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TEACHERS' AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Izvleček/Abstract

This study explores how preschool educators and primary school teachers interpret professional identity in relation to artificial intelligence (AI) in inclusive education. Semi-structured interviews with nine education professionals were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings indicate an ambivalent relationship with AI: participants recognize its usefulness for planning, adaptation, and individualization, while emphasizing the irreplaceability of relational, ethical, and reflective dimensions of professional practice. AI is interpreted primarily as a support tool rather than as a substitute for professional judgement. The study highlights professional autonomy and reflective practice as central dimensions of professional identity in inclusive education.

Poklicna identiteta učiteljev in vzgojiteljev predšolskih otrok v kontekstu umetne inteligence in inkluzivnega izobraževanja

V raziskavi preučujemo, kako vzgojitelji predšolskih otrok in učitelji v osnovni šoli interpretirajo poklicno identiteto v povezavi z umetno inteligenco (UI) v inkluzivnem izobraževanju. S pomočjo refleksivne tematske analize so bili analizirani polstrukturirani intervjuji z devetimi strokovnjaki s področja vzgoje in izobraževanja. Ugotovitve kažejo na ambivalenten odnos do umetne inteligence: udeleženci prepoznavajo njeno uporabnost pri načrtovanju, prilagajanju in individualizaciji, hkrati pa poudarjajo nenadomestljivost odnosnih, etičnih in refleksivnih dimenzij poklicne prakse. Umetna inteligenca je interpretirana predvsem kot podporno orodje in ne kot nadomestek za strokovno presojo. Raziskava izpostavlja poklicno avtonomijo in refleksivno prakso kot osrednji dimenziji poklicne identitete v inkluzivnem izobraževanju.

Keywords:
artificial intelligence in education, inclusive education, professional identity, professional autonomy, reflective practice.

Ključne besede:
umetna inteligenca v izobraževanju, inkluzivno izobraževanje, poklicna identiteta, poklicna avtonomija, refleksivna praksa.

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Introduction

This paper assumes that professional identity in the context of artificial intelligence (AI) is not primarily shaped by technological competences, but by how educational professionals interpret the relationships among technology, professional judgment, and the well-being of children and students. Such an approach shifts the discussion from the mere application of digital tools towards the question of professional practice under conditions in which technology increasingly influences the processes of planning, adaptation, and evaluation of educational work.

At the same time, the development of digital technologies is transforming both the organization of teaching and the expectations placed upon educational professionals in inclusive settings. In this context, AI is often discussed as a tool for adapting instruction, individualizing learning, and supporting the participation of children and students with diverse educational needs. However, the educational value of AI does not derive solely from its technological capabilities; rather it is pedagogically interpreted and integrated into specific educational situations. In other words, AI does not enter education as a neutral addition to existing practice, but as an element that requires professional judgment regarding its purpose, boundaries, and consequences.

Previous research on AI in education has primarily focused on technological functions, digital competences, and the potential of personalized learning, while paying considerably less attention to how educational professionals interpret their professional role in relation to technological change. Research indicates that AI can support lesson planning, the adaptation of instructional materials, and differentiated instruction, particularly in inclusive settings characterized by diverse educational needs (Salas-Pilco et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2025). Tan et al. (2025) further note an imbalance in AI research in education, where substantially greater attention is devoted to technological possibilities and student outcomes than to the professional development and professional roles of educational professionals. At the same time, the literature highlights issues of ethical responsibility, potential reductions in professional autonomy, and the risk that educational processes be interpreted primarily through the logic of technological efficiency (UNESCO, 2024).

These questions are particularly important in inclusive education. Inclusive pedagogy views learner diversity not as a barrier to learning, but as the starting point for pedagogical action (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). Such an approach implies an

understanding of the professional role as a process of ongoing adjustment, interpretation, and contextually grounded decision-making. This is particularly relevant in heterogeneous educational contexts, where successful inclusion depends not only on formal access to educational settings but also on professionals' capacity to recognize diverse needs, adapt pedagogical practices, and provide appropriate forms of support (Šilc and Schmidt Krajnc, 2022). Professional practice in inclusive education is not reduced to the application of predefined methods or technologies; rather, it involves the reflective integration of professional knowledge, experience, and the demands of educational situations (Ertsås and Irgens, 2017). From this perspective, professional identity is shaped through professional judgment, relationships with children and students, and interpretations of the purpose of educational practice.

Professional identity may therefore be understood as a dynamic and evolving construct shaped through educational professionals' responses to new professional demands and changes within the educational context (Blanuša Trošelj, 2024). Such an understanding is particularly relevant under conditions of digital transformation, as the professional role changes not only through the addition of new tools but also through shifting expectations regarding what it means to act responsibly, professionally, and pedagogically appropriately. Continuous professional growth is therefore not only an additional form of professional enrichment, but also an obligation, a right, and a responsibility of educational professionals (Blanuša Trošelj et al., 2020). In the context of AI, this means that professional preparation cannot be reduced to technical training in tool use, but must also include critical thinking, adaptability, ethical judgment, and the capacity for continuous learning.

The wider context of digitalization further confirms that the professional role of educational professionals is increasingly shifting towards mediating and shaping technologically supported learning experiences. Contemporary educational practice increasingly involves combinations of different digital technologies, such as virtual reality, 3D modelling, CAD/CAM tools, and gamification, thereby creating more complex learning environments than those supported by a single tool alone (Maričić et al., 2024). Research on ICT-supported experiential learning also indicates that technology can contribute to students' engagement when embedded within pedagogically structured and experiential learning activities (Cotič et al., 2019). Those environments require teachers and preschool educators to develop new forms of professional judgment in planning, organizing, and pedagogically evaluating technologically supported learning experiences.

The development and increasing availability of AI further intensify these demands, as educational professionals are progressively required to assess the pedagogical justification of technology use, its impact on children's and students' participation, and its possible consequences for professional autonomy and the quality of relationships within the educational process. Under such conditions, professional identity is formed not only through the acquisition of new competences but also through continuous reflection on technological possibilities, professional values, and pedagogical responsibility.

Despite growing interest in the application of AI in education, relatively little research has examined how preschool educators and teachers understand their professional roles in relation to technological change, particularly in inclusive contexts. Existing discussions more frequently focus on technological possibilities, digital competences, or the effectiveness of tools, while professional judgment, interpersonal dimensions of educational work, and the ethical dimensions of AI use remain considerably underrepresented in research. There is particularly little research that simultaneously connects professional identity, inclusive education, and the application of AI in the work of preschool educators and teachers. Consequently, the question remains open as to how educational professionals interpret the relationship between technological possibilities, professional autonomy, and responsibility for the well-being of children and students.

Method

The study used a qualitative interpretive approach and reflexive thematic analysis of the data.

Research Aim

The aim of the study was to explore how preschool educators and teachers interpret professional identity in relation to the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in inclusive education.

Research Questions

In participants' responses, professional identity was constructed through three interconnected dimensions: the interpretation of the professional role, professional autonomy, and the ethical boundaries of AI use. Accordingly, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do preschool educators and teachers interpret the professional role in relation to AI in inclusive education?
2. How do preschool educators and teachers interpret the relationship between AI and professional autonomy in educational practice?
3. How do preschool educators and teachers interpret the ethical boundaries of AI use in educational practice?

Sample

The study involved nine educational professionals employed in inclusive educational settings. The sample consisted of six preschool educators and three teachers working in primary school after-school programs. Participants had between 1.5 and 20 years of professional experience, including experience working with children and students with diverse educational needs. All participants were women, reflecting the gender structure of preschool education and the after-school care professions, where women constitute the majority of employees.

Participants were employed in preschool and primary educational institutions located in Rijeka and Ogulin, Croatia. They worked in heterogeneous educational settings that included children and students with diverse developmental, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on their professional experience in inclusive educational contexts.

Preschool educators and teachers employed in after-school programs were included because their professional contexts are characterized by intensive educational and socio-emotional work, flexible activity organization, and regular adaptation to children's and students' immediate needs. Work with younger children relies more heavily on everyday interactions, socio-emotional support, and situational professional judgment (Mashburn et al., 2008). At the same time, after-school programs represent a less structured, more curriculum-flexible form of educational work in which interpersonal relationships, the organization of everyday activities, and direct support for children are particularly important.

These professional contexts are also characterized by the still-limited integration of AI into everyday work with children, thereby enabling exploration of how educational professionals interpret its pedagogical legitimacy, professional role, and boundaries of application in inclusive education. In the present study, when participants referred to AI, they most frequently had in mind tools such as conversational chatbots (used for generating activity ideas or materials), adaptive

learning platforms, and speech-to-text applications, which are increasingly appearing in educational contexts. However, the use of specific AI-based tools remains sporadic and experimental, with most participants reporting only occasional or pilot experiences with such technologies.

The aim of the study was not the statistical generalization of findings, but rather an interpretive understanding of how participants construct professional identity, professional autonomy, and the ethical boundaries of AI use within specific professional contexts. Although the sample was relatively small, participants' responses revealed recurring patterns of meaning related to relational practice, professional judgment, and responsibility for the well-being of children and students.

Instrument

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview specifically designed for the study. The interview protocol included open-ended questions focused on interpretations of the professional role, professional autonomy, reflective practice, and the application of AI in inclusive education.

The interview included questions concerning interpretation of the professional role, professional autonomy, reflective practice, professional learning, as well as the possibilities and limitations of AI applications in inclusive education.

Procedure

The study employed a qualitative, interpretive approach. Interviews were conducted asynchronously, with questions delivered in writing and participants given the option to respond either in writing or via audio recordings. This approach was selected to provide participants with additional time for reflection and for formulating their responses.

Audio responses were transcribed prior to analysis. Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis, following the general principles proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it enables the interpretation of how participants construct meanings related to professional identity and professional practice in relation to AI, rather than identifying predefined categories of experience.

In the initial phase, the data were read repeatedly to familiarize the researcher with the content and to identify recurring patterns in participants' responses. Initial codes

were then developed to capture key meanings related to the professional role, professional autonomy, professional learning, and the application of AI in inclusive education.

Related codes were gradually grouped into broader thematic categories through comparison of participants' responses and interpretations in relation to the research questions and the study's conceptual framework. Analytical rigor was supported through repeated engagement with the data, iterative coding, and continuous comparison of participants' accounts with the research questions and conceptual framework. Theme development involved ongoing interpretive reflection rather than the identification of fixed analytical categories. Coding focused predominantly on the explicit meanings of participants' statements, while broader patterns of meaning were interpreted during theme development. An overview of the final themes and associated codes is presented in Table 1.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles of voluntary participation, anonymity, and data confidentiality. Prior to participation, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the intended use of the data.

Table 1

Overview of themes and subthemes identified through reflexive thematic analysis

Theme	Codes	Description
AI as pedagogically conditional support	AI as support tool; idea generation; organisational assistance	AI perceived as useful when supporting pedagogical work
Relational professionalism	Emotional support; empathy; trust; relational presence	Relational and emotional aspects viewed as irreplaceable.
AI-supported inclusion	Adaptation; accessibility; participation support	AI perceived as useful for reducing participation barriers.
Professional autonomy	Critical use; maintaining agency; professional decision-making	Emphasis on maintaining pedagogical judgement.
Ethical boundaries of AI use	Privacy; overreliance; reduced creativity; social isolation	Concerns focused on child well-being and responsible use
Professional learning and adaptation	Informal learning; digital competence; continuous learning	AI-related learning described as mostly self-directed

Results and Discussion

The analysis identified six interrelated themes through which participants interpreted professional identity in the context of AI in inclusive education: AI as pedagogically conditioned support; relational and ethical dimensions of professional practice; AI-

supported inclusion; professional autonomy; ethical boundaries of AI use; and professional learning and adaptation. An overview of the themes and associated codes is presented in Table 1.

The identified themes are not viewed as separate categories, but rather as interrelated dimensions of professional identity that partially overlap within participants' accounts. The findings are interpreted below in relation to the research questions and the relevant conceptual framework.

The Professional Role in Relation to Artificial Intelligence

The first research question concerned how teachers and preschool educators interpret the professional role in relation to AI in inclusive education. The analysis shows that participants do not primarily associate the professional role with technological competence, but rather with relational, ethical, and pedagogical dimensions of practice. AI is interpreted as a resource within the existing professional framework rather than as an element that redefines professionalism.

Participants most frequently described AI as support for activity planning, work organization, and content adaptation. One teacher stated that AI can help *"in creating certain activities"* and in offering *"creative ideas"* that she might not have developed independently (T1). Similarly, one preschool educator emphasized that AI can assist *"in better implementing ideas for educational work,"* but added that it is not necessary *"for understanding the professional role"* (E1). Such statements suggest an instrumental understanding of AI: technology is accepted when it supports existing professional goals, but it is not perceived as the foundation of professional identity.

The limits of such understanding are particularly evident in statements concerning emotional support and direct work with children. One teacher explained that AI *"can help in solving certain difficulties,"* but *"can never replace an empathetic approach to the student"* (T3). Similarly, one preschool educator stated that AI may provide *"new ideas, activities, and stimuli,"* but that it *"cannot replace the essential (human) part"* (E2). The professional role, therefore, is not constructed through managing technology, but through relationships with children, emotional presence, and responsibility for pedagogically appropriate action.

This interpretation is further reinforced by descriptions of the irreplaceable aspects of educational work. Participants emphasized *"approach to children, ways of interacting, hugs, comfort, understanding feelings and needs"* (E2), as well as *"pedagogical assessment," "providing empathy," "emotional support,"* and the *"educational role"* (E4). The findings

suggest that professionalism is understood as the capacity for situationally and emotionally sensitive action, which is particularly important in work with younger children, where professional competences are shaped through routine interactions and practical experience (Blanuša Trošelj et al., 2020).

At the same time, participants recognized the inclusive potential of AI, particularly when it can reduce barriers to participation. One teacher stated that the use of AI is justified when it enables a student with difficulties to participate *"on an equal level,"* for example, through the repetition of exercises *"without fear of judgment"* or by overcoming sensory and motor limitations (T3). From this perspective, participants position the professional role beyond the technical use of tools and connect it to responsibility for supportive interaction and pedagogically responsive action in specific situations. Similarly, one preschool educator emphasized that AI is justified when it *"reduces barriers for the child,"* but not when it *"reduces human interaction"* (E3). The inclusive potential of AI is therefore interpreted not as an automatic consequence of technology itself, but as a possibility dependent on pedagogical purpose and the preservation of meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Attitudes toward AI are therefore neither unambiguously positive nor negative. Participants accept AI when it supports planning, adaptation, and children's participation but become more critical when it encourages reliance on ready-made solutions. One preschool educator warned that AI may reduce *"reflection and personal engagement"* (E5), while another stated that it can assist in activity preparation only *"superficially,"* because children's interests often direct educational work in *"unpredictable directions"* (E4). In this sense, the professional role remains connected to reflective and context-sensitive action that cannot be reduced to technological functionality.

Overall, the findings indicate that teachers and preschool educators interpret AI primarily as support for professional practice, while professional identity remains connected to pedagogical responsibility, contextual judgment, and responsibility for children's well-being. Those interpretations correspond with inclusive pedagogy (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011) and with the concept of professional theorizing, which emphasizes the integration of experience, theory, and contextual judgment in professional practice (Ertsås and Irgens, 2017).

Professional Autonomy and Professional Judgment

The second research question concerned the relationship between AI and professional autonomy. The analysis indicates that participants do not understand

autonomy as the rejection of technology, but rather as the capacity to make critical decisions about when AI use is pedagogically justified.

One teacher stated that AI does not significantly affect her autonomy because it is *"only a tool and only an idea for the teacher"* (T2). A similar pattern appeared in the account of one preschool educator, who explained that AI may assist with administrative and organizational aspects of work, but that in direct work with children, *"the professional autonomy of the preschool educator remains essential and irreplaceable"* (E4). These statements suggest that participants view AI as a source of suggestions rather than a substitute for professional decision-making.

At the same time, participants recognized the risk of overreliance on technological solutions. One preschool educator warned that, in *"excessive amounts,"* AI may *"damage the identity of the preschool educator"* by leading individuals to rely too heavily on the information and activities it provides (E1). Another participant stated that a person who lacks confidence in their own knowledge and attitudes may *"rely excessively on artificial intelligence,"* whereas for a competent professional, AI may simply represent a *"bonus"* (E2). In this sense, autonomy is constructed as the capacity to preserve professional judgment and maintain a critical distance from ready-made solutions, rather than merely as the freedom to use or reject technology.

Such an understanding is consistent with the concept of professional theorizing, which interprets professional practice as the reflective integration of experience, theoretical knowledge, and the demands of specific situations (Ertsås and Irgens, 2017). Within this framework, AI may serve as a useful resource, but its use remains professionally legitimate only when educational professionals critically assess its purpose, appropriateness, and possible consequences.

Nevertheless, participants did not interpret AI exclusively as a threat to autonomy. Some participants described the possibility that AI could reduce administrative workload and create more time for pedagogically important aspects of work. One preschool educator explained that activity planning and material generation may allow more time for *"the core of our autonomy, direct work, and creative teaching"* (E3). In this sense, AI may support autonomy when it takes over technical tasks rather than replacing decisions that require professional responsibility.

The tension between support and dependence was especially clear in statements about the need for limited, reflective use of AI. One participant emphasized that AI may *"strengthen educational work"* when used as support, but that complete reliance on it may *"reduce the independence and individuality of the preschool educator"* (E6). The findings, therefore, suggest that professional autonomy in the context of AI does not imply

independence from technology, but rather the ability to distinguish between situations in which technology supports pedagogical practice and those in which it may impoverish it.

Overall, participants interpreted professional autonomy as critical and responsible decision-making regarding the use of AI. AI is accepted when it supports pedagogical goals, work organization, and children's participation but becomes problematic when it encourages uncritical reliance on ready-made solutions or reduces opportunities for reflective practice.

Ethical Boundaries of AI Use

The third research question concerned the ethical boundaries of AI use in educational practice. The analysis indicates that participants evaluate the ethical acceptability of AI less in terms of efficiency and more in relation to its impact on relationships, emotional safety, and children's development.

In almost all responses, empathy, emotional support, and direct presence were emphasized as irreplaceable aspects of professional practice. One teacher stated that AI cannot provide the *"emotional component"* nor replace *"that presence of being with children"* (T5). Another participant emphasized the importance of the *"relationship between teachers and children"* and the teacher's ability to *"feel, notice, and immediately react"* when a child shows insecurity or difficulty (T4). These statements suggest that the boundaries of AI are defined precisely where professional practice requires emotional sensitivity and direct understanding of the child.

Participants also warned about the possible negative consequences of excessive or irresponsible AI use. Concerns were particularly related to reduced independence, social interaction, and creativity. One teacher pointed to the danger that a child may *"stop thinking independently"* and *"fail to develop creativity and imagination,"* instead *"receiving everything ready-made from artificial intelligence"* (T2). Another participant mentioned *"screen addiction"* and the *"loss of social interaction"* (E1), while one preschool educator warned against seeking *"shortcuts"* and relying on ready-made answers (E2). Ethical risks associated with AI, therefore, concern not only technology itself, but also the potential weakening of children's active participation and developmental processes.

The boundaries of AI use become particularly clear in situations involving conflict, emotional vulnerability, or the assessment of children's needs.

One teacher stated that she would not use AI for *"conflict resolution and making diagnoses"* (T3). One preschool educator emphasized that socio-emotional conflicts require *"human presence, eye contact, a gentle word, and empathy that an algorithm can neither*

provide nor feel" (E3). Another participant stressed the importance of understanding the child's personality, emotions, and relationships within the group (E4). In such situations, AI is not rejected because of the technology itself, but because it is considered inappropriate for contexts that require moral and emotional judgment.

An important pattern also emerged regarding the relationship between efficiency and children's well-being. One teacher stated, *"If technology harms the well-being of the child, it is of no use to us"* (T1), while another participant emphasized, *"The efficiency of technology should never come at the expense of emotional well-being"* (E3). In this sense, ethical boundaries emerge around whether technology supports or replaces pedagogical practice in situations where human presence is necessary.

Overall, participants interpreted AI as an acceptable tool only insofar as it does not undermine the relational, developmental, and ethical dimensions of educational work. Professional responsibility is therefore not reduced to efficient work organization but includes the preservation of children's safety, sense of belonging, and emotional well-being. These findings correspond with approaches that associate the responsible use of AI in education with professional judgment, a human-centred approach to technology, and the protection of children's and students' well-being (UNESCO, 2024).

Although participants came from different professional contexts, similar patterns in the interpretation of professional practice emerged in their responses. Regardless of differences in professional settings, AI was generally understood as a tool whose value depends on pedagogical purpose, professional responsibility, and the preservation of meaningful relationships in educational work.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that teachers and preschool educators primarily interpret AI as a professional tool whose value depends on pedagogical purpose, professional judgment, and the well-being of children and students. Professional identity is therefore not constructed through technological competence itself, but through the relational, ethical, and reflective dimensions of professional practice. The findings further show that participants recognize the functional and inclusive potential of AI, particularly in relation to content adaptation, work organization, and support for the participation of children with diverse educational needs. However, the legitimacy of AI use is continually evaluated based on whether it supports or undermines the

quality of relationships, emotional safety, and professional sensitivity to children's needs.

In this context, professional autonomy does not emerge as the rejection of technology, but rather as the capacity for critical and responsible decision-making regarding its use in specific pedagogical situations. Professional judgment functions as the mechanism through which participants assess the pedagogical justification, appropriateness, and possible consequences of AI use.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in conceptualizing professional identity as a dynamic process shaped, under conditions of digital transformation, through the alignment of technological possibilities and pedagogical values. In this sense, the study contributes to discussions on AI in education by shifting the focus from technological possibilities to the ways educational professionals interpret their professional responsibility in relation to technology.

The findings also indicate a gap between the increasing availability of AI and the level of professional support necessary for its pedagogically and ethically grounded implementation. The findings suggest the importance of professional development approaches that move beyond technical AI training and include ethical reflection, pedagogical judgment, and critical evaluation of technology use in inclusive education. Teacher education and professional learning programs may therefore benefit from greater emphasis on reflective and context-sensitive approaches to AI integration. Participants frequently described professional practice as a process of individual coping, self-directed learning, and personal evaluation, highlighting the need for more systematic development of the reflective, ethical, and pedagogical competences required for the responsible integration of AI in inclusive education.

The all-female sample reflects the gender structure of the particular professional contexts but may also have influenced the ways relational and emotional dimensions of professional practice were interpreted. However, the purpose of the study was not statistical generalization, but an interpretive understanding of how participants construct professional identity, professional autonomy, and the ethical boundaries of AI use. Future research could include different professional and institutional contexts and further explore how professional identity and professional judgment are shaped under conditions of continued AI development in education.

Author Contribution Statement

Antonia Ćurić designed the study, collected and analysed the data, and prepared and revised the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The research data are not publicly available in order to protect participants' confidentiality and respect the conditions under which their responses were collected.

Statement on the Use of Generative AI Tools

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with text formulation and editing. The tool was not used to process or analyse the research data. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Informed Consent Statement

Before participation, participants received an email invitation explaining the purpose of the study, the option to provide written or audio-recorded responses, and the estimated time required. They were informed that their responses would be used exclusively for research purposes and reported anonymously. Participants subsequently took part by submitting their responses following this invitation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest in relation to this research and its publication.

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