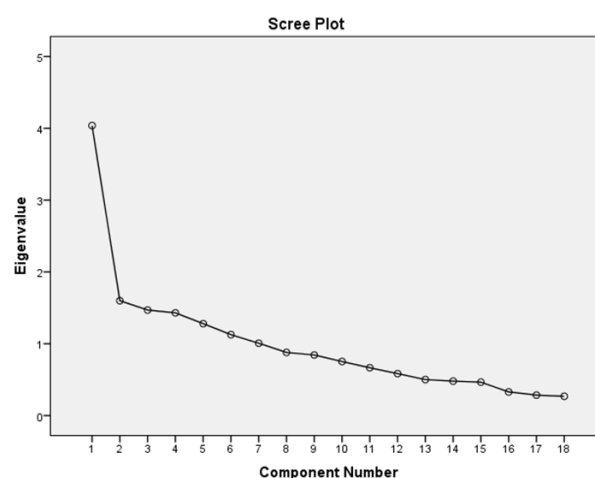


**Table 2.** Factor structure of the 'Educators' Attitudes Toward the Relevance and Potential Uses of Puppets in ECEC'\* scale with four components

| Educators' attitudes toward puppets in education  | Component matrix |       |       |       |
|---|------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|   | 1                | 2     | 3     | 4     |
| Improvising with puppets stimulates the development of children's linguistic creativity.                              | 0.75             |       |       |       |
| During children's performances, children are active participants in the creative process, not just performers.        | 0.72             |       |       |       |
| Systematic observation of children's puppet play improves educators' competencies for working with children.          | 0.71             |       |       |       |
| Theatre puppets are a valuable stimulus for fostering the emotional, social, and cognitive development of children.   | 0.68             |       |       |       |
| Puppets encourage learning in children.   | 0.67             |       |       |       |
| Theatre puppets support the development of a positive self-image.   | 0.58             | 0.37  |       |       |
| Improvising with puppets is no proof that children are transforming acquired knowledge.                               | -0.51            |       |       | 0.40  |
| Performing arts and puppetry don't provide opportunities for children to test real-life situations through role-play. | -0.47            |       |       | 0.42  |
| Storytelling and reading with a puppet don't promote pre-reading skills.  | -0.42            |       | 0.37  | 0.39  |
| Observing, evaluating, and documenting children's puppet play doesn't improve the educational process.                | -0.38            | 0.59  |       |       |
| Puppetry doesn't contribute to children's speech development.   |                  | 0.56  |       | -0.39 |
| Empathic educators are more likely to use puppets in their educational work.  |                  | 0.47  | -0.31 | 0.42  |
| It doesn't matter how the educator uses the theatre puppet.   | -0.34            | 0.45  |       |       |
| Puppets don't foster creativity in children.  |                  | 0.37  |       |       |
| Performing arts that limit children's freedom stifle their creativity.  |                  | -0.32 |       |       |
| Having appropriate materials such as stage elements and puppets is not a prerequisite for children's puppet play.     |                  |       | 0.78  |       |
| Puppets limit children's play.  | -0.36            |       | -0.53 |       |
| Rehearsing lines or scenes for plays contributes to children's artistic expression.                                   |                  |       |       | 0.57  |

\*ECEC= (institutional) early childhood education and care

The assessment scale was suitable for factor analysis ( $KMO=0.632$ ,  $\chi^2=548.522$ ,  $df=253$ ,  $P\leq 0.001$ ). Four key factors – the importance of puppetry for children's holistic development, the role of the educator, the significance of the environment, and limiting factors – accounting for 47.42% of the total variance were identified using the component matrix (Table 2). Figure 1 shows the prominence of the first factor (22.43% of the shared variance), understood as the contribution of puppetry to



**Figure 1.** Scree plot of 18 variables in the analysis of educators' attitudes toward the relevance and potential uses of puppets in ECEC.

children's development in the ECEC system. Recognizing the role of early childhood educators as one of the factors directs us to explore the possible connection between their experience and education as predictors of the use of puppets in the educational process.

When assessing the importance of puppetry, there was no statistically significant difference between participants who had a designated theatre and puppetry zone in their classrooms and those who did not ( $t$ -test,  $t=0.29$ ,  $df=98$ ,  $P=0.772$ ). Both groups attributed nearly equal importance to puppets. A borderline significant difference (94%) was observed between participants who had attended relevant training and those who had not ( $t$ -test,  $t=1.903$ ,  $df=98$ ,  $P=0.061$ ). Those who attended training or workshops focusing on puppetry and performing arts valued puppetry more highly (Table 3).

Table 3. Educators' assessment concerning the relevance and potential uses of puppets in ECEC\* by criterion variables

| Criterion variables                       | n  | Mean (SD)    | $t$   | df | $P$   |
|---|----|--------------|-------|----|-------|
| <b>Structured puppetry zones</b>          |    |              |       |    |       |
| Yes                                       | 78 | 56.33 (4.75) | 0.29  | 98 | 0.772 |
| No  | 22 | 56 (4.75)    |       |    |       |
| <b>Participation in puppetry training</b> |    |              |       |    |       |
| Yes                                       | 25 | 57.80 (5.73) | 1.903 | 98 | 0.061 |
| No  | 75 | 55.74 (4.27) |       |    |       |

\*ECEC= (institutional) early childhood education and care

We also investigated the relationship between educators' age or length of service and their assessment of the relevance and potential uses of puppetry. Here we found a slight, but statistically significant positive correlation between work experience and assessment, whereby educators with more work experience rated the importance of puppetry more highly (Pearson correlation,  $r=0.22$ ,  $P=0.032$ ). These data suggest a stronger correlation between the assessment of importance and work experience than educators' age (Table 4).

Table 4. Correlation between the assessment concerning the relevance and potential uses of puppets in ECEC\* and work experience or age ( $n = 100$ )

| Independent variables |     | Work experience | $\Sigma$ assessment** |
|-----------------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Work experience       | $r$ |                 | 0.22                  |
|                       | $P$ |                 | 0.032                 |
| Age                   | $r$ | 0.86            | 0.17                  |
|                       | $P$ | 0.001           | 0.085                 |

\*ECEC= (institutional) early childhood education and care

\*\*Assessment score for items in the 'Educators' Attitudes Toward the Relevance and Potential Uses of Puppets in ECEC' scale.

Using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), we observed a borderline significant difference ( $P=0.061$ ) in attitudes between different levels of educational attainment. We



found no correlation between assessments and the location/place of work ( $F = 0.93$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $P = 0.56$ ) or the type of ECEC institution by founder ( $F = 1.39$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $P = 0.171$ ). We did, however, find a statistically significant difference ( $F = 1.878$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $P = 0.031$ ) in the frequency of puppet use, suggesting that educators who regularly used puppets (at least once a week) rated their importance significantly higher than those who used them infrequently (at most once a year).

Only 17 participants answered the open-ended portion of the questionnaire, all of whom shared positive experiences. Most of them ( $n = 14$ ) claimed to regularly use puppets in their teaching practices, particularly for ‘problem-solving and modeling undesirable behaviors’ ( $n = 9$ ). Simultaneously, ‘children spontaneously and independently used puppets in their play’ ( $n = 11$ ). Participants underlined the positive impact of puppets on developing social and emotional skills ( $n = 7$ ) and creativity ( $n = 5$ ). One participant emphasized the ‘therapeutic and motivational effect of puppetry in helping children to master skills they have not yet fully acquired’, describing the puppet as almost irreplaceable. A relative majority ( $n = 8$ ) also noted the importance of puppetry in building confidence, especially in shy or withdrawn children, as well as children with special educational needs. One participant concluded that “puppetry enriches the child’s world in every way!”

## Discussion

Our findings indicate that early childhood educators recognize the importance of puppetry in education, although their attitudes toward different aspects of its application and its impact on children’s development vary. We observed no difference in assessments related to the spatial or material setup of the classroom.

This research focused primarily on the professional experience of early childhood educators. We found no statistically significant difference in assessment concerning the respondents’ formal education. Although it would be reasonable to expect that educators with a higher level of education would value the possibilities of using stage puppets more significantly in the educational process, this was not the case. This information may indicate shortcomings in formal education. In Croatia, formal education for early childhood educators requires a mandatory three-year higher education (bachelor’s degree). An additional two years of graduate study (master’s degree) are not mandatory. Unfortunately, according to available data (26), there is a shortage of about 5,000 educators in the ECEC system. Therefore, the system employs “unprofessional substitutes”, mainly primary school teachers. According to available study programs, their formal education did not include learning about the possibilities of stage puppets. However, they were not included in this research, and we are therefore unable to draw conclusions about their competencies.

We found no statistically significant differences between assessments of the research participants and the founders of institutions. In Croatia, preschool institutions can be founded by local government units, natural or legal persons, and religious communities. All of them are obligated to follow legal guidelines – the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (13) and *Državni pedagoški standard ranog i predškolskog odgoja i*

*obrazovanja* (translated as “State Pedagogical Standard for Early Childhood and Preschool Education”) (28). It can be concluded that the legal framework is uniformly respected, so this is not a predictor of differences.

We observed a slight correlation between assessments of the research participants and additional education in puppetry. Based on this, we can conclude that the importance that respondents attach to stage puppetry is primarily related to their professional experience, and that the length of service is more important than the age of the early childhood educators. The reasons for this may be multifaceted. Educators who have been in the system longer have expressed a greater ability to monitor and develop their personal practice, and they may have recognized the importance and possibilities of using stage puppets through experience.

Previous research has found that ECEC educators typically use puppets once or twice every two months (14). However, regular users have noted the benefits of puppetry in communicating with children, encouraging their play, and contributing to their holistic development (10, 18, 29). Educators usually opt for puppets that are easy to handle, such as finger puppets, stick puppets, and hand puppets. These findings are consistent with research done by Županić Benić (3). It remains to be seen whether this preference is due to the ease of handling, insufficient training on the use of puppets in educational settings (20), a lack of material resources, or personal conformism.

The educators in our sample recognized the potential of puppets as a didactic tool, believing that they have the pedagogical potential to foster children’s holistic development, aligning with the findings of relevant studies. For example, the role of puppetry in developing logical and divergent thinking is well-recognized in ours and in other studies (18). The positive impact of puppets on social and emotional skills was also acknowledged, in line with the studies by Karaolis (5), Mujahidah and colleagues (7), and Forsberg Ahlcróna (17). Although previous studies suggest that the use of puppets in ECEC fosters children’s expression and creativity (9) and helps children process real-life situations (15), our respondents demonstrated the widest range of opinions on this topic. Consequently, the educators were also divided on the relationship between language and speech development in children and the frequency of puppet use. This may be the consequence of a gap in professional training, which is reflected in pedagogical practice (20). Considering the risks of social exclusion for some children, there is a possibility that vulnerable children are not adequately screened in the process, leading to insufficient engagement and superficial conclusions about the lack of positive outcomes (11). Consistent with the values promoted by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (30), participants in our study believed that children were active participants in the educational process. However, the disparity between the proclaimed attitudes on children’s autonomy and actual practice is evident in the assessment of the importance of directive roles for educators. For example, only 13% of educators in our sample endorsed participatory documentation that fosters equal involvement of children. This may be due to ambiguous public education policies, which advocate for children’s emancipation and active involvement in decision-making (13), but still enforce normative psychophysical assessments of children before elementary school enrollment (31). While Korošec (29) points to the prevalence of directive approaches

among ECEC educators aiming for normative outcomes, Županić Benić (3) highlights the inappropriateness of such approaches, which stifle children's creativity and expression. Slunjski (32) suggests that existing pedagogical documentation promotes directive approaches. However, other studies have indicated that early childhood educators focused on improving the quality of the educational process are developing informal forms of documentation and evaluation aimed at monitoring and fostering children's individual development (33). Lindh and Mansikka (34) also stress that children should be included in documentation processes.

Our participants were not inclined to view puppetry as a limiting factor for children's learning, which is consistent with previous research (5, 7, 9). It is unclear why some instructors fail to integrate puppetry consistently into their educational practices. Research by Ivon (7) found a correlation with educators' level of empathy. Empathy, when understood as the ability to provide optimal responses to observed social and emotional needs, is a core skill for early childhood educators, with puppetry being an optimal tool.

Our research suggests some resistance among early childhood educators toward developmental and participatory documentation of children's educational progress. Only a third of the educators in the sample maintained individual records of children or developmental portfolios. According to Slunjski (32), this could be attributed to the rigid, legally mandated pedagogical documentation system. Lindh and Mansikka (34) warn that merely filling out templates (both in the documentation and teaching stages) serves no developmental role. Research by Visković and Zeleničić (33) suggests that educators are slowly recognizing the importance of tracking the individual development and achievements of every child as a basis for evaluating and planning new and purposeful developmental stimuli. In this context, the outcomes of this study confirm that educators who frequently use puppets have more favorable opinions on their use, suggesting that a focus on development can also contribute to quality.

The observed correlation between the frequency of and positive attitudes toward puppet use highlights the importance of developing pedagogical practice. This is supported by previous research suggesting that experience and a focus on exploring the quality of teaching and educational outcomes can contribute to the development of practice (20). This may involve a shift in educators' personal paradigms (6, 9). In this context, we note that the favorable assessment of puppetry in ECEC was slightly but statistically significantly correlated with educators' length of service (and, significantly less with their age) and with the frequency of their professional development. The insufficient frequency of professional training is therefore a matter of concern. This may correlate with research conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (35), which found a lack of interest in lifelong learning and professional development among adults, with only one in two adults participating in professional development. It is therefore justified to consider the possibilities of better formal education for early childhood educators that would include comprehensive learning about the importance and possibilities of using puppets in the educational process. Quality initial education would initiate early experience for them and, possibly, a systematic interest in further education.

### Study limitations

Although our sample size and structure are not representative of the early childhood educator population in SDC, our findings are indicative of educators' attitudes toward puppet use and their role in promoting children's well-being. Future research should include a sample that is representative in size ( $n \geq 310$ ) and stratified by educational attainment and the type of ECEC institution by founder (27). According to CBS data (26), only 16.6% ( $n=2522$ ) of early childhood educators in Croatia have a master's degree. Here, 18% of educators completed higher education programs, while 35% were still working toward their master's degrees. The representation of institutions in the sample does not reflect the structure of ECEC institutions in SDC, where 76.51% ( $n=189$ ) of early childhood institutions were founded by local governments, 18% ( $n=48$ ) by private individuals, and 4.04% ( $n=10$ ) by religious organizations (26). Similarly, the sample should also include male educators, who represent 1.08% of ECEC teachers in Croatia (26). While the size of this sub-sample is not significant in the population, it could yield interesting data for evaluating pedagogical practice. We also note that the reliability of this instrument is relatively low, possibly due to the small sample size and social desirability bias. However, we believe it to be acceptable for this type of research, but suggest future studies to adapt and supplement it to achieve better reliability.

### Conclusions

The findings of numerous relevant studies indicate that the use of puppets in the educational process contributes to the holistic development of children, especially their socio-emotional and educational well-being. However, an insight into the practice of ECEC, based on the (self)assessment of preschool teachers, shows that puppets are still insufficiently used in their work. This can be linked to inadequately covered initial education of preschool teachers but also to objective circumstances of working conditions. Besides preschool teachers, public education policy also has responsibility of puppets being present in the pedagogical process.

Although the existence of the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (13), which determines the fundamental values, principles and expected outcomes, methods of implementing the educational process is left to practitioners. At the same time, there is no continuous support provided through training of practitioners, who would respond to the appropriate needs of children and the educational process. Scientifically based research into practice can contribute to the recognition of difficulties and point to quality solutions.

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