

## EXPERIENCES OF EXPERTS INVOLVED IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EXTENDED PROFESSIONAL PROCEDURE FOR CHILDREN WITH PROBLEMS IN BEHAVIOR

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**Abstract:** The extended professional procedure (EPP) is carried out at primary schools as a special form of preventive work with children who manifest problems in their behavior and their primary environment. This paper aimed to investigate the experiences of experts — educators with backgrounds in social work, social pedagogy, or psychology, involved in the implementation of the EPP. We considered three research questions to investigate: (1) behavioral problems of children who participate in the EPP, (2) educators' experiences with the implementation of the EPP, and (3) educators' ideas for improving the program. For data collection, a qualitative focus group method was used, which included experts who have implemented the EPP; for data analysis, thematic qualitative analysis was used. The results show that children who were included in the EPP often manifested milder types of risky behaviors and usually came from families burdened with difficulties, a known risk factor for behavioral problems. Experiences of educators with the implementation of the EPP were both positive and negative. The negative aspects were mainly related to cooperation with the pedagogical service, social work institute, and parents, while the positive aspects were mainly related to the children's perception of the program and the experts. The experts' proposals and recommendations included improving the program by developing a clear definition of the EPP in both theory and practice, then paying strict attention to that definition.

**Keywords:** extended professional procedure, children, problems in behavior

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The extended professional procedure (EPP) is a special form of preventive work done with primary school children who exhibit mild behavioral problems and engage in risky behaviors; it is carried out in the children's schools. The program was created in the Croatian capital of Zagreb as an attempt to solve problems that were happening in one school; it involved the cooperation of the school, the Center for Community Services Zagreb – Dugave (hereafter, Dugave Center), and the former Institute for Social Work. Most of the children who participate are identified by the school (class teachers and pedagogical services). The program of the EPP is designed to prevent further, more intense, forms of behavioral problem. After proving successful, it spread throughout Zagreb and Zagreb County. However, it is important to note that there is almost no literature on the EPP. Only a few professional articles on this topic have been published; to our knowledge, the last was written in 2006.

As of 2024, the EPP is being implemented in 21 schools within the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County, comprising a total of 24 groups. Each group is facilitated by an educator with a professional background in social work, social pedagogy, or psychology. Each group consists of approximately 10 children, resulting in an estimated annual participation of 240 children. However, due to the dynamic nature of group membership, characterized by periodic withdrawals and new admissions, the total number of participants typically exceeds 300 annually. In 2024, 333 children were included in the EPP.

The primary aim of the EPP is preventing the emergence and escalation of more severe behavioral problems. While the program is not formally time-bound, empirical evidence suggests that a 2-year period is optimal for achieving significant outcomes. Prolonged engagement beyond this time frame has been associated with a decline in children's motivation to actively participate.

The theoretical background for the topic that we present in this paper is found in developmental theories (Loeber & Le Blanc, 1990, as cited in Majdak, 2009, p. 7) and integrative theories (Title, Villa, Bernard, & Snipes, 2006, as cited in Ricijaš, 2009, p. 12), both of which focus on risk factors of the family, school, leisure time, and abuse of substances.

Behavioral problems in children and young people represent a continuum of behavior, ranging from those that are less serious, dangerous, and harmful to oneself and others to those defined and/or sanctioned by regulations, which are often more severe in terms of consequences and needs for treatment (Koller-Trbović et al., 2017, p. 9).

Achenbach's dimensional classification of behavioral disorders (Achenbach, 1993, as cited in Koller-Trbović, 2004) includes two large groups of behaviors: internalized and externalized. Internalized symptoms of conduct disorders are those behaviors that are self-centered, withdrawn, and distant from the world, like depression, anxiety, withdrawal, and somatization (Klarin et al., 2018). Externalized symptoms include behaviors that are not sufficiently controlled and are directed outwards towards others, such as aggressiveness, delinquency, and hyperactivity (Žižak

et al., 2004). The more serious symptoms in this category are active behavioral disorders, which include unjustified absenteeism, lying, breaking the rules, disrespecting authority, quarrelling and fighting, throwing things, vagrancy, theft, sexual harassment, robbery and armed robbery, organized crime, and murder.

However, we cannot classify all behavioral problems into these two categories. For example, social problems, attention problems, and cognitive problems do not fall into either. It is important to note that individual children may show symptoms from both groups of behaviors, internalized and externalized, depending on their individual characteristics and situational factors.

Some children develop behavioral problems, and some do not, even when raised in similar stressful and risky circumstances (Bašić, 2000). The complex interaction of risk and protective factors can lead to both bad and good behaviors. Usually, risky behaviors are not due to a single risk factor or unfavorable situation but to many interconnected actions and reactions (Bašić, 2009). Risk and protective factors change over time.

The prevention of behavioral problems requires a focus on planned activities rather than waiting for problems to arise before responding. This can include a variety of strategies, from educational programs and support at school to promoting a positive community environment. In addition, prevention is based on recognizing risk factors and encouraging protective factors that can empower children and young people to face challenges and difficulties, and help them develop resilience, which is protective against behavioral problems.

Although no comprehensive studies have been conducted in Croatia regarding the importance of the prevention of behavioral problems, the international literature offers compelling evidence. Estimates suggest that each young person who drops out of school and becomes involved in criminal activity and substance abuse may cost society between \$1.7 million and \$2.3 million USD annually (Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 2002, as cited in Quinn and Poirier, 2004).

Large-scale longitudinal studies (Quinn & Poirier, 2004) conducted globally consistently demonstrate the substantial financial benefits of investing in prevention of behavioral problems. As emphasized by Quinn and Poirier (2004), these benefits extend beyond cost savings, encompassing broader societal advantages such as improved quality of life and social cohesion. They stated that preventive interventions significantly reduce the likelihood of school dropout, which is directly linked to poorer long-term outcomes for individuals along with their families, communities, and society. In the United States, figures from 2003 show that unemployment rates were considerably higher among individuals who had not completed secondary education compared to those who had (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

The EPP is a preventive program that is implemented in schools. It can be classed among selective preventive programs that provide secondary prevention — prevention that addresses recognized developmental difficulties. For prevention to be successful, it is necessary to have the

cooperation of partners in the community: the school, the local community, parents, non-governmental organizations, relevant institutions, local authorities, and any other interested parties who can contribute to assisting children, parents, and families.

Indications and criteria for inclusion in the EPP include school failure, failure to fulfill school obligations, risky behaviors, mild behavioral problems, exposure to risks within the family, and acceptance of treatment and willingness to cooperate (Marušić & Habijanec-Martinović, 2006).

The EPP working unit at the Dugave Center originated in one Zagreb elementary school in 1987 and, following demonstrated effectiveness, expanded to 12 schools with 20 groups of about 10 members each. From the very beginning, the program has covered certain socio-pedagogical areas through specific goals, as shown in Table 1 (Marušić, 1996).

Table 1. *Sociopedagogic Treatment Areas*

Socio-pedagogic treatment areas	Specific objectives
Self-relationship	Self-activity Develop responsibility for their behavior Independence Develop a positive self-image
Relationship to others (peers, adults, family members)	Developing togetherness Satisfying the need to belong Adoption of the basic rules of communication Respecting/complying with requirements and rules Cooperative relationships and understanding of one's own roles (in the group, family, ...)
Education	Mastering school material Creating habits of regular study Teaching techniques/learning methods Developing independence in work
Leisure	Develop perceived inclinations, skills, and ability Encourage and develop imagination and creativity Prevention of unacceptable behavior
Interest and habits	Encouragement in the maintenance of existing interests and habits (work, hygiene, basic rules of decency) and the development of new ones Observe and develop personal relationships, and the child's potentials

For each area, content for carrying out the work has been defined, such as games (projective, for group cohesion; quizzes; games for encouraging activities, etc.), concentration exercises, art and sports workshops, and many others. As the EPP developed, the obligation to conduct planned workshops on a specific topic was introduced. An individual plan is made for each child which encompasses these areas and goals (Habijanec-Martinović & Marušić, 1999).

When the EPP is implemented, the school must provide an adequate space. Treatment is provided to groups of 8 to 12 students who are in the 2nd to 8th grade, with a recommendation that

for working with one educator, 10 children would be optimal. The educators are professional employees of the Dugave Center, mostly social workers, social pedagogues, and psychologists. The program is continuous, with half-day treatment sessions occurring daily over a long period. It is recommended that treatment for an individual child does not last longer than 2 years, and that students should not begin the program in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

After talking to the parents and obtaining their consent, the school's pedagogical service sends the necessary documentation to the regional office of the Institute for Social Work, which, after talking to the parents, issues a referral (Social Welfare Act, Official Gazette 18/22, 46/22, 119/22) regarding the inclusion of the child in the EPP.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

This paper aims to explore the experiences of experts — educators with backgrounds in social work, social pedagogy, or psychology—who have been involved in the implementation of the EPP to gain insight into its implementation and the possibilities for improvement. Three main research questions were asked:

1. What behavioral problems do children who participate in the EPP express?
2. What are the experiences of educators with the implementation of the EPP?
3. What would it take to improve the program?

### **Method**

An exploratory qualitative approach was used in this study because of a lack of literature on the topic. Moreover, because we are exploring the personal experiences of a small, intentionally selected sample, a quantitative approach would not yield significant results. To conduct the research, focus groups were used.

### ***Participants***

Three focus groups were conducted, with eight members in the first, seven in the second, and five in the third, making a total of 20 participants. All participants were employees of the Dugave Center and working as educators conducting EPPs in schools in the city of Zagreb and Zagreb County. It was a female population, except for one male participant. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 64 years, and in EPP work experience from 3 years to more than 30. By profession, all were educators with backgrounds in social work, social pedagogy, or psychology.

### ***Data Collection and Processing***

Three focus groups ( $n = 8$ ,  $n = 7$ ,  $n = 5$ ) were organized in three different terms during May 2023 in the premises of the three schools where the program was implemented. The dates were

arranged with the help of the Head of the Department (decentralized unit<sup>1</sup>). The estimated duration for each focus group was 1 hour; the average duration was 1 hour and 7 minutes. Although it was not the official purpose of the focus groups, the participants also used them as an opportunity for discussion with their colleagues about other shared problems. Each focus group was recorded with a Dictaphone. The data were processed by thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006).

### ***Ethics***

All ethical research principles were respected in this research and communicated to participants: obtaining consent for research, information, voluntariness, the possibility of giving up at any time, freedom of expression of opinion, collective presentation of results, and the right to insight into results. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the research are presented in the three following sections, one for each research question.

### ***Behavioral Problems Expressed by Children Involved in the EPP***

Based on the experience of the professionals who carry out the EPPs, most problems that children encounter in the procedure are summarized below in decreasing order of prevalence.

#### ***Externalized Problems***

Externalized problems include: risky behavior (“Here is a boy who came to me a long time after he was diagnosed as having problems in behavior” D1,8<sup>2</sup>); hyperactivity (“These are children who had either a severe form of ADHD or a mild one...” D1,8); disrespect of rules and obligations (“... who does not respect authority, not only her, there are several who do not respect authority” E2,7); has underdeveloped working and learning habits (“None of them have developed work habits” D1,8; “Possible non-compliance with the rules at home, at school...” D2,2); and aggressiveness (“As far as my group is concerned, this is where verbally aggressive behavior is most often represented...” E2,3).

#### ***Problems Connected to School and Learning Difficulties***

Problems connected to school and learning problems include those of children who have educational difficulties related to their cognitive abilities (“... problems with understanding the material, weaker abilities and possibilities of acquiring educational content...” M1,2) or their difficulties with remembering material (“Memorization, memory, working memory. They are not

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<sup>1</sup> The Community Service Center Zagreb – Dugave (Center Dugave) is an institution consisting of four decentralized units, one of which is the Department (decentralized unit) of the extended professional procedure (EPP).

<sup>2</sup> The marks at the end of citation are codes for each participant.



able to associate, memorize, connect.” D1,8). Other learning difficulties were also noted (“learning difficulties, reduced concentration, and...” M1,5; “Most have learning disabilities.” D1,8). It should be pointed out that it follows from these statements that most of the children who are involved in the EPP have, in addition to the regular curriculum, the help of a teaching assistant (“He has a teaching assistant precisely because of his behavior, and he needs to be with him as a bodyguard because he just kicks someone when passing by, hits him, does not even understand that he has done something” V2, 6); an individualized school program (“In my group, the majority are with an individualized program...” D1,8); or an adapted school program (“I have children who are in an adapted program (two) and they have very big problems in comprehending the material.” E2,5).

### *Difficulties of Children Diagnosed According to Medical Classifications*

Difficulties of children diagnosed according to medical classifications include autism (“I have a very specific group, currently two with autism, one with Asperger’s...” L1,4) and neurological difficulties (“Difficulties in visual-perceptual organization, graphomotor coordination, dismaturation...” R3,5). Furthermore, participants’ statements described children with attention difficulties (“... difficulty concentrating, paying attention...” R3,5); as well as children with mental health problems (“And what is somehow newer to me, I have children who are included in psychiatric hospital because of some mental problems...” R1,7). Particularly prominent were the statements of the participants related to children with intellectual disabilities (“... that children who join EPP mostly come with reduced intellectual abilities ... their intellectual functioning is within the lower limits of below average...” R3,5).

### *Risks in the Family*

Risks in the family can be an indication for inclusion in the EPP: a running theme throughout the statements is that children from difficult family situations are often included (“... children who do not have a settled family situation, which is why they need additional support and work” M1,2); as are educationally neglected and generally neglected children (“... So basically, children are left to themselves after school. In fact, more severely neglected and educationally neglected children.” E2,3). Children from single-parent families are also getting involved more and more often (“I found it interesting when we asked the children, they needed to talk about the family a little and they were surprised how incomplete the family is.” M3,4). It is also often the case that the children of addicts are included in the EPP (“... and then the children are quite neglected, I have two girls whose parents are former addicts. Supposedly former. Let’s hope they’re former.” I1,6); as well as children of lower socioeconomic status (“Such is the family with financial problems. He just won’t see it. For example, we played Man, Don’t Get Angry [popular German board game]. The child has never seen or played Man, Don’t Get Angry.” M3,1).

### *Internalized Behavioral Problems*

Internalized behavioral problems affecting children include anxiety and depressive disorders (“Over the last few years, there has been more and more anxiety, depression, self-harm, there is a lot of it.” A2,1). Some statements speak of children with emotional difficulties (“But I have many children with emotional difficulties, problems with socialization, bad peer relationships.” D2,2). It seems that internalized behavioral problems are becoming more frequent, which can also be linked to distance learning due to the coronavirus pandemic and the teachers’ strike<sup>3</sup>.

### *Children From Families Under Measures Imposed by the Institute for Social Work*

Children from families under measures imposed by the Institute for Social Work include children separated from the family (“I have a boy whose mother is an alcoholic, so she is separated from the family.” I1,3); as well as children with directions providing professional help and family support (“Currently, two measures of supervision of parental care are being carried out in my group” D1,8). The population of children who are included in EPPs often comes from families that are already known to the Institute for Social Work, and for whom professional assistance measures are in place.

The results of previous research (Marušić & Habijanec Martinović, 2006) indicate that there are some children who do not fit into the program of the EPP, such as children with serious problems like autism, and those growing up in difficult family situations, especially where the family is being monitored by the Institute for Social Work.

### *Educators’ Experiences with the Implementation of the EPP*

#### *Cooperation with Professors*

Within the topic of different approaches that teachers take to our work and our population, the participants recognized both good and bad aspects of cooperation with professors.

**Negative aspects:** We will substantiate the category of professors’ ignorance of the work done in the EPP with the following statements that speak of professors’ lack of understanding of the difficulties that children manifest (“There is a great lack of education, a great misunderstanding, a personal reaction of anger, a lack of understanding of difficulties, a lack of empathy” L1, 4). In addition to the professors’ lack of understanding of children’s difficulties, the participants also pointed out their lack of understanding of our work (“The professors do not understand exactly what we are doing and that sometimes they follow the principle: I will now hand over the child to you so I don’t have to deal with him.” M1,5).

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<sup>3</sup> The nationwide teachers’ strike in Croatia took place in 2019, lasting from October 10 to December 2, and ended with a government–union agreement on gradual salary increases.



**Positive aspects:** The good aspects of cooperation with professors are visible in the following statement (“I have a great cooperation with professors, I can always contact them, and they help me,” I1, 3). Also, the participants consider mutual help important for everyday educational work (“We have colleagues who come out to meet us, help, we can work well together, and then we do it later with the children and they are better.” K2,5). The help of professors in the educational part is also a theme that ran through all three focus groups (“If we look at educational work, then in fact this cooperation with teachers is almost excellent in our country.” K2,5).

#### *Cooperation with the Pedagogical Service*

The participants also, as in the case of cooperation with professors, had different experiences of cooperation with the pedagogical service<sup>4</sup>.

**Insufficient cooperation:** Insufficient cooperation with the pedagogical service is manifested through its inertia (“For me, the problem is the pedagogical service, that is, only the pedagogue who is ... I feel like I must pull her sleeve around everything.” I1,6). Also, the participants pointed out the insufficient involvement of the pedagogical service (“Our colleagues are quite engaged and busy and, in most cases, do not have time, mostly we try to solve problems ourselves.” M2,4).

As with the previously mentioned themes, the insufficient support of the pedagogical service stands out (“I have to say that there were also situations where I did not receive the necessary support from the pedagogical service. I often felt that I was stealing their time when they came to talk about something or ask for something.” M1, 2). Ineffective cooperation with the pedagogical service was also reported (“The pedagogue does not participate or communicate with her at all. ... So, we only have a psychologist, who is always overwhelmed with work, she never has time.” D2,2). Participants also noticed that the pedagogical service had unrealistic expectations (“They often expect instant solutions. They give us children, and, in a month, there should be changes...” L1,4; “Unrealistic goals...” M1,5).

**Effective cooperation:** However, the participants also talked about regular and productive cooperation with the pedagogical service, especially with pedagogues (“I have to admit that the pedagogical pedagogical service makes my work a lot easier” A2,1); (“I somehow inform them about the problems I have with the children, which is why I mostly collaborate with the pedagogue” E2,3); (“Great pedagogical service. Now older women, but so sensitized to our problem, understand it.” R1,7).

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<sup>4</sup> The school’s pedagogical service participates in identifying children who display risky behaviors, and based on the opinion of the professional service, these children are either included or not included in the EPP. During the implementation of the program, the pedagogical service is continuously involved and monitors the work and progress of each individual child included in the EPP.

### *Working with Parents*

Different experiences in working with parents is the third topic within the second research question. As with the previous two topics, both positive and negative experiences were reported.

**Inadequate parental cooperation:** Inadequate parental cooperation, the first category, includes non-acceptance of changes (“Parents, I have the impression, don’t want to change, they rarely hear what you have to say, and you actually achieve something with the child, and then the child returns home again.” M1,5); and permissive parents who do not encourage positive change (“... Parents protect them, they are not objective, they don’t look at it realistically, so mom writes homework, for example, and so on.” K2,5). From the statements of the participants, inappropriate reactions of parents are evident (“There is no need to call at all and ask: Is my child coming to the group, is my child good, bad or what.” V2,6); (“Parents who do not cooperate, who only criticize, and there are others like that, make it difficult for me to work.” M2,4); as well as cases of not fully participating in the group due to permissive parents (“It was a mother who could not tell her child how long he would stay. She told him, ‘I’ll tell the professor to let you go at 2:00 p.m.’ And then he [the professor] calls me and says, ‘Don’t tell him [the child] that you talked to me or what I said, you tell him that he has to stay until 5 or 4 p.m., let him go at 4 p.m.’” M3,1). In describing their work experience, participants also noted that some parents resisted supporting the group (“What makes it difficult for me are the parents. Not only do they not support you, but they make an even bigger problem for you. They are not so interested in children at all, but in some of their [own] problems” G3,3).

**Supportive relationships:** Satisfactory and supportive relationships with parents, the second category in this topic, refers to experiencing good relationships with parents who express their gratitude and satisfaction (“They are grateful. Yesterday, for example, I called one mom yesterday and they are all grateful.” V2,6); and are cooperative (“I have excellent cooperation with them, no matter how disturbed they are, I always find a way”, V2,6). Some participants cited supportive relationships with parents (“It also means a lot to me if the parents are such that I can pass it on and they repeat it at home to the end, I have such parents.” E2,5). Participants also mentioned parent–teacher meetings, which made it easier for some (“I have a habit to hold a parent–teacher meeting at the beginning of the school year, where I nicely explain everything to the parents what I expect from them, support, we have to work together, and so on.” V2,6).

### *Cooperation With the Institute for Social Work*

This topic, experiences of cooperation with the Institute, is again divided into positive and negative experiences, but also includes recommendations for improving cooperation.

**Positive experiences:** We will start with satisfaction regarding cooperation with the Institute, which the participants mainly expressed by citing good experiences with the social pedagogue in the Institute (“I have excellent cooperation with the social pedagogue who leads the EPP.” D1,8). They also spoke of positive cooperation with the Institute (“My colleagues did their job as much

as they could and were interested and contacted me.” M1,2); and of good telephone communication with the Institute (“... We didn’t have any problems, we solve it with our mobile phone, easy, she looks at the computer.” E2,7).

**Negative experiences:** The next category in this topic are problems with the Institute: The Institute as a disruptive factor in the procedure (“They don’t know anything, it’s purely this formalization of our agreement, business, to go through the Institute.” A2,1); then the problem of communication with the Institute (“The Institute is a complete disaster. Since these Institutes cannot be reached by phone at all, then I use private contacts.” D2,2); (“You can’t reach them by phone at all, they answer their emails here and there.” I1,6). Participants also mentioned the prolongation or non-fulfilment of what had been agreed with the Institute (“It is often the case that something is prolonged or does not happen. My colleague did not show up at one of the professional teams, she forgot, or wrote down the wrong date.” M1,2); and the feeling of being a non-priority with the Institute (“They know what we are doing, but I think we are getting on their nerves”, A2,1). Also, there was a rapid turnover of colleagues at the Institute, creating a problem with competence (“They often change, the first 2 or 3 years I worked were the same, now every time someone new comes and you have to tell everything from the beginning.” I1,6). The participants also pointed out a lack of feedback from the Institute (“There’s a little bit of feedback missing.” L1,4), and problems with delays in referrals or decisions (“You need to dismiss your child, and you don’t have a solution.” D1,8). It was also difficult for participants to easily give reports, or information from reports to parents; instead, the Institute would take over (“After a six-month the expert team was reading my report in front of three families. She called them and read them my report, she was arrogant, it was extremely unpleasant” J1,6). Participants also cited insufficient communication with the leaders of measures<sup>5</sup> expecting a cooperative relationship, they instead encountered problems. (“From personal experience with the leaders of measures, they do not like to communicate with us, while we perceive them as a form of support.” (L1,4).

**Recommendations:** From their perspective as educators, the participants gave very clear and concrete suggestions for making their work easier. For example, they believed that there should be one person in the Institute designated to work with them (“I think that there should be one person at the Institute who is only in charge of us,” V2,6). The participants recognized that easier accessibility to the Institute was important in keeping up the quality of their work (“I think that we should still have some way of communication that is not an email so that we can talk directly,” G3,3).

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<sup>5</sup>The leaders of measures are the coordinators of professional assistance and support measures. The measures are imposed in accordance with the Social Welfare Act.

In summary, for the effective functioning of the EPP, four parties must cooperate:

1. The service provider: The Center for Community Services Zagreb – Dugave.
2. The school: The school agrees to cooperate and provide space, and the school's pedagogical service nominates the students to be enrolled in the program.
3. The parents: Parents must be ready to cooperate.
4. The Institute for Social Work: The Institute is needed to formalize the relationship among the parties and to cooperate by providing further assistance to those who need it.

### *Users' Perception of Educators and the EPP*

Exploring the topic of positive perception of educators and the EPP by users showed us that the participants recognized how children positively perceived both their work and the EPP itself. The topic consists of two categories: positive experiences in relationships with the children involved, and the positive aspects of educational work in the group. Interestingly, this is the only topic that has positive categories only; that is, all 11 of its themes concern the positive sides of educator work in the EPP.

**Positive relationships:** Positive experiences in relationships with the children involved emerged in this category's seven themes. Participants gave examples of children recognizing that they cared ("... I think the biggest turning point in working with them is the realization that I really care about their progress and when we achieve something, then I can do much more with them." I1,3). Participants also saw in their daily work that the children liked to come and be in a group ("For me, children respond very well to EPP. He won't go home..." L1,4). They also recognized that they have a specific relationship with the children who are included in the group ("Actually, there is a really specific relationship that we have with them. In the end, they say, the best thing about you was that you were strict." L1,4).

Another theme also relates to positive experiences through the connection of the educators with the children ("Although they are sometimes resistant, they don't love me, they hate me, yet I see that they have connected and connected with me and they see that I am there for them with both the teachers and the parents, so maybe they see some kind of protection." K1,1); there were also positive experiences deriving from this form of work ("I ask them, 'Why did you not solve this with your mom and dad at home?', and they say, 'No, professor, we'll talk to you', especially at this age." L1,4). Participants also reported that the children enjoyed group activities that involved spending time together on occasions when they could take a break from studying ("On Fridays we have a movie Friday ... so then we choose, they choose a couple of movies, then they vote and then we put on a Netflix movie and black out everything, we bring a snack early" A2,1). The participants especially appreciated the visits of those who had finished the program because they could then see how much the group and themselves meant to the children involved, which is certainly a motivator for further work and investment in the children who will be in the group in

the future (“The biggest crown of our work is when children who have gone to high school come to contact me.” M1,5).

**Positive experiences of group educator work:** The positive sides of group educator work are the second category of this topic, which comprises four themes. The participants mostly cited examples in which they recognized visible positive developments in the children they worked with (“I also had a child who, when he left the group after 2 years, wrote: When my mom included me, I thought she didn’t love me and that I was punished, and now that I need to leave the group, now I’m sorry, I would like to stay longer.” I3,2). Participants appreciated having the freedom in their work to recognize and independently assess what will lead to positive developments and create a good relationship with children (“I think it’s good in this business that we can say OK, you did your thing today, you went home nicely, and those who didn’t, they will stay a little longer.” G3,3). Knowing that the group has a good reputation at school is cited by the participants as an important factor in their work, because it means their work has been accepted by the children themselves (“What I have changed over the years is somehow the perception of that group at school. We are no longer a group for stupid and retarded children.” M2,4), as well as by the school, which has recognized the EPP as a useful program (“I mean, the foundations for the half-day stay were laid very well, so when I came there was a great collaboration.” M3,1).

Such visible positive developments — acceptance, positive perception by children, and awareness of others in the environment that this is a useful program — are rare in helping jobs. One participant described the work as follows: “I think we are doing a fantastic job, no matter how much it drains our energy and strength. It is not always easy because sometimes children are too demanding. But I think this is a great job and program, so let it just last.” (R1,7).

### *Problems We Encounter in Our Work*

The sixth and last topic that emerged from the second research question is the problems we encounter in our work. This topic consists of two categories: the negative side of working in an EPP group, and the importance of timely exclusion from the group.

**Negative aspects:** The first category is the negative side of working in an EPP group. This manifested as dissatisfaction with a preoccupation with educational content (“It seems to me that lately I have been doing more of this educational content, at least me, I have such children...” M1:5), and also with having children in the group who cannot succeed (“What I have noticed with resistant children, and regardless of the work in the group, is that parents are resistant, the parents have not accepted the program.” M1,2). Also, some children joined the group when it was already too late (“What is most difficult for me in my work is some children who may have been included too late. This year, I had a boy who is in the 6th grade. In my opinion, it is much, much too late, and I am sorry because it seems to me that much more could have been done.” Jn1:3). Another problem mentioned was the inclusion of an inappropriate population (“It also seems to me that sometimes we get children in the group who do not belong to the group. For example, I had a girl

who was 95% visually impaired. Or some children who have very pronounced learning problems. Customized programs that border on LMR [light mental retardation], where I also think that this is not most closely related to what we should be doing.” I1,3). As the last theme in the category of negative aspects of working in an EPP group, participants singled out situations in which the child is undergoing psychiatric treatment as an aggravating factor in their work (“Well, there is one thing that makes it more difficult: that parents are increasingly taking their children to private psychologists, psychiatrists, and so on.” A2,1).

Although participants gave numerous examples of the negative sides of educator work, it also seems from their statements that these negative sides are rare. They happen occasionally, but they do not recur and are not established.

**Timely exclusion:** The second and last category in this topic is the importance of timely exclusion from the group, a point that was highlighted by the participants based on their many years of experience in educational work. For example, participants stated that eighth graders should not be in a group (“If students still feel the need to stay in the eighth grade, I believe something is not quite right. Separation from me and from the EPP represents a natural process of growth. By the eighth grade they know they can always come back if they need something, but for the most part they are already keeping their distance. This shows that they have matured in a healthy way.” L1, 4) and stressed the importance of timely termination of the program, or exclusion, after 2 years (“I can say that after 2 years the user should leave the group.” G3,3). This can also be linked to exclusion at the initiative of experienced educators who are able to estimate the right moment for disconnection (“We have exclusions when we decide that enough is enough.” E2,7).

The participants stated that they were doing a difficult job and pointed out many of the shortcomings and difficulties they encountered in their work, but they also provided concrete examples of connection with children who are involved in the EPP. In practice, the negative aspects participants mentioned were non-compliance within the group, or non-compliance with the program itself. Also, the program already recommends that the maximum duration of a child’s involvement in the EPP should not exceed 2 years, and that students of higher grades, especially eighth grade, should not be included.

### ***Proposals for the Improvement of the EPP Programme***

#### ***Investing in Experts and the Lifelong Education of Professionals***

The first topic in the third research question is investing in experts and the lifelong education of professionals. It comprises two categories: the lack of education regarding the current problems of young people and changes in the population, and mutual exchange of experiences.

**Lack of education:** The first category concerns the inadequacy of the education that professionals receive with regard to the current problems of young people and changes in the population. The lack of education was cited in all focus groups (“I also agree that we have too little



education, and what we have is expensive, so we cannot afford it privately.” M2,4). Participants recognized the importance of education to aspects of current affairs that they felt would be useful in their daily work (“Certainly if we are given space for more education because the trends on the problems that children express are changing, maybe something we have learned before is no longer so useful.” M1,5). However, they also raised the problem of paying for education (“There was an online lecture and then we were arguing about whether I would pay for it or Dugave Center would pay for it anyway. So, I have a feeling that our institution needs to invest more in people.” E2,3).

**Mutual exchange of experiences:** The second category that participants recognized was the mutual exchange of experiences. Through all focus groups, participants cited a lack of supervision (“In 10 years, I have been involved in supervision only once.” I1,3), and the need for internal supervision and professional gatherings within the department (“We used to meet once a month, someone who has been there longer will remember it. Each of us knows something, so we agreed that someone would show something. That is interesting to me, and it was useful, even though sometimes we may not have felt like it, but in the end, we always got something out of finding ourselves that way.” L1,4). Participants believed that creating opportunities to exchange experiences would facilitate everyday work, especially in the very beginning of joining the group (“When I started working, I entered the room and had no idea what to do. ... So, you should have someone to guide you, to guide you, to give you advice and suggestions so that you don’t feel alone in this story.” M1,2). In addition to the above, the participants recognized the need for better cooperation within the diagnostic team (“I also miss part of the use of our long diagnostic team. And the children from the EPP seem to be not part of Dugave Center, and they are.” L1,4). The problem of lack of cooperation and of internal connection — the ignorance of the collective — is the result of many years of not carrying out joint activities. The lack of supervision in the social welfare system is perhaps an even bigger problem than the lack of education. This is a system in which a lack of support can easily lead to burnout, which ultimately degrades the system itself.

#### *Clearer Definition and Organization of Programs in Theory and Practice*

The second topic in our third research question is a clearer definition and organization of the EPP in both theory and practice. This theme consists of 4 categories and 13 codes. Educators are the ones who know best the group they work with, and therefore their involvement is necessary; however, they do not neglect the importance of the pedagogical service in the selection of candidates for inclusion in the program. Participants’ discussion of this topic can be divided into four categories: adequate systematization of the EPP, expansion of the EPP, defining clearer criteria for inclusion, and involvement of the pedagogical service.

**Adequate systematization of the EPP:** First, participants emphasized the need to adequately systematize the program by allowing it to be run in accordance with the experience and judgment of the professionals themselves. This was especially emphasized by participants who were working in pairs — those in whose schools there were two groups — and thus could support each other (“Somehow, my colleagues and I have learned to work without asking for too much help from the

pedagogical service, mostly we try to solve problems ourselves.” M2,4). The participants also emphasized the need to define our status in the system (“... the status of us as a form of work that is somewhere between education and social, is neither education nor social. You know, it should be defined.” K2,5). They recognized that to define their status, there is a need to structure the program (“I would like to have a more structured form of working with children.” M1,5).

**Expansion of the EPP:** The participants recognized the EPP as valuable and of high quality and felt that it should be expanded (“I am constantly questioned, privately, about the program. It should be expanded throughout the city. The need is great, and the school recognizes it as a quality program.” L1,4).

**Defining clearer criteria for inclusion:** In this third category, the participants recognized the need to define clearer criteria for inclusion in the program. The same subject had cropped up in the first and second research questions, though not as concisely, when the participants talked about problems ranging from which children should be included in the program to the need to improve cooperation with stakeholders involved in the program’s implementation. Generally, insufficient documentation is provided at the time of inclusion, which is especially evident in the remarks of participants who have been involved in the implementation of the program for a longer time (“At the level of the Institute, what we have mentioned, to send us a medical history when involving a child and to participate in this individual plan.” L1,4). The fact that inclusion takes place with insufficient information indicates that the EPP is poorly organized in practice (“... and another thing is that I think we should get some kind of information from the Institute, more information about families.” V2,6). It is notable that the participants who had been present for the implementation of the program emphasized the need to unify the criteria for inclusion and exclusion from the program (“What I somehow see as a problem is perhaps the selection of candidates for the EPP, and then perhaps some criteria, the introduction of criteria that perhaps more work is done on prevention.” E2,3). Participants emphasized the need for regular cooperation with the pedagogical service (“I collaborate with the pedagogue on a daily and very frequent basis; we even have individual meetings, and with the child we carry out interventions.” E2,3). and the need for their involvement in deciding on the enrolment of students in the EPP. These points speak to the importance of educators’ participation in decision-making (“... And as for inclusion, the child cannot be included if I do not give consent, if I do not assess whether he is for the group or not.” D1,8).

**Involvement of the pedagogical service:** Educators are the ones who best know the group in which they work, so their involvement is necessary, but participants did not neglect the importance of the pedagogical service in the selection of candidates for inclusion (“I am glad to say that the pedagogical service at school is good, all the children who come to the group come on their initiative. For all the children which they suggested to be included that proposal was good and these children needed this form of help.” G3:3). Participants also pointed out the need to simplify the processes of inclusion and exclusion, believing that this would contribute to a better

organization of the EPP (“... for example, exclude the child without these complications, and then include another, so that it is a more elastic, simpler, faster, more flexible system.” V2,6).

Everything that the participants stated regarding the need to define clearer criteria for inclusion seems not to be difficult to implement and concerns the problem of cooperation with social work institutes or regional offices. However, to get something, it is necessary to ask for it. In addition, as one participant stated, a redefinition of criteria is needed, not only for inclusion and exclusion, but for the entire program.

### *Better Organization and Greater Financial Support*

The final topic in the third research question is better organizational support and greater financial support. The topic’s five themes divide into two categories: good cooperation within the Center, and organizational and financial difficulties.

**Good cooperation within the Center:** In the first category, the participants cited examples of good cooperation within the Center (“When there was Sister Iva, I had excellent cooperation with her. While I needed urgent treatment, Iva arranged for me to be treated in a psychiatric hospital in three days” L1,4) and pointed out examples of good practice and organization (“The emphasis was that it used to be free; we received money once a month for the cinema, theatre, museum... now it feels as if I am constantly begging for something, and it is not even for myself” (G3,3).

**Organizational and financial difficulties:** In this second category, organizational and financial difficulties at work, the participants pointed out various difficulties but also gave some suggestions for improving group work with children that does not require financial outlays; however, certain organizational skills are needed for the implementation of these proposals (“for children from the EPP to socialize with each other” L1,4). Participants then noted that the classrooms in which the groups are held are poorly equipped, which is often a disruptive factor in the work (“We don’t even have the means to work.” I1,3). This is not the responsibility of the Dugave Center, however, as the school is responsible for providing adequate space for the implementation of the EPP and overseeing equipping the classrooms. In addition to the already mentioned difficulties, the participants also pointed out the lack of financial resources for more diverse content in the work, which hinges on the organization of the Center and its ability to engage in the community (“I think that such variety of activities — at least in board games or in outings beyond the school setting, such as cinema, theatre, museums — should be made available to us.” R3,5).

The whole category of organizational and financial difficulties depends on financial resources, which unfortunately, are routinely insufficient. Adequate financial resources could help improve the EPPs’ work with children, create a more pleasant environment for the program, and add variety to its content.

### ***Summary***

Taken as a whole, the topics in these research questions provide clear indications of what is needed to improve the program. Investing in experts is a tried and true approach, but perhaps the most important topic in the entire research is the one that expresses the need for a clearer definition of the EPP in both theory and practice.

### ***Implications***

Given the lack of professional publications or research related to the EPP, the present study represents an important contribution to the understanding of this program in the Croatian context. This is the first survey in the Republic of Croatia that focuses on the experiences of educators involved in the implementation of the EPP.

One of the key contributions of the research is the method of drawing on the experiences of experts to formulate a theoretical framework. The experiential approach allows experts to apply their many years of experience to the development of theory.

Based on the experience of the participants, we can give concrete suggestions for improving the program:

- Redefine the criteria for including children in the program. While the existing criteria function well, they could be improved to ensure clarity and consistency.
- Revise the program. Established in 1987, the program would benefit from updating given the substantial social, systemic, legal, and family changes that have occurred.
- Improve cooperation with the pedagogical service
- Improve cooperation with the Institute for Social Work
- Improve cooperation with parents
- Improve cooperation with Dugave Center and foster internal connections
- Promote interconnection between experts
- Invest in experts by providing greater access to professional education

### ***Conclusion***

The aim of this research was to explore the experiences of educators involved in the implementation of the EPP. We listed above the indications for inclusion in the program: as the participants clearly emphasized, the correct selection of group members plays a key role in the work. Regarding the role of the family, it was pointed out that the children involved in the EPP usually come from difficult family situations and are often monitored by the Institute for Social Work, which is in accordance with the primary indications for inclusion.

The experiences of educators in the implementation of the EPP have allowed us to identify both positive and negative aspects of their work. Challenges were most often linked to cooperation

with the pedagogical service, the Institute for Social Work, and parents, though responsibility for effective collaboration was seen as essential at all levels of the system. While cooperation can be demanding, active participation, regular meetings, and valuing information-sharing were viewed as ways to make it more productive. On the positive side, participants emphasized the recognition they receive from children, a sense of genuine connection otherwise rarely found in the profession, and the motivation provided by professional autonomy and visible improvements in children's development.

The suggestions and recommendations made by the participating experts that relate to the improvement of the program centered around the improvement of the program itself and their work. They recognized the need to invest in experts and improve education and supervision, noting that little has changed in practice and that shortcomings remain, which the experts must often manage unaided. Special attention was paid to the topic of clearly defining the program in theory and practice, with participants offering concrete suggestions for how the program could be improved. These ideas included revising the program, redefining the criteria for inclusion, fostering greater cooperation among all stakeholders and more interconnection between experts, and providing experts with more access to education.

It is unfortunate that, even though the EPP is such an important and now widespread program, it has never been formally evaluated. We nevertheless feel that our confidence in the quality of the program is justified, given that it has been implemented for many years and has given rise to so many positive experiences.

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