

Research Article

Teaching out-of-field: Primary school teachers stepping into early childhood education and care

Ida Somolanji Tokić¹ and Tijana Borovac²

¹Faculty of Education, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia (ORCID: 0000-0002-0566-2260)

²Faculty of Education, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia (ORCID: 0000-0002-7802-1288)

In response to a nationwide shortage of early childhood education and care educators in Croatia, many qualified primary school teachers have transitioned into early childhood education and care settings without formal preparation for work with young children. To address this gap, Croatia introduced its first university-level re-qualification program, aiming to support primary school teachers in acquiring the pedagogical and developmental competencies required in early years education. This study explores how primary school teachers experience this professional transition, the impact of the re-qualification program on their professional development, and the challenges they encounter. Grounded in Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory which emphasizes learning through social interaction and cultural context, the study employed an exploratory qualitative research design. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit eleven qualified primary school teachers who had already been employed in early childhood education and care settings as out-of-field educators and were enrolled in Croatia's first university re-qualification programme. Data were collected during the summer of 2025 through a researcher-developed structured written interviews consisting of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' professional experiences and reflections. Data were analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis combining deductive and inductive coding, following the thematic analysis procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke. Findings indicate that participants' transitions into early childhood education and care were shaped by interconnected structural, pedagogical and identity-related factors. While employment security emerged as the dominant motivation for entering the sector, participants also described significant pedagogical adaptation, ongoing identity negotiation and uncertainty regarding long-term professional positioning. The findings suggest that out-of-field transitions into early childhood education and care are not merely questions of workforce redistribution or qualification mismatch, but complex socio-professional processes involving pedagogical transformation, identity reconstruction, and structurally conditioned career mobility. As Croatia continues to address workforce shortages in early childhood education and care, aligning policy, institutional support and professional development will be essential for sustaining a qualified, reflective, and stable workforce capable of responding to the developmental, contextual and relational needs of young children.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care; Out-of-field teaching; Primary-to-ECEC transition; Professional development; Professional identity; Re-qualification

Article History: Submitted 25 May 2026; Revised 30 July 2026; Accepted 2 August 2026; Published online 30 August 2026

Address of Corresponding Author

Ida Somolanji Tokić, PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia; Cara Hadrijana 10, 31000 Osijek, Croatia.

✉ isomolanji@foozos.hr, ida.456@gmail.com

How to cite: Somolanji Tokić, I., & Borovac, T. (2026). Teaching out-of-field: Primary school teachers stepping into early childhood education and care. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 10(3), 132-154. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202646149>

1. Introduction

Croatia is experiencing a significant shortfall in qualified Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC] professionals, mirroring a broader international trend. Despite challenges of systematic data collection and comparability, there are signs and reports that most European countries are facing significant staff shortages in the sector. The Croatian Ministry of Education indicates an approximate shortage of 5850 ECEC teachers. The National Education System Development Plan for the period until 2027 and its Action Plan for the period until 2024 aim at increasing the coverage of preschool children (ages 4-6) from the current 78% to 97% (European Commission, 2023, p. 6). This shortage affects the capacity of ECEC services to maintain high-quality care and education. In response, governments, including Croatia's, are increasingly relying on temporary or alternative workforce solutions while addressing longer-term challenges in workforce development. Croatia responded to this shortage in the ECEC system by placing teachers out-of-field. To temporarily mitigate the shortage and labor gap, many qualified primary school teachers [PSTs] are stepping into roles within ECEC. However, these PSTs often enter the ECEC environment without formal training specific to early childhood pedagogy, child developmental psychology, or caregiving practices. This study aimed to explore how PSTs experienced this transition and the challenges and opportunities they encountered.

PSTs serve as so-called *unqualified substitutes*, which creates potential challenges in maintaining pedagogical continuity and developmentally and contextually appropriate practices in the ECEC spaces. Furthermore, PSTs have training focused on older children (8 to 12) and more structured academic learning present in primary school [PS], creating a mismatch in skills and expectations in the ECEC context. Recognizing the risks and limitations of relying on unqualified substitute, Faculty of Education, University of Osijek (2024) developed its first formal Re-qualification Programme for Acquiring the Qualification of an ECEC Educator for PSTs transitioning into early childhood education and care (see Appendix A). The urgency of establishing the programme was further reinforced by a legislative amendment introduced in 2022 (see Appendix B), which stipulated that PSTs already employed in ECEC settings as unqualified substitutes could continue working only if they obtained the official qualification of an ECEC educator within two years of employment.

This program, offered at the university level, aims to bridge the knowledge and skills gap by providing pedagogical training grounded in ECEC pedagogical principles. The program is designed to support professional adaptation to ECEC philosophies and environments, development of emotional and relational competencies critical to ECEC and sustainable career transitions for PSTs seeking long-term roles in ECEC. The programme therefore represents a systemic response to an immediate workforce shortage while simultaneously seeking to preserve the professional standards and quality of early childhood education and care.

The authors of this paper recognize this process as part of a broader phenomenon known as teaching out-of-field. According to Du Plessis (2015), while the concept of teaching out-of-field has traditionally been associated with teachers working outside their area of subject expertise (usually mathematics and science), emerging international literature (Eroja et al., 2025; Karlsson et al., 2018) makes it increasingly clear that out-of-field teaching significantly affects multiple subjects, educational levels and phases, including ECEC. In this context, the Croatian case exemplifies how the ECEC system is not immune to this phenomenon, and how re-qualification pathways are being introduced as a strategic response to ensure minimum quality, continuity, and professionalism within the field.

1.1. Literature Review on teaching out-of-field in ECEC

While the concept of out-of-field teaching is well-documented in primary and secondary school contexts (Badaru & Ndlovu, 2025; Hobbs & Porsch, 2021; Ingersoll, 2019), its application in ECEC remains underexplored. One interesting and rather similar research was conducted by Eroja et al. (2025), who conducted a phenomenological study in the Philippines investigating the lived

experiences of eight out-of-field kindergarten teachers. Their findings highlighted both the emotional rewards and structural challenges of working outside one's field, including insufficient training, lack of pedagogical resources, and difficulties in managing early learners. Teachers often relied on peer mentoring, emotional regulation, and improvisation to cope, underscoring the urgent need for tailored professional development programs (Eroja et. al., 2025). Their study affirms the importance of teacher identity, resilience, and self-efficacy, but also exposes systemic gaps that require policy attention.

In addition to studies explicitly focused on out-of-field teachers, relevant insights can also be drawn from research on *substitute* or *relief* teachers in ECEC contexts, where similar concerns about training, role clarity, and pedagogical preparedness emerge. For instance, Karlsson et al. (2018) compared the regulation and training of substitute ECEC teachers in Sweden and Australia, the two countries with comparable commitments to universal access and national curricula in ECEC, yet markedly different approaches to substitute staffing. Their findings revealed that while Australia requires substitute teachers to hold formal ECEC teaching qualifications and be registered with professional bodies (e.g., ACECQA, AITSL), in Sweden, there are no such formal requirements. According to them, substitute teachers are often viewed as “*extra hands*” rather than pedagogical actors and may be employed without any specialized training or qualifications (Karlsson et al., 2018). This distinction is critical, as it underscores that not all substitute ECEC teachers qualify as out-of-field educators in the academic sense. Out-of-field teaching, as typically defined, involves educators who possess formal qualifications which are often in another educational field, but are assigned outside their area of expertise (Hobbs & Porsch, 2021). In contrast, as stated by Karlsson et al. (2018), many substitute teachers, particularly in the Swedish context, lack any formal pedagogical training, positioning them as *unqualified replacements* rather than out-of-field professionals. This difference highlights the need for greater conceptual precision when addressing ECEC teacher shortages in ECEC and reinforces the argument that out-of-field teaching still presupposes a certain level of formal education and professional identity.

Building on this, the present research explores similar themes in the Croatian context, where PSTs who are without formal ECEC training are increasingly transitioning into ECEC roles due to staffing shortages. It highlights that out-of-field teaching in ECEC is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by structural shortages, policy gaps, and mismatches between teachers' training and the pedagogical demands of ECEC settings. While international research has begun to document these complexities, little is known about how such dynamics unfold in countries where PSTs are formally permitted – and increasingly required – to fill ECEC positions, as is now the case in Croatia. This gap underscores the need for context-specific research that examines how PSTs navigate these transitions, reconstruct their professional identity, and experience re-qualification processes within a system undergoing significant workforce strain. Given this research gap, the present study aimed to explore how primary school teachers experience their professional transition into ECEC, how they perceive the contribution of the re-qualification programme to their professional development, and the challenges they encounter during this process. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do PSTs perceive their professional transition from the school system to the ECEC system? and (2) How do PSTs perceive the influence of the re-qualification programme on their professional identity and career commitment in ECEC?

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this paper is socio-constructivist theory, as developed by Vygotsky (1978). This perspective emphasizes that learning and development are inherently social processes, shaped through interaction with more knowledgeable others and embedded within specific cultural and institutional contexts. By applying socio-constructivist theory, the study recognizes that PSTs are not just acquiring technical skills but are also socially re-constructing their identities as ECEC educators in a new professional culture. This involves possible shifting of beliefs and assumptions about teaching, learning, and caregiving, developing a deeper awareness

of the ECEC child-centered philosophy and engaging in reflective dialogue with peers and facilitators that shape their understanding of what it means to be an ECEC educator. Applying this framework helps to explore how re-qualification programs, professional communities and on-the-ground experiences shape the evolving professional identities and competencies of out-of-field PSTs in ECEC. This framework is useful in understanding how PSTs construct new knowledge and professional identities through social interaction and cultural immersion, especially in unfamiliar educational contexts such as ECEC.

At the same time, it should be recognised that this issue can also be seen through a distinctly different lens, namely, a critical pedagogy perspective which would allow future research to explore the power relations, structural inequalities, and professional hierarchies that shape these transitions, a direction particularly relevant given the early stage of examining this phenomenon in the Croatian ECEC context.

2.1. Teaching out of field as a Global Phenomenon

The term out-of-field teaching refers to the practice of assigning teachers to teach outside the subject area, age group, or educational phase in which they were formally trained and certified. As Hobbs and Porsch (2021) explains, out-of-field teaching involves a misalignment between a teacher's formal qualifications and their assigned teaching role, which can lead to challenges in content delivery, pedagogical confidence, and professional identity formation. Ingersoll (2019) further emphasizes that this phenomenon is not limited to isolated cases but is a systemic issue affecting educational quality on a global scale, particularly in contexts where teacher shortages are acute.

What distinguishes out-of-field teaching from simply being unqualified is that the individuals involved typically possess a formal teaching qualification or valid teaching degrees and certification, just not aligned with the field or phase they are currently teaching in. This nuance is critical in differentiating out-of-field teaching from the employment of untrained or substitute staff with no formal pedagogical background. As Du Plessis and McDonagh (2021) clarify:

Although these teachers might be highly qualified, they are not suitably qualified for a specific subject/year level or do not have 'developed expertise' in these unfamiliar teaching areas. The out-of-field teaching phenomenon is a 'quick fix' action to have teachers in specific subject areas or in classrooms. (p. 1)

2.2. Primary School Teachers Stepping into Early Childhood Education and Care

In Croatia, this concept takes a specific shape. Due to a national shortage of qualified ECEC professionals, an increasing number of PSTs are being hired in ECEC centers. PSTs are not considered unqualified; they hold a Level 7.1 (300 ECTS) qualification in PS education compared to ECEC professionals who are educated (Eurydice, 2026) through undergraduate (ISCED level 6 with 180 ECTS) and graduate university study programmes (ISCED level 7 with 120 ECTS). They are qualified for a different phase of education (typically children aged 8-12), and not for ECEC, where children range from infancy to age 7. This situates them squarely within the definition of out-of-field teaching as discussed in international literature: they are credentialed educators working in a field for which they lack phase-specific training and pedagogical preparation. International frameworks now increasingly recognize developmental phase transitions (e.g., primary to ECEC) as a legitimate and impactful form of out-of-field teaching (Eroja et al., 2025; Hobbs, 2013; Karlsson et al., 2018).

Unlike the assumption that teaching skills are easily transferrable across age groups, ECEC qualification is deeply tied to a specific pedagogical paradigm. As Nutbrown (2021) writes:

Qualifications are not simply 'a piece of paper' or a 'hoop to jump through' to obtain a particular job-role in early childhood education and care. A qualification should stand as evidence of what early childhood educators know and can do, and in particular how they can support young children's learning through highly attuned practice and thoughtful reflection. I suggest that qualifications are not so much the means by which educators should know what to do in some formulaic way but

rather, how to think about the situations they face, what they as educators offer and how they interact with young children in meaningful learning encounters. (p. 240)

In Croatia, ECEC educators are trained through bachelor's and master's level programs that emphasize child-centered and relational pedagogy, play-based learning, co-construction of meaning and integrated curriculum design. In contrast, PSTs are educated to teach structured subject matter to older children in a school system oriented toward standardized outcomes and external assessments. The specific distinction between PS and ECEC system in terms of pedagogical philosophy is that the Croatian ECEC system is grounded in a humanistic and child-centered approach (Eurydice, 2023), where the child is viewed as a competent co-constructor of knowledge and meaning (Bogatić, 2024; Borovac & Somolanji Tokić, 2024; Dahlberg et al., 1999; Sharmahd & Peeters, 2019; Slunjski, 2015). Unlike outcome-based primary school curricula that emphasize predefined learning objectives, the ECEC curriculum is process-oriented, flexible, and responsive to the child's interests, questions, and discoveries (Borovac & Somolanji Tokić, 2024; Campbell-Barr, 2025; Roberts-Holmes, 2015). Learning is understood to emerge from the child's active engagement with a complex, rich, and unpredictable environment, rather than being directed by external standards (Oliveira-Formosinho & de Sousa, 2019; Somolanji Tokić, 2024). This pedagogical orientation requires a fundamentally different understanding of teaching and learning, the one that prioritizes relational competencies, reflection, and contextual sensitivity, making it distinct from the more structured, subject-oriented focus typically found in PSTs education (Forman et al., 2001; Sharmahd & Peeters, 2019). This divergence in educational philosophy, methodology and child development focus marks ECEC as a distinct professional field, not merely a younger version of PS education. Therefore, PSTs entering this system without proper re-qualification are not fully equipped to meet the pedagogical and relational demands of ECEC and are thus considered rightly categorized as teaching out-of-field.

Although most literature on out-of-field teaching focuses on subject mismatch (especially STEM in secondary education), authors such as Hobbs (2013), Du Plessis (2020), and Ingersoll (2019) have called for a broader understanding that includes cross-phase transitions like those into ECEC. Ingersoll (2019) notes that teachers in kindergarten or pre-kindergarten settings may be out-of-field if they do not hold the qualifications and expertise required for that developmental stage, regardless of their broader teaching credentials. The issue is not just administrative or semantic. It has real and possibly long-standing consequences.

Research consistently shows that educator qualifications are one of the strongest predictors of high-quality ECEC, which in turn supports child development, equity, and social mobility (Bouillet et al., 2024; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025; Lagos-Serrano, 2024; Manning et al., 2017; Manning et al., 2019; Nutbrown, 2021; OECD, 2021). Thus, filling ECEC positions with teachers from other fields is a structural risk, even if temporarily necessary. Furthermore, research has found that working out-of-field can negatively affect teachers' self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and professional identity (Du Plessis, 2020; Hobbs, 2013), especially when transitions occur without adequate support or training (Du Plessis et al., 2014). In Croatia, the Re-qualification Programme introduced in 2022 aims to mitigate these risks.

2.3. The Croatian Re-qualification Programme as bridging the gap

Recognizing these challenges, Croatia introduced the first university-level Re-qualification Programme for ECEC educators in response to a 2022 legislative amendment mentioned earlier in this paper. The program provides specialized training to align PSTs' knowledge and competencies with ECEC expectations. It supports the development of relational competencies, reflective practice, and a deeper understanding of ECEC pedagogy. This program should not serve merely as formality. It should be seen as a systemic intervention in workforce development and a professionalization pathway for teachers entering ECEC from another field.

It responds to both immediate labour shortages and long-term goals of improving ECEC quality, aligning closely with global policy trends (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice,

2025; OECD, 2021). Furthermore, the complexities of ECEC (often misperceived as *just minding babies*) demand far more than general practical experience. ECEC requires a specialized set of pedagogical, emotional and relational competencies rooted in child-centered and developmentally responsive practice. As Bamsey and Fogarty (2025) argue:

Professionalism in ECEC is best understood not only as a matter of policy or qualifications, but as the outcome of deeper ideological and structural forces. (p. 3)

which makes the profession particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding and devaluation. This fragility of its professional identity, as they further describe it, reinforces the need for structural and cultural recognition of ECEC as a complex and skilled profession. According to Lagos-Serrano (2024), similar dynamics can already be observed in the Chilean ECEC system, where even qualified ECEC educators tend to distance themselves from the care-oriented aspects of their profession, a shift that may inadvertently contribute to the schoolification of ECEC. Accordingly, ensuring that those entering ECEC through out-of-field pathways receive rigorous, context-specific preparation is not merely an administrative requirement or a temporary staffing fix. Rather, it is essential for safeguarding the integrity of the ECEC profession and for ensuring that young children encounter ECEC educators equipped to support their development through reflective, relational, and developmentally attuned practice.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do PSTs perceive their professional transition from the school system to the ECEC system? and (2) How do PSTs perceive the influence of the re-qualification programme on their professional identity and career commitment in ECEC? This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design (Özdemir Beceren et al., 2025), as little is known about how PSTs experience the transition into ECEC and the re-qualification process.

3.2. Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. All participants were qualified primary school teachers who had already been employed in kindergartens as so-called unqualified substitutes before enrolling in Croatia's first university re-qualification programme for ECEC educators (see more about the programme in Appendix A and B). All held a level 7.1 teaching qualification (300 ECTS credits). Because the study focused specifically on this newly established re-qualification pathway, this group was considered particularly information-rich for addressing the research questions.

3.3. Data Collection

To address research questions, the researchers developed a semi-structured written interview specifically for the purposes of this study. The interview protocol was derived from the research aims and consisted of four background questions (age, years of teaching experience, total years of professional experience, and current position in ECEC) and twelve open-ended questions organised into six thematic domains: (1) professional pathway and motivation for re-qualification, (2) experiences of transition to ECEC, (3) perceived contribution of the re-qualification programme, (4) pedagogical differences and transition challenges, (5) professional identity and career intentions, and (6) recommendations for future participants. The complete interview protocol is provided in Appendix C.

Data collection was initially planned as individual semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom by the researchers. However, due to a very low response rate, the procedure was adapted to an asynchronous written interview administered through Google Forms. Participants received the same 16 interview questions and completed them independently at the time of their choosing. Because responses were provided in written form, no audio or video recordings were made.

Participants' written responses constituted the primary research data. Invitations were sent to all 23 teachers enrolled in the first cohort of the re-qualification programme over two rounds (two weeks apart), and eleven completed the form. Data was collected over the summer of 2025.

Ethical considerations included informing participants about the purpose and scope of the research, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and emphasizing that participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Since the researchers were also lecturers in the re-qualification program attended by the participants, to ensure ethical integrity and minimize potential bias, participants were invited to take part in the study only after they had completed all lectures and examination periods related to the program.

3.4. Data Analysis

Due to limited previous research on this topic, the analysis followed a hybrid thematic analysis approach combining deductive thematic analysis guided by the research questions with inductive identification of patterns emerging from participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lagos-Serrano, 2024). This method allowed the researchers to identify experiences and perceptions related to the teachers' professional transition, development, and identity reconstruction in the ECEC context.

As part of the analysis process, a blended approach integrating human expertise with AI-supported assistance was adopted. This strategy was informed by recent studies advocating for responsible integration of AI tools in qualitative research workflows (Bijker et al., 2024; Nguyen-Trung, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to generate preliminary coding suggestions and identify potential illustrative excerpts from anonymised participant responses. These outputs were treated solely as provisional prompts for researcher reflection and were not adopted as codes, themes, subthemes, or analytical interpretations without independent human review. The researchers repeatedly returned to the original responses to assess the relevance, contextual accuracy, and interpretive adequacy of each suggestion. Codes were repeatedly revised, merged, and reorganized throughout the analytical process to capture the complexity and ambiguity of participants' experiences rather than to impose fixed categories. The final themes and subthemes were developed, named, and interpreted by the research team through iterative discussion and critical engagement with the data. All analytical decisions were therefore grounded in human interpretation and refined in relation to the broader conceptual framing of professional identity, pedagogical transition, and out-of-field teaching.

4. Findings

Data analysis revealed five interconnected themes that structure the findings of this study: motivation for re-qualification, transition from primary school to ECEC, professional identity, career orientation and commitment and aspirations and recommendations. Together, these themes provide valuable insights into the complex experiences of PSTs transitioning into the field of ECEC, as they navigate new pedagogical expectations, re-define their professional identity, and consider their long-term career paths within this educational phase.

Table 1 presents the analytical structure developed through the thematic analysis process, including the main themes, selected sub-themes and initial codes. Codes and sub-themes were iteratively revised throughout the analysis to capture the complexity of participants' experiences and identity negotiations during their transition into ECEC.

Participants were between 23 and 50 years old, with overall work experience ranging from none to 20 years. Their experience as PST was more limited – from no experience up to 5 years. At the time of the study, they held different positions in ECEC centers: some were working with children aged 1 to 7 in age-homogeneous groups, some in mixed-age groups, and others in roles such as the third educator within an educational group. This highlights that PST out-of-field teaching in ECEC does not necessarily involve work with children closest in age to the school entry level, but spans

Table 1
Overview of themes, sub-themes and illustrative initial codes developed through thematic analysis

Theme and Sub-theme	Initial codes
Motivation for re-qualification	
Employment security	permanent contract; job stability; secure employment; inability to find work in school; long-term employment
Professional development	gaining new knowledge; expanding competencies; professional growth; learning about ECEC pedagogy
External pressures and circumstances	contract conditions; deadlines; legal requirements; labour market shortage
Intrinsic motivation for working with children	love for children; creativity; supporting children; meaningful work
Transition from school to ECEC	
Pedagogical differences	play-based learning; integrated curriculum; flexibility; no grading; child-centered approach
Adjustment to younger age groups	adapting to developmental needs; emotional support; care dimension; mixed-age groups
Professional adaptation	learning through practice; uncertainty; gaining confidence; adapting to teamwork
Challenges in transition	lack of structure; uncertainty; balancing expectations; emotional demands
Professional identity	
Strengthened confidence	feeling more competent; recognition from colleagues; self-confidence; professional validation
Ambivalent identity	"teacher at heart"; not fully competent; unclear professional status
Recognition and belonging	acceptance by colleagues; support from professional teams; teamwork
Perceived devaluation	"instant educator"; unqualified substitute; undervaluation of profession
Career orientation and commitment	
Commitment to ECEC	desire to remain in ECEC; preference for kindergarten work; long-term plans in ECEC
Pragmatic career decisions	proximity to workplace; job opportunities; work conditions
Returning to PS	preference for school system; conditional commitment to ECEC
Employment uncertainty	unresolved professional status; unequal opportunities; insecurity about future employment
Aspirations and recommendations	
Advice for future participants	think carefully; know your rights; prepare for transition
Importance of lifelong learning	continue professional development; learn from experienced educators; practical learning
Adopting ECEC mindset	flexibility; observing children; child-centered pedagogy; openness
Professional resilience	confidence in own abilities; resisting devaluation; emotional endurance

the full range of ECEC, including infants, toddlers and children at the age of 6 which is a developmental phase typically outside the pedagogical preparation of PSTs.

4.1. Theme 1: Motivation for Re-qualification

The first theme, *motivation for re-qualification*, captured participants' reasons for entering the re-qualification programme and transitioning into ECEC. The findings suggest that motivations were shaped by a combination of structural, professional, and personal factors.

Sub-theme 1.1. Employment security. The dominant motivation related to employment security and the possibility of obtaining a permanent contract within the ECEC sector. Participants described the transition as a pragmatic response to unstable employment conditions and limited opportunities within the primary school system. For example, some of the answers were: "I entered the programme primarily because I wanted a permanent position and long-term job security." or they described the re-qualification programme as "a pathway toward finally obtaining stable employment" which reflects broader structural challenges within the Croatian educational labour market.

Sub-theme 1.2. Professional development. Alongside employment-related motivations, answers also indicated professional development as an important reason for enrolling in the programme. Some participants viewed the transition into ECEC as an opportunity to expand their pedagogical competencies, acquire new knowledge about ECEC and engage with more child-centred approaches to learning and development. These responses suggest that, for some PSTs, the re-qualification process represented not only a practical necessity but also an opportunity for professional renewal. External circumstances additionally shaped participants' decisions. One participant stated: „I wanted to gain new knowledge about ECEC and better understand how young children learn and develop.”

Sub-theme 1.3. External pressures and circumstances. Participant answers also referred to legislative requirements, employment conditions or labour shortages as factors influencing their enrolment in the programme. In these cases, participation in re-qualification was experienced less as an autonomous professional choice and more as a response to institutional expectations and structural pressures. An answer that represents this sub-theme most accurately is the following: "Because of the legal requirements and employment conditions, enrolling in the programme became almost necessary."

Sub-theme 1.4. Intrinsic motivation for working with children. Although less prominent, intrinsic motivation connected to working with young children was also present. Some participant answers described enjoyment in working with children, appreciation for creativity and flexibility in ECEC and emotional fulfilment derived from child-centred work. This was reflected in participants' responses: "Working with younger children brought me more creativity, flexibility, and emotional fulfilment", while another explained:

Through working in a kindergarten, I came to realise firsthand that ECEC is my true vocation and the professional field in which I feel I truly belong. For me, this re-qualification programme represents a crucial step towards achieving that goal."

However, such responses appeared less frequently than employment-related motivations, suggesting that many PSTs entered ECEC primarily due to external labour market conditions rather than a long-standing professional aspiration toward ECEC.

4.2. Theme 2: Transition from Primary School to ECEC

The second theme focused on participants' experiences of transitioning from the school system into ECEC settings. Participants answer consistently described this transition as involving not only movement between educational levels but also adaptation to a distinct pedagogical philosophy and professional culture.

Sub-theme 2.1. Pedagogical differences. One of the most frequently emphasized aspects of the transition concerned pedagogical differences between PS and ECEC. Participants contrasted the more structured, outcome-oriented and subject-based nature of PS with the flexible, integrated, and child-centred philosophy characteristic of ECEC. Several answers highlighted that ECEC required a different understanding of the learning process, one grounded in play, relational interaction, observation and responsiveness to children's interests and developmental needs. For example, one participant stated: "I had to learn that in ECEC not everything is planned around outcomes and grades.". Other participants described this transition in greater detail:

I found it very challenging to adapt to a way of working that is completely different from teaching in PS. There is no fixed programme that has to be followed. ECEC educators have much greater freedom to shape both the physical environment and the learning experiences they provide. It took me some time to let go of rigid planning and start following the children's interests.

Another participant reflected:

One of the biggest challenges in moving from PS teaching to ECEC was adapting to a completely different way of working with children. In PS, the focus is mainly on teaching subject knowledge and following the curriculum, whereas ECEC requires a more sensitive, individualised, and developmentally appropriate approach. Young children learn through play and everyday experiences, so I had to rethink the way I planned activities and interacted with children.

Sub-theme 2.2. Adjustment to younger age groups. In addition to pedagogical differences, answers indicated challenges associated with adapting to younger age groups and the relational demands of ECEC work. Working with infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children required emotional attunement, caregiving responsibilities and continuous responsiveness that some participants, as indicated in their answers, initially experienced as unfamiliar and challenging. For example, one participant stated: "Working with very young children required much more emotional responsiveness and care than I had expected.". Some answers noted difficulties in balancing educational and care-oriented aspects of the ECEC educator's role, particularly during the early stages of the transition. One participant reflected: "My first experiences were not easy. It took me a while to adjust and get used to working as an ECEC educator, especially with one-year-old children.".

Sub-theme 2.3. Professional adaptation. Participant answers also described the transition as a process of ongoing professional adaptation. Learning through everyday practice, collaboration with experienced ECEC educators and participation in professional teams emerged as important sources of support during adjustment to the ECEC environment. Answers indicated that collegial relationships and informal mentoring was perceived as something that significantly contributed to the participants' sense of competence and confidence. This was reflected in participants' responses:

During my second year, I worked alongside two experienced ECEC educators. They were an enormous source of support, and I learned a great deal from them. I am very grateful for their guidance and encouragement. They also served as my mentors throughout the re-qualification programme, and we discussed the topics and course content I was studying on a daily basis. They also supported me in preparing my practicum portfolio. Throughout these two years, I also received invaluable support from the ECEC's professional support team.

Another participant also noted:

I had the support and guidance of my colleagues and the professional support team. However, I believe that this experience helped me develop my knowledge and skills much more quickly than if I had relied primarily on a colleague's expertise. I had to take responsibility for everything myself (while still receiving support from colleagues in other groups and from the professional support team), which pushed me to learn more and continue developing professionally.

Sub-theme 2.4. Challenges in transition. At the same time, participant answers described the transition as emotionally demanding and accompanied by uncertainty. Feelings of stress, insecurity and lack of confidence were particularly evident during the initial stages of employment

in ECEC settings. Some participants expressed uncertainty regarding expectations, pedagogical approaches and their own preparedness for the ECEC educator's role. One participant noted:

It was difficult, full of challenges and unexpected situations. I had to find my way in an unfamiliar environment without any prior understanding of how everyday life in a ECEC works. From the very beginning, I was expected to take on the responsibilities of an ECEC educator and had to do the best I could with the knowledge and experience I had at the time.

These experiences reflect the broader challenges associated with crossing pedagogical and professional boundaries between educational phases. This was reflected in participants' responses:

My first experiences were quite stressful because I started working with an already established group of children that had experienced several changes in staffing before I joined. As a result, the group was facing several challenges in its everyday functioning. After things gradually became more settled, I encountered several difficult situations involving communication and collaboration with families regarding children's behavioural difficulties. As someone who was still inexperienced in ECEC, I found these situations extremely stressful.

4.3. Theme 3: Professional Identity

The third theme concerned the ways in which participation in the re-qualification programme and work in ECEC shaped *participants' professional identity*. Findings indicate that professional identity development was characterized by both affirmation and uncertainty, reflecting an ongoing process of negotiating legitimacy and belonging within a new professional field.

Sub-theme 3.1. Strengthened confidence. For some participants, working in ECEC and completing the re-qualification programme strengthened their professional confidence. One participant stated:

Before enrolling in the re-qualification programme, although I already had practical experience in a ECEC, I often felt uncertain when making pedagogical decisions and relied mainly on my intuition and the advice of colleagues. Throughout the re-qualification programme, particularly during the online classes, my knowledge gradually deepened, and I became increasingly confident. I found it much easier to deal with different situations and felt more secure in my professional judgement.

They described feeling increasingly competent in their work with young children and reported greater recognition from colleagues and professional teams. Experiences of collegial support and inclusion contributed to a stronger sense of belonging within ECEC communities of practice. The following excerpt illustrates this process:

Participating in the re-qualification programme played a crucial role in shaping my professional identity. It helped me transform from someone who simply loved working with children into a professional who understands pedagogical processes and the principles of early childhood development. The programme gave me a strong sense of professional belonging and pride in being an ECEC educator.

Sub-theme 3.2. Ambivalent identity. At the same time, participants expressed ambivalence regarding their professional identity. Some continued to perceive themselves primarily as primary school teachers rather than fully integrated ECEC educators, describing themselves as, quote, "PS teachers at heart, even though I now work in ECEC.". Others questioned their competence or legitimacy within the field, particularly because of their non-traditional pathway into ECEC. This can be exemplified by the following excerpt: "Sometimes I still do not feel like a 'real' ECEC educator." or :

Whether I am now considered a 'professional' ECEC educator is still unclear, as some people continue to question the legitimacy of the re-qualification programme we completed. I know that I am, and I know that I do my job competently and conscientiously.

Sub-theme 3.3. Recognition and belonging. Recognition and a sense of belonging emerged as important contributors to professional identity development. The following excerpt illustrates this sub-theme: "It helped me transform from someone who simply loved working with children into a professional who understands pedagogy and early childhood development. The programme gave

me a strong sense of professional belonging and pride in being an ECEC educator.". Participants described acceptance by colleagues, support from professional teams, and collaborative teamwork as experiences that helped them feel part of the ECEC profession rather than newcomers. As one participant explained, "Support from colleagues helped me feel accepted within the ECEC team". Another also stated: "After I enrolled in the programme, I felt that my colleagues at the kindergarten viewed me more positively.".

Sub-theme 3.4. Perceived devaluation. Participant answers also referred to experiences of professional devaluation and ambiguity surrounding their status within the profession. This was reflected in participants' responses: "At the beginning, I received comments like, 'Why would you use your PS teaching degree to work in a kindergarten?' and 'You've taken a step down in your career.' But those comments never really affected me." . Another participant stated:

I encountered comments saying that I had wasted five years studying to become a PS teacher only to move into ECEC, which was not my original profession. At first, I found those views difficult to accept, but I believe that everyone has the right to do the work they choose and love.

Some perceived themselves as being viewed as "instant educators" or insufficiently qualified despite participating in formal re-qualification programme. For example, one participant stated:

I believe that the ECEC educators in the kindergarten where I work have a negative attitude toward PS teachers entering the profession, and many are unhappy about it. Personally, I was accepted much more positively as time went on because they came to see that I was good at my job. However, at the beginning they were very reserved and resentful about someone they considered unqualified doing what they saw as their profession.

Another participant reflected on their status present in social media:

Unfortunately, in recent days I have come across many negative comments on Facebook about PS teachers. We are referred to as 'instant ECEC educators,' and our re-qualification is portrayed as a degradation of the profession. Personally, I do not agree with these views. PS teachers and ECEC educators have much in common in terms of both their qualifications and knowledge. We are educated to work with young children, and the re-qualification programme simply provided us with the additional knowledge required for ECEC.

For some participants, these experiences contributed to feelings of uncertainty and highlighted tensions surrounding recognition and legitimacy within the ECEC sector.

I feel disappointed because completing the re-qualification programme has not given us equal opportunities to apply for permanent ECEC educator positions. Even after applying for permanent posts, I have still not been offered one because our professional status following this re-qualification remains unclear.

4.4. Theme 4: Career Orientation and Commitment

The fourth theme explored participants' long-term *career orientations and commitment* to the ECEC profession. Participants' responses revealed diverse and often fluid perspectives regarding their future professional trajectories.

Sub-theme 4.1. Commitment to ECEC. For some participants, working in ECEC strengthened their desire to remain within the sector long-term. These participants described feeling aligned with the relational, play-based and child-centred nature of ECEC pedagogy and expressed satisfaction with working in ECEC environments. In these cases, the transition into ECEC contributed to the development of a stronger professional commitment to the field. One participant reflected:

My experience working in ECEC has only strengthened my decision to remain in this field in the long term because I genuinely find this work fulfilling. I definitely see myself working in ECEC in the future. Although I value my experience as a PS teacher, I have come to recognize working with young children as my true professional calling.

Sub-theme 4.2. Pragmatic career decisions. However, participants continued to frame their career

decisions pragmatically. Employment security, proximity of their home to the workplace, positive work climate and availability of permanent contracts frequently shaped decisions regarding future employment yet not necessarily viewing it as their ideal professional destination. One participant explained:

As long as things remain as they are now, I have no intention of returning to primary school teaching. I currently work close to home, whereas I used to commute to the schools where I worked. The atmosphere in my kindergarten is excellent, and I have a positive relationship with all my colleagues.

In such cases, ECEC was sometimes viewed less as a professional calling and more as a stable employment opportunity within a challenging labour market. Similar excerpt reflects pragmatic career decision:

I see my future in PS education, and if the opportunity arose, I would move back to PS teaching. However, working in ECEC has its own unique rewards, and it is a wonderful profession that also requires genuine commitment and is highly demanding. I have embraced this role, and if I am not offered a permanent position in a PS, I will remain in ECEC.

Findings thus suggest that the professional identity of PSTs transitioning into ECEC may be shaped not only through acquiring new knowledge or skills, but also through an ongoing negotiation of belonging, legitimacy, and possible future career trajectories within a new professional culture of ECEC.

Sub-theme 4.3. Returning to primary school. Participants' answers also expressed conditional commitment to ECEC, indicating that they would consider returning to PS if stable employment opportunities became available, as one participant explained: *"For now, I plan to remain in ECEC because I have a permanent position."*. Another excerpt focuses on necessity, rather than personal preference:

I can see myself working in ECEC in the long term, although that decision is driven more by necessity than by personal preference. By nature, I am someone who likes structure, rules, and order, which are not always encouraged in ECEC. I find it difficult to be flexible, but I believe I have the knowledge and skills to provide children with a high-quality, creative, and stimulating environment that supports their development across all areas.

These findings suggest that career orientation among PSTs transitioning into ECEC remains strongly influenced by structural conditions and employment insecurity.

Sub-theme 4.4. Employment uncertainty. Participants additionally highlighted uncertainty surrounding their future professional status and opportunities within the educational system. For example, one participant stated: *"Even after retraining, I still feel uncertain about my future professional status."*. Concerns regarding unequal access to permanent employment, unclear recognition of qualifications, and instability within the labour market contributed to ongoing insecurity about long-term career trajectories.

Overall, this theme indicates that career commitment within ECEC cannot be understood independently from broader structural and institutional conditions. Professional aspirations were shaped not only by participants' emerging identification with ECEC but also by employment precarity, recognition, and long-term professional stability.

4.5. Theme 5: Aspiration and Recommendation

The final theme captured participants' *reflections and recommendations* for other PSTs considering a similar transition into ECEC.

Sub-theme 5.1. Advice for future participants of the programme. This sub-theme focused primarily on participants' structurally oriented advice, encouraging future candidates to carefully consider employment conditions, understand their professional rights, and prepare for the institutional realities of transitioning into ECEC. As one participant advised, *"I would advise future participants to think carefully before entering ECEC, to understand their professional rights,*

and to prepare themselves for a very different educational environment.”.

Sub-theme 5.2. Importance of lifelong learning. Participant answers indicated the importance of continuous professional learning and formal retraining. “You have to continue learning constantly if you want to work successfully in ECEC.”. Learning from experienced ECEC educators, participating in professional development and remaining open to new pedagogical approaches were described as essential for successful adaptation to the field. Participants frequently emphasized that competence in ECEC develops gradually through practice, reflection and collaboration. For example, one participant stated: “Continue developing through practice. You will learn the most from experienced colleagues, especially those who began their careers before the digital era.”.

Sub-theme 5.3. Adopting ECEC mindset. Another recurring aspect involved adopting what participants described as an “ECEC mindset.” This included embracing flexibility, child-centred pedagogy, relational responsiveness and openness toward children’s interests and developmental rhythms. The following excerpt illustrates participants’ recommendation:

My advice to PS teachers is to fully embrace the role of an ECEC educator because the mindset of an ECEC educator is fundamentally different from that of a PS teacher, especially when working with younger children. Replace a standardized, one-size-fits-all approach with an individualized and flexible approach to each child. Take the time to carefully observe children’s needs and the way they perceive the world around them.

Participants acknowledged that ECEC may not align with every teacher’s professional identity, expectations or personal values. Accordingly, they suggested that prospective candidates should critically reflect on whether the relational and child-centred nature of ECEC corresponds with their own professional orientation and long-term aspirations. The perspective of this unique professional position of an ECEC educator is reflected in the following: “If you don’t fall in love with the job within the first month, it’s probably not for you.”.

Sub-theme 5.4. Professional resilience. A recurring message was the importance of maintaining a strong sense of professional self-worth, resisting perceptions of being “less competent”, inferior or professionally inadequate. Several emphasized the need to value prior teaching experience while simultaneously remaining open to learning and adaptation within the ECEC context. For example, participants stated: “Don’t feel undervalued because you are regarded as an unqualified substitute. PS teachers are a real asset to children and have so much knowledge to offer.”. Another participant similarly stated:

Unfortunately, PS teachers are greatly undervalued and are often treated as unqualified substitutes, even though I strongly believe we are not. If you decide to work in ECEC, keep developing professionally, but don’t forget that the five years you spent studying to become a PS teacher still count.

5. Discussion

This study explored how primary school teachers experienced their transition into ECEC as out-of-field educators and how they perceived the role of Croatia’s requalification programme in shaping their professional development, pedagogical adaptation, and professional identity. Participants’ age emerged as an interesting factor in this study. While Hobbs and Porsch (2021) note that teachers are particularly likely to teach out-of-field during the early years of their careers, our findings suggest that, in the Croatian context, vulnerability to out-of-field teaching may be shaped not only by career stage but also by structural employment conditions. Primary school teachers may accumulate fragmented professional experience through temporary and part-time employment and thus be relatively experienced in terms of age and qualifications while remaining in precarious employment situations that sustain their vulnerability to out-of-field assignments. Within this context, requalification may represent more than a formal pathway into ECEC by providing opportunities for pedagogical adaptation and the reconstruction of professional

identity. Evidence indicates that practice-based teacher education experiences can become important contexts for reflection, professional preparedness, and identity formation (Danişman, 2026; Sounoglou et al., 2026).

The findings reveal that this transition was shaped by interconnected structural, pedagogical, identity-related, and career-related factors. A central finding concerns the pragmatic nature of motivations driving PSTs into ECEC. Participants largely viewed ECEC as a space of employment opportunity rather than a deliberate career choice, a pattern consistent with research showing that teacher career decisions, particularly in contexts of labour precarity, are shaped by structural and economic forces rather than intrinsic vocational callings (Dadvand et al., 2024; Du Plessis, 2020; OECD, 2021). This supports Bamsey and Fogarty's (2025) argument that conditions of the labour market profoundly influence teacher mobility and identity, especially when the profession itself is marked by what they call, the *fragility* of its public legitimacy. While some participants expressed intrinsic motivations related to working with young children and interest in child-centred pedagogy, such motivations appeared secondary to concerns regarding employment security and long-term professional stability.

The findings additionally suggest that transitioning into ECEC involved considerably more than movement between educational levels. Participants described the transition as crossing a substantial pedagogical and professional boundary, moving from predominantly subject- and outcome-oriented teaching toward more relational, process-oriented, and child-centred practice. This interpretation is consistent with research conceptualizing out-of-field teaching as a boundary-crossing experience that can require teachers to reconsider established understandings of their roles, competence, and professional identity (Hobbs, 2013; Ülker et al., 2026). In the present study, adapting to ECEC therefore appeared to involve more than acquiring new pedagogical knowledge; it also required participants to develop greater relational responsiveness, sensitivity to children's needs and interests, and openness to flexible and participatory forms of learning. Such characteristics are central to contemporary ECEC pedagogy, in which children's participation, relational responsiveness, and collaborative meaning making are foregrounded over rigid instructional transmission (Akyol, 2025; Bamsey & Fogarty, 2025). The transition can thus be understood as a process of professional reorientation in which participants were required to reconsider both how they teach and how they understand themselves as educators. Practice-based professional learning may be particularly important in supporting this process, as opportunities for reflection and engagement with new pedagogical contexts can contribute to preparedness and the reconstruction of professional identity (Sounoglou et al., 2026).

The emotional and professional uncertainty accompanying this transition further highlights the complexity of out-of-field teaching in ECEC contexts. Many participants described initial feelings of stress, insecurity, and lack of preparedness, particularly when adapting to younger age groups and unfamiliar expectations regarding care-oriented and relational work. At the same time, collegial relationships, mentoring and learning through practice emerged as important forms of support during adaptation. Such experiences are recognized in previous research as important factors in strengthening professional identity and professional self-efficacy (Borovac & Somolanji Tokić, 2025; Loughran, 2014). These findings also reinforce international research suggesting that successful transitions into unfamiliar educational contexts depend not only on formal qualifications but also on access to supportive professional communities and opportunities for situated learning (Du Plessis, 2020; Hobbs, 2013).

Professional identity emerged as a particularly complex dimension of participants' experiences. Some participants reported strengthened confidence and recognition from colleagues, which contributed to a stronger sense of legitimacy and belonging within ECEC settings. However, these experiences often coexisted with ongoing ambivalence and uncertainty regarding their professional identity. Several participants continued to perceive themselves as "*PS teachers at heart*" rather than fully integrated ECEC educators, despite participating in formal re-qualification programmes and working within ECEC environments. The findings suggest that professional

identity development among PSTs transitioning into ECEC extends beyond acquiring new competencies or qualifications. Rather, identity formation appears closely connected to questions of professional belonging, social recognition and acceptance within the ECEC community, a statement also supported by Ribeiro (2019). This dynamic aligns with international studies indicating that professional identity in out-of-field contexts is shaped not only by skill acquisition but also by the extent to which teachers feel legitimate, supported, and recognised within their new communities of practice (Du Plessis, 2020; Hobbs, 2013). Such challenges are typical in transitions that require teachers to cross professional or phase boundaries, as these shifts often demand a re-examination and reconstruction of their underlying professional beliefs, values, and competencies (Borovac & Somolanji Tokić, 2025).

The perceived ambiguity of participants' professional status further complicated identity development. Although the re-qualification programme supported competence-building and pedagogical adaptation, participants still described uncertainty related to recognition, legitimacy, and long-term professional positioning within the educational system. Identity development is highly sensitive to institutional affordances such as stable contracts, clear career pathways, and professional recognition (Bamsey & Fogarty, 2025; Bouillet, 2024). In the absence of such conditions, even well-prepared teachers may struggle to fully internalize a new professional identity. This finding reinforces Ingersoll's (2019) argument that out-of-field teaching is fundamentally a systemic issue rather than merely a training deficit: teachers are assigned roles outside their preparation because of structural conditions, while the system itself may fail to provide sufficient long-term support once transitions occur.

Participants' career orientations additionally revealed the fluid and conditional nature of professional commitment within ECEC. While some participants expressed a genuine desire to remain in the sector and identified strongly with ECEC pedagogy, others viewed kindergarten employment more pragmatically, emphasizing job stability, proximity to home, or employment opportunities rather than long-term professional attachment to ECEC. Some participants also indicated they would return to PS if stable opportunities became available. These concerns resonate with international research showing that identity development is highly sensitive to institutional affordances such as job security, recognition, and stable professional trajectories (Bamsey & Fogarty, 2025; Bouillet, 2024; Dadvand et al., 2024). When such conditions are lacking, teachers can struggle to fully internalize a new professional identity, regardless of motivation or training. These findings suggest that re-qualification alone does not necessarily guarantee long-term professional integration into ECEC, particularly when broader employment insecurity and unclear professional trajectories remain unresolved.

At the same time, participants' recommendations to future PSTs entering ECEC reflected an emerging sense of professional agency and a gradual alignment with ECEC values and practices. Their emphasis on continuous learning, collaboration with experienced educators, openness to child-centred pedagogy, and maintaining professional confidence despite experiences of uncertainty or devaluation suggests that they were beginning to position themselves as active participants in their own professional development. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that teacher agency is strengthened through collaborative professional learning, reflection, and opportunities to participate actively in shaping professional practice (Badal, 2025; Melasalmi & Husu, 2019). Participants' recommendations also reinforce the view that professional identity is not fixed but develops through practice, reflection, relationships, and continuing negotiation of one's place within the profession (Danişman, 2026; Sounoglou et al., 2026). At the same time, their continued emphasis on emotional resilience, professional legitimacy, and the need to resist perceptions of inferiority points to persistent concerns surrounding the status and recognition of ECEC work. Such concerns have been documented in ECEC scholarship, particularly in relation to unequal professional recognition, limited career structures, and the positioning of early years educators as subordinate to teachers in compulsory education (Bamsey & Fogarty, 2025; Nutbrown, 2021).

The findings suggest that labour shortages and employment insecurity motivate PSTs to enter ECEC through re-qualification pathways, after which they engage in processes of pedagogical adaptation and identity negotiation that ultimately shape varied forms of professional commitment to the ECEC sector. Overall, the findings suggest that out-of-field transitions into ECEC cannot be understood solely as issues of qualification mismatch, but rather as complex processes of pedagogical adaptation, identity negotiation and structurally conditioned career mobility. These findings suggest that transitioning from PS to ECEC involves movement between distinct professional cultures rather than merely between educational sectors.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the transition of primary school teachers into early childhood education and care, as an increasingly common response to workforce shortages, cannot be understood as a simple transfer between educational settings. Rather, the transition represents a complex professional, pedagogical, and identity-related process shaped by structural labour market conditions, pedagogical adaptation, and ongoing negotiations of professional legitimacy.

The study showed that PSTs most often entered ECEC due to employment insecurity and limited opportunities within the PS system, highlighting the structural nature of out-of-field transitions within contemporary educational contexts. At the same time, participants' experiences suggest that movement into ECEC requires adaptation to a distinct pedagogical philosophy grounded in relational, child-centred and developmentally responsive practice. This transition therefore involves not only acquiring new competencies, but also rethinking previously established beliefs, professional expectations, and understandings of teaching and learning.

The findings further indicate that professional identity development among PSTs in ECEC appeared to be shaped by both affirmation and uncertainty. While some participants experienced increased confidence, support and recognition within ECEC environments, others continued to negotiate tensions related to legitimacy, belonging and professional self-understanding. These experiences suggest that successful re-qualification extends beyond formal certification and depends heavily on institutional support, collegial recognition, and opportunities for meaningful integration into ECEC professional communities.

Participants' career orientations additionally revealed that commitment to ECEC remains fluid and strongly connected to broader employment conditions. Although some participants expressed long-term attachment to the field, others viewed ECEC primarily as a pragmatic employment solution or remained open to returning to PS if more stable opportunities emerged. This suggests that workforce sustainability in ECEC cannot rely solely on re-qualification pathways, but also requires clearer professional positioning, stable employment opportunities, and stronger systemic recognition of ECEC as a distinct and highly skilled profession. Ultimately, the findings indicate that re-qualification is an educational intervention, whereas the challenge it seeks to address is fundamentally systemic. Long-term workforce stability will therefore depend not only on increasing the number of qualified educators, but also on creating the structural conditions that enable them to remain and develop within the profession.

7. Implications

At the policy level, participants' recommendations suggest that successful re-qualification requires more than providing access to additional qualifications. Respondents repeatedly highlighted the need for clearer employment pathways and equal career opportunities following programme completion, alongside greater professional recognition of retrained PSTs within the ECEC workforce. Policies should therefore support not only qualification requirements but also the professional integration and long-term retention of retrained PSTs within the ECEC workforce. While the Croatian re-qualification programme represents an important response to workforce shortages, its long-term impact will depend on the extent to which retrained PSTs are professionally supported, recognised, and integrated within the ECEC sector.

With regard to the re-qualification programme, participants' reflections indicate that prospective candidates would benefit from pre-enrolment orientation addressing employment conditions, professional rights, and the pedagogical differences between PS and ECEC. Greater emphasis on reflective identity development, child-centred pedagogy, and practice-based learning may better prepare participants for the professional transition.

At the individual level, participants' reflections suggest that prospective candidates should be encouraged to make informed career decisions by developing a realistic understanding of the philosophy and professional realities of ECEC before enrolling in a re-qualification programme. Successful transition depends not only on obtaining an additional qualification but also on embracing the child-centred and relational nature of ECEC practice.

At the institutional level, participants emphasized the importance of experienced colleagues, workplace learning, and supportive professional relationships. Structured mentoring, collaborative learning communities, and opportunities for continuous professional development may therefore facilitate successful adaptation and strengthen newly qualified educators' sense of professional belonging.

Overall, this study suggests that out-of-field transitions into ECEC are not merely questions of workforce redistribution or qualification mismatch. Rather, they are complex socio-professional processes involving pedagogical transformation, identity reconstruction and structurally conditioned career mobility. The study therefore raises broader questions about policy responses to ECEC workforce shortages. Although re-qualification provides an immediate mechanism for increasing the number of qualified educators, participants' experiences suggest that qualification alone cannot ensure successful professional transition or long-term workforce stability. Sustainable solutions require coordinated policies that integrate professional preparation, identity development, workplace support, and equitable employment conditions, rather than relying on re-qualification as an isolated intervention.

8. Limitations

This study carries several limitations. The sample is small which limits the generalisability of findings. The findings should also be interpreted within the context of a single national re-qualification programme. Experiences of PSTs participating in other institutional or policy contexts may differ, limiting transferability beyond the Croatian setting. The use of written interviews may have reduced the richness and depth of responses compared to synchronous qualitative interviews and social desirability bias remains possible given participants' prior relationship with the researchers. As is common in thematic analysis, interpretation relies heavily on language and may not fully capture deeper causal mechanisms underlying teachers' experiences. Nonetheless, the study provides important exploratory insights in an under-researched national and international context.

Acknowledgements: The authors express their gratitude to the participating students and school personnel for their collaboration and assistance during the research process.

AI usage and assistance: AI tool (ChatGPT) was used to generate initial coding suggestions during the early stages of qualitative data analysis. These outputs served solely as preliminary prompts for researcher reflection and were independently reviewed, refined, and interpreted by the authors. ChatGPT was also used to assist with the initial English translation of participant quotations, after which all translations were reviewed by the authors to ensure semantic accuracy and fidelity to the original Croatian text.

Author contributions: All authors contributed to all sections of the manuscript. All authors read and approved all present stages of the manuscript.

Data availability: The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not currently available in an open-access repository due to ethical and privacy restrictions. Because of the rich qualitative nature of the data, complete anonymization cannot be ensured without

compromising the integrity of the data and potentially risking participant identification.

Declaration of interest: The authors declare no financial or personal conflict of interest. The authors were involved in teaching the re-qualification program. However, this study was conducted only after participants completed all coursework and assessments, and participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous.

Ethics declaration: Ethics approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek (Approval No. 602-04/25 -04/04, 2158-63-02-25-68).

Funding: This scientific paper is co-financed from the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism (RRF; source 581 - institutional research project "Improving Culture and Quality of the Education System in the Context of Teachers' Professional Development - KUL-PRO", code 581-UNIOS-49) within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Croatia, financed by the European Union - NextGenerationEU. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the granting authority. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

References

- Akyol, T. (2025). The effect of participatory pedagogy and children's participation training on early childhood teachers' views on children's participation. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 9(4), 102-118. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202533781>
- Badal, B. (2025). Teacher agency in professional development workshops: A South African perspective. *International Journal of Didactical Studies*, 6(3), 34598. <https://doi.org/10.33902/ijods.202534598>
- Badaru, K. A. & Ndlovu, N. S. (2025). Understanding the out-of-field teaching experiences: A review of selected national contexts. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research*, 7(2), a04. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.2.04>
- Bamsey, V., & Fogarty, L. (2025). 'We are teachers too': reclaiming professionalism in early childhood education from within. *Early Years*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2025.2580480>
- Bijker, R., Merkouris, S. S., Dowling, N. A. and Rodda, S. N. (2024). ChatGPT for automated qualitative research: Content analysis. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 26, e59050. <https://doi.org/10.2196/59050>
- Bogatić, K. (2024). The child and childhood [Dijete i djetinjstvo]. In A. Višnjić Jevtić (Ed.), *Pedagogy of early childhood education and care: A university textbook* [Pedagogija ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja: Sveučilišni udžbenik] (pp. 75-93). Alfa; Sveučilište u Zagrebu Učiteljski fakultet.
- Borovac, T., & Somolanji Tokić, I. (2024). Kurikulum ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja [Early childhood education and care curriculum]. In A. Višnjić Jevtić (Ed.), *Pedagogija ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja: Sveučilišni udžbenik* [Pedagogy of early childhood education and care: A university textbook] (pp. 423-443). Alfa; Sveučilište u Zagrebu Učiteljski fakultet.
- Borovac, T., & Somolanji Tokić, I. (2025). Etički izbori i osobne pedagoške paradigme: put prema transformativnom učenju u visokom obrazovanju [Ethical choices and personal pedagogical paradigms: A path to transformative learning in higher education]. In A. Huljev, Ž. Rački, & A. Bilić (Eds.), *Procesualne i strukturalne dimenzije kvalitete odgoja i obrazovanja u kulturi odgojno-obrazovne ustanove* (pp. 29-39). Faculty of Education, University of Osijek. <https://repozitorij.fooz.hr/object/fooz:2683>
- Bouillet, D. (2024). Croatia – ECEC workforce profile. In P. Oberhuemer & I. Schreyer (Eds.), *Early childhood workforce profiles across Europe: 33 country reports with key contextual data* (pp. 206-232). State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy. <https://www.seeepro.eu/CompletePublication2024.pdf>
- Bouillet, D., Brajković, S., Farnell, T., Jusup, L., Novoselec, I., Pijaca Plavšić, E., Šimanović, M., & Biloglav, M. (2024). *Enhancing equity and inclusion in primary education in Croatia: analysis and policy recommendations*. Institute for the Development of Education.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Campbell-Barr, V. (2025). Early childhood education: A unique and quasi-hidden curriculum. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2025.2532557>
- Dadvand, B., van Driel, J., Speldewinde, C., & Dawborn-Gundlach, M. (2024). Career change teachers in hard-to-staff schools: Should I stay or leave? *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 51, 481–496. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-023-00609-9>
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (1999). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. Falmer Press.
- Danişman, Ş. (2026). Generative AI supported practicum experiences contribute to the pedagogical reasoning and professional identity development of preservice mathematics teachers. *E-Learning and Digital Media*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20427530261465688>
- Du Plessis, A. E., Gillies, R. M., & Carroll, A. (2014). Out-of-field teaching and professional development: A transnational investigation across Australia and South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 66, 90–102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2014.03.002>
- Du Plessis, A. E. (2015). Effective education: Conceptualising the meaning of out-of-field teaching practices for teachers, teacher quality and school leaders. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 72, 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2015.05.005>
- Du Plessis, A. E. (2020). *Out-of-field teaching and education policy: International micro-policy perspectives*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1948-2>
- Du Plessis, A. E., & McDonagh, K. (2021). The out-of-field phenomenon and leadership for wellbeing: Understanding concerns for teachers, students and education partnerships. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 106, 101724. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101724>
- Eroja, J. N., Cuenca, J. B., III, & Dela Cruz, F. M. (2025). Lived experiences of the out-of-field kindergarten teachers of Sibagat II: Basis for a proposed training plan. *Pantao: The International Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 1320–1328. <https://doi.org/10.69651/PIJHSS0402123>
- European Commission. (2023). *Staff shortages in early childhood education and care (ECEC): Policy brief*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2766/385>
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2025). *Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2025*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2797/66224>
- Eurydice. (2023). *Educational guidelines: Croatia*. European Education and Culture Executive Agency. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/euryperia/croatia/educational-guidelines>
- Eurydice. (2026). *Initial education for teachers working in early childhood and school education: Croatia*. European Education and Culture Executive Agency. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/euryperia/croatia/initial-education-teachers-working-early-childhood-and-school-education>
- Faculty of Education, University of Osijek. (2024). Re-qualification programme for acquiring the qualification of ECEC educator. Croatian Employment Service. <https://vauceri.hzz.hr/pruzatelji/fakultet-za-odgojne-i-obrazovne-znanosti-sveuciliste-josipa-jurja-strossmayera-u-osijeku-4782/>
- Forman, G., Hall, E., & Berglund, K. (2001). The power of ordinary moments. *Child Care Information Exchange*, 141, 52–53.
- Hobbs, L. (2013). Teaching “out-of-field” as a boundary-crossing event: Factors shaping teacher identity. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 11, 271–297. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10763-012-9333-4>
- Hobbs, L., & Porsch, R. (2021). Teaching out-of-field: Challenges for teacher education. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(5), 601–610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2021.1985280>
- Karlsson, R., Bigsten, A., & Garvis, S. (2018). A snapshot of substitute early childhood teachers in Sweden and Australia: Differences in training, regulation and quality. *Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, 2(1), 21–32. <https://doi.org/10.24130/eccd-jecs.196720182145>
- Ingersoll, R. M. (2019). Measuring out-of-field teaching. In L. Hobbs & G. Törner (Eds.), *Examining the phenomenon of “teaching out-of-field”* (pp. 21–51). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3366-8_2
- Lagos-Serrano, M.-J. (2024). Feeling like “the ham of the sandwich”: The contested professional identities of school-based early childhood educators in Chile. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 25(1), 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491221120036>
- Loughran, J. (2014). Professionally developing as a teacher educator. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 65(4), 271–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487114533386>

- Manning, M., Garvis, S., Fleming, C., & Wong, T. W. G. (2017). The relationship between teacher qualification and the quality of the early childhood education and care environment. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 13(1), 1-82. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2017.1>
- Manning, M., Wong, G. T. W., Fleming, C., & Garvis, S. (2019). Is teacher qualification associated with the quality of the early childhood education and care environment? A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(3), 370-415. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319837540>
- Melasalmi, A., & Husu, J. (2019). Shared professional agency in early childhood education: An in-depth study of three teams. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 84, 83-94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.05.002>
- Nguyen-Trung, K. (2025). ChatGPT in thematic analysis: Can AI become a research assistant in qualitative research? *Quality & Quantity*, 59, 4945-4978. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-025-02165-z>
- Nutbrown, C. (2021). Early childhood educators' qualifications: A framework for change. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 29(3), 236-249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2021.1892601>
- OECD. (2021). *Starting strong VI: Supporting meaningful interactions in early childhood education and care*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f47a06ae-en>
- Oliveira-Formosinho, J., & de Sousa, J. (2019). Developing pedagogic documentation: Children and educators learning the narrative mode. In J. Formosinho & J. Peeters (Eds.), *Understanding pedagogic documentation in early childhood education: Revealing and reflecting on high quality learning and teaching* (pp. 32-51). Routledge.
- Özdemir Beceren, B., Baydemir, C., & Ari Arat, C. (2025). Exploring preschool teachers' perspectives on social and emotional learning in early childhood: A qualitative inquiry. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 9(5), 180-196. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202534890>
- Ribeiro, M. A. (2019). Working identity constructions and workplace learning modes in a global South country: Exploring relations through a narrative approach. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 3(1), 37-49. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2019.3>
- Roberts-Holmes, G. (2015). The "datafication" of early years pedagogy: "If the teaching is good, the data should be good and if there's bad teaching, there is bad data." *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(3), 302-315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2014.924561>
- Sharmahd, N., & Peeters, J. (2019). Critical reflection, identity, interaction: Italian and Belgian experiences in building democracy through pedagogical documentation. In J. Formosinho & J. Peeters (Eds.), *Understanding pedagogic documentation in early childhood education: Revealing and reflecting on high quality learning and teaching* (pp. 52-66). Routledge.
- Slunjski, E. (2015). *Outside the box: Qualitative advances in understanding and designing the preschool curriculum* [Izvan okvira: Kvalitativni iskoraci u shvaćanju i oblikovanju predškolskog kurikuluma]. Element.
- Sounoglou, M., Christodoulou, M., & Lytsiousi, S. (2026). Practicums and student teachers' identity formation: A study using the explanatory sequential design. *Journal of Pedagogical Sociology and Psychology*, 8(1), e29580. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPSP.202629580>
- Somolanji Tokić, I. (2024). Učenje u ranom i predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju [Learning in early childhood education and care]. In A. Višnjić Jevtić (Ed.), *Pedagogija ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja: Sveučilišni udžbenik* (pp. 193-223). Alfa; Sveučilište u Zagrebu Učiteljski fakultet.
- The Act on Amendments to the Preschool Education Act, Official Gazette 57/2022 (2022). https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/full/2022_05_57_805.html
- Ülker, A., Aras, S., & Akman, B. (2026). Out-of-field early childhood teachers' perceived identity and capacity: A three-year long professional development experience. *Professional Development in Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2026.2665199>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Zhang, H., Wu, C., Xie, J., Lyu, Y., Cai, J., & Carroll, J. M. (2025). Harnessing the power of AI in qualitative research: Exploring, using and redesigning ChatGPT. *Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans*, 4, 100144. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbah.2025.100144>

Appendix A. Re-qualification Programme for Acquiring the Qualification of an ECEC Educator (ANONIMISED)

The Re-qualification Programme for Acquiring the Qualification of an Early Childhood Education and Care Educator is delivered by the ANONIMISED, as a university-level lifelong learning programme. It is intended exclusively for qualified primary school teachers who are already employed in Croatian kindergartens as so-called *unqualified substitutes* and therefore need to obtain the formal qualification required for continued employment under Croatian legislation.

The programme comprises 70 ECTS credits (2,100 hours) and was designed based on the Croatian Qualifications Framework standard for the bachelor's degree in early childhood education and care. It includes coursework in Pedagogy of Early Childhood Education and Care, Developmental Psychology, Integrated Curriculum in Early Childhood Education and Care I and II, Early Literacy, Child Health Care and Education, and a supervised professional practicum. Because of the intensive nature of the programme, several courses carry substantially higher workloads than equivalent courses within the regular undergraduate degree (e.g., each Integrated Curriculum course carries 15 ECTS credits).

The programme aims to reduce the gap between participants' previous teacher education and the pedagogical requirements of early childhood education and care by strengthening knowledge of early childhood development, integrated curriculum, play-based pedagogy, observation and documentation, relationships with young children and families, and reflective professional practice. At the same time, it supports participants' professional adaptation to a new educational context and enables them to fulfil the legal requirements for continued employment in the sector.

Given its scope and structure, however, the programme should not be regarded as equivalent to a full initial degree in early childhood education and care. Rather, it represents a targeted educational intervention designed to address an urgent workforce shortage while providing participants with the essential competencies required for professional practice.

Appendix B. Legislative Amendment to the Preschool Education Act (The Act on Amendments to the Preschool Education Act, Official Gazette No. 57/2022)

In response to a persistent shortage of qualified early childhood education and care educators, Croatian legislation had already allowed primary school teachers to be employed in kindergartens as so-called *unqualified substitutes*. The Act on Amendments to the Preschool Education Act (Official Gazette 57/2022) regulated their continued employment by stipulating that primary school teachers already employed in early childhood education and care settings could remain in these positions only if they obtained the official partial qualification of an early childhood education and care educator within two years of employment. This legislative requirement prompted Croatian universities to develop formal re-qualification programmes, enabling these teachers to meet the statutory requirements for continued employment while strengthening the professional qualifications of the workforce.

Appendix C. Table of interview questions used for this research

Section	Example questions
Professional background	Age; years of teaching experience; current role in ECEC
Professional pathway	Describe your professional journey from primary school teaching to ECEC.
Motivation	What motivated you to enrol in the re-qualification programme?
Transition	How would you describe your first experiences working in an kindergarten?
Learning	How did the programme contribute to your professional development?
Challenges	What were the greatest challenges during your transition?
Pedagogical differences	Describe situations illustrating differences between primary school and ECEC pedagogy.
Professional identity	How has the programme influenced your professional identity?
Future career	Do you see your future in ECEC or primary school education?
Advice	What advice would you give to other PS teachers entering ECEC?