



Journal of the Institute for Educational Research
Volume 56 • Number 2 • December 2024 • 303–320
UDC 376-056.26/.36-053.4(497.11)
37.064:373.21(497.11)

ISSN 0579-6431
ISSN 1820-9270 (Online)
<https://doi.org/10.2298/ZIPI2402303J>
Original research paper

PERSPECTIVES OF PARENTS AND EDUCATORS ON MUTUAL TRUST IN INCLUSIVE PRESCHOOLS*

Marija Jelić** ➤ ORCID: 0000-0003-0146-9663
*University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation,
Belgrade, Serbia*

Nataša Buha ➤ ORCID: 0000-0002-8568-6309
*University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation,
Belgrade, Serbia*

A B S T R A C T

When parents and educators form and maintain collaborative partnerships to support children's development, the outcomes of inclusive preschool practices improve, not only for children but also for parents and educators. Since trust is a crucial foundation for building such partnerships, and given the lack of research on this topic in our context, this study aimed to examine the congruence of trust levels between parents and educators, as well as differences in trust based on children's developmental status (children with and without developmental disabilities). The sample included 306 educators and 450 parents of children with and without developmental disabilities. The Trust Scale was used, with separate forms for educators and parents. The results showed that educators exhibited higher levels of trust compared to parents. Additionally, parents of children with developmental disabilities reported significantly lower trust in educators than parents of children without developmental disabilities, particularly regarding aspects of developmental support and educators' communication with parents. The lack of trust between educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities poses a risk to building effective partnerships, which undermines unified efforts to support children's learning and development. To address this, educators should be empowered through initial training and professional development, with an emphasis on effective communication

* *Note.* This paper was created as part of the project "Creating a Protocol for Assessing Educational Potentials of Children with Disabilities" funded by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of Serbia (Contract No. 451-03-66/2024-03/200096).

** E-mail: marijajelic@fasper.bg.ac.rs

strategies and approaches for working with children with diverse needs and with their families. The study also highlights directions for future research to develop successful inclusive education programs where parents and children feel a true sense of belonging.

Key words:

preschool education, inclusion, parental trust, educator trust, parent-educator partnership.

■ INTRODUCTION

According to the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), the family and preschool/school are part of a child's microsystem, which directly influences their development and upbringing. The mesosystem, as the next level of the model, involves the partnership between these two educational agents, aiming to achieve positive developmental outcomes for the child. The exosystem and macrosystem represent the broader social and cultural environment surrounding the child, indirectly impacting their development and education. The macrosystem, in which children do not participate directly, encompasses laws and regulations related to inclusion and the provision of quality education for all children and students, as well as the evaluation, monitoring, and research of inclusive educational practices. International policy documents (UNESCO, 2015, 2020) emphasize that achieving quality education for all children (e.g., improving learning outcomes, reducing developmental delays, and decreasing marginalization) requires mutual trust and partnerships at every level, from macro to micro. Numerous studies across various educational levels have shown that a strong partnership between families and educational institutions is linked to better learning outcomes (Boonk et al., 2018; Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Lang et al., 2022; Rey-Guerra et al., 2022; Sheridan et al., 2019), particularly for the learning and development of children with disabilities (Attard & Booth, 2023; Chen et al., 2020; Garbacz et al., 2016; Mokhtar et al., 2023).

Recognizing the importance of strong relationships between families and educational institutions for children's development, parent partnerships have become a key component of national educational policies in many countries, including the education system in the Republic of Serbia. In accordance with international policy documents (e.g., UNESCO, 1994, 2015, 2020), the past two decades have seen the establishment of the right to quality education for all children (inclusive education), creating formal conditions for children with developmental disabilities to attend regular educational institutions (Zakon o osnovama sistema vaspitanja i obrazovanja, 2009). As building partnerships with parents is essential for quality education for all children, involving parents of children with developmental disabilities in the educational process has become a responsibility for educators at all levels.

The development of the partnership concept stemmed from recognizing the limitations of previous traditional cooperation models. The approach has evolved from a strictly formalized relationship that excluded parents to one where they are included as equal partners and essential contributors to the educational system, no longer following a pre-defined form set by the institution. Unlike traditional models of collaboration, the partnership approach calls for an equal relationship, characterized by a shift in power dynamics, shared responsibility, dialogue, and mutual trust (Pavlović Breneselović, 2014).

Trust and Partnership between Parents and Educators

The partnership between families and educational institutions is defined in various ways in the literature (e.g., Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mapp & Henderson, 2002), but most authors emphasize that it arises from complementary interests and shared goals between the family and the educational setting, both aimed at jointly supporting children in reaching their full potential. For this partnership to develop, a process of mutual participation and action is required, through which trust is built and an environment is created that motivates all parties in the educational process to work together in supporting children's learning and development (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). This approach to partnership focuses on fostering the quality of the relationship between parents and educators.

Establishing a partnership with parents is crucial when a child starts preschool, as it provides the foundation for their long-term development and education. By upholding the right of all children to education through inclusive practices in early childhood settings, particular attention is given to partnering with the parents of children with developmental disabilities (Pravilnik o osnovama programa predškolskog vaspitanja i obrazovanja, 2018). In the Republic of Serbia, preschool education is intended for children aged 6 months to 7 years, just before they begin primary school. In accordance with legal changes (Zakon o predškolskom vaspitanju i obrazovanju, 2010), priority for enrollment in preschool institutions in Serbia is given to children from socially vulnerable groups, including those with developmental disabilities. Since these children are at a higher risk for negative developmental outcomes compared to their typically developing peers, establishing partnerships with the parents of children with developmental disabilities at the preschool stage is crucial for their later development and education (Larcombe et al., 2019). Additionally, preschool education provides an opportunity for early identification of children at risk for developmental delays, allowing parents and educators to plan and implement timely interventions to meet the children's needs, minimize developmental delays, improve outcomes, and prevent social marginalization.

As previously mentioned, establishing a strong partnership to support children's early development and learning requires mutual trust between educators and parents (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Trust between parents and professionals is built over time, and the experiences gained through their relationship with the educator, along with the child's early learning outcomes, significantly influence the development of trust and future partnerships. This is particularly relevant for parents of children with developmental disabilities, as it can impact their collaboration with elementary school teachers and other professionals (Chen et al., 2020; Garbacz et al., 2016). Therefore, researching mutual trust between parents and educators is crucial in the context of inclusive preschool education.

Most definitions of trust come from studies of close interpersonal relationships, which have provided the theoretical basis for examining trust between key actors in the educational process. Empirical research, drawing on different theoretical approaches, has sought to explore trust using various measures, including multiple subcategories of this construct (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000), as well as singular definitions with a unidimensional measure (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000). For the purposes of this study, we define trust as the belief that the other party will meet expectations related to their role (e.g., educator) and will be open, honest, well-intentioned, and reliable (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Specifically, regarding the educator's role, parental expectations are focused on their professional competence in providing quality support for their child's development and learning. On the other hand, regarding the parental role, educators' expectations are focused on parental competencies in working together to support the child's development and learning. Trustworthiness refers to the predictability of mutual expectations, while goodwill reflects the belief in the other party's genuine intent to fulfill their role. When educators and parents trust one another, they tend to be more open and honest, and when they share truthful information, mutual trust is more likely to be established. All these aspects of trust are essential for building a strong, trustworthy relationship.

Trust involves reciprocity, meaning that in order to assess mutual trust between educators and parents, it is essential to consider the perspectives of both parties, particularly when the initial situation is marked by differences and an asymmetrical relationship. The potential differences in the level of trust parents have in educators, and vice versa, stem from their distinct roles, motivations, knowledge, values, needs, and expectations regarding children's development and upbringing, as well as from the individual characteristics of educators, parents, and children. Regarding children's characteristics, the expectations of parents of children with developmental disabilities differ from those of parents of children without such disabilities, especially regarding the educators' ability to meet their children's needs. Moreover, compatibility between educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities is challenging, as

educators must support and work with both parents and children who have complex and diverse needs. Although educators generally agree that children with disabilities should be in the same environment as their typically developing peers, research shows that they often lack the necessary knowledge and experience to address the needs of these children, which can hinder their ability to meet the needs of both parents and children (Akalin et al., 2014; Attard & Booth, 2023; Jablan & Maksimović, 2020; Korać et al., 2018; Van der Steen et al., 2020). These differences can easily lead to misunderstandings, biases, and conflicting expectations between educators and parents, which, in turn, can damage the trust relationship and create distrust in the potential for collaboration on children's learning and development. The greater the congruence between educators' and parents' perceptions of mutual trust, the more likely it is that a partnership will be formed, resulting in joint efforts to achieve positive outcomes for the child. Conversely, disagreements about mutual trust may impede their collective engagement in working towards shared developmental goals for the child (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Beycioglu et al., 2013; Santiago et al., 2016; Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

The concepts of partnership and trust are interconnected, but they are not the same. Partnership is a broader concept, while trust is one aspect of it, specifically related to the emotional and interpersonal dynamics between parents and educators (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Empirical research on partnerships that focuses on the role of trust between parents and educators are relatively rare (Kikas et al., 2016; Mavračić Miković & Tot, 2020), and they are primarily conducted within the school context (e.g., Adams & Christenson, 2000; Janssen et al., 2012; Santiago et al., 2016). Studies on parental trust in children with developmental disabilities within inclusive education are also more prevalent in the school context (Attard & Booth, 2023; Larcombe et al., 2019). However, research on parental trust in children with developmental disabilities within inclusive preschool education, particularly focusing on the congruence between parents' and educators' perceptions of mutual trust, is limited (Sucuoğlu & Bakkaloğlu, 2018), and, to our knowledge, there are no studies on this topic in Serbia.

This study aims to examine the level of mutual trust between parents and educators, recognizing its significance for the quality of their relationship and, indirectly, for the development and learning of children. It also seeks to explore any differences in trust levels based on the developmental status of the children (with or without developmental disabilities). Specifically, the research questions are: Are there differences in mutual trust between parents and educators, and is there congruence in how they perceive this trust? Does the developmental status of the children (with or without developmental disabilities) influence parents' trust in educators, as well as educators' trust in parents? Are there differences or congruence in the level of mutual trust between educators and parents of children without developmental disabilities, and between educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities?

Answering these questions about mutual trust between parents and educators will help us to better understand the quality of their relationship and highlight directions for further research in this area. It will also provide insights into the measures needed to develop successful inclusive programs where both parents and children feel a sense of belonging.

■ METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The study, which examined mutual trust between parents and educators, included both parents and educators from 12 preschool institutions in Belgrade and 12 in the Vojvodina region of Serbia. The sample consisted of 306 educators and 450 parents. Of these, 294 (65.3%) parents had children without developmental disabilities, while 156 (34.7%) had children with developmental disabilities. The children's ages ranged from 3 to 7 years ($M=5.73$, $SD=1.05$; 52% were boys). According to preschool records, the developmental disabilities of the children included cognitive difficulties, emotional and behavioral challenges, speech and language delays, chronic health conditions, sensory impairments (vision and hearing difficulties), motor difficulties, and multiple disabilities.

The researchers initially contacted preschool directors via email to inform them about the study's purpose. After receiving a list of interested parents and educators from various rural and urban areas across Serbia, the questionnaires were sent electronically. Once completed, the responses were returned in the same way. Before participating, all participants were informed about the intended use of the results, assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the collected data, and told that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Instrument

The Trust Scale was used, with separate forms for educators and parents. These scales are part of the Family-School Relationships Survey (Adams & Christenson, 2000) and consist of 19 statements starting with "I am confident that the educator/parent..." (e.g., is doing a good job in teaching a child, encourages the child's sense of self-esteem, has the child's best interests at heart). Educators and parents assessed their mutual trust by choosing one of the following responses on a Likert-type scale for each statement: never – 1, rarely – 2, often – 3, always – 4.

The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which indicated high reliability for both scales in our study. This was true for the overall sample of educators ($\alpha=0.975$) and parents ($\alpha=0.989$), as well as for the subsample of parents of children without disabilities ($\alpha=0.988$) and parents of children with developmental disabilities ($\alpha=0.990$).

Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS software package. Descriptive statistics and basic statistical tests were applied: Pearson correlation, as well as paired-samples t-test and independent-samples t-test to examine differences between and within groups.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Differences and Correlations in the Levels of Trust between Parents and Educators

Table 1 shows the descriptive results for the Trust Scale across the total sample of educators and parents, revealing that educators have a higher level of trust than parents. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to examine differences in trust levels between the groups, and it was found that educators' trust in parents is significantly higher than parents' trust in educators ($t=5.77$; $df=448$; $p<0.000$). The correlation between parents' and educators' trust levels indicates a significant, but low, relationship ($r=0.25$; $p<0.000$).

Table 1. Descriptive indicators of the Trust Scale for the total sample of educators and parents

Trust scales	Min	Max	M	SD
Parents	1	4	2.93	0.88
Educators	1.53	4	3.19	0.67

Differences and Correlations in Trust Levels between Parents and Educators Based on Children's Developmental Status

Table 2 presents the results of the independent-samples t-test analyzing differences in trust levels based on the developmental status of children across both participant groups. Statistically significant differences were observed only among parents, with parents of children with developmental disabilities reporting significantly lower trust in educators compared to parents of children without developmental disabilities.

Table 2. Mean trust levels and differences based on children's developmental status on the Trust scales in both examined groups

Trust scales	WDD (<i>n</i> = 294)	DD (<i>n</i> = 155)	(N = 449)	
	M(SD)	M(SD)	t(df)	p
Parents	3.04(0.86)	2.74(0.89)	3.48(448)	0.001
Educators	3.23(0.66)	3.14(0.69)	1.39(448)	0.165

Note: WDD = without developmental disabilities group; DD = developmental disabilities group

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to examine differences in trust levels between groups based on children's developmental status. The results showed significant differences between the trust levels of educators and parents of children without developmental disabilities ($t=3.62$, $df=293$, $p<0.000$) and between educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities ($t=4.70$, $df=154$, $p <0.000$). As presented in Table 2, both parent subgroups reported lower levels of trust in educators compared to the trust educators had in them. However, while a significant moderate correlation was found between the trust levels of educators and parents of children without developmental disabilities ($r=0.31$, $p<0.000$), no significant correlation was observed for educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities ($r=0.14$, $p=0.173$).

A detailed item analysis was conducted to identify the areas where parents' trust in educators was lowest. As shown in Table 3, both parent subgroups gave the lowest average ratings to items 5 and 13: *Teacher is doing a good job encouraging my participation in my child's education* (item 5) and *Teacher is receptive to my input and suggestions* (item 13). Conversely, educators gave the lowest ratings to items 4 and 5 for both parent groups: *Parents provide me with information about the child's interests and behavior outside the preschool context* (item 4) and *Parents are doing a good job disciplining their child* (item 5).

Table 3. The lowest mean item values in the parent and educator subgroups

Trustscales	Item	WDD (<i>n</i> = 294)	DD (<i>n</i> = 155)
		M(SD)	M(SD)
Parents	5	2.61(1.05)	2.39(1.00)
	13	2.75(0.99)	2.43(0.94)
Educators	4	2.82(0.91)	2.91(0.89)
	5	2.98(0.71)	2.91(0.71)

Note: WDD = without developmental disabilities group; DD = without developmental disabilities group; 5_p = Teacher is doing a good job encouraging my participation in my child's education; 13_p = Teacher is receptive to my input and suggestions; 4_e = Parents provide me with information about the child's interests and behavior outside the preschool context; 5_e = Parents are doing a good job disciplining their child.

The analysis of the highest average values revealed the aspects where trust was the strongest. The highest average values (with standard deviations in parentheses) for both parent subgroups were found in items indicating that they believe the educator contributes to their child's learning, $M_{WDD}=3.14(0.89)$, $M_{DD}=2.89(0.93)$, and the adoption of behavioral rules, $M_{WDD}=3.13(0.90)$, $M_{DD}=2.87(0.92)$. On the other hand, educators have the highest level of trust in both parent groups, believing they are genuinely concerned with their child's proper development and upbringing, $M_{WDD}=3.52(0.66)$, $M_{DD}=3.35(0.76)$, and that they care adequately for the child, $M_{WDD}=3.50(0.68)$, $M_{DD}=3.37(0.77)$.

■ DISCUSSION

Building on the importance of trust between parents and educators for the quality of their relationship, and its indirect impact on children's development and learning, the objectives of this study were to examine the congruence of trust levels between parents and educators, as well as the differences in trust based on the developmental status of the children (with and without developmental disabilities).

Mutual Trust between Educators and Parents in Inclusive Preschool Settings

The findings from the overall sample revealed that parents have significantly lower levels of trust in educators compared to the trust educators have in parents. This discrepancy may stem from differences in expectations, motivations, and needs associated with the distinct roles of educators and parents. It also highlights the influence of the sociocultural context in which trust is evaluated. While few studies have explored trust perceptions between educators and parents, their results differ from current study, consistently showing that parents tend to have higher levels of trust in educators than educators do in parents (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000; Janssen et al., 2012; Sucuoğlu & Bakkaloğlu, 2018; Vidal et al., 2020). The higher level of trust that parents place in professionals in the studies mentioned is attributed to their reputation and professional competence. However, our results suggest that this does not apply to the teaching profession in the Serbian context. On the other hand, the legally mandated partnership with parents creates a binding obligation for educators. Therefore, it is possible that the higher level of trust educators report may reflect socially desirable responses rather than the actual situation in practice. Moreover, since the educator sample was recommended by preschool directors, this likely limits the objectivity of the data concerning educators' trust in parents.

Given that congruence in parents' and educators' perceptions of mutual trust reflects the quality of their relationship, our results confirmed that such congruence exists, but it is weak. In addition to the significant differences in trust levels, the explanation for this finding lies in the results of a more detailed analysis, which showed that agreement between educators and parents occurs in areas related to their primary roles. Educators most trust the genuine care of parents for their children's proper development and upbringing, while parents most trust the educator's contribution to their child's learning and acquisition of behavioral rules. Although this suggests that both sides, in line with their competencies, are willing to establish trust and build a partnership, the results from the lowest-rated aspects of trust highlight key barriers to strengthening their mutual trust. Specifically, the analysis of the lowest-rated trust aspects from both educators' and parents' perspectives reveals mutually exclusive views. While educators have the least trust in parents' willingness to inform them about the child's interests and behavior outside the preschool context, parents have the least trust in educators' willingness to listen to their opinions and suggestions. Additionally, it is contradictory that educators trust parents the least when it comes to their methods of raising children, while parents have less trust in how educators contribute to their parenting competencies and involvement in their child's upbringing. These findings suggest a lack of mutual understanding and emphasize the importance of considering

both sides' perceptions when assessing mutual trust. When these perceptions are not aligned, the likelihood of forming a quality partnership focused on jointly supporting the development and upbringing of children diminishes (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Beycioglu et al., 2013; Santiago et al., 2016; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). The results point to the need for further research on the factors that contribute to varying levels of trust between educators and parents, and why their mutual trust is often weak.

Mutual Trust between Educators and Parents Based on the Developmental Status of the Children

This study focused on examining the impact of children's developmental status on mutual trust between educators and parents, amidst numerous other factors that can influence this relationship. The results showed that the developmental status of children does not affect educators' trust in parents, though, as discussed earlier, this finding should be interpreted with caution. On the other hand, for parents, the developmental status of their children is a significant factor in determining their trust in educators. Parents of children with developmental disabilities exhibit significantly lower trust in educators compared to parents of children without disabilities. Additionally, it was confirmed that there is a moderate level of congruence in mutual trust between educators and parents of children without developmental disabilities, which is promising for their partnership and collaborative efforts aimed at achieving positive outcomes. However, the absence of a significant correlation between the trust levels of educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities suggests that there is insufficient trust to establish a partnership, reducing the likelihood of setting shared goals and working together to support the development and learning of children with developmental disabilities.

Parents of children with developmental disabilities are considered a higher-risk group for forming quality relationships with both their children and educators compared to parents of children without disabilities (Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Rodas et al., 2016; Staunton et al., 2023), and therefore require more support from educators in fostering their children's development. However, our results show that parents of children with developmental disabilities have the least trust in the expected support from educators in developing their parenting skills and becoming more actively involved in their child's education. Unlike parents of children without disabilities, these parents expect additional support from educators, specifically regarding the unique challenges their children face and guidance on how to stimulate their child's development and learning. For these expectations to be met, educators must possess well-developed professional competencies to work with both parents and children with diverse needs. Unfortunately, evaluative

studies on inclusive education in the Serbian context (Jablan & Maksimović, 2020; Korać et al., 2018; Rajić & Mihić, 2017; Stančić & Stanisavljević Petrović, 2013; Vujačić et al., 2015) and internationally (Akalin et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2020; Hasson et al., 2022; Van der Steen et al., 2020) consistently show that educators and teachers are not adequately prepared to work with children with developmental disabilities. Even parents with positive experiences regarding inclusion often express anxiety and concern over educators' competencies and the level of support provided, particularly parents of children with more severe disabilities (Attard & Booth, 2023; Larcombe et al., 2019; Mithimunye et al., 2018; Reupert et al., 2014). Research has shown that a trusting, collaborative relationship between parents and professionals fosters positive outcomes for both children and parents of children with developmental disabilities (Attard & Booth, 2023; Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Mokhart et al., 2023). In line with this, a study found that parents of children who receive more intensive, individualized support report significantly higher levels of trust in educators and more positive attitudes toward collaborating with them, compared to parents who reported lower or moderate levels of trust (Adams & Christenson, 1998). Since the competencies and trustworthiness of the other party are critical elements of trust (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000), it is likely that the lack of knowledge and experience in working with children and parents with diverse needs is a key factor behind the distrust parents of children with developmental disabilities may feel toward educators.

The aspect where parents expressed the lowest level of trust was the willingness of educators to accept their opinions and suggestions. Numerous studies on the partnership between parents of children with developmental disabilities and professionals have confirmed that many parents feel frustrated by poor communication from staff at educational institutions. They point to the lack of open, two-way communication based on mutual respect as a significant barrier to accessing support and building trust (Attard & Booth, 2023; Hamm & Mousseau, 2023; Hasson et al., 2022; Larcombe et al., 2019; Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Reupert et al., 2014; Stoner & Angell, 2014; Sucuoğlu & Bakkaloğlu, 2018; Vidal et al., 2020). When relating these findings to the results of the current study, it can be assumed that the lack of trust between parents of children with developmental disabilities and educators—particularly regarding the educators' willingness to accept their opinions and suggestions—stems from communication patterns that are not grounded in respect for parents and the essential skills required for effective collaborative communication. Open and honest communication, as a fundamental aspect of trust (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999), allows both parents and educators to exchange important information about the child's progress and behavior between home and school. This, in turn, enables them to set common goals and work together to support the child's learning and development in line with his/her individual needs. On the other hand, communication that is

unequal and comes from a position of power, often accusatory and focused on the child's shortcomings, reflects a traditional approach to parent collaboration, which leaves little room for establishing mutual trust or fostering the learning and development of children with developmental disabilities.

■ CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Building mutual trust and establishing partnership relationships between educators and parents in preschool settings is a topic of significance not only for children and parents but also for the staff in educational institutions and educational authorities. It is crucial in ensuring the conditions and resources necessary for quality education for all children. Given the limited number of studies on mutual trust between parents and educators, especially in the Serbian context, the findings of this study contribute to expanding knowledge on this topic and provide guidance for inclusive practices and further research.

An important contribution of this study is its confirmation of the significance of examining the congruence in the perception of trust between both parties in the relationship. When these perceptions are not aligned, the likelihood of establishing a partnership decreases, negatively affecting children's learning and development. Accordingly, our key findings highlight that parents of children with developmental disabilities are particularly vulnerable in building trust with educators, which poses a risk to the formation of quality partnership relationships and, consequently, positive developmental outcomes for these children.

Given that trust is built on the competence of the other party and two-way communication, the results indicate that changes are needed in the way educators communicate with parents, as well as more effective support tailored to the needs of children with developmental disabilities and their parents. Therefore, initial teacher education and ongoing professional development in the field of inclusion should enhance educators' competencies to provide appropriate support to children with developmental disabilities and their parents. A sense of personal competence is a key motivational driver for effective work with these children. Considering the importance of practical experience, it is essential that initial education and professional development for educators integrate theory and practice, everyday experience, and a self-reflective attitude toward their own work. This approach would lead to a better understanding and substantive change in their practice with children who have various developmental disabilities. Additionally, our findings suggest that the traditional model of communication between educators and parents dominates in practice, and that through professional development programs, educators should be empowered and trained in the skills needed for collaborative communication.

Moreover, in initial teacher education, courses related to family-school partnerships should place greater emphasis on developing communication skills and the practical application of both successful and unsuccessful communication patterns. These interventions would contribute to building trust-based relationships between educators and parents, making parents feel supported, and empowering them to participate in joint work with children. For these outcomes to be achieved in inclusive practices, mutual trust and partnership are needed at both macro and micro levels, not just among those directly involved in the preschool education process.

The methodological limitations of this study stem from the use of indirect techniques and quantitative assessment methods. Future research would benefit from incorporating qualitative methods, such as focus groups and observations, to provide more objective insights into the mutual trust between educators and parents in inclusive preschool settings. While the sample is representative in terms of size, particularly regarding educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities, it only covers the Belgrade and Vojvodina regions of Serbia. Different cultural contexts may yield different results in terms of mutual trust. Therefore, future studies should include a more representative sample, covering other regions and education stakeholders (such as directors, professional staff, children, and decision-makers), which would allow for greater generalizability of the findings.

This study, to the best of our knowledge, is the first to explore mutual trust between educators and parents, and as such, it lays the groundwork for further investigation into the relationship between trust and partnership, not only in preschools but also in elementary and secondary schools. The results and hypotheses emerging from this research provide valuable insights into these relationships and offer guidance for future studies on the correlates of mutual trust between parents and professionals. Given that the findings contribute to expanding knowledge on mutual trust between educators and parents of children with developmental disabilities, future research could delve deeper into differences in trust among parents of children with various types of developmental challenges. An interesting question to explore is how the trust of parents of children with developmental disabilities impacts their later trust in school teachers, which would require more focused longitudinal studies. Moreover, examining trust levels between parents of children with developmental disabilities and professionals in both regular schools and special education settings could provide valuable insights into how different educational environments influence parental trust. Lastly, it would be crucial for future research to investigate how mutual trust and relationships between parents and educators are linked to children's social and academic competencies. Addressing these and similar questions would not only deepen our understanding of the constructs at hand but also have significant implications for practice, helping educational authorities create more effective inclusive programs where both parents and children feel a true sense of belonging.

REFERENCES

- Adams, K. S., & Christenson, S. L. (1998). Differences in parent and teacher trust levels: Implications for creating collaborative family-school relationships. *Special Services in the Schools*, 14, 1–22.
- Adams, K. S., & Christenson, S. L. (2000). Trust and the family–school relationship examination of parent–teacher differences in elementary and secondary grades. *Journal of School Psychology*, 38, 477–497.
- Akalın, S., Demir, Ş, Sucuoğlu, B., Bakkaloğlu, H., & İşcen, F. (2014). The needs of inclusive preschool teachers about inclusive practices. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 14, 39–60. DOI:10.14689/ejer.2014.54.3
- Attard, N., & Booth, N. (2023). Autism and mainstream education: the parental perspective. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 121, Article 102234. DOI:10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102234
- Beycioglu, K., Ozer, N., & Sahin, S. (2013). Parental trust and parent-school relationships in Turkey. *Journal of School Public Relations*, 34, 306–329.
- Boonk, L., Gijsselaers, H. J. M., Ritzen, H., & Brand-Gruwel, S. (2018). A review of the relationship between parental involvement indicators and academic achievement. *Educational Research Review*, 24, 10–30. DOI:10.1016/j.edurev.2018.02.001
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Bryk, A.S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. Russel Sage Foundation.
- Burke, M. M., & Hodapp, R. M. (2014). Relating stress of mothers of children with developmental disabilities to family–school partnerships. *Mental Retardation*, 52(1), 13–23. DOI: 10.1352/1934-9556-52.1.13
- Chen, N., Miller, S., Milbourn, B., Black, M. H., Fordyce, K., Van Der Watt, G., Alach, T., Masi, A., Frost, G., Tucker, M., Eapen, V., & Girdler, S. (2020). The big wide world of school": Supporting children on the autism spectrum to successfully transition to primary school: Perspectives from parents and early intervention professionals *Scandinavian Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychology*, 8, 91–100, DOI:10.21307/sjcapp-2020-009
- Epstein, J. L. & Salinas, K. C. (2004). Partnering with Families and Communities. *Educational Leadership*, 61(8), 12–18.
- Fantuzzo, J., McWayne, C., Perry, M. A., & Childs, S. (2004). Multiple dimensions of family involvement and their relations to Behavioral and Learning Competencies for Urban, Low-Income Children. *School Psychology Review*, 33(4), 467–480. DOI:10.1144/0016-76492006-09
- Garbacz, S. A., McIntyre, L. L., & Santiago, R. T. (2016). Family involvement and parent-teacher relationships for students with autism spectrum disorders. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 31(4), 478–490. DOI:10.1037/spq0000157
- Hamm, J. E., & Mousseau, A. D. (2023). Predicting parent trust based on professionals' communication skills. *Education Sciences*, 13(4), 350. DOI:10.3390/educsci13040350
- Hasson, L., Keville, S., Gallagher, J., Onagbesan, D., & Ludlow, A. K. (2022). Inclusivity in education for autism spectrum disorders: Experiences of support from the perspective of parent/carers, school teaching staff and young people on the autism spectrum. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 70(2), 201–212, DOI: 10.1080/20473869.2022.2070418
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The elementary school journal*, 106(2), 105–130.

- 📖 Hoy, W. K., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (1999). The five faces of trust: An empirical confirmation in urban elementary schools. *Journal of School Leadership*, 9, 184–208.
- 📖 Jablan, B. Đ., & Maksimović, J. M. (2020). Razvoj inkluzivnog obrazovanja iz ugla nastavničkih kompetencija - stanje, problemi i perspektive. [The development of inclusive education with regard to teacher competencies: Current situation, problems, and perspectives]. *Zbornik radova Pedagoškog fakulteta, Užice*, 22, 85–100. DOI:10.5937/ZRPFU2022084J
- 📖 Janssen, M., Bakker, J., Bosman, A., Rosenberg, K., & Leseman, P. (2012). Differential trust between parents and teachers of children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds. *Educational Studies*, 38(4), 383–396. DOI:10.1080/03055698.2011.643103
- 📖 Kikas, E., Lerkkanen, M.K., Pakarinen, E., & Poikonen, P.L. (2016). Family-and classroom related factors and mother–kindergarten teacher trust in Estonia and Finland. *Educational Psychology*, 36(1), 47–72. DOI:10.1080/01443410.2014.895298
- 📖 Korać, I., Kosanović, M., & Klemenović, J. (2018). Inicijalno obrazovanje vaspitača i njihove profesionalne kompetencije za rad u inkluzivnom okruženju [Initial education of preschool teachers and their professional competencies for working in an inclusive environment]. U R. Đević i N. Gutvajin (ur.), *Uvažavanje različitosti u funkciji pozitivnog razvoja dece i mladih* (str. 61–74). Institut za pedagoška istraživanja.
- 📖 Lang, S. N., Jeon, S., & Tebben, E. (2023). Relationships Between Families and Head Start Staff: Associations with Children's Academic Outcomes Through Home Involvement and Approaches to Learning. *Early Education and Development*, 35(3), 413–430. DOI:10.1080/10409289.2022.2155772
- 📖 Larcombe, T. J., Joosten, A. V., Cordier, R., & Vaz, S. (2019). Preparing children with autism for transition to mainstream school and perspectives on supporting positive school experiences. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49(8), 3073–3088. DOI:10.1007/s10803-019-04022-z
- 📖 Mapp, K. L., & Henderson, A. T. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Harvard Family Research Project.
- 📖 Mavračić Miković, I., & Tot, D. (2020). Uloga profesionalnih znanja i vještina odgojitelja u izgradnji i razvijanju partnerstva s roditeljima [The role of professional knowledge and skills of preschool teachers in building and developing partnerships with parents]. *Croatian Journal of Education*, 22(Sp.Ed.3), 71–81. DOI:10.15516/cje.v22i0.3910
- 📖 Mithimunye, B., Roman, N., Studies, F., & Pedro, A. (2018). Factors which enhance or hinder meeting the educational needs of autistic children in Western Cape Province, South Africa: A parents' perspective. *International Journal of Special Education*, 33(2). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1185616.pdf>
- 📖 Mokhtar, K., Zaharudin, R., Amir, S., & Mokhtar, N. F. (2023). Family Involvement In Education Of Special Needs Students: A Systematic Literature Review. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 8(52), 244–257. DOI:10.35631/IJEPC.852020
- 📖 Mueller, T. G., & Buckley, P. C. (2014). Fathers' experiences with the special education system: The overlooked voice. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 39, 119–135.
- 📖 Pavlović Breneselović, D. (2014). Partnerstvo sa porodicom - tri paradigme, dva modela, jedna ili više stvarnosti [Partnership with families: Three paradigms, two models, one or more realities]. U Matović N., Spasenović V., Antonijević R. (ur.), *Januarski susreti pedagoga Identitet profesije pedagog u savremenom obrazovanju* (str. 111–115). Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu.
- 📖 Pravilnik o osnovama programa predškolskog vaspitanja i obrazovanja [Regulation on the fundamentals of the preschool education program] (2018). *Službeni glasnik RS*, br. 16/2018.
- 📖 Rajić, M., & Mihić, I. (2017). Doživljaj kompetentnosti i motivacija vaspitača za rad sa decom sa smetnjama u razvoju [Sense of competence and motivation of preschool teachers for working with children with disabilities]. *Godišnjak Filozofskog fakulteta u Novom Sadu*, 42(2), 339–359.

- Reupert, A., Deppeler, J. M., & Sharma, U. (2014). Enablers for inclusion: The perspectives of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 39(1), 85–96. DOI:10.1017/jse.2014.17
- Rey-Guerra, C., Maldonado-Carreño, C., Ponguta, L. A., Nieto, A. M., & Yoshikawa, H. (2022). Family engagement in early learning opportunities at home and in early childhood education centers in Colombia. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 58, 35–46. DOI:10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.08.002
- Rodas, N. V., Zeedyk, S. M., & Baker, B. L. (2016). Unsupportive parenting and internalising behaviour problems in children with or without intellectual disability. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 60(12), 1200–1211.
- Santiago, R. T., Garbacz, A., Beattie, T., & Moore, C. L. (2016). Parent-teacher relationships in elementary school: An examination of parent-teacher trust. *Psychology in the Schools*, 53, 1003–1017. DOI:10.1002/pits.21971
- Sheridan, S. M., Smith, T. E., & Kim, E. M. (2019). A meta-analysis of family-school interventions and children's social-emotional functioning: Moderators and components of efficacy. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(2), 296–332.
- Stančić, M., & Stanislavljević Petrović, Z. (2013). Mišljenje vaspitača o koristima od inkluzije i načinima njenog ostvarivanja [Nursery school teachers' attitudes on the implementation and benefits of inclusion]. *Specijalna edukacija i rehabilitacija*, 12(3), 353–369.
- Staunton, E., Kehoe, C., & Sharkey, L. (2023). Families under pressure: stress and quality of life in parents of children with an intellectual disability. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 40, 192–9. DOI:10.1017/ipm.2020.4
- Stoner, J. B., & Angell, M. E. (2014). Trust and communication: Perspectives of mothers of children with disabilities on the role and importance of communication in trusting relationships with teachers. *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals* 141–162. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1134856.pdf>
- Sucuoğlu, N. B., & Bakkaloğlu, H. (2018). The quality of parent–teacher relationships in inclusive pre-schools. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(8), 1190–1201
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2001). Collaboration and the need for trust. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 39(4), 308–331.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. & Hoy, W. K. (2000). A multidisciplinary analysis of the nature, meaning, and measurement of trust. *Review of Educational Research*, 4, 547–593.
- UNESCO (1994). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. Adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality. Salamanca, Spain: UNESCO
- UNESCO (2015). *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656>
- UNESCO (2020). *Inclusion and education: All means all*. Global monitoring report. UNESCO. <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2020/inclusion>.
- Van Der Steen, S., Geveke, C. H., Steenbakkens, A. T., & Steenbeek, H. W. (2020). Teaching students with autism spectrum disorders: What are the needs of educational professionals? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 90(103036), Article 103036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103036>
- Vidal N., Martínez-Tur V., Pătraș L., Gracia E., Moliner C., & Ramos J. (2020) Participation in collaborative projects as a precursor of trust in organizations for individuals with intellectual disability. *PLoS ONE* 15(11): e0242075. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0242075>

- 📖 Vujačić M., Lazarević, E., & Đević, R. (2015). Inkluzivno obrazovanje: od zakonske regulative do praktične realizacije [Inclusive education: From legislation to implementation]. *Teme*, 34(1), 231–247.
- 📖 Zakon o osnovama sistema vaspitanja i obrazovanja [The law on the fundamentals of the education system] (2009). *Službeni glasnik RS*, br. 72/09, 72/2009, 52/2011, 55/2013, 35/2015 (Аутентично тумачење), 68/2015, 62/2016.
- 📖 Zakon o predškolskom vaspitanju i obrazovanju [The law on preschool education]. (2010). *Sl. glasnik RS*, br. 18/2010, 101/2017, 113/2017 - dr. zakon, 95/2018 - dr. zakon, 10/2019, 86/2019 - dr. zakon, 157/2020 - dr. zakon, 123/2021 - dr. zakon i 129/2021. <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon-o-predskolskom-vaspitanju-i-obrazovanju.html>

Received 14.09.2024; accepted for publishing 20.11.2024.