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Article

'Hug Helps' – Kindergarten Experiences through the Eyes of Children at Risk of Social Exclusion

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Abstract: This study explores the perspectives of children at risk of social exclusion (RSE) regarding their everyday experiences in kindergarten. Using semi-structured, developmentally appropriate interviews, we examined the views of 48 children (M = 70.32 months) identified by teachers as vulnerable due to social, emotional, or contextual circumstances. Overall, children described kindergarten as a generally positive and enjoyable environment, emphasizing friendships, play, and familiar routines. However, many also expressed concerns related to limited autonomy and agency. Rules were frequently perceived as restrictive rather than supportive, and penalties often involved social or physical constraints, such as exclusion from activities or temporary isolation. Children also reported difficulties identifying consistent encouragement or available support from teachers, except during moments involving strong emotional distress. These findings highlight the ongoing need for inclusive, responsive, and autonomy-supportive pedagogical practices in early childhood education. The results suggest that children not only desire opportunities for participation but also need to feel visible, recognized, and respected as legitimate contributors to the educational process. Such reflections indirectly point to possible gaps in the quality of educational practice and the professional competencies of educators. Adults' assumptions about knowing what is best for children may unintentionally restrict children's participatory rights, particularly for those already at risk of social exclusion, who may have fewer opportunities to influence their learning environment.

Keywords: Children's Autonomy; Children's Perceptions; Social Interaction; Support; Vulnerable Children

1. Introduction

Children's early years are critical for their overall development, yet a significant proportion grow up in environments that pose risks to their well-being and future opportunities. Recent studies estimate that between 7% and 30% of young children face conditions that can negatively impact their development, education, and social inclusion [1,2]. These risks stem from various factors, including socioeconomic disadvantages, family instability, and limited access to quality education. While not all children exposed to such risks experience social exclusion, research suggests that those facing multiple adversities are more vulnerable to exclusion from educational, cultural, and social opportunities [3]. Early childhood education (ECE) plays a vital role in mitigating these risks, but the extent to which children—particularly those at risk of social exclusion (RSE)—feel included, supported, and empowered within kindergarten settings remains underexplored. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how children in RSE perceive their experiences in kindergarten, shedding light on their autonomy, social interactions, and the role of teachers in fostering inclusion.

Growing up in challenging conditions does not automatically lead to social exclusion [4]. The presence of high-quality pedagogical support, which nurtures a strong sense of identity, respects children's autonomy, and provides consistent support from peers and teachers, can serve as a protective factor against exclusion [5]. As Boyd-Swan [6] highlights, only well-structured and inclusive ECE systems can effectively mitigate the negative impacts of RSE.

Although contemporary discourse often portrays children as competent and autonomous [7], those at RSE frequently have fewer opportunities to practice agency. Dominant ECE perspectives that celebrate children's decision-making and self-expression [8] insufficiently account for the structural and relational constraints vulnerable children face. Research that centres children's own perspectives remains rare and ethically constrained; moreover, existing qualitative studies are often discounted as inexact, and children's views dismissed as inconsistent—limiting their impact on practice and policy. This study addresses these gaps by using children's own descriptions, focusing on their autonomy, social interactions, and experiences of teacher support. By comparing these narratives with similar studies [9–11], the paper identifies the level of participation among children at RSE.

2. Children in the Risk of Social Exclusion

The concept of the RSE is described as a 'dynamic characteristic and process stemming from the interplay between a child's characteristics and the structural features of their environment... that has the potential to hinder children in realizing their potential and rights' [9] (p. 33). Children raised in conditions considered (potentially) precarious are more likely to encounter harm to their well-being. Risk factors may include individual variations in a child's psychophysical state (such as giftedness or developmental challenges), non-standard family circumstances (dysfunctional families, poor quality of parenting, low socioeconomic status, specific family structures) and/or minority cultural identity (i.e. national, ethnic, religious, or migrant backgrounds), as well as residence in isolated communities (such as islands, mountainous regions, rural areas) [3]. Certain groups considered particularly vulnerable like children in healthcare settings, those involved in the justice system (whether as victims or perpetrators of crimes), and children within alternative care systems (children taken from families, living in care homes or with foster families). Another risk factor for children is overwhelming professional engagement of parents, which may lead to suboptimal parenting and subsequently, weakened emotional bonds [6,12–14].

Children in RSE more often experience poorer outcomes compared to their peers [15–17]. The experience of social exclusion can result in compromised emotional and mental health [15,16], educational challenges [18], reduced prosocial behaviors [19], and low self-esteem [20].

Global research indicates that children in RSE, compared to their peers, are less enrolled in ECE and for shorter [21]. They are often not recognized within the system or considered a priority group [22]. Children with developmental difficulties are more visible than other groups of children in RSE. I.e., there is about 24.4% of children at risk of poverty in Europe that are not recognized in ECE [22].

3. Children's Perspective

The contemporary pedagogical paradigm assumes active involvement of children in the educational process [23], focusing on children and respecting their expressions [24]. Participation forms the foundation for a transformation towards a culture that respects children's rights, values, and principles of democracy and citizenship. It involves children's competence to contribute to their own well-being [25]. Murray [26] emphasizes children's rights to participation, decision-making, and personal engagement in what is important and interesting to them. This obliges public policies, the educational system, and the consideration of children's perspectives in creating the educational curriculum [27–29].

Levels of children's participation are often assessed using Hart's Participation Scale [30] or Shier's Model of Participation [31]. Providing children with an opportunity to express their views is often easily misinterpreted as participation. Lundy [32] emphasizes that children should be invited and encouraged to express their personal opinions in an inclusive and safe space. The author Bogatić [33] stresses that it is not sufficient merely to "include" children, but also necessary to understand them.

Children of early and preschool age in the Republic of Croatia are enrolled in ECE in accordance with the Act on Preschool Education [34]. Early and preschool education—nurseries and kindergartens—constitute a unified system. However, programme modalities differ by duration, ranging from short programmes (up to 4 hours per day)

to full-day programmes (up to 10 hours per day). The curriculum guidelines for ECE in Croatia [35] are founded on the principles of listening to children's needs and interests. Unfortunately, if children's participation is understood solely at this level, it represents the lowest level of children's involvement. Adults, whether parents or teachers are responsible for facilitating the child's participation, adjusting it to the child's age and maturity [36]. Taking children's opinions into account implies openness to change. It is not just an act of listening but requires an open and sensitive approach and a positive attitude towards implementing children's ideas in decision-making. Specifically, openness to changes initiated by children can be problematic when considering children's participation in early years. By limiting choices (for example, in play, toys, or activities), we give the illusion of participation in decision-making. Children decide within the framework of our choices without the real power that agency brings. It is necessary to discuss whether this is due to adults' fear of losing authority or uncertainty about children's competencies. Trust in children's abilities and respect for their opinions and experiences contribute to the quality of the educational process [37,38]. Andresen and colleagues [39] highlight that children's perception of their personal status is one of the most important factors in assessing the suitability of the environment for overall child development. Listening to and respecting children's opinions can facilitate understanding and drive change. Although there are doubts about the permanence of children's statements, emotional expressions are always authentic to the moment in which they are made. Furthermore, the term "children's voice" does not imply that all children share the same opinion, but rather that each individual statement is part of the child's identity, experiences, feelings, and preferences [40]. Neglecting children's perspectives diminishes their experience of autonomy and self-regulation, which can, in turn, reduce their motivation for learning and participation in their own education.

The importance of understanding and respecting the perspective of children is one of the reasons for researching children's opinions. Although some researchers [5,10] advocate for actively involving children in research about them, such research is scarce. The purpose of this research was to listen to and acknowledge the perspective of children in ECE regarding their status in kindergarten, without the interpretation of their statements by adults. The focus on listening, understanding, and respecting distances itself from assumptions [41].

4. Method

The research was conducted as part of the project 'Models of Responding to Educational Needs of Children at Risk of Social Exclusion in Early Childhood Education and Care Institutions' (hereinafter MORENEC), funded by the Croatian Science Foundation. The project includes a total of 3500 preschool-age children, along with their parents (N = 3500) and teachers (N = 1299), across 66 ECE institutions.

The primary objective was to ascertain the prevalence and underlying factors contributing to children at RSE within the ECE system in the Republic of Croatia, while also investigating appropriate pedagogical support procedures.

4.1. Participants

The participants were 48 children in (potential) RSE, in age 65 to 89 months (M = 70.32; SD = 6.05). The sample includes 21 girls and 27 boys from 14 kindergartens in Croatia. The sample of kindergartens is stratified according to regions, founder, institution size, and the prevalence of children in ECE. According to teachers' observations, children are in one or more notable RSE and the causes of RSE a various (**Table 1**).

The sample partially corresponds to the population of children in ECE in Croatia. For example, in Croatia, about 18.4% of children are in poverty or at risk of poverty, and only 5.5% are covered by ECE [42]. The sample includes 11% of children with developmental deviations, including 6.6% of children with developmental disabilities.

Vargas-Barón and colleagues [43] estimate that at least 10.5% of children have developmental risks and need early intervention. Despite the need for early intervention, only one out of 8 children have the possibility to receive it [3] especially for families facing poverty and residing in rural areas [43]. In the ECE, only 1.4% of children belong to ethnic minority identity [9]. However, the data may be outdated in relation to migrations due to the war in Ukraine in the last 2 years.

Table 1. Participants by the number and cause of RSE.

	Elements	Number of Children
Number of RSE	1	19
	2	26
	3 and more	3
The most common causes of RSE	Speech, language and communication development	12
	Family environment	8
	Poverty	4
	Developmental difficulties	3
	Gifted children	2
	Minority background	2
	Behavioural difficulties	2

4.2. Research Procedure

The research has been approved by the headmasters, teachers, parents, and the children themselves. Before the interviews, all children were informed about the purpose and methodology of the research. Emphasis was placed on their interest, the respect for children's interests, and the right to withdraw their participation. The identity of all children in the project is protected with codes known only to the researchers. All recordings and conversation transcripts are accessible solely to the members of the research team.

Working alongside the teachers, the researchers spent time within the educational group to foster familiarity and a sense of security. Following Lundy's [32] framework for research with children, the children were informed of their rights to participate—or not—and were supported in expressing their personal views. Throughout the study, they were encouraged to articulate what mattered to them and where they wished to have influence. The researchers made a deliberate effort to listen (honouring the right to an "audience,") [32] without (re)interpreting the children's perspectives.

Interviews with children lasted 10 to 30 minutes, depending on the children's interest. Children were approached as co-researchers and encouraged to analyse their personal experiences. There was no insistence on answers to prevent children from becoming silent [37]. Some interviews were conducted multiple times, according to the children's interest. The interviews were recorded, and transcripts of the conversations were made based on the audio recordings.

Three researchers analysed the transcripts in two rounds. The first round, conducted by one researcher, was eliminative, excluding interviews (N = 5) assessed as not focused on children's experiences. Two researchers, the authors of this paper, performed content analysis and reduction of the remaining interviews. The process involved several rounds of reading the interview transcripts to extract themes/content, reduce data, and define codes [44]. The data were analysed using the NVivo software program.

4.3. Research Instrument

For the purposes of this research, a semi-structured interview was constructed. Demographic data on the children (status, age) were obtained from teachers. The instrument contained 23 broad open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were used to inquire about:

- children's self-image, for example: What do you think other children (the educator) think of you? What does your mom/dad say when you do something? What are you good at? What do you sometimes do even though you know others will not like it?
- personal satisfaction and happiness (i.e., what makes them happy and what would make them happier), for example: What do you like most? What makes you happy? What do you most like to do? What do you most like to play? If you had a magic wand, what would you create/do?
- their opinions on social interactions, for example: With whom do you most like to play? Who is happiest to see you when you come to kindergarten?

In recognition of children's right to withdraw, some questions were omitted for certain participants, and some children chose not to answer the majority of questions.

5. Findings and Discussion

Participation in ECE plays a crucial role in shaping a child's positive self-identity and improving the quality of their socio-emotional interactions [45]. It also contributes to a greater sense of well-being and subjective life satisfaction [14], while supporting both short-term and long-term educational success. These benefits are especially significant for children growing up in adverse conditions, as ECE provides them with a more solid foundation for personal growth and social development [46,47]. In line with these findings, the European Child Guarantee [48] underscores the importance of ensuring equal access to ECE for all children.

Understanding children's perspectives adds valuable insight into their self-image, feelings of happiness and satisfaction, and what they believe could further improve their well-being. Their views also shed light on the quality of social interactions they experience within the ECE setting.

5.1. Self-Image

The period of early childhood is crucial for building personal identity and relationships with others [49]. Children initially form their self-image based on information from their environment, emphasizing the importance of affirmative messages from adults.

Children in the research talk about themselves primarily based on feedback from adults (teachers and parents) and children's perception of adults' opinions. They construct a self-image as 'good' and 'valuable' based on teachers' statements. They believe that teachers see them as 'good' when they 'listen' (follow adults' instructions), 'exercise', 'play', 'help other children', 'share' (toys and sweets), and behave 'nicely.' They assess themselves as 'good' when playing with friends and when 'everyone is happy.' They evaluate themselves as 'not good' in situations where they fight (f = 11), disturb others (f = 4), or do not listen teachers (f = 5). Two children describe themselves as 'not good' and 'lazy' because they don't like to tidy up toys. Some children (f = 7) 'don't know' what they are like because 'the teacher hasn't told them.'

Children in the sample also build their self-image based on age. It is implied that age is a significant factor because 'older ones know more and better', can help younger children, and thus become 'helpers' to teachers.

It can be inferred that some children's responses reflect limited opportunities for participation in the educational process. When the right to participate is treated merely as optional and/or children are neither listened to nor respected, they may form a self-concept of powerlessness [32,33,41].

5.2. Personal Satisfaction and Happiness

Happiness is a fundamental human emotion encompassing satisfaction, optimism, hope, and trust. Although life circumstances and social environments can influence feelings, happiness can also be interpreted through personal engagement and absorption. Some authors emphasize that positive emotions encourage affirmative behaviours [50]. Almost all children in the sample associate satisfaction with play, especially playing together with other children. This aligns with another research [5,10]. Children are pleased when they are at the kindergarten ('I'm not afraid of anything at kindergarten.'), greet friends, and, when teachers tell them they are 'good'. They look forward to shared events, such as birthday celebrations (their own and others'). The concept of satisfaction is explained through the feeling of happiness. One girl clarifies, 'I feel happiness in my heart; I hear my heart pounding.'

Children recognize dissatisfaction as a negative feeling, primarily when they are excluded from play (f = 18). They explain that other children do not let them join into play, exclude them from group play, and say 'mean' words to them. Dissatisfaction is associated with anger (as a reaction to prohibitions and limitations) and boredom (as a consequence of exclusion). Only one child highlights physical punishment as the reason for dissatisfaction. Unfortunately, the child accepts physical punishment as a (justified) consequence of his behaviour ('When you're not good – you get a spanking. And they (parents and grandma) are to blame for making me angry'). Some children cannot verbalize what makes them dissatisfied and/or unhappy. This aligns with certain opinions that children do not express dissatisfaction verbally [10] but possibly through behaviours.

Children especially emphasize their contentment when given the chance to choose activities. Unfortunately, most children (f = 34) emphasize that teachers decide on the ways, places, and times of play. They are dissatisfied when they are forced to do something (i.e. 'Even when we are not tired, we have to lie down'). It is justified to conclude that children in the sample feel (partially) restricted in their autonomy as teachers decide on the daily

rhythm and the activities. A boy describes 'Teachers have one book (pedagogical documentation - authors' note). They write what we do. But they don't tell us what they write. They just show us what we must do.'. These statements correspond with the results of a study of Borić and Mataga Tintor [9] revealing that children perceive adults as making decisions on 'everything' rather than involving them. The children notice that they lack the ability to make decisions, even in situations they are involved and could (potentially) lead to problems. Typically, it is the teachers who resolve potential conflicts. Some children emphasize the need for autonomy with the statement, 'We don't fight when the teacher is watching. We hide and then fight.' Only a few children can describe situations in which problematic situations were resolved through mutual agreement.

Some children in the study identified spending time with their parents as a key source of happiness and satisfaction. This aligns with previous research highlighting the critical role of supportive family relationships in fostering a sense of well-being [51,52]. One girl, for instance, shared that she "loves working with mom on that green book"—referring to the developmental map, a form of participatory documentation (authors' note).

Such reflections underscore the importance of parental engagement and the value of incorporating children's perspectives into our understanding of well-being. However, it is concerning that almost none of the participating children mentioned parental involvement within the ECE institutions. One possible explanation is that many forms of parental engagement—such as parent-teacher meetings or individual consultations—occur without the child's direct presence. Additionally, post-pandemic restrictions may have further limited children's opportunities to observe or experience parental involvement in educational settings.

This lack of recognition is troubling, given that Delpit [53] emphasizes the critical role of parental engagement, particularly for families from national and/or cultural minorities. Previous studies [54,55] have shown that limited parental involvement in ECE settings is negatively correlated with children's overall well-being. Moreover, research by Kaiser et al. [12] links insufficient parental engagement to an increased RSE among children. Children are encouraged to recognize reasons for happiness. As a verbal prompt, children were presented with a 'magic wand,' symbolizing the ability to fulfil wishes for happiness. Among the children (n = 19), a majority expressed a focus on enhancing their kindergarten experience, aspiring to acquire more toys and 'decorate' the kindergarten. Notably, two children desired wealth, believing it would bring happiness ('to be rich... because the rich must be happy'), enabling them to purchase items like computers and phones. Another child envisioned space travel, while one girl wished for 'more teachers who don't get angry' to achieve happiness. Additionally, five children expressed a desire for more friends but remained uncertain about the wand's effectiveness in achieving this. Meanwhile, two children declined the magic wand altogether, and two asserted that it is merely a toy, incapable of fulfilling wishes. While some children linked happiness to material possessions, this research did not find any correlation between children's perception of happiness and their region of living. This distinction is evident when compared to the study conducted by Kurniawati and Hong [56], where children from rural areas associated happiness with material resources, whereas their urban counterparts connected it to social relationships.

5.3. Social Interactions

Even though children are at potential risk of RSE, most of them are satisfied with their experience in kindergarten. They attribute this satisfaction to social interactions with peers and teachers, and they recognize their classmates as friends within their educational group. One boy defines a friend as 'someone who is always good to me. Who always plays nicely with me. Who don't beat me. When I fall, he helps me get up and check that I'm fine'. Children acknowledge peer support in various situations, such as 'lending a hand on a walk' or 'helping to tie shoelaces'. They also recognize the support of teachers, especially in tasks such as 'reaching for toys' and 'helping with worksheets'. In addition, they themselves show support by helping others, sharing toys, and hugging to comfort those who are sad ('you hug him if he's sad because a hug helps').

An analysis of specific social situations, where joint play is the most common, reveals that some children express dissatisfaction due to perceived exclusion. For example, one child mentions 'I don't really like this group because all the children are rude to me, they poke me, push me, and I don't know what else. I feel sad.'. Some children express their desire to move to primary school, expecting a more positive social environment ('I have been in kindergarten for 100 days. I want to go to school because there will be other children there.').

Most of the children who participated in the joint analysis of social situations can describe possible solutions to problematic situations. For example, 'When someone takes your toy, you fight. But you can make an agreement.

If you are not going to play together, each of you can have a toy for five minutes'. They emphasize that if they have already quarrelled, it is good to reconcile and say 'I'm sorry'. Only a few children verbalize physical conflict as an acceptable way of solving problem situations, shifting the responsibility to other children.

Although they verbalize dissatisfaction due to (occasional) exclusion (most often from joint play), most children recognize peer support. 'I tell others when I'm sad and angry. And then they help me to be happy and then we play and become friends'. The comment from a boy expressing his preference for when the teacher 'punishes him' (sits alone at the table) is intriguing. Occasionally, a little girl joins him during this time and plays to make his punishment 'more bearable'. The question arises as to why the child perceives 'time-out' as a desirable way of dealing with him. It is possible that this allows the child to avoid interactions in which they may not feel most comfortable and realizes those that are comfortable for him, but which he does not know or cannot achieve independently.

Certain children recognize their own role in the social exclusion experienced by others, as shown by statements such as '(Y)ou are good if you play with someone who has no friends.' All children value a friendship. One boy emphasizes the importance of friends with the statement 'I have fifty hundred relatives and one true friend.'

Children recognize social support as a source of satisfaction and happiness. They conclude that it is good to be a friend and have friends. Having friends allows you to 'laugh and run,' according to one girl. Another emphasizes that, with friends, you can be 'gentle.' A boy concludes that being the 'best friend is good because then you can laugh and hug, and a hug helps.' Most children recognize the importance of physical support, explaining, '(W)hen you're sad, you cry, but you shouldn't be ashamed. You tell the teacher you're sad, and she hugs you, and everything passes. She can also play that song for you. And my mom sings me a lullaby. That helps.' However, one girl specifically mentions the absence of support as a problem: 'I did everything nicely, but they (other girls) made fun of me. I told the teacher, but she didn't do anything. She just said, 'Come on, we won't complain now.' Well, I was really sad.' Another boy is sad when no one plays with him. Once, he sought help, but 'the teachers didn't do anything.'. These statements confirm that children can express their experiences in the context of ECE and recognizing the influence of peers and adults [11]. Only one girl, despite the support of her peers, concludes that 'I'm not sure when I'm happy. I do not care.'

It is justifiable to conclude that peer interactions can contribute to children's sense of satisfaction. Simultaneously, positive moods enhance cognitive activities, achievements, as well as empathetic behaviours and altruism [50]. Satisfaction positively correlates with trust and a sense of security, further encouraging affirmative behaviours. Unfortunately, negative emotions exert a greater influence on children's behaviour than positive ones. They are often linked to negative feedback from the environment, criticisms, and a lack of social support, which can, especially in children, restrict affirmative behaviours [50].

5.4. Belonging to Minority Groups

Peleman and colleagues' [21] study suggests that children with a minority cultural identity and a migrant background experience elevated RSE attributed to cultural and language barriers. Their social interactions and play activities are diminished in comparison to children belonging to the ethnic majority [57]. Global research by af Ursin and Haanpää [58] underscores the correlation between family deprivation and children's perception of their rights being acknowledged. The more significant the family deprivation, the more pronounced the children's sense that they are not being heard and respected.

Interestingly, the children in the sample of this study do not recognize the ethical, cultural, and/or religious minority identity of certain children as a risk factor. They acknowledge being in groups with children who 'speak differently' but are focused on solutions (how to communicate with them). This correlates with research suggesting that children from developed multi-ethnic cultures recognize individuals in RSE and include them in shared activities [59].

5.5. Consistency of Children's Statements

Some children modify their statements during the conversation. For example, 'I never, really never get angry,' but they got extremely angry when someone took their toy. Children associate emotions with specific social situations, making each statement justifiably accepted as credible.

Some children in the sample initially do not understand certain expressions, such as agreement or fairness. However, in concrete examples, they recognize the meaning and can argue for it, for instance, 'Fair means when

someone does something wrong, and someone corrects it so that it becomes nice for them.'

The small sample limits generalizability, and children's responses may reflect the interviewer's presence, leading to possible social desirability bias.

6. Recommendations

It would be necessary to embed structured, age-appropriate participation frameworks that confer genuine influence (aligned with Lundy's dimensions) and to expand children's autonomy through flexible, child-responsive arrangements, supported by sustained professional development and reflective supervision.

7. Conclusions

Children's statements in this study highlight the challenges and benefits of their participation in ECE. They emphasize the importance of relationships between adults and children, the experience of being respected and participating in the educational process, as well as the development of attachment and trust. It is evident that children in the sample form their self-image based on feedback from adults. Social interactions with both adults and peers in preschool contribute to building confidence in personal abilities and establishing their place in society within their age group. Unfortunately, most of them feel that educators limit their autonomy and contribute to a sense of exclusion.

Well-being is evident in the development of a positive self-image, fostering friendships, and engaging in purposeful interactions with peers. Through peer support, children develop a sense of social justice and learn constructive ways of solving problems. They associate satisfaction with freedom of choice and play, especially free play with peers. Social relationships during play generate positive feelings (happiness), but also negative experiences (exclusion, limitations). Although some children cannot fully verbalize their feelings, they connect them to behaviours. It is concerning that they accept punishment as a justified response to personal behaviours.

The statements of some children indicate insufficient family time and the lack of parental involvement in the educational process. Non-participation of parents in the educational process is higher among children in socially disadvantaged situations, especially among parents from national and/or cultural minorities. At the same time, the play activities of these children are fewer than those of children from the ethnic majority. This contributes to the children's sense of social deprivation.

The outcome of growing up in RSE will not always lead to social exclusion. However, prolonged exposure to negative factors (limiting involvement in the educational process and play with peers, lack of peer support, restriction of children's autonomy, and disregard for their opinions) can negatively affect their self-concept, engagement, and learning. This further emphasizes the need to explore protective factors to prevent negative outcomes from childhood experiences. The findings of this study also indicate inadequate recognition of children's right to participate in their own upbringing, care and education. Children do not recognize their right to freedom of expression and co-decision-making within the community (the educational group, the family). It is possible that certain socially unacceptable behaviours (e.g., conflicts with other children), which they themselves acknowledge, are merely their response to being unnoticed within the group.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to conceptualization, methodology, research, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation and review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The research was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Code of Research with Children, and approved by the Croatian Science Foundation (No. IP-2019-04-2011) and the Ethical Committee of the University of the author(s) (2019).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Data is not available due to ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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