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EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN CROATIAN SCHOOLS: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

NIERÓWNOŚCI EDUKACYJNE W CHORWACKICH SZKOŁACH. PERSPEKTYWA NAUCZYCIELI

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Abstract: This paper aims to identify factors that facilitate or hinder inclusiveness and equity in Croatian schools from the perspective of teachers. In education, the term *inclusiveness* refers to the process of eliminating barriers to access, participation, and successful completion of education, while the term *equity* refers to the principle of ensuring that all learners are regarded as equally important. Data were collected through thirteen semi-structured interviews with subject teachers who teach students in early adolescence. Inductive thematic analysis was applied. Barriers to inclusiveness and equity in Croatian schools are primarily manifested through weaknesses in the quality of pedagogical practice, insufficient and uneven support for teachers, and ineffective forms of professional development. The strengths of the system are identified as examples of high-quality pedagogical practice and teachers who compensate for structural deficiencies through their own engagement and professionalism. Although less common, such examples demonstrate the potential of existing schools to develop a higher level of inclusiveness and equity. These are important prerequisites for ensuring the positive development of young people, so that through supportive relationships with people and institutions in their environment they can realise their potential and make positive contributions towards themselves, their families, and society.

Keywords: inclusiveness of the educational system; equity in the educational system; positive youth development; teacher perspectives; Croatian schools

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja czynników sprzyjających inkluzyjności i sprawiedliwości edukacyjnej w chorwackich szkołach lub stanowiących dla nich przeszkodę, z perspektywy nauczycieli. W edukacji termin „inkluzyjność" odnosi się do procesu eliminowania barier w dostępie do edukacji, uczestnictwie w niej oraz jej pomyślnym ukończeniu, natomiast termin „sprawiedliwość edukacyjna" oznacza zasadę zapewnienia, że wszyscy uczący się są traktowani jako równie ważni. Dane zebrano w ramach trzynastu częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów z nauczycielami przedmiotowymi pracującymi z uczniami we wczesnym okresie adolescencji. Zastosowano indukcyjną analizę tematyczną. Bariery dla inkluzyjności i sprawiedliwości edukacyjnej w chorwackich szkołach przejawiają się przede wszystkim w niedostatkach jakości praktyki pedagogicznej, niewystarczającym i nierównomiernym wsparciu nauczycieli oraz nieskutecznych formach doskonalenia zawodowego. Mocnymi stronami systemu są przykłady wysokiej jakości praktyki pedagogicznej oraz nauczyciele, którzy poprzez własne zaangażowanie i profesjonalizm kompensują niedostatki strukturalne.

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Chociaż takie przykłady występują rzadziej, pokazują potencjał istniejących szkół do rozwijania wyższego poziomu inkluzyjności i sprawiedliwości edukacyjnej. Są to istotne warunki zapewnienia pozytywnego rozwoju młodych ludzi, umożliwiające im – poprzez wspierające relacje z osobami i instytucjami w ich otoczeniu – realizowanie własnego potencjału oraz wnoszenie pozytywnego wkładu w rozwój własny, swoich rodzin i społeczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: inkluzyjność systemu edukacji; sprawiedliwość edukacyjna w systemie edukacji; pozytywny rozwój młodzieży; perspektywa nauczycieli; chorwackie szkoły

1. Introduction

This paper was produced as part of the Thematic Network *Lifelong Learning Accessible to All* project by the Institute for the Development of Education, implemented in Croatia from 2020 to 2023 with financial support from the European Social Fund. As part of the project, a network of researchers and civil society organisations addressing educational inequalities in Croatia was established, *Lifelong Learning for All*. The network advocates a fair and inclusive education system in Croatia (Baketa et al., 2022). Equity and inclusion in education are closely related terms that refer to the addressing of various forms of educational inequality. The network defines these terms and their interrelationship in accordance with UNESCO (2017) definitions. *Inclusion in education* refers to the process of eliminating barriers to access, participation, and successful completion of education. This process involves adopting measures at the level of educational institutions and the education system to equalise opportunities among learners (De los Santos et al., 2020; OECD, 2023).

Equity in education refers to the principle of ensuring that all learners are regarded as equally important. This principle recognises that learners in educational programmes are diverse and that because of personal characteristics and external circumstances, many may be at a disadvantage compared with others during the learning and development process. The principle of equity means ensuring that all learners can participate successfully in the educational process and achieve appropriate educational and developmental outcomes, regardless of their characteristics and circumstances. Inclusiveness in the education system is the foundation for achieving equity in education, and both are important prerequisites for positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2005). According to the positive youth development framework, young people thrive when immersed in safe, predictable, connected, and supportive microsystems (Lerner, 2012). Grounded in relational and developmental system models of the individual–context relationship, researchers use the positive youth development framework to study the foundations and outcomes of thriving during early adolescence and youth. They suggest that efforts to promote positive youth development should take an integrative approach to fostering young people's cognitive, behavioural, and emotional strengths from an early age (Schmid et al., 2011). Early adolescence is a transitional developmental period marked by intense identity formation, changes in self-concept, and a redefinition of relationships with peers and adults. It is characterised by increased self-focus, growing awareness of one's own abilities and traits, and sensitivity to social comparisons and acceptance; consequently, it is often accompanied by a temporary decline in self-esteem and heightened vulnerability to psychosocial influences (Alexander, 2017; Bakulov et al., 2020). The positive youth development framework is based on the premise that young people who maintain supportive relationships with individuals and institutions in their environment are more likely to realise their potential and make positive contributions to themselves, their families, and society (Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Kozina & Wiium, 2023;

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Lerner et al., 2015; Quinn et al., 2022). Positive development is fostered by investing in activities, programmes, and interventions that involve family, school, peers, neighbourhood, culture, and other social contexts (Årdal et al., 2018).

The authors agree that leaving school early , an important indicator of educational inequalities, is linked to cultural values, beliefs and behaviours, cultural and social barriers, academic barriers within school structures, discrimination and prejudice, and culturally constructed gender norms. This calls for culturally sensitive educational policies and practices that recognise the heterogeneity of student cultures and promote inclusive, equitable learning environments (Brown et al., 2025). The effort to ensure that all students have equal opportunities for success, regardless of their background, is rooted in the recognition of education as a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2017). Three areas of policy can affect inclusiveness and equity in education: the organisation of educational systems, practices inside and outside school, and the provision of resources (Field et al., 2007).

The aim of this paper is to identify factors that facilitate or hinder the inclusiveness and equity of Croatian schools from the perspective of teachers. Two research questions were posed:

1. What factors do teachers perceive as hindering inclusiveness and equity in Croatian schools?
2. What factors do teachers perceive as facilitating inclusiveness and equity in Croatian schools?

This paper contributes to the conceptualisation of educational inclusion and equity in the Croatian context by identifying and organising the factors that teachers consider relevant to ensuring equal educational opportunities. In doing so, it expands the theoretical understanding of mechanisms that can either foster or mitigate educational inequalities and provides an empirical basis for planning systemic interventions to develop a more inclusive and equitable education system.

2. Review of the literature

Although one of the fundamental goals of education policy is to enhance inclusivity and equity by ensuring that all students meet minimum standards of knowledge and skills, and by mitigating the impact of personal and family circumstances on educational outcomes (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2017), there is a clear, long-established link between students' socioeconomic status and their educational achievement. Students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds consistently attain better educational outcomes across various education systems and over extended periods (Chmielewski, 2019; Cronin et al., 2018; OECD, 2026). At the same time, living in disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions limits young people's ability to realise their innate potential due to restricted access to quality education, healthcare and other resources, ultimately resulting in adverse mental health outcomes (Cronin et al., 2018; Reiss, 2013).

Longitudinal research shows that childhood school experiences predict developmental outcomes in adolescence. When the school context provides opportunities, support, and a sense of belonging, young people later achieve positive developmental outcomes. Research by Lee et al. (2025) shows that children's engagement in school consistently predicts their future prosocial behaviour, while Matthews et al. (2015) found that children who were socially isolated in earlier schooling experienced greater mental health problems later in their youth. Typically, the quality of schooling that students access is strongly associated with future developmental outcomes, affecting both youth and adulthood. Research confirms that educational inequalities are already present when children start school, so schooling often maintains these inequalities, from school financing and the quality of teachers to segregation in schools, the quality of the curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and many other factors (Salloum et al., 2017).

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Key characteristics of the education system considered to help mitigate educational inequalities include stratification and external differentiation (e.g., the number of available types of educational institution, vertical mobility, and permeability between educational levels), the degree of educational standardisation (variability in educational quality across institutions and regions), and the link between educational institutions and employment (Gross et al., 2022). Furthermore, efforts to prevent educational inequalities increasingly focus on the quality of teachers' pedagogical practices, given that no other attribute of an educational institution has nearly as much impact on children's achievement (Blanden et al., 2022). Rueger et al. (2010) report that young people perceive similar levels of support from parents and teachers. Martinot et al. (2022) highlight that the quality of the student–teacher relationship significantly influences student engagement and helps reduce deviant and socially undesirable behaviours. Wang et al. (2023) also point to a link between the teacher–student relationship and educational achievement.

High-quality pedagogical practice is considered an important compensatory mechanism that mitigates the risk of educational inequalities, as it plays a key role in shaping the relationships, interactions and contexts in which young people learn and develop (Bouillet & Brajković, 2023a). It is expected that appropriate educational support will be provided to disadvantaged students – encompassing learning, teaching, demonstrating knowledge and socialisation within the educational institution – through the participation of all stakeholders in the educational process and the integration of interventions aimed at disadvantaged students into everyday educational activities and processes (Cefai et al., 2021; Pearce et al., 2019).

Research conducted in Croatia (Bouillet & Brajković, 2023a) has shown that many students identify as disadvantaged at higher levels of education, which complicates the provision of timely support for their learning and development. At the same time, at these higher levels, teachers are less involved in supporting these students, relying instead on other system stakeholders, such as pedagogues, psychologists and other professionals from different services (social welfare, health system, etc.). The research identified significant barriers to achieving inclusive and equitable education in Croatia, including pedagogical discontinuity across educational levels and a mechanistic approach to implementing change adopted by education policymakers (Bouillet & Brajković, 2023b).

The findings presented suggest that educational inequalities cannot be viewed solely as a consequence of students' individual or family characteristics. Although socioeconomic conditions significantly shape educational opportunities and developmental outcomes, the school environment plays a crucial role in either mitigating or exacerbating their impact. Educational inclusion and equity can therefore be understood as the education system's capacity – through its structures, available resources and pedagogical practices – to compensate for students' adverse life circumstances and to ensure the conditions necessary for their successful learning and development, and participation in school life (UNESCO, 2017). In light of the above, it is worthwhile to investigate which factors teachers identify as strengths, and which as obstacles to achieving inclusivity and equity in the Croatian education system, given that they play a pivotal role – through their day-to-day actions – in translating educational policies into students' actual experiences.

3. Methodological explanations

Data were collected through thirteen semi-structured interviews with subject teachers who teach students in early adolescence. Participants were selected purposively by quota sampling, rather than randomly, as part of a broader research project.

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Although the number of participants was partly determined by the research design, its adequacy was further confirmed by the achievement of data saturation; specifically, in the final stages of data collection, new interviews yielded no additional themes or categories relevant to the research questions, indicating that thematic saturation had been reached. The inclusion criterion was employment as a subject teacher in a primary school, specifically teaching students in the upper grades. Participant selection aimed to ensure regional representation and a diversity of professional experience. Regional representation was a key sampling criterion, whereas experience in working with specific student groups, subject areas, and the urban or rural nature of the schools were not distinct selection criteria. Data on school location were not collected, in order to further protect participant anonymity, and consequently urban–rural differences were excluded from the analysis. Given the inclusion of participants from various parts of Croatia and different educational institutions, the sample encompassed a wide range of professional experience and educational contexts.

The sample included one male and twelve female teachers working in schools in Central Croatia (n = 3), Northern Croatia (n = 3), Eastern Croatia (n = 1), the City of Zagreb (n = 2), Istria and Primorje-Goranska County (n = 3), and Dalmatia (n = 1). Their experience of working with students ranged from 5 to 23 years. All study participants work with students in subject-specific instruction and teach subjects such as the natural sciences, including mathematics, geography and biology (n = 5), foreign languages (n = 4), the native language (Croatian) (n = 3), and physical and health education (n = 1).

A project associate conducted the interviews online in spring 2023, asking questions about educational inequalities, support for disadvantaged students, teacher competencies in ensuring equal opportunities, and the adequacy of their initial and ongoing education. All participants provided written informed consent, with assurances regarding the protection of their personal data. They were informed in writing about the context and purpose of the research beforehand. The average interview lasted forty minutes. All interviews were recorded with the respondents' permission, then transcribed and analysed using NVIVO (version 14). Data collection was approved by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth in spring 2023.

Inductive thematic analysis was applied, which is appropriate for research that aims to understand how participants experience and interpret certain phenomena and to identify patterns of meaning within their experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2020). Through multiple readings, themes and categories were developed to capture the essence of individual sections of the transcripts (Kuckartz, 2019).

4. Results

4.1. Factors hindering inclusiveness and equity in Croatian schools

Thematic analysis of barriers to inclusion and equity in Croatian schools identified five themes: the quality of participation of disadvantaged students in the educational process, the quality of the curriculum, the quality of the available resources to support students, the quality of cooperation between stakeholders, and the quality of teachers' competence in teaching disadvantaged students. According to teachers, the quality of students' participation in the educational process is largely influenced by the specific characteristics of the students themselves (health, developmental and/or social status), which are not adequately addressed in schools, as well as by insufficient support for students' education within the family.

> *"I can find at least five such examples in every class." (Teacher_01)*

> *"That child was left at home because the mother decided it was better that way. The doctor's notes that are submitted*

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are often faked because teaching classes need to be excused. The doctor writes the note, but in reality, the student is looking after her brothers at home; they are all at home and do not go to school. Then the child has no right to that education because she is not at school for three weeks. After three weeks she returns and does not know where we are, what we are doing or how things are; it is difficult." (Teacher_11)

"A student with learning disabilities follows an adapted programme and has difficulty mastering the content, so I have noticed that, because of this, he is sometimes targeted with ridicule by his classmates." (Teacher_06)

"I think that today we are perhaps even more deprived of gifted children, because the system focuses heavily on children with disabilities and we devote more attention to them, while we perhaps treat gifted students in the same way as average students in the classroom." (Teacher_11)

"… one student has great potential and ability; she could achieve a lot if she studied and worked consistently at home. However, since she does not receive much support or encouragement from her parents, she mostly works on her own and only does as much as she can manage by herself, and so she does not achieve much because no one supervises her." (Teacher_02)

Regarding the quality of the curriculum, teachers highlight students' workload, an excessive focus on factual knowledge, and superficial approaches to assessment, without acknowledging opportunities for changes that would better align the curriculum and pedagogical practices with students' needs and guide them towards improved learning outcomes.

"… I mean the programme, the class schedule, that is the key. Sometimes I have students in at 7:10 p.m., and those same children attend everything, such as music school and all the additional activities. And then they sit there, in Year 8, and we continue to pour information into their heads." (Teacher_11)

"What is required is still exclusively factual knowledge, and a great deal of it. For example, I have so many outcomes in geography that I must cover in class according to the curriculum. My hands are pretty much tied." (Teacher_01)

"I think there is a problem in the system as a whole because A grades are given too easily. Everyone thinks that anyone can get an A. Then a problem arises when a child says that her friend got an A and she did not." (Teacher_04)

Teachers highlight numerous difficulties regarding the organisation and functioning of school professional services, which are expected to provide direct support to students in disadvantaged positions and to the teachers who work with them. In particular, they emphasise the insufficient number of professional support staff and the lack of support for teachers. Many teachers also mention the inadequate training of teaching assistants who support students with developmental disabilities in Croatian schools.

"We have a pedagogue, a psychologist and a speech therapist in our school, but there are so many children that not all of them have the chance to take turns. The speech therapist probably does the most work, but she herself does not work enough, and she cannot actually see as many children and work with them as she should." (Teacher_13)

"You do not have real support; you do not have full support, and the only support you have is that the student has some kind of paper and you are then protected because you basically have free rein to draw out from that child everything that makes them feel good, everything that makes them happy." (Teacher_08)

"But do we have support at school? No. No, it is purely individual, depending on whether you are that kind of person or not." (Teacher_09)

"The support provided by teaching assistants is organised so that almost anyone can come, including those who have no experience or pedagogical background in education." (Teacher_13)

The quality of cooperation among stakeholders in the educational process includes collaboration with the social protection system, as well

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as information exchange and cooperation with parents, which are currently inadequate.

"I am outraged by various letters, such as those sent to the Social Welfare Centre, which seem ineffective to me. I think we should have mechanisms for prompt action. A letter cannot wait for a response if domestic violence or child abuse is suspected; it cannot wait, it must be dealt with immediately, not tomorrow." (Teacher_07)

"We genuinely do not know some things. On the one hand, we are not allowed to know; on the other, we do not need to know, as these concern private lives. We find out a lot by chance, in informal conversations." (Teacher_07)

"They go to various pedagogues, speech therapists, social pedagogues – we do not even know who these people are. It all happens outside the school, so that part is catastrophic; there is no order there." (Teacher_09)

"Declaratively, yes, inclusion is a trend and we all have to follow it; it is all beautifully presented on paper. However, when you ask for a specific answer to a question, not even for help, they do not really know much about you." (Teacher_09)

"We often have to reach out to parents, which can be problematic because, even when we contact them, they may not understand the importance of what we are discussing. Sometimes they also have unresolved situations at home, so we have to involve the Social Welfare Centre, but then a new problem arises because staff there are overloaded and unfortunately have too many cases. By the time information comes through, it takes a long time, and by then the problem is urgent and should already have been resolved." (Teacher_43)

"In general, it can be difficult with parents. In an ordinary life situation, it is difficult, and then, regarding that aspect, that communication, because you are very attached to your parents, a parent is practically like someone sitting in your class." (Teacher_09)

Teachers acknowledge shortcomings in ensuring the appropriate quality of competences for teaching disadvantaged students, both in initial and in-service education. They particularly highlight the inconsistency of professional development programmes offered by the national Agency for Teacher Training and Education.

"Well, initial education has hardly contributed to these competences at all." (Teacher_03)

"I think that, for an average teacher, one hundred euros for a two-day seminar is really a lot of money to spend." (Teacher_13)

"There were topics such as supporting students with developmental disabilities, for example, or specifically including students with developmental disabilities in physical education classes and similar areas, but those were mostly general statements." (Teacher_10)

"Regarding the Agency, I would say everything is just theory. When you ask them about practical matters, there is nothing truly practical. They are all lecturers who tell you stories, and when you ask them about certain things in practice, they do not answer." (Teacher_11)

In summary, teachers identified numerous failures of the system in addressing the challenges of fair and inclusive education. The results highlight the need for serious reflection and improvement of the Croatian education system to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students. The conclusion of this part of the analysis emphasises the need for a stronger affirmation of the right to quality education, which requires changes in education policies to enable and encourage the autonomy and professionalism of all education workers, while providing appropriate support for children, families and teachers. This is a complex, long-term process that requires observation of high professional standards at all levels and in all components of the system and cannot be achieved through blanket or superficial solutions.

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4.2. Factors facilitating inclusiveness and equity in Croatian schools

Despite numerous weaknesses, the system generally guides teachers towards fair and inclusive education. Analysis of the interviews shows that the key factors in this process are direct pedagogical practice (with children and family members), teachers' professionalism, and the support available to them. Examples of inclusive and equitable education, compared with the identified obstacles, appeared in the interviews to a significantly lesser extent. Thematic analysis identified three key themes: the quality of pedagogical practice, the quality of support for teachers, and the quality of in-service learning.

According to teachers, pedagogical practice that promotes inclusiveness and equity in the educational process includes a focus on social-emotional learning, fostering an inclusive classroom culture, the availability of support for students, and various forms of teaching (such as supplementary and additional teaching, extended school attendance, and project-based teaching).

> *"For example, at school we have something called 'School Afternoon Just for Me'. It is essentially a project with a euphemistic name, but in reality, it is for students who lack adequate parental care and social or material support. During that part of the day, teachers look after these students, study with them, help them with their work, and provide a meal specifically for the reasons they are there. It is called that so they are not stigmatised at school." (Teacher_07)*

> *"I have a relationship with my students where I always tell them to contact me if they need anything. For example, my class has my WhatsApp number and can message me. That kind of cooperation and relationship is very important to me, and I want them to feel they can come to me without fear and say whatever happens. Sometimes it works very well – I see them come, ask, call me, and sometimes they say, 'But do not tell anyone I was there.'" (Teacher_06)*

> *"I generally try not to focus on differences between students, to encourage them to accept and work with each other. I always try to mix students when we work in pairs or groups, never pairing those who already spend time together during breaks or after school. I always try to form groups or pairs with students who may not socialise or communicate as much when they are with their best friends." (Teacher_02)*

> *"I had many ideas. At school, a colleague and I, together with a few others, ran an excellent project called I Want, I Can, I Change. We ran it for almost ten years, organising various workshops for children to open up the school, so that it is not just a place where children come, spend five hours, and leave, but somewhere they can come at other times for activities suited to them, and where they actually want to be." (Teacher_13)*

> *"I work specifically with another Croatian teacher. We have a media group where we make films, and it has proved very successful. Firstly, the students get involved in a range of additional activities. I remember one boy who had just finished high school – he could not cope at school, he was very shy, he did not even speak. We practically forced him to join our media group, where we involved him in filming and photography. That was when he started to open up, and I remember that by Year 8 he was really talkative and everyone in the class liked him." (Teacher_07)*

> *"This year we also created a manual for learning Croatian because the teachers did not have any materials. One of the teachers developed the teaching materials herself and compiled them into a manual to help other teachers." (Teacher_04)*

Teachers believe that high-quality pedagogical practice is supported by readily available, high-quality assistance, including support from professional services and peer networks.

> *"Our school has excellent professional services, including a psychologist, a pedagogue, a social pedagogue and a speech therapist." (Teacher_07)*

> *"I believe these professions can consistently provide strong support for one another, both through good examples and various guidelines. I do not think there is anyone here who*

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knows everything; nor am I claiming to have discovered anything new." (Teacher_07)

Teachers emphasise training courses organised by civil society organisations or private institutions as their preferred form of in-service learning for developing their competencies, and they consider their availability important.

"... but I think I received a lot of high-quality education from (anonymised). We also completed a programme for mediators." (Teacher_07)

"... but perhaps I gained most of that knowledge from those courses I paid for myself, ranging from therapeutic ones to communication, critical thinking, and working with children with behavioural problems. Then I went to the Polyclinic with Dr (anonymised), and so on, with some additional training on the side, I would say." (Teacher_11)

"I know you cannot achieve much with webinars. I also know it is better to do many things in person, but I cannot go to Zagreb for two- or three-days during term time, so I think that if some things were decentralised, and held, say, in Rijeka or Pula, it would be much easier for us." (Teacher_05)

The results of this part of the analysis indicate that the factors contributing to inclusiveness and equity in Croatian schools mainly stem from high-quality pedagogical practice that is diverse, enriched with various modalities, and promotes social-emotional learning and inclusive relationships. Such practice is supported by appropriate teacher education, which is not accessible to all. These are unsystematic approaches that largely depend on individual choices and the specific characteristics of each educational institution. Therefore, networking and the effective use of available resources are important factors in enhancing the inclusiveness and equity of the educational system. This includes networking among teachers, connecting schools with other services and institutions, collaboration with civil society organisations, professional development, and fostering an inclusive organisational culture within each institution.

The findings suggest that inclusivity and equity in Croatian schools are not yet adequately ensured through systematically designed policies and support mechanisms. Instead, the protective factors identified stem primarily from individual teacher initiatives and isolated examples of good practice. Although such an approach can mitigate educational inequalities, it cannot systematically reduce them, as the availability and quality of these measures depend on the resources, competences, and commitment of individual schools and their staff. From a sociological perspective, these results highlight the importance of the structural and organisational characteristics of the educational system in shaping students' educational opportunities. When access to support depends on local circumstances and individual initiative, there is an increased risk of unequal educational experiences and the reproduction of existing social inequalities. Consequently, the findings point to the need to strengthen systemic support for disadvantaged students, as well as professional and organisational support for the teachers working with them, so that inclusivity and equity become systemic features rather than isolated examples of good practice.

5. Concluding remarks

This study has shown that barriers to inclusivity and equity in Croatian schools arise primarily from shortcomings in the quality of pedagogical practice, inconsistent support for teachers, and the limited effectiveness of professional development. In contrast, specific examples of high-quality pedagogical practice and teachers who, through their own commitment and professionalism, manage to mitigate the system's structural deficiencies stand out as system strengths. These findings are consistent with research identifying high-quality pedagogical practice as one of the most powerful school-related factors associated with students'

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educational achievement (Blanden et al., 2022), as well as an important compensatory mechanism for preventing educational inequalities (Bouillet & Brajković, 2023a).

The results obtained are particularly significant in the context of early adolescence, a developmental period during which school experiences play a crucial role in shaping educational, social, and emotional outcomes (Bakulov et al., 2020). Previous research indicates that school engagement and a sense of belonging contribute to positive developmental outcomes and subsequent prosocial behaviour, whereas social isolation increases the risk of mental health difficulties (Lee et al., 2025; Matthews et al., 2015). Furthermore, high-quality teacher–student relationships are associated with greater student engagement, better educational outcomes, and a lower risk of social exclusion (Martinot et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). In this regard, teachers can be considered an important protective factor during early adolescence.

This interpretation aligns with the principles of positive youth development, which hold that optimal development is achieved not primarily by reducing risks, but by creating conditions that support the identification and cultivation of personal strengths, the building of positive relationships, and the active participation of young people in their own learning and development (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2015; Bonell et al., 2016). Such an approach is particularly important during early adolescence, a period identified by the OECD as critical for the development of learning motivation, self-regulation, a sense of belonging, and lifelong learning habits (OECD, 2025). At the same time, this is a period of heightened vulnerability to school disengagement and loss of interest in learning, especially among students growing up in adverse circumstances (Povey et al., 2022). Therefore, teachers are expected to create inclusive learning environments that foster students' academic and social-emotional competencies through differentiated instruction, supportive relationships, formative assessment, social-emotional learning, active participation, and the encouragement of student autonomy.

However, the results of this study indicate that such components of inclusive and equitable education are not sufficiently embedded within the education system itself. Instead of stemming from consistently developed policies, adequate resources, and systematically organised teacher support, they often rely on the individual competences, motivation, and professional commitment of particular teachers. This confirms earlier findings on pedagogical discontinuity and the limited effectiveness of systemic mechanisms for equalising educational opportunities within the Croatian education system (Bouillet & Brajković, 2023a; 2023b). Consequently, the quality of support provided to disadvantaged students depends largely on the characteristics of individual schools and their staff, which obstructs the realisation of inclusivity and equity as universal features of the education system. This issue is particularly pronounced during early adolescence, a period marked by increasing educational demands, a changing educational environment, and frequently a decline in individualised student support (Baketa et al., 2022). Under these circumstances, the absence of systemic support can further heighten the vulnerability of disadvantaged students and contribute to the widening of existing educational inequalities.

When the results are viewed through the framework of inclusive and equitable education proposed by UNESCO (2017), Croatian schools can be seen to demonstrate examples of high-quality, inclusive pedagogical practice; however, significant challenges remain in ensuring that this practice is systematic and accessible to all students. The key strengths identified lie in the realm of practice, specifically the professional commitment of teachers, their focus on student support, and their efforts to address diverse student needs through strong relationships, individualised approaches, and social and emotional learning. Conversely, the findings highlight limitations

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in structure and policy, evident in insufficient support for disadvantaged students, unequal opportunities for teacher professional development, inadequate inter-sectoral cooperation, and underdeveloped mechanisms for coordinating the actions of different system stakeholders.

The findings also suggest that the principles of inclusion and equity have not yet been fully embedded at all levels of the Croatian education system as a shared conceptual framework to guide decision-making, resource allocation, and the development of educational practice. Consequently, the realisation of inclusion and equity still relies heavily on the individual competences, professional beliefs, and commitment of particular teachers and schools. Although such examples highlight the system's considerable potential, the long-term reduction of educational inequalities requires greater integration of concepts, policies, structures, and practices into a unified, coordinated, and proactive support system. Only in this way can inclusion and equity become hallmarks of the entire education system, rather than merely the outcome of isolated initiatives and examples of good practice.

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