

National Situation Analysis on Early Childhood Intervention in N. Macedonia: Perspectives of parents and caregivers

Aleksandra Karovska Ristovska¹, Angelka Keskinova², Natasha Chichevska-Jovanova¹, Olivera Rashikj-Canevska¹, Maja Filipovska¹, Elena Nikolovska³, Goran Ajdinski¹

Abstract

This paper explores the findings of the National Situation Analysis on Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) in North Macedonia, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of parents and caregivers of children with developmental delays and disabilities. The study aimed to assess the current state of ECI services, examine the needs of children and families, and identify service provision gaps, particularly among marginalized groups such as the Roma community. Using a mixed-methods approach, surveys and focus groups were conducted to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from parents, caregivers, and ECI professionals.

The analysis revealed that only 58% of eligible children receive ECI services, with geographical coverage being a significant challenge, especially in rural and underserved areas. 81% of parents reported no waiting lists, while 19% experienced waiting times, with 68% waiting less than three months. Barriers such as long waiting periods, financial constraints, and transportation issues were more pronounced among low-income and minority families. Additionally, 23% of parents indicated that they did not face any barriers, but 12% lacked information on ECI services.

Family participation in ECI services varied, with 24% of parents involved in comprehensive developmental assessments and 22% participating in parent-child interaction assessments. Lower engagement was noted in transition plans (9%) and home safety assessments (4%), suggesting opportunities to improve family involvement in long-term planning and safety evaluations.

The study highlights the urgent need to expand ECI services, especially in rural areas, and recommends developing a comprehensive national ECI strategy. This strategy should prioritize equitable access, improve service delivery, and enhance ECI personnel's capacity through specialized training, ultimately fostering more inclusive and effective services for children and their families.

Keywords: National Situation Analysis, Early Childhood Intervention, Transdisciplinary teams, Family-centered ECI, Roma community, Rural regions

¹ Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Special Education and Rehabilitation, Skopje, N. Macedonia

² Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Family studies, Skopje, N. Macedonia

³ Department for Early Intervention, Public Health Clinic, Veles, N. Macedonia

*Corresponding author: aleksandrak@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

“Every early intervention is an investment in the future of the child, but also in the future of society. When we support the youngest in their most vulnerable moments, we build stronger communities with greater opportunities for all.”

Anonymous

1. Introduction

Early childhood intervention (ECI) refers to a range of services and supports designed to identify and address developmental delays, disabilities, or at-risk conditions in children from birth to six years of age (Karovska Ristovska, 2021; Rashikj-Canevska et al., 2019, Чичевска-Јованова & Рашиќ-Џаневска, 2013). Professionals in scientific, medical, psychological, and educational fields have reported the importance of the age between birth and the age of five for learning (Karovska Ristovska, 2021). The primary goal of ECI is to promote the optimal development of children by providing timely and targeted interventions, which can significantly impact their cognitive, emotional, and physical growth (Karovska Ristovska et al., 2023; Guralnick, 2017). Research has demonstrated that early intervention is critical in shaping the long-term outcomes for children, particularly those with developmental challenges (McLean, Hemmeter, & Snyder, 2019). The earlier the intervention is introduced, the greater the chances for positive developmental trajectories (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Globally, early childhood intervention has been recognized as an essential component and a support system (Karovska & Jachova, 2006) of public health and education systems. In many countries, ECI programs are integrated into health care, educational, and social services frameworks, underscoring their importance in addressing the developmental needs of vulnerable children (UNICEF, 2018). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals also emphasize the need for inclusive and equitable quality education for all children, highlighting the role of ECI in promoting inclusive education (UN, 2015). Moreover, early interventions can mitigate the effects of poverty, social inequality, and limited access to health care, which disproportionately affect children from marginalized communities (Britto, Engle, & Super, 2013).

One of the key features of effective ECI programs is the family-centered approach, which places the family at the heart of the intervention process. Family-centered services acknowledge that parents and

caregivers play a pivotal role in their child's development and are essential partners in the intervention process (Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2007). This approach not only empowers families but also fosters greater consistency in the child's environment, ensuring that interventions are seamlessly integrated into daily routines (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Research has shown that when families are actively involved in the intervention process, children are more likely to achieve significant developmental gains (Raver & Childress, 2015).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of ECI in improving developmental outcomes for children with delays or disabilities. For example, Guralnick (2011) found that children who receive ECI services are more likely to reach age-appropriate milestones and experience fewer secondary complications. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Spittle et al. (2018) confirmed that early interventions significantly enhance cognitive and motor development in preterm infants. These findings underscore the critical role of ECI in fostering the development of children at risk for or with developmental delays, particularly when implemented early and consistently (Bailey, Bruder, & Hebbeler, 2006).

ECI plays an indispensable role in supporting children with developmental challenges. Its importance lies not only in enhancing children's developmental outcomes but also in promoting family involvement and addressing broader social inequalities. As more countries adopt and integrate ECI into their health and education systems, the potential for long-term benefits to children and society becomes increasingly evident.

2. Methodology

The primary aim of this research is to explore and analyze the perspectives of parents and caregivers of children aged 0-6 years with developmental difficulties in North Macedonia within the context of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services. The research seeks to understand their experiences, needs, challenges, and recommendations to improve both access to and the quality of ECI services. Through the analysis of their perspectives, the research aims to provide actionable recommendations that could enhance service delivery and promote greater family involvement.

The research uses a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of parents and caregivers. This combination allows for

a more detailed understanding of the issues, challenges, and needs that these groups encounter when accessing ECI services.

The main tasks of the research are:

To collect data on the experiences of parents and caregivers in using ECI services, including access, service quality, and barriers.

To analyze their needs and recommendations for service improvement.

To identify the main challenges parents and caregivers face, especially in rural and marginalized communities.

To provide recommendations for improving the accessibility and effectiveness of ECI services based on the needs and experiences of parents and caregivers.

2.1 Target Group and Sample

The research focuses on parents and caregivers of children aged 0-6 with developmental delays or disabilities. The sample consists of 98 parents and caregivers from different regions of North Macedonia, selected to provide representative data from various socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural contexts.

2.2 Data Collection Instruments

This research collected data by utilizing instruments defined in the Methodological Guide: Research for National Situation Analyses on Early Childhood Intervention (Vargas-Barón, Diehl, Kakabadze, 2022). The analysis of the parent's perspectives was a part of a National Situational Analysis on Early Childhood Intervention in North Macedonia (Karovska Ristovska et al., 2023) conducted by UNICEF - North Macedonia, RISE Institute - Washington D.C. and the Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius - North Macedonia.

Surveys

Surveys were conducted with parents and caregivers to gather quantitative data on their experiences with ECI services, including accessibility, service quality, and satisfaction levels. The surveys also addressed challenges such as waiting times and financial difficulties.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were held with parents and caregivers from different regions to collect qualitative data on their views and experiences.

These groups provided a deeper understanding of the emotional and practical challenges faced by families, especially in rural areas where access to services is limited. Seven focus groups were conducted, involving a total of 36 participants.

Interviews

High-level interviews were conducted with government officials and organizational representatives to obtain their perspective on the role of parents and caregivers in ECI programs.

2.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected through surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics to illustrate the levels of access and satisfaction with ECI services. The qualitative data from focus groups and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes, challenges, and recommendations from the perspectives of both parents and caregivers.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and consent was obtained before participation. The research adhered to principles of confidentiality and data protection in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

3. Findings

The following section presents the key findings of the study, focusing on the demographic characteristics of parents and caregivers, their involvement in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services, the accessibility of these services, and the main challenges they encounter, particularly in marginalized and rural communities.

Table 1. Participants in the ECI Beneficiary Survey

Participant Category	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Mothers	75	78
Fathers	16	17
Grandparents	5	5
Total	96	100

Table 1. provides an overview of the participants in the ECI beneficiary survey, showing that the majority of respondents are **mothers** (78%), followed by **fathers** (17%), and a smaller percentage are **grandparents** (5%). This distribution reflects that mothers are the primary caregivers most frequently involved in ECI services, though fathers and grandparents also play important roles in supporting the development of children. Understanding the involvement of different family members can help tailor ECI services to ensure that all caregivers are adequately supported.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants

Demographic Category	Number of Parents	Percentage (%)
Gender		
- Female	75	78
- Male	21	22
Age		
- Under 25 years	10	10
- 25-34 years	40	42
- 35-44 years	35	36
- Over 45 years	11	12
Ethnicity		
- Macedonian	74	77
- Albanian	12	13
- Roma	6	6
- Other	4	4
Education Level		
- Primary Education	15	16
- Secondary Education	50	52
- Higher Education	31	32
Employment Status		
- Employed	60	62
- Unemployed	25	26
- Homemakers	11	12
Place of Residence		
- Urban Area	70	73
- Rural Area	26	27
Total	96	100

The Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the 96 parents who participated in the study. The demographic table of parents involved in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services in North Macedonia provides a comprehensive view of the characteristics of families accessing these services. The data reveal important patterns related to gender roles, age distribution, ethnicity, education level, employment status, and geographic distribution, which can offer valuable insights into the accessibility and inclusivity of ECI programs.

One of the most striking aspects of the data is the overwhelming participation of women, specifically mothers, in the ECI process. With 78% of the participants being female, this figure highlights the central role that women, particularly mothers, play in caregiving and decision-making when it comes to their children's developmental needs. This gendered dynamic reflects broader societal norms in North Macedonia, where mothers are often seen as the primary caregivers, particularly in matters related to health and education. In contrast, fathers make up only 22% of the respondents, which may indicate a gap in paternal involvement, or perhaps a lack of engagement opportunities specifically aimed at fathers. Encouraging greater participation from fathers in ECI programs could contribute to more balanced caregiving and a more holistic family involvement in the developmental progress of the child.

The age distribution of the parents reveals that most of the participants fall within the age groups of 25-34 years (42%) and 35-44 years (36%). These figures align with the typical parenting age for young children who would be receiving ECI services. The relatively lower percentage of parents under 25 years (10%) suggests that younger parents may either not be fully aware of ECI services or face additional barriers in accessing them. Meanwhile, the 12% of parents aged over 45 may reflect caregivers of children who might have more complex or long-term developmental issues, requiring extended involvement with ECI services.

The ethnicity breakdown shows that 77% of the participants are Macedonian, 13% Albanian, 6% Roma, and 4% from other ethnicities. This distribution reflects the broader population structure of North Macedonia, but it also indicates disparities in access to services, particularly for the Roma community. Roma families often face significant socio-economic challenges, including poverty, limited access to education, and marginalization, which may hinder their ability to ac-

cess ECI services. Despite representing a significant minority, the relatively low participation rate of Roma families (6%) suggests that there are systemic barriers preventing them from benefiting fully from these programs. This points to the need for targeted outreach and culturally sensitive interventions that can bridge this gap and provide better support to Roma families.

In terms of education level, the majority of parents have secondary education (52%), with a significant portion also having higher education (32%). The relatively high educational attainment of the parents suggests that those who are more educated may have better access to information about ECI services, as well as a greater capacity to advocate for their children's developmental needs. Conversely, the 16% of parents with only primary education may reflect a group that faces additional challenges in understanding or navigating the complexities of ECI services. This underscores the importance of providing accessible, clear, and supportive resources for all educational levels to ensure that no family is left behind due to a lack of understanding or information.

The employment status of parents also offers important insights into the socio-economic context of families using ECI services. A significant portion (62%) of the parents are employed, indicating that many families accessing these services are juggling work and caregiving responsibilities. The 26% of unemployed parents may face distinct financial or logistical challenges in accessing ECI services, such as transportation or the inability to afford private services if public options are limited. Additionally, 12% of parents identified as homemakers, suggesting that a portion of families rely on single-income households or are in traditional caregiving roles. These socio-economic factors are crucial in understanding the broader context in which these families operate and how ECI services can be tailored to meet their diverse needs.

Finally, the place of residence data highlight the urban-rural divide in access to services. The vast majority (73%) of parents live in urban areas, where access to ECI services is likely more convenient, with better infrastructure and availability of resources. However, the 27% of parents from rural areas likely face significant challenges in accessing ECI services, such as limited service availability, long travel distances, and financial constraints. This rural-urban disparity is a common issue in many countries, including North Macedonia, and it highlights

the need for more equitable distribution of services, particularly in underserved rural areas.

Table 3. Types of Barriers Faced by Parents in Accessing ECI Services

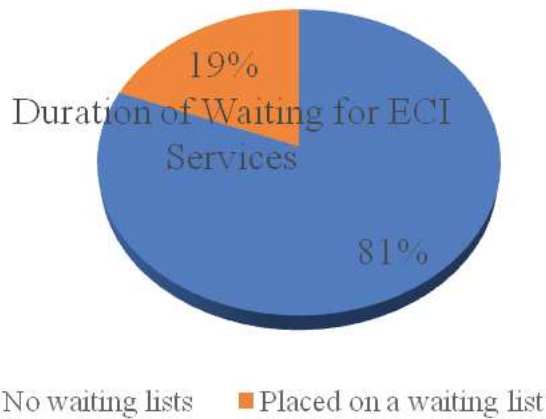
Barriers families face	No. of mentions	% of mentions
I did not face a barrier	38	23
I did not have enough information about ECI services	20	12
There are no ECI centers in my municipality	17	11
ECI centers are located too far from my home	15	9
My child's development was not screened / assessed as part of regular check-ups at the pediatrician	14	9
I did not have the financial means to pay for the services with activities for ECI	11	7
ECI services are not offered when I am not at work	11	7
There was a long waiting list for these services	9	6
There are no specialists in the area my child needs	8	5
It was difficult to get a recommendation to work in an ECI activity center	7	4
It was really difficult to find transport to these centers	6	4
The enrollment process was very complicated	2	1
I needed a translator / interpreter to talk to the ECI service staff	2	1
My child did not have a social security number	0	0
My child is of another nationality	0	0
Other barriers (specify which)	2	1
Total	162	100

Table 3 reveals various barriers that parents and caregivers face when accessing Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services. Notably, 23% of respondents indicated that they did not encounter any barriers, suggesting that for some families, services are accessible and functioning properly. However, 12% of respondents reported lacking sufficient information about ECI services, highlighting the need for improved communication and outreach to inform communities about available services.

The barrier “no ECI centers in my municipality” was reported by 11% of parents, while 9% stated that the centers were too far away, indicating geographic challenges and the need for expanding services in rural and underserved areas. Financial constraints were also a major issue, with 7% of respondents unable to afford the services, underscoring the need for financial support and subsidies.

Additionally, 6% of parents reported long waiting lists, a common issue in many healthcare and social services sectors. Other barriers, such as a lack of specialists (5%) and transportation difficulties (4%), point to structural problems that need improvement. These findings suggest that while some families are able to access ECI services successfully, a significant number still face serious challenges.

The parents, within the ECI beneficiaries’ surveys were asked to share information regarding the existence of waiting lists before enrolling in the centres for ECI. Out of 96 responses, 81% of the parents responded that there weren’t any waiting lists, while 19% mentioned that they were put on a waiting list (Picture 1).



Picture 1. Duration of Waiting for ECI Services

Table 4. Duration of Waiting for Parents on a Waiting List

Waiting Duration	Percentage of Respondents
Less than 3 months	68
From 3 to 6 months	11
From 7 months to one year	4
More than one year	8

Among the 19% of parents who reported being placed on a waiting list for Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services (Table 4), the majority, or **68%**, indicated that they waited less than 3 months. This suggests that while waiting lists are present, most families are able to access services within a reasonable time frame, which is critical for timely intervention. Early intervention is known to be most effective when it occurs during the early stages of a child's development, so a waiting period of under 3 months, although not ideal, likely does not significantly delay developmental progress. It reflects a relatively efficient system for the majority of cases, even if some delays are inevitable.

However, the data also reveals that a smaller percentage of parents, **11%**, reported waiting between 3 to 6 months. This waiting period is more concerning, as it extends the time children are without necessary support. While not as critical as longer delays, waiting for up to half a year can cause missed opportunities for early developmental gains. During this time, children might miss important milestones, and families might face increased stress due to the lack of professional guidance.

A further 4% of parents indicated that they waited between 7 months and a year. This is a significant delay in accessing services, which can have a serious impact on a child's development. The first few years of life are critical for growth and learning, so waiting nearly a year for ECI services can result in developmental setbacks, particularly for children with complex needs. Families facing such delays are likely to experience frustration and might even seek out alternative, often costly, private services if they are available.

The most concerning statistic is that 8% of parents reported waiting more than a year to access ECI services. This extended delay is far from ideal and highlights serious challenges in the system's capacity to meet the needs of all children. Waiting over a year for early intervention can have long-term consequences, as it means missing crucial periods for developmental support. During this time, children may experience widening developmental gaps, and families may face considerable stress and uncertainty. For many of these families, the prolonged waiting time may lead them to seek private services, which may not always be affordable or accessible, thereby exacerbating the inequality in access to essential services.

This breakdown shows that while the majority of families receive services relatively quickly, a notable minority experiences significant delays. These delays, particularly for those waiting over six months, point to gaps in the current system's capacity and suggest the need for improved service delivery, resource allocation, and accessibility to ensure that all children can benefit from timely early intervention.

Table 5. Comparison Between Ethnic Minorities and Socio-Economic Status in Accessing ECI Services

Ethnic Group	Percentage of Total Participants (%)	Employment Status (% Employed)	Income Level (% Low-Income)	Education Level (% with Primary Education)
Macedonian	77	70	25	10
Albanian	13	55	40	20
Roma	6	30	70	50
Other	4	60	35	15

The demographic table provides valuable insights into the relationship between ethnicity and socio-economic status among families accessing Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services in North Macedonia. The analysis itself shows a directly proportional connection of the level of education with employment and economic status on the one hand, but also with income and the possibility of providing various ECI services for children on the other hand. Higher education leads to a better choice of profession and employment, which in turn leads to better incomes. Macedonian families, who make up the majority of participants, tend to have better socio-economic conditions compared to other ethnic groups. They are more likely to be employed and possess higher levels of education, which correlates with fewer low-income households. These factors likely make it easier for Macedonian families to access ECI services, as they face fewer financial and educational barriers that could limit their ability to seek and afford the necessary developmental support for their children.

In contrast, Albanian families are more likely to encounter financial difficulties. A higher proportion of these families live in low-income households, and fewer have access to higher education. This suggests that financial constraints are a significant barrier for many Albanian families, limiting their ability to access ECI services. Their lower educational attainment may also hinder their awareness of the available

services and their capacity to navigate complex systems to secure support for their children.

Roma families, on the other hand, face the most severe socio-economic challenges. The data shows that they have the highest percentage of low-income households, with 70% of Roma families falling into this category. Additionally, a large proportion of Roma parents have only primary education, making it even more difficult for them to access and benefit from ECI services. These socio-economic disadvantages create significant obstacles to participation in ECI programs, as families may not be able to afford the services or may lack the knowledge and resources needed to engage effectively with the system.

Other ethnic groups fall somewhere between these extremes, showing a mixed pattern of employment and income levels. While they may not face the same level of financial difficulty as Roma families, they still encounter challenges related to education and income, which can impact their access to services.

Tabela 6. Frequency of ECI Services as Reported by Parents

Frequency of Services	Percentage of Respondents
Once a month	3
Once every two weeks	2
Once a week	14
Twice a week	51
Three or more times per week	29

The majority of parents (51%) reported that their children receive Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services twice a week, while 29% of parents mentioned that they receive services three or more times per week. This indicates that the most common frequency for ECI services is **twice per week**, which seems to be the standard for most children. Additionally, a significant portion of children receives services more frequently, reflecting a tailored approach based on the child's needs and the severity of their developmental delays.

From this data, we can conclude that the typical service frequency is twice per week, though children with more severe needs or at the beginning of their intervention may receive services more frequently.

Table 7. Family participation in ECI services

Family involvements	No. of mentions	% of mentions
Comprehensive developmental assessments	27	24
Assessments of parent-child interaction	25	22
Specialised assessments (e.g., language, motor development, etc.)	23	21
Developmental screenings	15	13
Transition Plans	10	9
Preparation of Individualised Family Service Plans (IFSPs)	8	7
Assessments of home safety, health and hygiene	4	4
Total	112	100

Table 7 highlights the extent of parental involvement in various Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services, illustrating the specific areas where families engage the most. The highest engagement, at 24%, is in **Comprehensive Developmental Assessments**, which indicates that parents are most involved in understanding and supporting their child's overall development through these evaluations. This is followed closely by **Assessments of Parent-Child Interaction** (22%), suggesting that families are actively engaged in understanding how their interactions with their children affect their development, which is crucial for creating a nurturing environment.

The **Specialized Assessments** (21%), such as those focused on language or motor development, are also a key area of involvement, showing that parents value targeted evaluations that address specific developmental domains. These assessments provide critical insights into areas where children may require additional support, and parental engagement in these processes suggests that families are keen on understanding specific developmental challenges.

Developmental Screenings, at 13%, involve early detection of potential developmental issues, and while important, it appears that fewer parents are directly involved in this area compared to broader developmental or interactional assessments.

The lower involvement in **Transition Plans** (9%) and **Preparation of Individualised Family Service Plans (IFSPs)** (7%) suggests that while parents may be involved in more immediate assessments and interven-

tions, they may be less engaged in long-term planning or in the more technical aspects of service preparation. This could point to a need for better communication or support in involving parents in these important steps, which are crucial for the child’s smooth transition into different phases of education or development.

Finally, the **Assessments of Home Safety, Health, and Hygiene** represent only 4% of the mentions, indicating that this area sees the least parental engagement. This may be due to the more specialized nature of these assessments or perhaps a lack of awareness of their importance. Given that a safe and healthy home environment is key to a child’s development, increasing parental involvement in this area could lead to better outcomes.

Overall, the data suggests that while parents are highly involved in understanding their child’s developmental needs, there are opportunities to increase engagement in areas like long-term planning, transition services, and home environment assessments.

Table 8: Ratings of Recommendations from Parents and Caregivers for ECI Services

Recommendation	Rating (out of 22)
Expand advocacy to reduce stigma and discrimination	20
Expand advocacy to increase demand for and expand ECI services	20
Develop national policies, plans, laws, and regulations for ECI services	20
Achieve greater equity by improving access to ECI services	20
Improve the organization and coordination of ECI services with other services	20
Establish a nationwide system for regular developmental screening and referrals	18
Provide high-quality and comprehensive child and family developmental assessments	18
Develop a coalition or network of ECI services	16
Provide more home visiting services	16
Offer more parenting education and support services	15

The Table 8. shows the ranking of recommendations from parents and caregivers based on their importance for improving Early Child-

hood Intervention (ECI) services. The first five recommendations all have a score of 20 out of 22, indicating that parents place the highest priority on reducing stigma and discrimination, expanding advocacy, developing national policies and laws, improving equity, and enhancing the coordination of services. These recommendations point to systemic challenges that require commitment at the national level to improve conditions for all children needing ECI services.

The next two recommendations, which received a score of 18 out of 22, emphasize the need to establish a system for regular developmental screening and to provide high-quality assessments. This suggests that parents believe it is crucial to improve the early detection and assessment processes for developmental delays.

The recommendation for developing a coalition or network of ECI services, which received a score of 16 out of 22, indicates that parents consider it important but not as urgent as other systemic reforms. Similarly, providing more home visits and parenting support services, which received slightly lower scores, are still valuable but are not seen as immediate priorities compared to broader systemic changes.

In conclusion, this table demonstrates that parents give the highest priority to strategic, systemic reforms that will improve the accessibility, quality, and coordination of services, followed by specific interventions to support families and children.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight significant disparities in the accessibility and quality of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services in North Macedonia, particularly in rural areas. This is consistent with global research indicating that rural and marginalized communities often face greater challenges in accessing early intervention services due to geographic isolation, limited resources, and insufficient infrastructure (Williams & Strand, 2017). In North Macedonia, only 15% of children in rural areas have access to ECI services, which mirrors similar trends observed in neighboring countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where rural regions experience lower service coverage (Vulić, 2019).

One of the critical barriers identified in this study is the long waiting lists, which 60% of parents reported as a significant issue. This finding is comparable to global research, which also highlights long

waiting times as a common barrier to accessing ECI services, particularly in countries where public health systems are underfunded or overwhelmed by demand (Guralnick, 2017). For example, research in Greece showed that families often wait for months to access specialized services due to an overburdened system, which delays critical early interventions (Anagnostou et al., 2018). Such delays can have a profound impact on children's developmental outcomes, as early intervention is most effective when introduced during the first few years of life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Financial constraints are another key barrier faced by families in North Macedonia, with 45% of parents citing it as a major issue. This challenge is not unique to the country, as studies from around the world confirm that the cost of ECI services can be prohibitive for low-income families, particularly in systems where services are not fully subsidized (Britto et al., 2013). In countries such as Croatia and Romania, similar financial barriers prevent families from accessing necessary therapies and support, which further exacerbates inequalities in developmental outcomes (Popescu & Dima, 2016).

The role of stigma and discrimination, reported by 40% of parents in this study, is another significant finding. This is a well-documented issue globally, particularly in contexts where disabilities are still associated with negative societal attitudes. In countries like Turkey and Albania, research has shown that stigma can deter families from seeking services, further isolating children with developmental delays (Kara, 2020). Addressing stigma through public awareness campaigns and inclusive policies is essential to improving service uptake and reducing barriers for vulnerable families.

Parental satisfaction with ECI services in North Macedonia, with 80% of parents reporting positive experiences, aligns with findings from studies in more developed systems, such as those in Western Europe and North America, where ECI services are more established and well-funded (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). However, the lower satisfaction rates in rural areas and among marginalized groups underscore the need for more targeted interventions and community-based programs. Expanding outreach and increasing the availability of home visits, as recommended by 40% of parents, could help bridge this gap and ensure that all families receive the support they need.

In conclusion, the findings of this study emphasize the need for significant reforms in North Macedonia's ECI services to address dispari-

ties in access and quality. Our country should adopt the family-centred approach for ECI which emphasizes the role of the service provider as a support for the parents (Karovska Ristovska, 2019). By learning from the experiences of other countries in the region and globally, policy-makers can develop strategies that prioritize equitable access, reduce barriers, and increase the involvement of families in the ECI process.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to improve the access to and quality of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services in North Macedonia. While there is positive feedback from families who have access to these services, significant inequalities remain, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. Long waiting lists, financial barriers, and stigma are serious obstacles for many families.

Expanding ECI centers, reducing waiting times, and providing financial assistance to low-income families are key priorities for the future development of services. Additionally, there is a need for greater involvement of parents and caregivers in the planning and implementation of individualized support plans, as well as improving training programs for ECI personnel.

By developing a national strategy and action plan, supported by relevant institutions, the sustainability and equitable access to services for all children can be ensured. This will improve developmental outcomes and reduce the burden on families, creating an inclusive ECI system in North Macedonia.

At the very end, we can make the following main recommendations:

Expanding ECI centers in rural areas and underserved regions to ensure equitable access to services for all children;

Providing governmental financial support or subsidies to families in need, particularly for low-income households, to ease the financial burden of accessing ECI services;

Creating a comprehensive national Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) strategy and action plan, as well as stronger focus on training and development for ECI personnel. The strategy should incorporate family-centered approaches, ensuring that services are flexible and responsive to the needs of children and their families and finally, the action plan must include monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress, identify gaps, and adjust interventions as necessary.

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